

Fredericksburg pays tribute to beloved artist Johnny P. Johnson

- By JEFF BRANSCOME / THE FREE LANCE-STAR (July 8, 2018)
- PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The teenager felt angry and alone in the psychiatric ward of the hospital.

Nathan Lawson’s father had died a year earlier, and some worried he was suicidal. But nobody at the hospital could help, or so it seemed to him at the time.

Then Johnny P. Johnson paid him a visit with a large art pad under his arm and a smile on his face. Lawson, then 15, normally hated it when adults smiled at him. But on that day, the smile from Johnson, his art teacher at Fredericksburg’s James Monroe High School, meant the world.

Johnson is among the Fredericksburg region’s most well-known and respected artists, but those who know him say he created another legacy of compassion. Or as Lawson put it: “His art may be valuable, but his heart is priceless.”

Johnson’s friends and family shared stories about the beloved artist and retired art teacher during Saturday’s inaugural Johnny P. Johnson Day celebration at a packed Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site) in downtown Fredericksburg.

Lawson, now a restaurant manager and artist in his 40s, could not be there because he lives in Texas, but his aunt, Elaine Lawson, shared her nephew’s written tribute at the event. Johnson, 82, and his wife, Jean, listened from a front pew as people described how he had impacted them or the community as a whole.

He has donated thousands of dollars’ worth of paintings to charities, inspired students to become art teachers themselves and served as a role model for civility, those who know him said.

Johnson started teaching in 1959 at Walker–Grant School, Fredericksburg’s first publicly funded school for black students. He graduated from Virginia State University with an art degree, but had to teach all subjects to his sixth-grade class. He also taught a high school art class, coached basketball and served as an assistant principal for no additional pay, a fellow teacher recalled.

Richard Garnett, who became Walker–Grant’s principal during integration, said Johnson knew how to tackle controversial topics in a calm and collected manner. He mentored a countless number of students, he said, helping them deal with the anger they felt during the push for equal rights.

“I’ve never heard anyone say a bad word about Johnny P. Johnson,” Garnett said. “That speaks to the content of this man’s character and his life’s work.”

Mandy Carr said she grew up believing stereotypes about African-Americans, having never really interacted with them. She met Johnson after graduating from college, and her perspective changed. Back then, Johnson chaired the Fine Arts Department at Fredericksburg's James Monroe High School, and Carr was a rookie teacher there.

"You opened my eyes to a whole different way of thinking; you educated me," she told Johnson. "Because I was ignorant of what it would be like to have a meaningful conversation with someone who wasn't like me."

University of Mary Washington President Troy Paino noted how Johnson became the Fredericksburg school's first black faculty member in 1968. He taught an art education class and would go on to serve as an adjunct professor for two decades.

"Johnny P. Johnson paved the way for a new era," Paino said.

The Rev. Lawrence Davies, a former Fredericksburg mayor, spoke about Johnson's role as a civil rights activist who pushed for civility. During the civil rights movement, he said, a group of teenagers wanted to loot downtown Fredericksburg as a form of protest.

Johnson and other adults learned about the plan, and met with the teenagers to discourage them from carrying it out. The teens decided against the riot, changing their objective from "destructive to instructive," Davies said.

Marguerite Young, a former colleague of Johnson's at Walker-Grant, described him as being "obsessed with keeping the peace." "No one, no one, has done more than Johnny P. to help keep Fredericksburg civil during the civil rights struggle," she added.

Johnson's sons, Shelton and John Patrick Johnson, offered some light-hearted comments about their dad, who is affectionately known to many as "Johnny P."

Shelton Johnson said he cried as a kid during his father's birthday because he wanted a gift, too. So Johnny Johnson started getting presents for the whole family on his own birthday.

John Patrick Johnson joked that, as a child, he was his dad's greatest critic. He would tell him that his abstract art looked like someone simply spilled paint onto a canvas, he recalled to laughter.

He also remembered finding some unsigned paintings under his dad's bed and how Johnny Johnson corrected him when he referred to the pieces as art. "That's not art," his dad told him at the time. "Art is nothing until you share it."

So it's fitting that the general public can see a new mural of Johnson at the back of Corky's on Sophia Street. Xavier Richardson, Johnson's long-time friend, unveiled the 14-foot by 18-foot mural by artist Bill Harris after the ceremony at Shiloh Baptist.

Harris then handed Johnson a paint brush so he could add his own touch to the painting. Johnson, known for putting others before himself, dabbed the brush into blue paint and wrote, "Bill is great!"

An emotional Johnson told The Free Lance–Star that he was overwhelmed, humbled and somewhat embarrassed because he never did things for attention. “The Lord helped me to do the right thing, but for the right reasons,” he said.



Johnny P. Johnson makes a quip about how his hair is depicted in a mural by artist Bill Harris during Saturday's event.



Well-wishers greet Johnson at the close of an event kicking off 'Celebrate Johnny P. Johnson Day' at the church.



Cameron Johnson hugs his grandfather after singing a song honoring him at Shiloh Baptist Church (Old Site).



Johnny P. Johnson adds his touch to a mural by local artist Bill Harris during the event.