

Navy Vet Looking for Shipmate Gets Documentary Treatment

The 92-year-old man found who he was looking for, but that's just where the story begins.



By Scott Viau, Patch Staff

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It started with a simple Facebook post.

For the past year or two, Cheryl Johnson Brown's father kept telling her that he was the only one alive from when he served as a signalman on the LST-218 during World War II.

Joliet resident Raymond DeVere Johnson is 92 years old. It was quite possible, even likely, that he was the only one alive.

But Brown kept telling her father that he wasn't. She and her family took the photo of Johnson holding a sign asking if there was anyone else alive from the ship. Within days, the photo went viral with over a million shares.

Then what was thought to be unlikely became very real. There was another person still alive. John Heimsoth was living in Missouri. He and Johnson are the only ones left from the LST-218 team.

Documentary filmmaker Kyle Olson also saw that post and he was struck with an idea for a film.

"My gears started spinning about how this could be a good story," Olson said.

Plenty of media outlets wanted to tell Johnson's story, but Brown wanted to keep her father's story at least somewhat private.

"Kyle kept asking me and my kids are going 'Mom, protect grandma and grandpa,'" Brown said. "It's hard when you're getting thousands of messages."

Olson approached her again and after some discussions Brown and Johnson allowed Olson to film the meeting.

"Kyle was awesome. Him and his crew were amazing," Brown said. "I'm so thankful we did it now. Most people never get to experience something like this."

Olson got a crew together and flew to Stover, Missouri where Heimsoth was living and did a pre-interview with him and then flew to Joliet to speak to Johnson.

"Then we followed the whole journey of following a 92-year-old man from Joliet, Illinois down to Stover, Missouri," Olson said.

But the story is more than just the reunion. It deals with the realities of aging, the difficulties of the road trip itself and a daughter's love for her father.

It's also about a man who left the war and never looked back.

"A lot of times the media portrays the veterans as having PTSD or being completely involved with the world of the war," Olson said. "That was not the case here. He was very open about the fact that he left the war and wanted to put that in the past. He was proud to have served, but he wanted to move on and start a family."

The stories that Johnson told weren't just new to Olson, they were new to Brown, who learned many things about her father while filming the documentary.

"I sat there like, 'Wow,'" Brown said. "My dad never talked about it before. He never showed me his scrapbook. I never even knew."

Johnson is a man of few words. Perhaps that's why he never mentioned what happened in the war to his daughter.

When asked what he thought of the Facebook post and how popular it became, Johnson said he "didn't think at all."

When asked about meeting his shipmate, Johnson said it was "neat" and that he "didn't remember him."

Understandable for not having seen someone for 70 years.

But for Brown, watching her father meet up with the man he served with was something she'll never forget.

"It was really emotional, it was awesome. It was an amazing day," Brown said. "They were both young men when they boarded that ship."

The film is about 95 percent done. Olson is currently in the post-production stage and looking for a distributor.

"I know we have something good here," Olson said. "It's just a matter of finding the best home for it. That could be HBO documentaries, that could be History Channel or some of the well-known film festivals across the country."