

# DANCING IN THE STREET



## Anita Oubre struts her stuff in three parade troupes

*By Dean M. Shapiro*

New Orleans is known worldwide as a city whose people and visitors love to party and have fun. Dozens of festivals, parades and other festive events that happen frequently here are proof of that, and this is where Anita Matamoros Oubre is in her element.

A hospitality industry employee by profession, Anita is an entertainer by choice, consistent with her bubbly, outgoing, perpetually cheerful personality. As a member of three women's dance clubs, she loves to parade in colorful costumes and twirl decorated umbrellas – most of which she designs and decorates herself – especially during Mardi Gras and other festive annual events.

"I'm a New Orleans gal through and through and this is what I love doing," Anita proudly proclaimed. "When we're out on the parade route you can see the joy. You can feel it. People are cheering for us on both sides of the streets. They're having a good time and yelling 'Go girl!' and they're trying to mimic our moves. They're dancing to the music and everybody's in a real happy, euphoric place."

Sadly, the COVID-19 outbreak has brought the city's famous celebrations and parading traditions to a near-complete hiatus and Anita sadly laments this unexpected and unplanned byproduct of the malaise that has spread worldwide. But even despite not

being able to regularly do what she loves most, she has taken part in some smaller, low-key events in which she could dress in costume and celebrate to a limited extent.

During a recent Saturday in May, Anita and several other members of her Muff-A-Lottas dance troupe dressed in costume and helped out with a food distribution at the former Holy Angels Academy on St. Claude Avenue. “It was very hot that day and having a mask on made it even more uncomfortable and exhausting for the three hours we were out there,” she said. “It took me two days to recover but it was nice just getting out and being able to dress up again,” she added.

Most recently, Anita and a dozen of her friends from the New Orleans Baby Dolls – another one of the groups she parades with – celebrated the birthday of one of their older members by staging a brief, fully masked, second line, accompanied by a single horn player, on the street where they were gathered. “It was for a whole half a block,” she laughed. “We were in



costume and it felt great, doing what we love to do.”

Growing up in Mid-City and later in Kenner, the daughter of a Nicaraguan father and a New Orleans born-and-raised mother, Anita took dance classes with the New Orleans Recreation Department and elsewhere over the years. She attended Bonnabel and Alcee Fortier high schools, then went on to Delgado Community College where she became editor-in-chief of the student newspaper. After receiving her Associates Degree there, she enrolled at Loyola University where she wrote for their student newspaper, and received her B.A. in Media Arts and Communications, minoring in English and print journalism.

On a professional level, she wrote feature articles for a monthly newspaper primarily targeting the city’s African American community. One of those articles, on the late Antoinette K-Doe, founder of the Ernie K-Doe Baby Dolls, and two other legendary Baby Dolls, eventually led to Anita becoming a Baby Doll herself.

“Sitting there interviewing these New Orleans icons and listening to their stories about the Baby Dolls’ history and traditions was very exciting to me,” Anita said. “And then, years later, it came full circle when I was invited to be a Baby Doll myself.”

She is also a member of the Lady Rollers Social Aid and Pleasure Club.

In addition to Mardi Gras parades, Anita and the groups she belongs to also perform for festivals, conventions, Carnival balls, private parties and for seniors at facilities for the elderly. They also do charitable work, sponsoring or participating in drives to collect supplies for local schools. In addition, they help out with donations and food to families of members who have lost loved ones.

“All of these clubs that I’m involved in are not only dance-based, they’re also sisterhoods,” Anita explained. “The community service is what’s really at the heart of each one of them.”

As for her “day job,” Anita recently returned to her desk as the director of human resources for a French Quarter hotel after the past several months of



working from home. A large part of her job involves calling employees and other staff who have been furloughed and asking them to return to work, as well as serving as their trainer in COVID-prevention protocols.

On the home front, Anita and her husband, Conrad – a much-in-demand welder who specializes in forging New Orleans’ famed wrought iron and decorative fencing – are enjoying being “empty-nesters” after jointly raising six kids in what she called “a real-life ‘Brady Bunch’ household. He was my neighbor and it was a second marriage for both of us. He had two kids, I had three and we had one together,” she explained. Each child was instilled with the importance of education and learning and they are all embarked on successful careers.

As a devout Roman Catholic, Anita enjoys being a regular Sunday churchgoer, especially while listening to Conrad singing in the choir. “I can hear his voice all the way in the back row,” she laughs. But, on the more serious side, she prays for the continued good health of her family and an end to the current public health crisis, as well as a return to doing what she loves best – entertaining and helping people.

“Dance is such a beautiful art form,” Anita said, noting that she is a season subscriber to the New Orleans Ballet Association. “And when I’m dancing myself it gives me life; it gives me joy. It makes me feel really happy and I love sharing that joy with others.”