Titan: A Ship Honoring Titanic…While Fighting Global Poverty

On a quiet February evening, I find myself nervously sweating, faced with a decision unlike any I’ve had to take before. Thirty minutes pass before I finally manage to put myself together, realizing that I may never again get the opportunity that is now offered to me. I take my phone into my tense hands, and dial the number given to me.

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

“Hello, is this Mr. Joseph Ricker?”, I ask, my voice trembling.

“Yes, I am”, the man responds.

With this phrase, it finally hits me: It is happening. I’m going to interview Joseph Ricker, Chairman of the SS Titan Foundation.

Founded in 2008, non-profit SS Titan Foundation 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”.

In January of 1998, the then 30-year old ocean liner enthusiast Joseph Ricker, was watching James Cameron’s film *Titanic* in a Minnesota theater, accompanied by his sister.

“I was watching the scenes of the ship as it departed Southampton and passed Ireland, and my sister was there, and she’s like, “Why don’t they just build a new one?” And I turn to her and say, “Do you know how much that would cost?”

Not having taken the remark seriously, it was only a few weeks later that Ricker recalled it from the back of his mind.

“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.”

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 plans for a *Titanic* replica, *Titanic II.* This happened right as Mr. Ricker’s company was to first announce 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.”

After this unexpected fiasco, family and personal responsibilities caused the two friends to lose focus on the project, as the *Titan* dream faded.

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:

“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.”

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.

“When you’re that young, and someone dies, you’re just like “Why?” I did not even know what death was back then.”

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.

“And I had that picture of *Titan* in my mind, from 1998, you know…And I was like: How much would that make? To build the ship, to fund…”.

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:

“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.”

Despite the difficulties, Mr. Ricker is extremely glad for all of the support he has received from people over the years. 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 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. Instead, I ask about Titan’s sailing date.

“That all depends on how and at what point financing is”

He now reveals 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 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.”

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.*