

## Van Johnson tells inspiring story to students

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The third First Friday Forum, a now regularly attended affair by many in the Franklin County School class of Elinor Mount-Simmons, was once again an eye opening experience. Mayor Van Johnson of Apalachicola was the speaker and his story is an inspiring one.

Mayor Johnson explained that an individual has three major life changing experiences that are considered to be obstacles. They are: The loss of a job; the loss of a loved one, and divorce. Of the

three, the Mayor has experienced two.

Both happened fairly quickly together. First, he lost his father, who was his best friend and most valued teacher. He was a man who gave all 8 of his children the opportunity to attend college, although he



Johnson

was legally blind.

When Johnson's father died he had to drop out of college to take care of his family. He soon learned that he was to be a father at the young age of 19. It was a weight on his mind, but he knew he could be all that was expected of him. He got a job at a seafood house in Apalachicola and the day before he and his new bride were to put the down payment on their first home, he was fired!

The Mayor stood before students and admitted that he cried during the longest walk of his life, all the way home, where he

had to tell his wife that she could not have her home. The devastating news was an obstacle for the new couple, but the young Johnson knew that if his father could take care of a family blind, then he certainly could deal with his obstacles too. He stated to the students, "Today, if I saw that man that fired me, I'd shake his hand and thank him."

That obstacle that brought dark clouds had a silver lining and brought an opportunity for

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a job on St. Vincent Island that allowed the new family to not only purchase the home they had planned for, but they were able to afford a brand new mobile home. Just in time for the second baby, was also the 2nd loss of a job. Just like many young people today, the security of a job and a good family life was shaken six months into the dream come true.

Mayor Johnson told the students, "The easiest thing to do in life is to give up." He said, "There will be many opportunities that will present themselves as reasons to give up. But I'm standing here today to tell you, to show you that giving up is not an option."

The Mayor went on to tell the students that he took a job he never thought he would, explaining that pride can also be an obstacle. "If we can overcome pride, we can do anything." And, because the young father and husband was determined to live up to his obligations, he took a job as garbage man for Franklin County.

Students exchanged looks of surprise as Mayor Johnson went on to tell that because of that position, where he rode on the back of the garbage truck, he was given the opportunity that ultimately led him to his current position the Mayor of Apalachicola. Before that he was a County Commissioner for 10 years and today he wears many hats in Franklin County. He owns his own business, but he is also the Director of Solid Waste, Director of Animal Control and the Director of Parks and Recreation.

"So, I'm here to tell you, as the Mayor, that it can be done." The loss of his father, becoming a father before he was quite ready to, and the loss of two jobs before he was 21, gave plenty of opportunity for Johnson to give up. He stated, "My father and my faith in God is what carried me through."

The Mayor added, "No matter what I did, whether it may be digging a ditch or whether it may be working on the garbage truck or flipping a burger, I do it as if I'm doing it for God."

The students were given the chance to ask questions and they learned that the algebra that

Johnson learned in school was and still is used in his job as a county employee. They learned that the mayor's love of history and government, which lead him to where he is today, is because of one history teacher. When asked why he became the mayor, he replied, "to serve you." The mayor told the students that a public service job is nothing to shy away from.

Johnson wants the community to be a better place and he has many plans still in store. When asked how he manages all the positions he holds he replied that early in life he learned that we all need someone we can trust and depend on. He stated that without the help of his staff he would be lost.

Mayor Johnson advised the students to always have at least one right hand man. He encouraged them to surround themselves with good people, to be patient and to have perseverance and to use prayer and have faith in God and themselves. With that he left his phone number with the students and told them to call him- for anything!