

Paul B. Johnson

A Legacy Passed Down

Perhaps Paul Johnson's career aspirations were shaped when he was an infant in his crib, and God's deep voice proclaimed from above, "You will be an engineer!"

"As it turns out, that was not the voice of God, but of my father, a civil engineer himself," Paul laughs today. "Who knows how much of your life's path is shaped by choice, or destiny, or opportunity, or obligation. But I always felt that following in my father's footsteps was what I had to do. He was my childhood hero."

While Paul and his father were always incredibly close, he and his mother had a hard time hearing each other—literally. Only decades later, when his wife urged him to go to an audiologist, was he diagnosed with a hearing deficiency that prevented him from detecting certain frequencies prevalent in female voices. "There's a certain range where I can hear the noise, but I can't distinguish what's being said," he explains. "The words just sound like background clutter. In hindsight, my mother probably said a lot to me in that frequency. We had no idea we couldn't understand each other—we were just fighting constantly."

To help diffuse the tension, Paul's father brought him along on engineering projects, which helped cultivate his lifelong interest in the industry. But no amount of avoidance could keep the peace, and when Paul was in early elementary school, he and his mother had a fight that became a defining moment in his life. "She told me that as soon as I graduated high school, I was either joining the Army or going away to college," he recounts. "Either way, she said, I was out of there. I remember getting on my bike and riding to a friend's house because I was so shocked. Thereafter, she reminded me periodically that it was only a matter of time before I was on my own. It ingrained in me that I better do something in my life to be successful, because I was going to need to

rely on myself."

In this way, Paul learned how to forge his own path forward, but life can have a way of bringing us full circle. He now leads the way in preserving his family's legacy as the President of Charles P. Johnson and Associates, Inc. (CPJ), the full-service land planning, civil, and environmental engineering firm launched by his father. Following in his father's footsteps while marching to the beat of his own drum, he wouldn't be where he is today without the impact of both his parents as people, imperfect but profound.

"In childhood, I saw my father as a godlike figure," Paul reflects. "He believed in the power of the mind and used to tell me I could make a glass move across the table if I just focused hard enough. But by the end, he was mortal. Conversely, I spent many years thinking my mother was a bad person because she was so much harder on me than on my siblings. However, I know now that she did me a favor, because

it shaped me into the tougher, stronger person I am today. We're all just people making our way through the good and bad of life, with the responsibility to help others along the way the best we can. That's what we strive to do at CPJ."

CPJ was launched in 1971 as Johnson, McCordic & Thompson, P.A., in Silver Spring, Maryland, specializing in planning, engineering, and surveying for residential and commercial properties. Paul joined in 1976 and was profoundly shaped by the strengths and personalities of its three partners. His father, Charlie, was the creative planner. Another partner, Bruce Thompson, was the no-nonsense surveyor. The last one, Mike McCordic, was fully-focused on engineering.

Since that time, and with the help of Paul's leadership, CPJ has evolved to focus on the five core services of planning, engineering, public sector projects, surveying, and environmental



services. It is now comprised of around ninety employees spread across several offices, each with its own niche. The Fairfax operation, where Paul has worked for 32 years now, specializes in challenging in-fill development projects. Its Maryland site excels at processing large subdivisions faster than other firms can, thanks to their unique assembly-line approach of pooling a variety of specialists to obtain the various agency approvals required by the state. Their Frederick office acts as a survey outpost and is poised to become a design office in case the surrounding market gears up, as well as a Gaithersburg office and an Annapolis office.

Thanks to his leadership and work ethic, Paul was recognized in 1994 by the Northern Virginia Building Industry Association as Associate of the Year, and since then, peers, contractors, and developers have repeatedly voted to recognize CPJ's quality work. "I firmly believe that no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care," he affirms. "Caring is the most important part of what we do. I want to make all my clients a success. Only then will they make us a success. Therefore, we do all we can to do quality work for our people. It's all a continuation of my father's vision."

This vision was firmly ingrained in Paul from the earliest days of his childhood growing up the second child of four and the oldest boy. He was born at the Old Sibley hospital in Washington, DC, and raised in Prince Georges County, where his father worked and his mother stayed at home. She was social, outgoing, and Type A, and each of the children had similar traits, except for Paul. "My older sister was queen of the neighborhood, and my younger brother was the mayor," he laughs. "My youngest brother was the funny guy. But I was a shy, introverted kid afraid of my own shadow. I was a good kid, but I just wasn't what my mom wanted me to be. She absolutely loved me, but we just didn't get along. I think 90 percent of what I tried to give her got lost, and vice versa. We each felt like we gave a lot, but neither felt we were getting anything back."

When their disagreements became too much, Paul would hop on his bicycle and ride far away. "To this day, bikes represent freedom for me," he affirms. "I had about a mile radius to explore when I was on foot, but when I was on a bike, that expanded to ten or twelve miles. It opened up a whole new world for me, which is

why bikes are still so important to me today. Going out for a ride helps to clear my mind and answer my questions." Like Paul, Charlie also sought escapes—sometimes pulling weeds in the garden, but oftentimes at work.

Paul brought home the best grades in the family, but any B he got was worse than his sibling's lower grades, because his mother knew he could have gotten an A. He was taught to spell phonetically, and because he couldn't hear very well, he struggled with spelling. Math became his dominant subject, pointing him down the engineering path his father had predicted when he was a baby. "I always knew I wanted to be an engineer, even back then," he says. "Because of my hearing problems, I thought my dad was a 'silver' engineer, not a civil engineer. I wanted to be one better, so I said I was going to be a gold engineer."

Aside from his early engineering explorations with his father, Paul loved kickball and was crowned the dodgeball champ of his third-grade class. He made spending money by mowing the lawn for his father, picking raspberries at his grandfather's farm nearby, and taking on a paper route. He had a lot of energy that was hard to focus at times, so his parents placed him in a private school in a class of eight for a year and a half. "In private school, I had to wear a tie," he recalls. "The first thing I realized was that I could still be a dodgeball champ and a kickball hero in a tie. I also began competing with another math whiz in the class. We would teach ourselves and race through extra workbooks to see who could get further. By the time I returned to public school, I had gone through three years of math in half that time."

In 1963, Paul's parents took up golf and joined a country club, which meant the kids could go swimming every weekend. Around that time, Paul joined the Boy Scouts and became an Acolyte in the Episcopal Church, where he considered a future as a priest or a minister. "I was drawn to the comfort of peace, serenity, and belief," he remembers. "I liked the responsibility of my role and the friends I met there. The Church has always been an important part of my life."

In high school, Paul negotiated a deal with his ninth-grade geometry teacher that, in lieu of doing homework, he could tutor students during class and help by solving particularly tough problems on the board. "Some of the kids just needed some one-on-one attention to get caught

up, and she knew I was capable of handling that," Paul says. "My dad was a master negotiator, so I learned from watching him." He also played football after his father convinced him the girls would love it. He excelled, but a faulty facemask led to a traumatic nose injury that reigned in his initiative.

When it came time to go on to college, Paul followed his parents' wishes and enrolled at Virginia Tech, where his grandfather had gone. "My father sent me off with three rules: party hardy, get C's, and pass the Engineering in Training (EIT) exam," Paul says. Dragged down by a traumatic breakup with his high school girlfriend, he went through a period of abysmal grades, but his father reiterated that getting C's was okay because learning about people was more important than learning formulas. One period filled with difficult courses Paul achieved a 3.2 only to have his dad ask "what's wrong, couldn't get a date?" Away from his family and able to define himself for the first time, Paul flourished and began to come out of his shell. "Families are great, but it can be hard to get them to see you in a different light," he says. "But on campus, I was free to grow."

As he prepared to enter the workforce in 1973, Charlie's firm was in its early stages, and he urged Paul to seek work at another firm to diversify his experience. "It was outstanding advice," Paul affirms. He landed a job at Matz Childs and Associates, but when Paul walked in for his first day of work, he discovered his supervisor used to work for his father. "My dad had promoted someone else over him, which he was still not happy about," Paul says. He stayed for a year and then decided he wanted to shift his focus to a more technical track, taking a job as a structural engineer in Richmond. There, he helped design the West Falls Church metro station—a major contract and unique challenge requiring skill in cutting-edge techniques.

Paul spent a year completing the project, but right before they reached the finish line, market conditions shifted and put everything on hold. The firm abruptly let go of all but three employees—a lesson in the tremendous variability of the industry. He took the opportunity to shift his focus from structures back to land development, and a year later, Bruce Thompson at CPJ picked up a highway contract and brought Paul onboard as a design engineer doing block

grants for neighborhoods in Prince Georges County. "They were developed without curbs or gutters, with very poor amenities and failing sewer systems," Paul explains. "We retrofitted everything under the Block Grant program, and once the revitalization was complete, I moved over to the engineering section."

Several years later, Mike McCordic left, and Paul became head of the engineering section. In 1980, when Fred Mirmiran came onboard and the firm expanded to take on public works transportation projects, it evolved into Johnson, Mirmiran & Thompson, P.A., growing tremendously as it opened offices in Fairfax, Baltimore, and Silver Spring. Meanwhile, Paul tackled his last remaining elements of shyness and introversion by joining Toastmasters. The program's public speaking exercises taught him that he had a sense of humor all his own—not as flashy as the wit and charm of the rest of his family, but engaging and empowering in its own rite.

This period of professional growth and prosperity was fractured personally, however, when Paul's mother was killed in a car accident in 1984. "It was a huge shock," he remembers. "We had just started to really understand each other, and even though we knew we'd never see eye to eye, I felt like at least we knew we cared for each other." Charlie became less active in the firm, and as Managing Partner, Fred convinced Paul to take over operation of the Fairfax location.

With Bruce Thompson having left to become a developer, Fred and Charlie split the firm in 1988, giving CPJ the identity it has today. "For my dad, money wasn't his goal," Paul says. "He wanted to build a firm that was outstanding in its reputation, and with a really solid culture. He wanted to invest in people and grow the firm according to where employees wanted to take us. As a result, we didn't grow just for the sake of growth."

Around 2000, Charlie and Paul began talking about Paul's ascent to President of the firm. The transition lasted until 2006, when Paul took the reins fully. "My brother and sister also came to work for CPJ, and as dad got older, he was very thankful we were involved, because he knew he could really trust us," Paul says. "He always knew we'd have the firm's best interest at heart. In a sense, we joined the firm to get closer to him." Charlie passed away from Alzheimer's disease in

2016, but thanks to CPJ, a big part of him remains alive still, changing the world a little bit each day.

Today, fifteen of the firm's original shareholders are still with the business, and CPJ has opened ownership up to all employees by giving out shares as longevity bonuses. Paul remains the largest shareholder, and as a leader, he works to build consensus. He is also markedly cautious and thoughtful, never one for a knee-jerk response. "When people bring me new thoughts and ideas, it's important to me to take time to mill it over," he says. He also relies on Vistage, the executive coaching program that has helped elevate his approach to leadership to a new plane. "Vistage helped me see that my job is really more about developing the next group of leaders so our mission can carry on after I'm gone," he says.

Along the way, Paul has been grateful for the relationship he shares with his wife, Leslie. The two were acquaintances through her work with the Northern Virginia Building Industry Association, and though she originally turned him down when he asked for a date, he tried again. "It turned out to be an unbelievable fit, and we got married a few years later, in 1996," he recounts. "She is everything I could ask for in a spouse. She's incredibly confident, supportive, and encouraging, and she allows me to be everything I want to be."

In advising young people today, Paul underscores the truth that a successful life is a journey that relies on passion and continual personal growth. "Somewhat mirroring the advice of my father, I believe that college should be one third academics, one third physical and spiritual development, and one third about learning how to live with people," he says. "Make sure you take the time to learn about people, join activities, and get involved, from sports to church to community engagement. Realize that life is more than just you. This will form the foundation that allows you to pursue a professional life you're passionate about."

Paul is also always cognizant of God's presence in life, open to the guidance of a greater force as he makes his way. Sometimes, he believes, this presence must use extreme measures to get people's attention—like the day the bones in his ankle shattered suddenly for no apparent reason. "I had been walking along a dam, and even before the ambulance arrived, I looked up and said, 'You've got my attention, what are you trying to tell me?'" he remembers. "I came to the conclusion that God wanted me to change some priorities in my life."

The experience didn't just change Paul's attitude—it changed his whole approach to CPJ as he embraced his new role as a leader dedicated to the next generation of leaders. "However many years I have left, I want to develop new managers who will lead the company in the future," he says. "People who, like me, get so much joy from helping to create new neighborhoods that provide shelter and build communities, making lives a little better. It was my father's legacy, and now, it's mine too."

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