

AS SEEN IN THE APRIL 2015 ISSUE OF HARRISBURG MAGAZINE.



Rod Broker and his daughter, Peyton

# HEROIC PATHS:

THE ROLES  
AND  
RESPONSIBILITIES  
OF MEN



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LIFE OFFERS COUNTLESS TEACHABLE MOMENTS, OPPORTUNE INSTANCES DURING WHICH A PERSON CAN CHOOSE TO SKULK AWAY FROM HARDSHIPS OR BOLDLY LEAD BY EXAMPLE. THE DISTINCTIVE ROLES A MAN CAN PLAY THROUGHOUT HIS LIFETIME FEATURE PROMINENTLY IN SHAPING THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF FUTURE GENERATIONS. TO CELEBRATE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FATHERS, HUSBANDS, BROTHERS AND "POP-POPS" EVERYWHERE, *HARRISBURG MAGAZINE* SPOKE WITH THREE MIDSTATE MEN ABOUT THEIR OWN INFLUENTIAL MENTORS, THE LESSONS THEY'VE LEARNED AND THE QUALITIES THEY HOPE TO PASS ON AS ROLE MODELS.

*"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."*  
—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

## ROD BROKER

"My dad always stressed character and integrity," remarks the seemingly unflappable Rod Broker, as he shares his story over the sounds of a happy home – the clicks and clacks of Franklin, the family's chocolate lab, as he prances about; the playful howls of Jules, their boxer; and 3-year-old Connor's boisterous laughter as he chases his pets and his toddling 1-year-old sister, Peyton, throughout the ground floor of their lovingly decorated Dover home.

On a quiet Sunday evening, the town feels sleepy in comparison to the activity bursting through the walls of the Broker household – the perfect environment to raise a vibrant, rambunctious family.

"Dad was always big on doing the right thing," he continues. "I try to live the same way, though I can't say I'm perfect at it."

Rod takes in the sounds of a rubber toy thwacking the wall and a diapered bottom hitting the floor, followed by several ear-piercing shrieks. Then the gentle tones of a bemused mother, 32-year-old Carmen, restore order, and Rod picks up where he left off: "You handle yourself well, you speak well about people and about yourself," he says, quoting the wisdom of his father, who

John Rabenstein





Clement Johnson, Jr.



sadly passed away about two years ago. “And, ‘If you do something, you finish it,’” he adds. “Those things have stuck with me and both my brothers to this day, and those things are what I want to teach my kids right now.”

A graduate of Kutztown University, Rod majored in history because he “enjoyed learning how the past affects the future.” Now 38, and with 10 years of real estate sales under his belt, he draws on this sentiment as he builds upon the lessons his father instilled in him in the raising of his own children. Together, he and Carmen emphasize respect and proper manners – “we want them to be good people” – but wish for their kids to know the freedom of making their own choices.

“I don’t want them to play sports because I played sports,” says Rod. “If they like music or acting, I’ll enjoy those things because they do. We want to guide them in the right way but allow them to be who they are, to not feel they have to take one specific course in life.”

Rod tries to be the strong role model his father was for him. He draws inspiration

from the examples of his close friends and older brothers. “I want my kids to be able to say, ‘My dad made the right choices.’ I want my son to be able to use me as a role model for what it’s like to be a father, a husband, a man. I want my daughter to use me as an example of what she should expect from a relationship and nothing less. I want her to get that from how I treat her mother.”

Rod and Carmen married nearly five years ago, their firstborn child arriving almost nine months to-the-date of their fondly remembered destination wedding in St. Lucia.

“The first time I saw Connor’s face, it was just such a magical moment,” Rod reminisces, a grin alighting upon his face. “You see Carmen in him and me in him, and nothing prepares you for that.”

Three years later, Peyton arrived – a tiny replica of her mother.

“You’re really starting to see her personality come out,” says the proud papa. “She’s got so much spunk, just like Carmen, and that’s such a great thing to have because it’s going to make her so successful.”

But recently, the Brokers’ love story has taken a tragic twist, as Carmen has been diagnosed with incurable stage IV breast cancer.

“We wanted to share our lives together...but life has given us a new path. It’s not a role you’d ever want to be in, but it’s one of those things where when life gets hard, it’s not an excuse to do less. I don’t want her to ever think I’m not with her 100 percent. So we go to all her treatments and appointments together, and my role is to help her through this and to be a strong person for her to lean on, a shoulder she can cry on.”

Rod and Carmen refuse to let the heart-breaking diagnosis define their family and wish to make their children’s lives as normal as possible.

“There’s no other alternative than try to be positive. We have a certain amount of time on

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this planet, and I don't think we should be miserable every day. So we try to put on brave faces and be as happy as we can just knowing that we are still together and our children are happy."

The Brokers' focus on life's simple, but achingly sweet moments – frenzied games of indoor freeze tag, hide-and-go-seek and fort-building and peaceful evenings spent reading bedtime stories. Most nights find the family sprawled together on the living room floor, a cozy mess of tangled limbs, watching TV, or better still, watching the children running and playing around them.

"One of my favorite parts of being a father right now is when Connor comes into my room every morning at 6:30 a.m.," Rod reveals. "I don't want to disturb Carmen as she's recovering from her therapy, so every morning I give Connor a hug, and we go downstairs together, and I'm just so happy to see him."

Rod doesn't feel he deserves to be recognized as a "good father" simply because he's there for his children while his wife battles her illness.

"That's what fathers should do," he insists.

"He's so modest," laughs Carmen. "I know a lot of people in our situation where the father didn't come through." She hopes that families in similarly tragic situations will take away inspiration from their story, that they will understand positivity can thrive during times of misfortune.

The Brokers' eyes meet across the dining room table, their mutual love apparent and seemingly stronger through so many shared moments of tenderness and angst.

"Our kids don't have a full grasp of what's going on, but eventually they will," shares Rod. "I want them to see how their mother fought through this. I want them to see how their father supported their mother. I want them to know that type of relationship, and I want them to know that's what you do as a husband and wife – you support each other. I want them to grow up with that."

*"If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, you are a leader."*

–John Quincy Adams

## CLEMENT JOHNSON, JR.

"I consider myself an entrepreneur, a dealer in hope, a motivational-speaking-life-coaching-volunteering-giving-back-to-my-community kind of person," says the sharply dressed, impeccably groomed man whose free-flowing, passionate words and polished mannerisms belie his meager 26 years of age.

Meet Clement Johnson, Jr., a natural born leader poised to bring positive changes to the Harrisburg area and beyond – if he has anything to do with it.

"When I was at NC State, it amazed me how cheerful and friendly Southerners are!" Clement exclaims with contagious enthusiasm. "I want to bring that here. But not just here – I feel a huge calling that everywhere I lay a foot, I'm able to have that impact."

He pulls a neatly folded sheet of paper from his briefcase, the writing within resembling a flowchart of sorts, a series of squares labeled "G-Man," "Dickinson Library" and "Carlisle Community Center."

Clement explains: "Carlisle has so many eminent places, but they are all independent. I want everything to be interconnected, everyone working together, united as one. When I'm ready, I'll keep going to the top dogs with well-thought plans on how they can impact their community and how their name can be bigger because of the role that they might play."

He warms to the subject as his dreams come tumbling forth.

"Carlisle is a gold mine for change. So many organizations are here to help kids, but so many kids are failing. A lot of mentees in need, not enough mentors. I don't care if you're a success or a failure, people can learn from your failures, too. It's a shame that everyone is so crippled by the fear of what others think of them and, in the end, just look out for themselves."

Clement plans to begin by building up Carlisle's youth football program. He hopes to get the community and local churches involved while utilizing his connections within the National Football League (NFL) and Canadian Football League (CFL). He envisions busses picking kids up from school, tutoring and mentorship systems in place.

"It's not about football – this is life. How hard you work, showing up, being responsible, following rules...it all transfers. I want to inspire youth to follow their dreams."

He pauses to catch his breath and gather his thoughts. "Just think of what could be accomplished and how it could build and how the youth would grow."

And Clement isn't merely full of big ideas. He has plenty of experience from which to draw. For starters, he's a father of three young children: Cayson (6), Ryleigh (3) and Reagan

(8 months). He currently works as youth coordinator for ResCare Workforce Services, giving guidance to kids ranging from 16 to 24 years of age looking to further their education or join the workforce. He also works as a mental health care worker for National Health Service (NHS) and as a personal trainer and fitness attendant at the Carlisle YMCA.

Perhaps most significant, Clement has the real-life experience of pulling himself up by the bootstraps and overcoming some personal barriers of his own.

The youngest and only son of 10 children, Clement grew up with the struggles of a low-income family and remembers feeling lonely and "as if there was no one I could relate to."

His father, a police officer from Philadelphia, moved in and out of his life. "He had a whole other family he kept hidden," explains Clement. "But I was blessed with a stepfather who was a disciplinarian and who was always there. He kept me out of trouble, though I didn't appreciate it so much at the time."

Despite these setbacks, Clement earned a sociology degree from NC State, where he also excelled in football. Post-graduation, he pursued a professional football career in the CFL with the Hamilton Tiger Cats.

"It was just a dream come true," he says. "I loved it."

His professional career lasted just one short year, when a hamstring injury put his career in limbo, prompting him to transition into the workforce.

"I struggled for awhile, trying to figure out my identity in life," he admits. "After 20 years of doing what I was passionate about with football, it was difficult for me to just have a job. I felt like I was here to do a job, not just have one."

The experience led Clement to working with misguiding youth.

"I am able to take my experience with pursuing what I love to do and try to relate to and refocus kids to let them know you can pursue what you love and what you dream to do."

Recently, Clement connected with Matt Tuckey, associate director of Carlisle's YMCA, who encouraged him to become involved with Harrisburg's Big Brothers Big Sisters program. "He gave me a book to read, *Heroic Path*, by John Sowers and put the bug in my ear that this might be something I'm here to do – to take somebody under my wing and help them grow, to show them there are other options in life."

Clement takes his "little brother" to parks to play basketball, baseball and football and to the gym for games of racquetball. They go



out to eat and will soon be attending a 76ers game together.

Sometimes, he brings his son along.

"I want him to set a good example for my son, and I let my son know the situation his 'big brother' is in and that we're here to be leaders for him. I let them both know they are leaders for each other. They're both trying to sharpen their images for one another. I love that we are helping someone else, and it makes us better, too."

*"The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well."*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

## JOHN RABENSTEIN

"As I get older, more and more, I realize how God took a hand in the course of my life," muses John Rabenstein over the ticking of the grandmother clock behind him. "He didn't reach in and bang me over the head or anything, but..." he trails off, lost in over 85 years of thought.

John is referring to his long-ago decision not to become a plumber, which led him down a path of knowledge and teaching and into the arms of Betty Noon, the woman who would later become his wife of 50 years and one month.

"I look back and say, 'Thank you, thank you, Lord.'"

John's eight decades of life are a prime example of how to live and love to the fullest extent.

Around 1951, John's service with the U.S. Navy fulfilled, his mind made up against a career in plumbing – "I'm not that mechanically inclined" – he applied to Penn State Altoona at the suggestion of a few officers. His acceptance surprised him as no family member before him had attended college. And he broke yet more barriers when, four years later, now a happily married man, he graduated with a bachelor's degree in psychology and childhood education and then, a few years later, his master's in speech pathology.

"And then I wanted to go on and get a doctorate, so I applied to the University of Pittsburgh," John says, matter-of-factly.

He and Betty loved their years in the city – John a full-time teacher with the Allegheny School District and part-time student and his wife a secretary for several downtown industries.

Stephanie and Pamela, the Rabensteins' daughters came along around the time John

completed his dissertation. Shortly thereafter, he was offered a position as assistant professor of educational psychology in special education and rehabilitation with the University of Connecticut.

"I was training undergrads to work with people who had disabilities to try and help them live the most normal lives possible," he explains. "I loved working with students. If I could have spent all my time just working with students, I'd have been perfectly happy, but I had to do research and scholarly stuff and all that jazz."

His 27 years as a teacher and motivator prepared him for the role of grandfather. So, too, did the 10 years he and Betty traveled the country, post-retirement, as volunteers for Stonecroft Ministries. "We helped build three or four churches."

John has four grandchildren. Stephanie, a family therapist, and her children – daughters Avery (23) and Chandler (21) and son Gideon (19) – reside in London, Ontario. Pamela, an operations manager for a large hospital in Houston, and her son Michael (27) live in Texas.

Their portraits and artwork cover nearly every available inch of Rabensteins' lovely Mechanicsburg home.

With a pleased smile, he shares: "The oldest, Michael, works as a technician in a medical office while working on his master's. Avery is finishing up her bachelor's in bilingual early education at the University of Ottawa, and Chandler is working on a degree in linguistics and criminal law. Both girls are fluent in French and English and Chandler in Spanish. Gideon recently applied to a school in Windsor, Conn. to major in theater production and television. He's taught himself to work on and repair Apple computers."

John carries himself like a man with few regrets, confident that, as much as possible, he's made decisions true to both himself and his faith, life choices that allowed him to follow his passions while remaining present and available for his family.

"That's my role, as grandparent, to be available for the kids," he says. "I try to be what I can for them. I try to be their friend, help them financially, try to motivate them, give them advice without lecturing...all that kind of stuff. I try to make it as much fun as I can – we laugh and joke and have a great time. I try to be involved as much as I can without interfering with the family structure."

He explains that both his grandfathers were friendly, but aloof. "Children were to be seen not heard." But John has always enjoyed working with kids, as his career path and special relationship with his own grandchildren prove. He and Betty were present for each grandchild's birth and, throughout their youth, traveled back and forth between Ontario and Texas each Christmas, with the grandchildren visiting their Connecticut home for summer getaways every year.

The Rabensteins moved to their Messiah Village home in September 2004 after Betty suffered a stroke. The couple decided a retirement community equidistant to both daughters would be ideal. Betty, the extrovert, convinced John to become involved with various Messiah Village committees, councils and clubs.

"I think it was God's way of preparing me for what was to come," says John.

Betty passed away shortly after their 50th wedding anniversary, which the couple celebrated early with a huge party attended by family, friends and members of their wedding party.

"All the activities I was involved in, thanks to Betty, kept me busy, kept me going."

His daughters and grandchildren also rallied around him.

"Stephanie calls every Saturday, and Chandler calls back most Sunday mornings to ask for advice on exam preparation and when she needs help selecting college courses," says John. "Pam will call every day during her commute to work, and she and Michael call on Sunday evenings." He also Skypes on a regular basis with both families.

And John has a multitude of happy memories to reflect upon: the elaborately planned tea parties Betty shared with her granddaughters, the vacations to Maine spent digging for clams, working side-by-side with the boys doing yard work, taking his granddaughters to the Hershey and Lancaster outlets and watching them model school outfits.

"I had fun every minute of the time," says John.

"It's coming down now, I don't have that many years left in me," says the man who looks and acts 20 years younger than his birth certificate claims. "I hope they remember that I was there for them. That I was available to them. That I was happy to be with them in their presence. That I enjoyed them as people."

He pauses, clearing his throat.

"It wasn't a responsibility," he finally says, his voice thick with emotion. "It was my pleasure." ☉