

Local icon Johnny Johnson dies

Beloved artist, philanthropist, teacher passes away at age 86

ADELE UPHAUS

The Free Lance-Star

Johnny P. Johnson, who for more than 60 years inspired the Fredericksburg community as an artist, humanitarian, philanthropist, teacher, mentor and coach, died early Saturday morning at the age of 86.

“He served as an example of what a successful professional artist looks like, but also what a decent human being should be,” said one of Johnson’s many mentees, the Georgia-based artist Ayokunle Odeleye. “Johnny P. Johnson served as an example of how to treat each other regardless of difference. I don’t think there is a church in Fredericksburg [big enough] to hold a funeral for this man.”

Fredericksburg Mayor Mary Katherine Greenlaw, who taught with Johnson at James Monroe High School in the late 1960s and maintained a friendship with him ever since, said he “made everyone whose life he touched better by knowing him.”

“I don’t even know how to start talking about someone who absolutely lived his faith and belief in humankind,” Greenlaw said.

Gaye Adegbalola, who also taught with Johnson, said she has been “in and out of tears all day.”

“Not because he passed, but because this world doesn’t have



Well-wishers greet Johnson at the close of an event kicking off ‘Celebrate Johnny P. Johnson Day’ at Shiloh Baptist Church Old Site in 2018.

him anymore,” she said. “Oh, he was so good. He was just so good.”

Johnson was born in North Carolina in 1936 to a mother who worked as a domestic and a father who was a mill worker. His artistic calling was clear from his earliest years.

“He shared with us once that when he was very young, he used to sit in church and sketch in the air,” said Janice Davies, a lifelong friend and fellow member of Shiloh Baptist Church Old Site. “He painted a picture of so many things. He painted life as he went along.”

Johnson attended Virginia State University, where he played basketball, becoming captain and eventually earning a spot in the VSU Sports Hall of Fame. He would also receive a master’s degree in fine arts from Howard University and completed additional studies at the Corcoran School of Art.

He arrived in Fredericksburg in 1959 and started teaching at Walker-Grant School, the city’s first publicly funded school for Black students.

The town was deeply segregated and there was limited hous-

ing available for Black teachers, so the tradition was for them to live with a student’s family, said Xavier Richardson, senior vice president and chief corporate development officer at Mary Washington Healthcare and a lifelong friend of Johnson’s.

Johnson lived with the Bridges family and taught sixth grade. Richardson’s future wife, LaZalia Bridges, was in the first class he ever taught and would talk about how all the sixth-grade girls were “crazy” about this “young, attractive” new teacher.

In addition to teaching all subjects to his sixth-grade class, Johnson also taught a high school art class, coached basketball and served as an assistant principal for no additional pay.

Johnson told The Free Lance-Star earlier this year that he only intended to teach for a year and then he was going to “turn the art world upside in New York.”

But he stayed because he fell in love with a local girl, Jean Blackstock, and because he fell in love with teaching.

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Johnson

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“Our teachers were role models bigger than life,” said Richardson, who was also in one of Johnson’s classes. “Although the segregated Walker-Grant didn’t have the facilities of other schools, we had all the support we needed in the form of the teachers.”

Richardson said the only C he ever received in a class was from Johnson.

“He knew what my potential was and that I wasn’t living up to it,” Richardson recalled. “He made me a better person because I knew the excellence he expected.”

Throughout the turbulent 1960s, Johnson served as a leader to students advocating for civil rights in Fredericksburg by organizing sit-ins at local lunch counters.

Pamela Bridgewater, a career diplomat who was also Johnson’s student at one time, recalled how he was among the leaders who taught the students about peaceful protest.

“When several people would come to foment unrest, he would be there to quell it,” she said.

Johnson would go on to teach at James Monroe High School and as an adjunct professor of art at Germanna Community College and the University of Mary Washington—becoming UMW’s first Black faculty member in 1968.

In 1977, Johnson was named Virginia Teacher of the Year, the first time an art teacher earned that honor.

He told the Free Lance-Star earlier this year that, “I always have felt good about students, because ... it’s good for them to see somebody who cares about them as an individual, and not how much their family’s income [is], or what a great athlete they are.”

Johnson retired from teaching after 32 years and became a full-time artist. He opened a studio on Charles Street and was a founding member of Art First, the city’s oldest artist co-op.

He was a deacon and Sunday School teacher at Shiloh Baptist Old Site and a lifelong member of the NAACP.



FILE, ROBERT A. MARTIN, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Johnny Johnson talks with Michael Evans, 10, about his art project for the Rappahannock Big Brothers Big Sisters art show at Old Mill Park in Fredericksburg in June 1988.



FILE, PETER CIHELKA, THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Fredericksburg artist, educator and humanitarian Johnny P. Johnson is honored during ‘Celebrate Johnny P. Johnson Day’ in Fredericksburg on July 7, 2018.

He was a leader of Fredericksburg’s Council on Human Relations and the Fredericksburg Area Community Relations Organization in the 1960s and 1980s, respectively.

When Bridgewater was serving as ambassador to Benin in the early 2000s, she invited Johnson to come over and conduct art workshops. After the visit, Johnson created the Benin Art Support Project as a way to continue supporting arts education in the west African country.

Bridgewater also invited Johnson to come to Jamaica, where she served as ambassador from 2010 to 2013, for the country’s celebration for the 50th anniversary of its independence from the United Kingdom.

There was an exhibit of two dozen of his paintings at the U.S. Embassy and Johnson visited local schools and senior living facilities and did multiple radio and TV interviews talking about his art and approach to social commentary.

Johnson was generous with his time and his talent, donating thousands of dollars worth of paintings to community orga-

nizations, Richardson said.

In 2018, Fredericksburg city officials declared July 7 “Johnny P. Johnson Day.” There was a packed celebration of his life at Shiloh Old Site and local artist Bill Harris unveiled a mural featuring Johnson at the back of Corky’s on Sophia Street.

When Harris gave Johnson a paintbrush and asked him to add his own touch to the mural, Johnson instead wrote, “Bill is great!”

Greenlaw said she’s glad the community had a chance to honor Johnson while he was still alive.

“So often we don’t honor people while they are with us,” she said.

Adegbalola said that in losing Johnson, “the world has lost a true Christian, a man whose living was Christ-like.

“We were blessed by having Johnny P. Johnson,” she said. “He was just Christ-like in the way he treated people. He showed us how to live, which is what Christ did. He showed people a way to live.”

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