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A Super Sweet 15 for Farragut teen

Farragut mom spares no detail (or expense) for teen daughter's lavish birthday bash

By **KEVIN COWAN**, cowan@knews.com
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It is raining cats and dogs on her daughter's big day, and Leslie Gibbs has a horse on her mind.

"We had a rain plan and didn't want to use it," she says. "Brittany's dream was to ride her horse in. If it doesn't work out, I will have a horse for her wedding to ride."

The grand equine entrance will have to wait until Brittany Gibbs ties the knot, thanks to the torrential downpours.

On Sept. 23, Leslie weathered the storm and threw her daughter the ultimate 15th-birthday bash at Maple Grove Inn in West Knoxville.

"It will take me till her wedding day to recover from this party," Leslie jokes.

Her inspiration for the event: MTV's popular and controversial show "My Super Sweet 16," which depicts wealthy teenagers planning over-the-top celebrations, especially birthdays. With most costing six figures, no expense is spared, nor any drama. Tantrums, pouting and ingratitude play important roles in the series, now into its second season.

Leslie and Brittany have been fans of the show since it began, and Leslie decided to throw her only daughter a party in the same vein. Though she wasn't willing to share the grand total cost of the party with us, suffice it to say it would meet MTV's standards.

Leslie, a transportation specialist for a Farragut brokerage firm, contacted MTV to have the network film the party and the events leading up to it. They agreed to follow the affair and were ready to send a crew to Knoxville in July to begin filming.

The MTV gig turned out not to be music to the Gibbsses' ears. Leslie didn't like the tune producers wanted her daughter, a freshman at Farragut High School, to sing.

"We realized they wanted to see a snotty little brat," Leslie says. "They wanted her to be flamboyant and over-the-top, the more attitude the better. That's not Brittany. She's pretty mellow."

"This is just crazy," Brittany said. "People are like, 'Oh, my God. This is a joke.' They think it's a prank or something. (Word about the party is) going around at Webb, CAK and Bearden. I don't know how it spread to all of those schools."

Special delivery Only a fraction of those in the know would get to see what they had heard about. About 150 people received invitations to the event.

The United States Postal Service would not do to deliver the invitations. Brittany, Leslie and Leigh Janous, Leslie's companion, and about a dozen of Brittany's closest friends piled into a stretch Hummer limousine to drop the invitations off in person a few weeks prior to the party. The mailman: Taylor Hall, 19, a debonair sophomore at Furman University and Webb High School graduate.



JOE HOWELL
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Brittany Gibbs is carried into her birthday party at Maple Grove Inn by Webb School of Knoxville athletes Kevin Zirkle, front left, Jeffrey Johnson, front right, Dawson Morton, back left, and Chad Manning, back right, to the cheers of her friends. "Our job is to be eye candy," says Johnson.

Hall got the job because he delivered in the looks department. A friend of his family's recommended him to Leslie. To seal the deal, Taylor sent a photo of himself via cell phone to Leslie.

To deliver the invitations Hall donned a tuxedo with a pink-and-white striped tie. Pink is Brittany's favorite color.

The invitations were a far cry from those found at the local Party City. Done in a rolled scroll style, they were made of silk paper from India.

"It cost \$400 just to ship them here," Leslie said.

For a smooth delivery, Leslie told Brittany she could not get out at each stop. The teen agreed to get out just for the "hot guys."

Party prep Five young hunks didn't require an invitation to the party. The five Webb High School athletes were handpicked to mingle and dance with partygoers. Their uniform: pink bow ties, jeans, and a coat of spray glitter on their bare upper bodies.

"Basically, our job is to be eye candy," said Jeffrey Johnson, a 16-year-old football player at Webb. "It's an odd request, but we have a good story to tell for the rest of our lives."

Jeffrey and the gang weren't the only ones recruited to shake their moneymakers. Leslie hired dancers from the Performer's Edge Dance Studio on Western Avenue as part of the entertainment.

A week before the bash, Leslie, Brittany, friends and family gathered at the studio for a sneak peek at the six-member troupe's routine built around one of Brittany's favorite songs, "SexyBack," by Justin Timberlake.

Choreographer and dancer Sam Bell was a bit taken aback by the invitation to perform at a teen birthday party.

"When she called, I was like, you want us to do what?" Bell said. "We have never really danced around kids that much. We dance more at clubs and on UT's campus. She told us to make it sexy, but we're trying to keep it PG-13."

Finishing touches Six hours before the soiree, there is enough tension to buoy a cinematic melodrama as the rain falls and water flows into the party tent.

"I'm feeling anger, frustration, anxiety," Leslie laments. "It's a freakin' monsoon. Our original date for the party was last Saturday, but that was the weekend of the Tennessee-Florida game. The weather was perfect."

Meanwhile, party planner Whitney Bowman of Tying the Knot scurries around the tent, taking care of this and that.

"We started planning this in March," she says. "This is the most interesting event that I have done. I haven't done anything quite this big. I wanted the kids to come to something like they had never seen and something they will never see again."

Bowman, along with planner Allison Sprouse of Modern Hostess, transformed a white tent on the inn's patio into a girly party palace fit for a princess. White feather boas drape the tent's entrance. White and pink Japanese lanterns hang from the ceiling. Tables are covered in custom linens. Two of the tables look particularly sweet, with jars of pink and green candies, including hand-separated M&M's and Skittles. Giant Pixy Stix are arranged like flowers in vases.

Partygoers will not dine on candy alone. In the Maple Grove Kitchen, chef Brian Besseman is busy preparing heavy hors d'oeuvres.

"It's like, whatever you want, honey," he said about the evening menu. "If she wanted 150 grilled cheese sandwiches, that's what we would do."

Grilled cheese sandwiches? That would be gauche. Snazzy snacks include mini beef Wellingtons, Thai spring rolls, chicken puffs, mini chicken-salad croissants, wrap sandwiches with herb cream cheese, ham and turkey, chicken tenders, teriyaki chicken, stuffed new potatoes, tortilla chips with guacamole, salsa, cheese fondue, a chocolate fountain station and non-alcoholic cosmopolitans.

The culinary centerpiece is a birthday cake in the shape of stacked pillows, done by Peggy Hambright of MagPies in the Old City. The topper is a replica of a tiara to be worn with Brittany's gown for the party.

The intricate cake is one of Hambright's most challenging assignments ever.

"This is definitely in the top three," she said.

While Besseman and his crew finish the food, the hair and makeup team work on Brittany and four of her best friends, who make up the teen princess's court.

Freelance makeup artist and drag performer Justin McKee paints the girls' faces.

"I think my sweet 16 was a steak dinner at Shoney's," he says. "I was just a fat kid wearing husky pants."

McKee takes them from little girls to little women. Brittany resembles a young Sharon Stone, while friend Lauren Weil becomes a dead ringer for singer Carly Simon.

Jared Hollyfield of Salon Visage does the 'dos.

"I feel like a celebrity hairdresser because this is such a big deal. I'm going for '50s-inspired hair," he says.

After sessions with McKee and Hollyfield, Brittany slips into her dream dress, a Reem Acra wedding gown from White Lace and Promises. To finish the look, Leslie lets her play dress-up in some of her own sparkling diamond baubles. Topping off the look: custom iridescent fairy wings from California.

McKee's assistant, Kristin Perkins, gushes at the vision in off-white.

"You're so pretty," she says. "I'm getting her into the next pageant even if it is at Foothills Mall."

Party time As everyone continues to get ready for the party, the first guests descend on the inn. Leslie's friends, with guest lists and walkie-talkies, greet them, most dropped by off by parents, who are told by a Knox County Sheriff's officer that their kids will be searched for drugs, alcohol and weapons before they are admitted.

One partygoer, Hannah Foster, drives up in an Infiniti SUV packed with her friends. There's a problem: She's not on the list, but her pals are. Hannah is told to pull over to the side while the crisis is sorted out.

Hannah did not RSVP. Leslie decides to let her into the party, but not without a stern lecture.

At the door: "You did not RSVP," she says. "It said on the invitation you must RSVP. Now, I'm going to let you in this time. We need that RSVP so we know how much food to prepare. Since you didn't RSVP, that could take away from someone who did."

Hannah says: "I'm so sorry. Thank you so much. I won't even eat."

Leslie assures Hannah she can still eat.

The relieved teen is among about 80 partygoers.

Around 7 p.m., Hall, the invitation deliverer, announces Brittany's arrival. The DJ cranks up "Let's Get It Started" by the Black Eyed Peas. With her court in tow wearing pink and green

satin evening gowns and shiny wings, she enters on a green litter trimmed with pink feathers, carried by four of the shirtless Webb athletes. The original plan had Brittany coming in on her quarter horse, Riley. The fifth Webb footballer, Bo Johnson, dressed in military-style regalia, awaits her.

Cheers, whistles and catcalls fill the tent.

The fanfare is short and sweet, as Brittany and the court make their way back into the inn. Brittany re-emerges in a neutral empire-waist Bianca Nero gown with silver beading.

The birthday girl dances and chats with friends and well-wishers.

After the dance troupe performs, Brittany is pulled onto the black-and-white dance floor for a little treat, lap dances from the group's male members. Her mother receives one, too.

Big surprises After another costume change, this time a blue silk halter dress, Brittany is ready for the night's entertainment headliner, Georgia rapper Bubba Sparxxx.

"Bubba, Bubba, Bubba," the restless crowd chants.

When he walks onto the stage, the youngsters explode with applause and yells. Digital and phone cameras are raised high, like high-tech lighters.

"Happy birthday, Brittany. We love you," shouts the rapper. "We are thrilled to be here. There is no place we would rather be than here in Knoxville, celebrating Brittany's birthday. It's great to be a part of so much love."

Sparxxx opens his set with "Deliverance," his first single, and closes with his biggest hit to date, "Miss New Booty," which is Brittany's ring tone on her cell phone.

After performing the crowd-pleaser, Sparxxx calls an embarrassed Brittany onto the stage and gives the princess a new title.

"Make some noise for Knoxville's official Miss New Booty," he says.

Sparxxx hangs around after the performance and treats 16 lucky people to a meet-and-greet session in a corner room of the inn.

How do you top an appearance by Bubba Sparxxx? You pull out the big guns, this time in the form of a little luxury sports car. Brittany's surprise gift: a 2006 BMW Z4.

"The reason we are having all of this is because of the car," Leslie says. "She had her heart set on a BMW Z4 in this certain shade of blue. Grayson (car dealership) searched all over and found one in Oregon. I didn't want to have to wait a year to give it to her."

Wearing a Bubba Sparxxx "New South" T-shirt, and "Miss New Booty" shorts, Brittany looks stunned when she sees the Sierra blue roadster with big silver bow on the hood. She fans her face as tears fill her eyes. She gives mom a big hug and gets into the car.

Sparxxx hops into the car with her and says, "She needs a Bubba CD."

Almost instantly, one appears. "We rolling now, baby," Sparxxx says.

Brittany can't bring herself to get out of the car that retails for about \$45,000.

"Oh, my God. That's all I can say," she says. "I was thinking a piece of jewelry maybe. This is the best automobile made on the planet. I don't even have a permit yet. This is crazy, crazy, crazy."

Leslie's generosity extends to the partygoers as well. They take home gift cards from teen hot spots Abercrombie & Fitch, American Eagle and Hollister, and bags of candy.

Last words "I'm kind of sad that it's over," Brittany says a few days after the party. "I want it to come back. It was amazing. I've never felt that awesome. I felt like everybody was there

to see me."

Even though Brittany cherishes the extravagant night, she realizes it wasn't necessary for a good time.

"It would've been fine if I had a few friends to go the movies," she says.

Many would opt for a more modest kind of birthday recognition. They will view the car and the party as obscene and overindulgent.

"I don't care," Leslie says. "To each their own. It's about her. It's about me making this the best for her."

She continues, "Brittany's my baby, my princess. If I could do it even bigger, I would. She's so good (Brittany brought home straight A's on her first report of the school year). If she was a snot, a little brat, I wouldn't do this."

So what will Brittany's Sweet 16 birthday party be like?

"Next year, she gets hot dogs at the pool," Leslie says. "That's it."

Kevin Cowan may be reached at 865-342-6426.



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