

SHAWN
JOHNSON



Courtesy/Jeremy P. Amick

Silver Star Families photographer Shawn Johnson battled cancer while serving in the U.S. Navy. He continues to support his fellow veterans through his professional and volunteer work.

Lessons learned from adversity

Veteran uses life's obstacles to connect to servicemembers

By Jeremy P. Amick
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The opportunity to leave home and embark upon a career often removed from one's hometown is the dream of many an aspiring youth.

But for local veteran Shawn Johnson, his pursuit of a career in the military would land him face-to-face with his own mortality.

With a father serving in the U.S. Army, Johnson was born at Fort Riley, Kan., in 1971 — on the post where his father was stationed.

A year later, his father was discharged from the service, and after a couple of moves, the family eventually purchased a house in Burns, Kan.

Johnson attended Peabody High School and graduated in 1990. As is often the common refrain in the song of youth, he began both working and attending college full-time.

"I really didn't have much time for anything during those days," Johnson recalled. "Between work, school and trying to maintain some semblance of a social life, my grades began to suffer."

With an admission that would please virtually any Mizzou fan, Johnson grew tired of life in Kansas and longed for a

change of scenery.

"I knew that if I joined the Army there was a chance that I would be stationed at Fort Leavenworth or Riley," stated the veteran. "If I joined the Air Force, there was the potential for assignment to McConnell Air Force Base (in Wichita)."

In pursuit of a rewarding career and not wanting to risk the chance of remaining in his home state, he made the decision to join the Navy in 1992.

On Sept. 21, 1992, the fledgling recruit reported to his boot camp at Great Lakes Naval Station just north of Chicago. During his initial training, Johnson caught pneumonia and had his boot camp extended by two weeks.

Graduating a day before Thanksgiving, the young sailor reported to his advance training at the same location, and began receiving instruction in becoming a deck-hand.

"We learned things such as how to tie nautical knots, fight fires onboard a ship, navigational basics and rules of the sea," Johnson noted.

Following his graduation that December, Johnson returned home for two weeks of leave before having to report to his first duty assignment.

Catching pneumonia yet a second time while home on leave, the newly trained sailor began to suspect something might be wrong.

"I was terribly sick and really just

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thought I was going to die," stated Johnson.

Recovering from his second bout with illness, Johnson reported to Norfolk, Va., in early January 1993 and was assigned to serve aboard the USS Mount Whitney — the command ship for the Navy's Second Fleet.

The ship had recently been refitted with a new computer system and was still going through testing trials. Johnson spent his first week onboard the vessel performing mundane tasks such as scraping paint and mopping decks.

The ship then left port to begin trials and returned a week later to prepare for a second trial run. During the break in trials, Johnson caught pneumonia again and was sent to see the ship's surgeon.

"The doctor said that I was too sick to remain on the ship during maneuvers and called an ambulance to pick me up," stated the former sailor.

After arriving at Portsmouth Naval Hospital, the young sailor was asked by one of the attending doctors whether he smoked.

"When I told the doctor I did not, he said that there was a problem."

Following a series of tests, doctors discovered that Johnson had cancer in one of his lungs but could not perform surgery right away.

"I thought I was finished," noted Johnson. "Everyone that I had known to have cancer died."

The doctors determined that the sailor's lung could not be saved. In February 1993, Johnson underwent surgery to have the lung removed. He remained at Portsmouth for several months of recovery after the surgery.

"I'm glad that I was in the military when I had my surgery because they were a lot harder on me," noted Johnson. "Whenever I would be walking around during recovery, I would droop my shoulders ... and the doctor would yell at me to 'Stand up straight!'"

Asked whether he wanted to stay in the Navy and face a potential career behind a desk or receive a medical discharge,

Johnson requested the latter.

"I signed up for the Navy so that I could travel and see the world," said the veteran. "What was the point of staying if I was going to be stuck behind a desk?"

Johnson was transferred to the Transient Personnel Office and received a medical discharge in October 1993. He returned to his boyhood home in Burns, Kan., and enrolled in vocational rehabilitation training with the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Through this program, he was able to attend college at Emporia State University and graduated with a bachelor's degree in public administration in December 1996.

He was hired by the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) in 1997 and served approximately two years as a district executive overseeing five counties. During his tenure with the BSA, he was able to increase Scouting units in his area by 40 percent.

Hired by the Kansas state office of the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans' Employment and Training Service (U.S. DOL-VETS) in July 1999, Johnson served as a veterans' program assistant overseeing grant programs and providing technical assistance to veterans with employment issues.

In October 2009, he was hired as an assistant director with the U.S. DOL-VETS office for Missouri and now resides in Jefferson City.

After meeting the author of this article, Johnson began volunteering with the Silver Star Families of America and was recently appointed as the organization's official photographer.

Reflecting on the brief period that he spent in the service and his battle with cancer, the veteran still considers the military as an important part of his life.

"The opportunities I have had throughout the last several years are all because of my service in the Navy," he said. "I'm just glad to have had the opportunity to serve — no matter how brief — and to use my experiences to support my fellow veterans."

Jeremy P. Amick served is the public affairs officer for the Silver Star Families of America.