tMark Kardash

Professor Arvesen

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“Raising” the *Titanic:* A Man and His Dream

Paragraph 1:

It is a quiet, smooth February evening. At this hour, I would typically be watching YouTube, reading, drawing, or simply relaxing in my chair. Today, however, is an exception. My entire body is tense, and I do not know how to handle it. “Now?!”, I ask myself, “How will I do the interview now?!”. For the next half hour, my brain splits into two opposing parts, constantly arguing with one another over whether I should postpone what is about to come.

Paragraph 2:

I finally tell myself to stop. I assure my rebellious side that this is the opportunity of a lifetime, and that I simply may never get this chance again. I take my phone into my tense hands, and dial the number given to me. As the connection takes its time to be establish, I try to prepare my voice to sound natural, not overexcited, but not frightened and pitiful, either.

“Hello”, a young male voice says on the other end.

“Hello, is this Mr. Joseph Ricker?”, I ask, my 10-second voice-training seemingly having failed.

“Yes, I am”, the man responds.

Paragraph 3:

With this phrase, it finally hits me: The deed is done, and I have myself a ticket for a once-in-a-lifetime experience: I’m going to interview Joseph Ricker, Chairman of the SS Titan Foundation.

Paragraph 4

Founded in 2008, the non-profit SS Titan Foundation has an extraordinary goal: To build a ship resembling the infamous and legendary RMS Titanic, which went down after colliding with an iceberg on April 14th, 1912, taking with her 1,503 lives. The plan proposed by Mr. Ricker, however, is quite different from all other attempts. Rather than being recycled in the corporate business, the costs earned from operating the liner will be going towards the needs of the sick and poor children around the world, as the vessel will become a sort of “messenger of goodwill”. As an ocean liner enthusiast myself, I have always been looking for a way of using my passion for the benefit of the world, so hearing Mr. Ricker’s voice on the phone was a magical moment.

Paragraph 5:

The story to be told here began in January of 1998, in a Minnesota movie theater. The world was in the middle of a rapidly spreading craze, started by the release of James Cameron’s epic film, *Titanic*. Having been a *Titanic* enthusiast since the age of 5, the then 30-year old Joseph Ricker wouldn’t miss it for the world. That is why, accompanied by his sister, he went to witness the cinematic miracle himself. “I was watching the scenes of the ship as it departed Southampton and passed Ireland”, he tells me over the phone, “And my sister was there, and she’s like, “Why don’t they just build a new one?””. Mr. Ricker says his sister’s remark caught him by surprise, and, at that moment, he did not take it too seriously. “And I turn to her and say, “Do you know how much that would cost?”, he recalled his initial response.

Paragraph 6:

Mr. Ricker quickly forgot about the occurrence, and simply enjoyed the rest of the film, without the topic being brough up again. That is, until a few weeks later, he found himself in the theater again.

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

Paragraph 7:

It was at that exact moment, he tells me, that the words of his sister, as well as his own response, came back to him, as if in a flashback. He found himself pondering over his own question: “How much would something like that *really* cost?” This is how the mighty ocean liner *Titan* was first conceived. With this magnificent idea, Mr. Ricker began the path towards the fulfillment of a series of childhood fantasies.

Paragraph 8:

That same year, Joseph Ricker and his childhood friend founded their first company, SS Titan, Ltd. The goal of this now-defunct firm was quite similar to the one of his current foundation: To build a modern ocean liner honoring the *Titanic*. However, there was a major difference between now and then: SS Titan, Ltd, was a for-profit. During our conversation, Ricker explained to me that it is equally difficult for both non-profit and for-profit businesses to find investors for their goal. However, he and his friend actually had extra obstacles. By an unbelievable coincidence, also in January of 1998, South African businessman Sarel Gous came forward with his own plans for a *Titanic* replica, to be called *Titanic II.* This happened right as Mr. Ricker’s company was to come forward with their first announcement for the *Titan.*

“And we were like, “Hey, we’ve been working on that for months, we had that idea. But back then, we were just a bunch of kids, you know, blue collar. We knew nothing about business.”

Paragraph 9:

After this unexpected fiasco, family and personal responsibilities caused the two friends to lose focus on the project, and for the *Titan* dream to fade. However, it wasn’t for too long. In the year 2007, Joseph Ricker had found himself pondering over his future. Submerged in his own thoughts, he spent 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. Mr. Ricker told me he was very disappointed by the $3-$20 sums these commercials were asking people to give:

“I said, “Well, that just isn’t enough. What’s the 20 dollars going to do? Okay, maybe if a thousand people give, maybe something’s gonna happen. But that…just wasn’t enough for me.”

Paragraph 10:

It turns out, however, that Mr. Ricker’s concern for children, and desire to help them, was not started only by social commercials, but by a traumatic personal experience. It turns out, he lost 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.

“When you’re that young, and someone dies, you’re just like “Why?”., I hear him saying through the phone, the weight of the situation evident in his voice, “I did not even know what death was back then.”

Paragraph 11:

I’m shocked. I do not know what to say besides offering my condolences. Although this seems like the perfect opportunity to learn more about the person, I decide not to delve deeper into this. The very mention of this only exists here to show others how a person can turn something so traumatic into a cause, and how this reflects their further actions. And as for Mr. Ricker’s cause, all of this experiences soon came together to show him the way.

Paragraph 12:

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?” He did not want to grow constantly looking back at his life, and wishing he had done one thing or another, dreaming of unfulfilled desires of the past. He wanted to act then and there. And in that incredibly difficult, pivotal moment of self-quest, he found his calling.

Paragraph 13:

“And I had that picture of *Titan* in my mind, from 1998, you know…”, he says, mentally returning to that same exact moment, “And I was like: How much would that make? To build the ship, to fund…”. In this incredible way, Ricker’s childhood fantasy, which, it seems, had always been in his heart, showed itself once again in the time he needed it the most. It also helped that a very persistent fan of the original project had contacted him and his friend several times, once in every few months, asking them about the future of *Titan.*

Paragraph 14:

On the 14th of August, 2008, the SS Titan Foundation, as we know it today, was born into the world, and the following year, their Facebook page was created. On October 2nd, 2009, the foundation reached the stage of creating a proposal letter for feasibility studies with shipyard Harland and Wolf in Belfast, Ireland. Harland and Wolf is the shipyard that built the original RMS Titanic, along with her sisters, Olympic and Britannic. Although they completed their last newbuilt in 2003, and have not undertaken any major projects since then, 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. The shipyard ran into major financial troubles later, and was on the verge of closure. However, after changing hands in 2017, the shipyard was saved by a man named John Wood, and things seem to now be improving. Joseph Ricker is very hopeful he can build the Titan in Belfast, due to the historical significance of the location, it being the birthplace of the Titanic. However, should this ambition fall through, he assured me they have considered several good shipyards in France, and other parts of Europe.

Paragraph 15:

To my question of what has delayed the project for all these years, Mr. Ricker responds that:

“I think the major obstacle here is that I’m just an average, working guy with a family, you know. I’m not a millionaire, billionaire that can put all of this together in a couple of months.”

Paragraph 16:

Despite the difficulties, Mr. Ricker is extremely glad for all of the support he has received from people over the years. Since the very start from the project, Ricker had the chance of meeting some extraordinary people. Many of them were from the Titanic Honor Society (THS), perhaps the largest society of Titanic experts and enthusiasts. Mr. Ricker’s personal acquaintances include artist Ken Marshall, whose paintings inspired some of the scenes in James Cameron’s film, Titanic actress Judy Prestininzi, and families of Titanic survivors, among them the great granddaughter of survivor Molly Brown. 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 hired by the company Blue Star Line, owned by Australian billionaire Clive Palmer, who announced his own plan to build the *Titanic II*. When I ask Mr. Ricker how he first reacted to the Clive Palmer project, he confesses: “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.” (To my surprise, he doesn’t appear to know that Palmer’s project, previously thought abandoned, is now moving at full swing.) As for the negative reactions from people that such a project might produce, Mr. Ricker says that he, himself, has not had any such complaints. “I have never had somebody call me and say that they’re against what we’re doing. And if I ever have, I will make sure to do my best to figure out why.” Even the great-granddaughter of Molly Brown, with whom Ricker is now good friends, is extremely supporting of the SS Titan Foundation’s goal.

Paragraph 17:

Answering my question regarding the Titan’s anticipated launch date, Ricker states:

“That all depends on how and at what point financing is”, he commented on my question of when will his ship finally set sail, And it is at that point that he finally reveals the next big step for the SS Titan Foundation. Turns out, they are planning to organize, with the help of the company WorldVision, a huge music festival in Minnesota, in order to secure financing for the Titan, and receive the initial funds for the ship. The costs needed for the festival itself are about $450 million. The festival will be broadcast worldwide through satellites, and it is during that music festival, Mr. Ricker says, that he plans to announce the *Titan* to the world at large. And then, as we were talking, he said many ocean liner enthusiasts have longed to hear: He answered the “when” question.

“If all goes well with COVID…If I can get the initial money…I’m planning for a late 2022 festival…[So] we could potentially see Titan sail in 2026-2027.”

Paragraph 18:

A pause. I sit there, not believing what I’m hearing. Not even the global Coronavirus pandemic has derailed this man’s great, noble plans, although it did shut down a for-profit company of his. He himself says that the Titan project was not impacted due to not having significantly advanced beyond 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.”

Paragraph 19:

It is at this point that I realize what is fascinating about the person I was interviewing: He never gave up. For over 20 years, he has been marching towards his goal, and has never put an end to his dream of building Titan. I realize now that maybe this is why there needs to be an article about the SS Titan Foundation. To teach people that however impossible your dream may seem, you must never let that part of you die.

Paragraph 20:

As I wish Mr. Ricker a good night and the interview is drawing to a close, I apologize to him about my slow note taking, which has been partially caused by my cerebral palsy. His reply surprises me, as he says that once the Titan is put into operation, he intends on doing research into different illnesses and conditions that affect children, including my own condition. He tells me that 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 cares about our health, seeking ways to make our lives better through any means they can. And for Joseph Ricker, that means is the Titan.