Titan: A Ship Honoring Titanic…While Fighting Global Poverty

For over 20 years, Joseph Ricker, businessman and CEO of the SS Titan Foundation, has been working on a plan to bring back the golden age of ocean liners.

Founded in 2008, non-profit company aims to build a ship honoring the ill-fated RMS Titanic. The costs earned from operating the liner will go towards aiding children in need around the world, the ship becoming a sort of “messenger of goodwill”. According to the Foundation’s official website, the vessel will have a tonnage of about 165,000 GT, a length of 1,182 feet, and an incredible speed of 45 knots. She will cost about $1.6 billion to build.

In January of 1998, the then 30-year old Ricker, already an avid ocean liner enthusiast, was watching James Cameron’s film *Titanic* in a Minnesota theater, accompanied by his sister. During my interview with him, Mr. Ricker recalls that as he was watching the scenes of the ship as it departed Southampton and passed Ireland, his sister asked him a very unexpected question: “Why don’t they just build a new one?”. Completely surprised by the suggestion, Ricker responded with a rather sarcastic “Do you know how much that would cost?”.

Not having taken the remark seriously, it was only a few weeks later that he would come back to it.

“And then I was sitting in the theater a few weeks later, watching it for the fourth time… and I said to myself: “Boy, wouldn’t it be something to see it again. To see it sailing…To see it rebuilt.”, he tells me.

Right then, the words of his sister came back to him, as if in a flashback, making him wonder “How much would something like that *really* cost?”

That same year, Joseph Ricker and his childhood friend founded the for-profit SS Titan, Ltd., focusing on the *Titan,* a newbuilt honoring *Titanic* . To add to the difficulties of finding investors, by an unbelievable coincidence, also in January of 1998, South African businessman Sarel Gous came forward with his now-scrapped plans for a *Titanic* replica, *Titanic II.* This happened right as Mr. Ricker’s company was to first announce the *Titan.* Though he and his friend were extremely disappointed that an idea they had been working on for years was now being publicly proposed by someone, the CEO admits that in that day and age, both of them still knew nothing about business and proposals.

Fast forward to 2007, Joseph Ricker had found himself pondering over his future. Submerged in his own thoughts, he spends his evenings in front of the TV, occasionally coming across social commercials about starving and sick children in Africa, children of war in Syria, and other worldwide issues. He recalls being very disappointed by the $3-$20 sums these commercials were asking people to give: For him, he says, it just wasn’t enough.

Mr. Ricker’s concern for children was also fueled by the traumatic experience of losing a childhood friend to cancer when they were both about six. He recalls that, at first, he did not even truly understand what was happening, as his friend simply stopped coming to school.

I’m shocked. I offer my condolences, and decide not to delve deeper into this. I only mention this to show others how a person can turn tragedy into a cause, how this reflects their further actions, and, in Mr. Ricker’s case, shows them their calling.

Looking into the mirror on his 40th birthday in October 2007, Ricker began a conversation with himself , asking “You’re forty years old today. What are you going to do with the rest of your life? How are you going to help these starving children?” The answer came like lighting, with a picture of the *Titan*, all the way from 1998, surfacing from his memories. His sister’s question, the question that started it all, was then reversed in his mind. It now became: “How much would that *make*?”

On August 14th, 2008, Ricker created the SS Titan Foundation, and the following year, their Facebook page. On October 2nd, 2009, the foundation had a proposal letter for feasibility studies with shipyard Harland and Wolf in Belfast, Ireland. The same shipyard built the original RMS Titanic. Although the yard has had major financial problems, and have not undertaken major projects since 2003, Mr. Ricker has assured me that the situation is now improving. He indicated that he had gotten in touch with the head of the shipyard’s head of Sales team in as early as 1999, and had done so again in 2003. During both of these times, Harland and Wolf seemed very interested in the idea of the Titan. Even though Ricker is very hopeful he can build the Titan in Belfast, due to the historical significance of the location, he assures me that should this plan fall through, they have considered several good shipyards in France, and other parts of Europe.

To my question of what has delayed the project for all these years, Mr. Ricker responds that perhaps the biggest obstacle in his path is himself being an average, working man with a family, as opposed to a millionaire or billionaire who can organize the entire operation in a very short time.

As our interview is about on its 40th minute, Mr. Ricker tells me an interesting detail: It turns out Molly Brown’s great-granddaughter had, in 2012, actually been by Australian billionaire Clive Palmer, who announced his own plan to build the *Titanic II*. That project was another blow for Ricker.

“I wasn’t very happy…I wasn’t very happy, because he’s doing it for profit, and no one should make money off of this [tragedy]. I haven’t made a penny off of this, and I don’t intend to.”

As we are talking about Clive Palmer, Mr. Ricker remarks that “I guess that project isn’t moving ahead anymore.” However, having personally contacted Deltamarin, Titanic II’s naval architects, I know that this isn’t true, and that Palmer’s ship is still in her design phase. Surprisingly, Ricker doesn’t know this, and I decide it is better not to tell him.

While he claims that the completion and sailing date of the *Titan* depends on the financing progress, Ricker did reveal the next big step for the SS Titan Foundation: a huge music festival in Minnesota, that will be broadcast worldwide through satellites. And on that festival, he says, they will announce *Titan* to the world. If the financing situation flows smoothly, the plan is to have a late-2022 festival, and a 2026-2027 sailing date.

A pause. I sit there, not believing what I’m hearing. Not even the global Coronavirus pandemic has stopped this man. Although it did shut down a for-profit company of his, Ricker says that the Titan project was not impacted, still being in the proposal stage. But despite the constant setbacks, Mr. Ricker gives a very valuable piece of advice that he learned from his 20+ years of working on the project:

“You can’t give up your dreams…Some people dream to go to Mars…Some dream of becoming the richest man on the planet…It’s important to not let your dreams go. When you let your dreams go, a part of you dies.”

Ricker’s story now has me at the edge of my seat. For over 20 years, he has been marching towards his goal, never letting go of Titan. Holding the phone firmly in my hand, I realize the true purpose of my publication: To inspire.

Apologizing for my slow note taking, caused by Cerebral palsy, I learn that Ricker’s future plans include research into conditions that affect children, including my own, as the aim of the project is to help “individuals such as yourself”. That moment is something I feel obligated to share. Not because I want to make myself special in any way, but to show other individuals with conditions like mine that someone out there seeks to make our lives better through any means they can. And for Joseph Ricker, that means is the *Titan.*