

Last chapter of Everyone Has a Story

David Johnson retires after 30 years of finding the extraordinary in the lives of ordinary people



Tribune/Barry Kough

Joel Mills/Lewiston Tribune

When newspaper reporter David Johnson walked into the Cavendish Store 36 years ago, he was just looking for a good story.

But the enterprising excursion into what Johnson fondly calls "the hinterlands" yielded the key to an idea that had been germinating in his curious mind for some time.

"I met Leo Koch, the owner," Johnson said of the day he got the spark that would eventually become Everyone Has a Story, the Lewiston Tribune column that ends its 30-year run today. "During our conversation, he said something like, 'Cavendish used to have a lot more oomph, a lot more people around. Now we're hardly listed in the phone book.' "

Johnson, who possesses a deep empathy for people and their everyday triumphs and struggles, wanted to get more average Joe-type stories in the pages of the Daily Idahonian, his employer at the time. But Koch's offhand comment gave him the notion of going to the phone book to randomly pick his potential subjects.

"It just started percolating in my mind," he said.

An editor was receptive, but wasn't willing to devote the necessary resources to the project. Johnson became the Tribune's roving reporter later that year and frequently wrote stories about average people. But his idea for "phone-book journalism" sat dormant until an opportune meeting with a famous television reporter six years later.

Known for his "On the Road" chronicles of everyday American life, Charles Kuralt was at Washington State University for the annual Edward R. Murrow symposium. The managing

editor at the Moscow-Pullman Daily News (formerly the Idahonian) was also present at what Johnson called a "cocktail hour."

"I got introduced to Charles Kuralt by Jay Shelledy as the Charles Kuralt of the Tribune," he said. "Then he introduced Charles Kuralt as the Dave Johnson of CBS News. Everybody yukked it up, and based on that, Kuralt started talking to me."

During their conversation, Johnson pitched his phone book idea.

"He just sort of halted, looked at me and said 'That's one of the best ideas I've heard.' I think that endorsement convinced the Tribune, because we were doing it about four weeks later."

Over the intervening decades, Johnson has crisscrossed the newspaper's vast circulation area, forming a random web of nearly 1,500 stories. He calls it a mini human geography project that offers a true glimpse of who Tribune readers really are.

Johnson holds that all-important word, "readers," close to his heart. While newspapers always focus on so-called "newsworthy" people and events, he is proud that the Tribune gave him the space to spotlight the news readers, rather than the newsmakers.

"If I'm honest, parts of all these people become parts of me, vicariously," he said. "I've gone into suicide, cancer, all the dark corners that people have shared that I haven't had to deal with directly. We always do the stories about the airplanes that crash. Well, these are stories about the airplanes that constantly land."

Johnson turned 66 on Christmas Day, and has plenty to keep him busy during retirement. He's working on a new book about life with his adult stepson, David, who has autism. There's motorcycle riding to do and karate to practice. And the canoe he bought to take him back to his Minnesota roots isn't going to paddle itself.

But Johnson doesn't think he will go through withdrawal over the end of Everyone Has a Story.

"It's been pretty satisfying," he said. "As much as I'd like to say I'm an old, ink-stained wretch, I don't have ink in my veins. I think I can walk away from it. We'll see though."

In the foreword to a 1994 collection of Everyone Has a Story columns, Kuralt recalled thinking that if Johnson could actually pull off his big idea, he would be "a helluva reporter."

"That is exactly what David Johnson turned out to be," Kuralt wrote. "The proof is on the pages that follow, full of interest and variety, joy and sadness, and the highs and lows of human life. How thick is that phone book? Dave Johnson has a lot of work ahead of him."

And now, that work is done.

Mills may be contacted at jmills@lmtribune.com or (208) 848-2266.