

Coming Up Roses

A Thompson School Student Plumbs the Depths of Her Education to Grow a Business That Blooms

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Erica Johnson in her element at the Macfarlane Greenhouse Facility

Erica Johnson '14 is on course to fulfill her highest dreams, guided by a strong work ethic as a nontraditional student at the Thompson School of Applied Science (TSAS). Her education in Horticultural Technology has been her true North, providing the hands-on experience and support that is steering her towards the expansion of her start-up, Compass Rose Floral Design. "My goal is to open my first retail location in Portsmouth within two years of graduation," says Johnson.

Originally from New Gloucester, Maine, Johnson joined the Sea Cadets at the age of 10 and continued serving the organization for the next six years. Her first tax-paying job during high school in her coastal Maine hometown was to pick crabmeat, but Johnson never lost her passion for floral design. Even as she worked a variety of jobs from stretching pizza dough to directing a YMCA – all while volunteering as a firefighter and EMT – Johnson brought beauty to the mundane and chaotic. But it was with flowers that her talents really sailed. "My mom used to make wedding bouquets and would let me play with the unused material," says Johnson. "Once I made a eucalyptus swag with dried flowers in the middle and ribbons coming down. She still has it."

Applying to a university after being in the workforce for 16 years was one hurdle to overcome, but Johnson, used grit and determination to go full speed ahead and become the first woman on both sides of her family to earn a college degree. "[The director of admissions at the Thompson School] Deb Pack wanted me to come and try taking two classes a semester to see if it would work well for me," says Johnson who was working full time alongside her firefighter husband, Chris, when she first enrolled. Johnson matriculated in the spring after completing 19 credits with a 4.0 GPA and is set to graduate this May with honors.

The faculty and staff of the Thompson School have really put the wind in Johnson's sails during her educational and extra-curricular pursuits. "From day one [Professor of Horticulture] Rene Gingras has been standing behind me and supporting every decision that's helped me to move forward in my education," says Johnson. "[Director of the Thompson School] Regina Smick-Attisano has been so supportive with her standing open door policy. And Deb Pack has given me the opportunity to design the arrangements for open houses and the Thompson School graduation, putting her faith in me to set up an entry way that will be appropriate for new students and their families."

In addition, representing the Thompson School as a student of Horticultural Technology has charted a new course for this talented floral designer who is also president-elect of the Horticultural Club. "I've had opportunities here that I would never have elsewhere," says Johnson. "I have been offered a chance to work on the Pasadena Rose Bowl parade floats and to participate with designs at the Philadelphia Flower Show." Furthermore, Johnson is leading the Horticultural Club in fundraising efforts to make possible two trips for its members this year. "We'd like to go to the sculptural gardens, insectarium, and bio dome in Montreal," says Johnson, "and visit the White House Rose Garden and National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., as well as see the gardens at Monticello in Charlottesville."

Johnson and her husband have two young children, Cole and Caitlyn, who frequently visit the campus with her. "They love that I'm a student here," says Johnson. "My

daughter enjoys walking around the horse barns, and Deb always has animal crackers waiting for her. At the Thompson School you are not just a number; you're a person. They know everyone and every single story."

Johnson's story is one of navigating some rough waters toward smooth sailing in a career buoyed by an exceptional education at the Thompson School. "I've achieved more than I ever thought possible," says Johnson, "and this is just the beginning."

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