

(This article was published on Georgia State University's homepage on September 17, 2013. View it here: <http://www.gsu.edu/2013/09/17/student-travels-with-hip-hop-tour/>.)

[head] Picture Perfect: From a Small Town to a National Tour

[deck] Art student goes on tour with hip-hop artist 2Chainz and Nicki Minaj

[byline] By Sarah Gilbreath

*This article is part of Generation Georgia State, a series that highlights the academic, personal and career accomplishments of Georgia State students, alumni, faculty and staff who are the first in their families to attend college.*

Even before graduating from college, art major Johnny Self has already accomplished what most professional photographers only dream of: he was the backstage photographer on the national tour for 2Chainz and Nicki Minaj.

"I was shooting a lot of nightlife. That's how I really started meeting people."

Johnny had been working with a promotional team, who booked him to shoot gigs in the city. It was during one of these shows that he met hip-hop artist 2Chainz, who was impressed by his work.

2Chainz was about to go on a six-week national tour with Nicki Minaj, and he offered Johnny the chance to join the tour as the backstage photographer.

"That was the first time I thought, 'Wow, Johnny, you could actually be a photographer,'" said Johnny. "I thought, 'this is a calling. This is a sign.' It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

TO WATCH A VIDEO OF JOHNNY'S STORY, CLICK HERE.

No one in his family had ever been to college. They joined the family recycling business in Adairsville, and expected him to do the same. But Johnny wanted to do something more.

"I feel like I was programmed to do something else," he said. "I wanted to be creative. I decided to go my own route and go to college."

That decision would change his life, and launch his career.

Even though he was bucking his family tradition, his parents supported his decision.

"It's hard going against the norm in my family," said Johnny. "It's been a learning experience, but a good one."

He was accepted to several private art schools, but soon realized that the cost would be prohibitive.

“I couldn’t afford the art schools that I got into,” he said.

Instead, he enrolled in a local community college, where he took two years of classes. His dream of going away to college once again seemed out of reach, but fate had other ideas.

“I like to say that Georgia State chose me,” he said. “I showed up on campus by total accident: I made a wrong turn. And without that wrong turn, I would have never have been here.”

Once he saw the campus, he fell in love with the school.

“It’s the best choice I’ve ever made in my life,” he said. “I was blown away.”

After growing up in a single-stoptlight town, Johnny knew that he wanted to be in Atlanta.

“The city is where I need to be,” he said. “It’s where my career has lead me.”

Johnny quickly got involved with Plaza on campus, and started following the music scene downtown. By spring, he was photographing concerts downtown, and by summer, 2Chainz had asked him to join the tour.

The tour went to almost every major city in America.

“We were in a different city every single night. The experience was breathtaking.”

Johnny’s goal was to showcase the artists and capture their life on the road. Traveling on the tour bus was unlike anything he had done before, and he got to know all the members of the show.

“Nicki Minaj told me I was cute,” he said. “That’s something I will never forget. That was my favorite moment.”

Johnny credits Georgia State with helping him start his career.

“If it weren’t for Georgia State, I literally wouldn’t have gotten that opportunity. And that’s the opportunity of a lifetime.”