

A surprising and very happy birthday

November 25, 2020



Before Saturday, Don Johnson had celebrated 91 birthdays and thought he has seen it all.

But thanks to his granddaughter and firefighters throughout Del Norte County, Johnson's 92nd birthday is one he will never forget.

As Johnson was celebrating with his family Saturday afternoon, he heard a familiar sound — sirens from the Crescent City Fire Department. A longtime volunteer with the fire department, Johnson has also lived around

the corner from the station for decades.

But these sirens were different. After the initial sound of sirens, something else began to play out of the fire engine driving down Breem Street. The sounds of “Happy Birthday” soon began to be heard, and Johnson and his family started paying more attention. When the first engine arrived in front of his house, Johnson was clearly shocked.

His granddaughter, Vanessa Duncan, and her children jumped out to say happy birthday. For the next five minutes, fire engines and police cars moved slowly down the street with their lights and sirens flashing, all saying happy birthday to one of Crescent City’s favorite residents.

As Johnson watched, he started waving to the emergency responders and soon was crying openly.

“What in the world did you do,” he asked his granddaughter as she gave him a hug.

“Hey, I work at the fire department,” she responded. “I know we won’t be together for Thanksgiving, so I wanted to do something to get us together.”

After the firefighters and police drove by, it took Johnson a few minutes to compose himself.

“It was unbelievable,” he said. “I’ve never heard of such a thing happening.”

Johnson was a volunteer firefighter for 28 years, beginning in 1956. He said he volunteered initially just to help out.

“For one thing, at the time they needed volunteers,” Johnson said. “One of the people I worked with was a volunteer and he got on to me to join.”

In addition to volunteering with the fire department, Johnson always looked for ways to help his hometown. In 1971, the chamber honored him by naming him man of the year.

He said being in Crescent City since 1954 has been amazing for he and his family.

“It’s been a good place to raise our family,” Johnson said as four generations mingled in his yard. “Of course, I love the redwoods right over there and the ocean right over there.”

In addition to celebrating his 92nd birthday, Johnson said it was nice just to have his family together.

“We’ve been sticking so close to home,” he said. “It was very nice.”

At 92, it may seem like Johnson is in the twilight of his life, but he could have many birthdays to come. His mom lived to be 110 and was physically and mentally sharp until the very end.

When he celebrates his 93rd birthday next year, he said it would be difficult to top the 92nd.