

By Mary Paul Reporter staff writer

Classical vocalist and Weehawken resident Yolanda F. Johnson doesn't like having limits. She also doesn't like reading a person's age in print immediately following their name, insisting that it's a number that shouldn't matter.

But it's worth noting that at 30 years old, Johnson has taken a new turn in her life that includes performing her first solo recital in New York City at the Broadway Presbyterian Church and writing a book about the three-decade milestone that she claims as a "second wind" of youth rather than its end.

Being 30 is even why Johnson has set tickets for her recital on Sept. 13 at 7 p.m. at \$30. Accompanying her will be pianist Miki Fujihara and guitarist Jeff Haley, as well as mezzo-soprano Dena Holland.

Singing to her heart's content

Growing up in Nebraska, Johnson began piano lessons at age 4 and became a classical choral singer by age 9. After attending the University of Tulsa in Oklahoma, she received her bachelor's degree in voice and then received a graduate degree in arts management from the University of Akron in Ohio.

"I'm a big proponent of classical arts programs," Johnson says, who made her living through talent shows until taking behind-the-scenes administrative roles in the world of performance.

While her graduate studies served her well in the Midwest as acting executive director of Tulsa's first community music school and an instructor of voice and humanities at Tulsa Community College, Johnson felt the lure of the Big Apple. "There's no place like this - the New York City, Jersey metro area - to be able to pursue your passion and still be able to survive."

Currently, she works as a development manager for the Princess Grace Awards, which raises money to help artists, dancers, and filmmakers.

"I'm about to open a voice studio, but right now, being able to support other artists helps keep me going," says Johnson. "While you work toward doing your passion, you have to be smart about it sometimes [in being able to support yourself], but I've been very blessed [in her daytime job] to help in doing the arts."

One of her friends lived in Weehawken and that was why, in summer 2004, she came straight to the town on the impetus of her dreams.

"I made a decision one day and just did it," she explains. "I had always talked about it. I packed up everything I owned in a minivan and drove cross-country with my best friend, and when we turned on Boulevard East, we gasped, because it was the first time we had seen the skyline."

After four years, she adds that her home in Weehawken suits her, saying, "It's just so peaceful and conducive to my art."

The screenshot shows the Hudson Reporter website. The main article is titled "If she can make it there... Classical vocalist realizes her dream, gives solo recital in NYC" by Mary Paul Reporter. The article text is highlighted with an orange box. To the right of the article are two "What is your credit score? View Yours for FREE!" widgets. The widgets show a scale from Excellent (750-840) to Poor (340-619) and an "I Don't Know ????" option. The widgets also include a "Find out INSTANTLY!" button.

And that art is flourishing as new opportunities are still to come this year.

"I'm going to be presenting at an International Performing Arts Conference ['Performing the World'] on songs being personal narratives - a lecture recital in October in New York," Johnson explains. "I'll also be starting up teaching at the Children's Aid Society."

Additionally, she participates in Musicians on Call, where she and other performers sing for oncology patients. Now, as she prepares to sing in her first big solo recital, she's selected songs that highlight the experience of her 30 years, including Purcell's "Music for a While" and Verdi's "Stornello" in Italian.

"I'm doing a Mozart, and the recital ends with 'The Lord's Prayer,' " says Johnson, whose faith is very important in her life. "That's very personal for me, because it is the prayer, and it's still a form of worship for me to sing that."

This milestone birthday is a motivation for Johnson, and for her, this performance represents a renewed vow to put her passion first.

"This is the thing I should have done when I was 28, but to really stay focused on my purpose now, that's what the recital is really a kickoff to," she said.

12 months of 30

In January of this year, Johnson's 30th birthday inspired her to invite new experiences and write *12 Months of 30*, an introspective look at the approach women take to turning 30 and what it means in terms of the direction their lives take.

The idea came when she found herself confronted with other women her age already building families or settling into societal niches while she felt like this was a time to do more and seize the day.

"I started a crossroads, and I thought, 'What are you going to do now?' " Johnson explains. "I have more disposable income, and I know what I think about a lot of things, so will I go that route or will I go the other."

Johnson said that it can seem as if women "must get married and have babies and catch up to society," but in her case, she proclaims, "Things I haven't gotten to do yet, I'm going to do them."

She explains, "It started at the beginning of the year. I threw a big party, and the theme of that party was my favorite things. I put my favorite things into a gift bag and I gave them to people."

From then on, her motto became, "No fear; trust God," as she adds, "Everything we usually want to do that we don't do is because of fear."

Among the items on a list Johnson is still filling out are attending the Westminster dog show, traveling with a friend to Denmark, and flying on a trapeze.

"It's very fast, they have wonderful instructors, and they teach you very quickly, and I'm afraid of heights," she says. "I screamed so loud that the instructor had to ask me not to scream the second time. But I did it, and I held on tight. There's something to be said for the ground beneath your feet, literally. It was worth it."

But her greatest feat is still ahead.

"Possibly the biggest thing I'm going to be doing is the recital with songs ranging from Elizabethan music to spiritual, and a lot of it is about me and things I used to sing and things I was afraid to sing," she explains. "I'd been performing a lot, but I haven't done my actual solo recital, so this is a big thing that I keep putting off that I have to do. The other things are just things that I wanted to do in my life... but the recital, I've realized this year at 30, that music and the arts are my purpose."

Johnson is hoping for the book to be released in 2009, though she is still searching for a publisher, which may be a daunting challenge, and to that, she says, "But once again, I'm not deterred by anything."