

Thank you, Johnny!

Family, friends of legendary entertainer gather over Homecoming weekend for dedication of Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film

BY JOEL GEHRINGER

JA t the end of an exhausting weekend, Cory Carson stood near the corner of the Lied Center stage, taking photos of the scene.

On stage, a few dozen tables were surrounded by his family and friends and faculty, staff and alumni from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Hixson-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts.

Carson snapped a few shots of his table, mostly occupied by family members, and said he wished he could climb up into the rafters to get a shot of the whole stage.

Surveying the scene, he commented to the person standing next to him about what he had seen that weekend.

"Yeah," he said, "my dad did a good thing here."

Cory, along with his family and Uni-

versity of Nebraska–Lincoln Hixson-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts alumni, visited the university Oct. 12-14 to celebrate the dedication of the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film, named after Cory's father, Johnny Carson.

The legendary Carson, who was raised in Norfolk, Neb., graduated from the university with a degree in radio and speech in 1949. He went on to become one of television's and entertainment's biggest stars on "The Tonight Show" and in November 2004, donated \$5.3 million to the University of Nebraska Foundation to renovate and expand the Temple Building, home of his namesake school. An additional gift of \$5 million was received following his death in 2005.

Nearly three years after his initial gift was announced, the celebration began.

The Carson dedication weekend in-

troduced the renovated Temple Building to the public. Carson's gift provided for the creation of a black box theater and sound stage, a new scene shop, a renovated lobby, classrooms and laboratories, all in the Temple Building.

As an undergraduate student, Carson studied and went to classes in the Temple Building. It was his wish that \$4.3 million of his donation be used to update the building and \$1 million to create an endowment that will fund future updates to the school's technology.

On hand to commemorate the man, the gift and the school named after him were Carson's relatives: brother Dick Carson and sister Kit Sotzing, both UNL graduates, and their spouses, Karlyn (also a UNL alum) and Ralph; widow Alex and her nephew and niece, Ryan and Jaclyn Elphinstone; son Cory Carson and his wife, Maria; nephew Jeff Sotzing, now

With a chorus of "Thank You, Johnny," the students of the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film ended the program Oct. 12 with a flurry of confetti in celebration of the gift. Photo by Kelley Hascall, UNL College of Journalism and Mass Communications.

COVER STORY



Photo by Kelley Hascall, UNL College of Journalism and Mass Communications

Alex Carson (left) and Chancellor Harvey Perlman reveal the lighted display tribute to Johnny Carson in the lobby of Howell Theatre in the Temple Building.

head of Carson Entertainment Group, and his wife, Peggy; nephew Mike Sotzing and his wife, Gail; nephew Chris Carson and his wife, Debbie; and niece Kathy Tucker and her daughter, Lindsey.

The weekend, UNL's 2007 Homecoming weekend, centered around Johnny Carson and his accomplishments. The Homecoming theme, "Big Red Studios: A Tribute to Johnny Carson," allowed students to pay homage to Carson's life through floats, displays and music. Even Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman got in on the act, declaring Oct. 12 "Johnny Carson Day" in the state.

"Johnny Carson Day" began with a morning dedication ceremony in the Tem-

ple Lobby, which proudly displays Carson's name on the wall and, for this weekend, displayed Carson memorabilia, including Emmy Awards and his Kennedy Center award in display cases. That morning, it was filled with students, faculty and media as the Carson family gathered. UNL Chancellor Harvey Perlman addressed the gathering, as did University of Nebraska Foundation CEO Terry Fairfield, College Dean Jack Oliva and film and new media junior Josie Azzam.

"Looking around, you can see that the facilities dream we had in 2004 has now become a reality of the highest order," Oliva said. "John Carson's giving back to the Uni-

versity of Nebraska says something special to our faculty and our students about the value that he placed on his education here.

"It also reminds us, however, that in the end, students and their education were his highest priority, first and foremost. As those students pass though this building now and in years to come, they will be following in John Carson's footsteps.... This is truly what we are most grateful for."

Next, Perlman presented Alex Carson with a custom-made glass necklace created by a university scientific glass blower, and the two unveiled a centerpiece of the lobby—a backlit, triangular display that greets Temple visitors with photos and a quote

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from Carson.

Afterward, the family and guests crossed the street for lunch in the Lied Center.

"We're very grateful that the family is here," Perlman said in an interview after the ceremony. "They give a personal side to Johnny Carson."

Perlman said Carson's gift should take the school to another level of prominence and opportunity.

"It clearly elevates the school," he said, "and I think it will free the faculty and students to do things they wouldn't otherwise do. I'm hopeful the gift raises our expectations for what we can expect of that school, and we hope it can meet those expectations."

Many in the Carson family enjoyed the opportunity to gather together and remember Johnny, who died in January 2005, just two months after making his donation.

In addition, family members said they were impressed by what they saw that morning.

"It's amazing the amount of work they've done is such a short amount of time with the amount of money; it would have cost probably 10 times this if it were done in Los Angeles," said Jeff Sotzing, Carson's nephew. "I'm honored to be involved."

As president of Carson Entertainment Group, Sotzing is essentially a keeper of all things Carson, and a certain level of expectation comes with the legendary name. For some in the school, it's a high mark to live up to.

Sotzing helped some of the students live up to those expectations by providing access to Carson footage and material to a team of two broadcasting students and two film students who worked seven months to create a student film honoring Carson's life and his time at the university. The film debuted during the weekend at the Temple Building.

After seeing the finished Temple Building, Sotzing said he's confident the school

will live up to Carson's name.

"That's obviously why Johnny has contributed to the university for so many years, because he does feel they're able to live up to the expectations and have a very successful program," Sotzing said.

Later that "Carson Day," the celebrants gathered on R Street just north of the Temple Building to watch the Homecoming parade.

Many student floats paid tribute to Carson and "The Tonight Show," and as the university marching band passed, they played the show's theme song for the gathered guests, to much applause.

Richard "Pete" Petrashek watched the parade. A UNL grad who worked with Carson in the 1950s at WOW-TV in Omaha, Petrashek said he thought the parade, and the weekend, was a great event for UNL alumni.

"We had ringside seats (for the parade)," Petrashek said. "We thought it was great, my wife and I."

Petrashek was a student at UNL in 1947 and knew Carson through classes. He also worked with Carson at WOW-TV in Omaha. Now a magician at 81, Petrashek said he appreciated the chance to reunite with fellow students and revel in his memories.

"This was the first time I'd been back to the Temple," Petrashek said. "Of what I saw, it was really great. I'd like to come down again sometime and go through all of it."

After the parade, the guests returned to the Temple for dinner and a program in the Howell Theatre. The event featured comments from University of Nebraska President J.B. Milliken, Perlman and Carson School director Paul Steger and the debut of the student-produced film.

At the end of the program, Carson School students poured into the theater and showered the audience with confetti, screaming "Thank you, Johnny!" in a show of gratitude for the gift.

*'Johnny
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Hopefully he
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Dick Carson

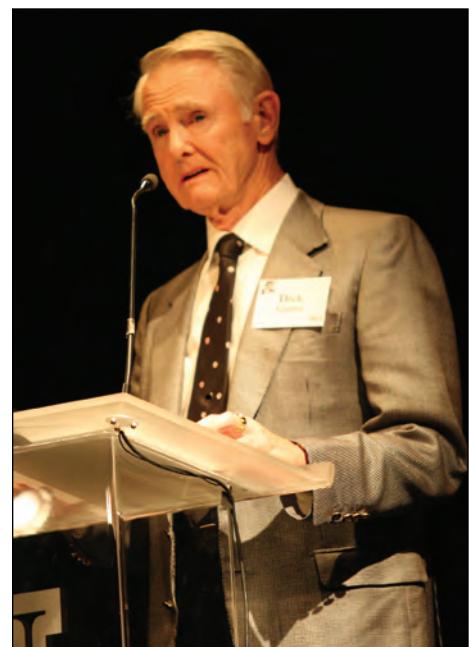


Photo by Leisha Smith, UNL College of Journalism and Mass Communications

Johnny Carson's brother, Dick, speaks at the Dedication Dinner on Oct. 12 in the Howell Theatre.

Senior David Ackermann was one of the students who stormed the Howell.

"Johnny's so huge in the entertainment industry," he said. "I feel like I'm a part of something bigger now."

To Steger, the weekend's events had the feel of a true homecoming.

"If you're a theatre major or film major, you live in the Temple Building, pretty much from eight in the morning until, well, overnight sometimes, because that's the kind of stuff we do. That's what Johnny did, and for us, there's this idea of Johnny having a home in the Temple Building."

Steger also noted that 2007 represented major milestones for the school. In addition to the dedication, the Temple Building was celebrating 100 years of live performance, and the Nebraska Repertory Theatre was marking 40 years of shows.

"For the school, it's enormous," Steger said. "This weekend is about celebrating all of those things and about honoring Johnny Carson and trying to do everything in our power to help continue his legacy of both contributing to the university and to this state by providing funds for people to en-

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Chancellor Harvey Perlman with (L-R) Cory and Maria Carson, Ralph and Kit Sotzing, and Karlyn and Dick Carson during the Cornhuskers Homecoming football game.

hance their cultural enrichment through theater and film."

The next morning, a Husker football Saturday, the celebration continued at the Chancellor's Pre-Game Breakfast in the Nebraska Union. Then, at the football game, Dick and Karlyn Carson, Cory and Maria Carson and Ralph and Kit Sotzing were introduced to 84,000-plus fans between the first and second quarters. At halftime, the band's program focused on music related to Carson's life.

After the game, alumni gathered at Lincoln's Pioneers Park for a reunion picnic.

Meanwhile, the Temple Building remained open throughout the day, and many who had come for football dropped in to see the updates. A few wandered through the new theater and scene shop, taking in the renovations, but most gathered in the lobby, viewing the memorabilia and watching memorable "Tonight Show" clips on video screens.

"It's nice to be [a student] here at a time of positive change," said senior Matt Miller, who worked as a greeter and tour guide at the open house. Miller lamented his coming graduation and wished he could have more time to take advantage of the new facilities. "I wish we could show our gratitude more,"

he said. "We really are glad for the gift."

On the final day of the dedication weekend, the school's guests gathered in the Lied Center's Johnny Carson Theater and then moved to the Lied's main stage for breakfast. The meal marked one last hurrah for the group, as Carson's old friends shared stories with his family and faculty reconnected with former students and classmates.

Petrashek, Carson's classmate, shared a table with some of Carson's fraternity brothers and reintroduced himself to Dick Carson, whom he had met years before when Johnny Carson worked at the Omaha television station. One lucky group of current students shared a table with "Tonight Show" writers Andrew Nicholls and Darrell Vickers, who told tales of the entertainment biz and shared advice.

"This weekend celebrated two things," said the University Foundation's Fairfield. "First, somebody that always loved the state

and loved the university gave back to it. That kind of loyalty is precious. Second, in the last 10 years, it [the school] has grown so tremendously, and adding the Carson name enhances that program."

Steger said the school is now prepared to "think bigger" and tackle more ambitious projects as well as better train its students for the professional world.

"What we can do now is dream," he said. "We can actually put together plans to do the things we've always dreamt about. We always think of what we could do if we had a little bit more. And now we have a little bit more. That ability is there now."

At the close of the weekend, an exhausted but ever-friendly Dick Carson had no shortage of praise for the renovations and the celebration.

"My son Chris saw the theater, and he used to work at Sony," Carson said. "He walked in and saw it and said, 'They've got more than Sony's got. They've just got everything here. You could walk out of there and work anywhere.'"

Dick Carson said he enjoyed having his family gathered in Nebraska again. Carson grew up in Norfolk but now lives on the West Coast. Many family members hadn't been back in some time, and for a few, it was their first trip.

"They just loved it here," Carson said. "My son, he doesn't want to leave. It just felt so good to have them here."

Carson said his brother would have been embarrassed at all the attention he had received.

"He would probably break up," Carson said. "He was very shy. But he would have loved it—of course, he would have loved it."

Just then, Dick Carson almost broke up himself.

"Hopefully," he said, "hopefully, he knows." ■

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**'What we
can do now is
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**Paul Steger,
director of the Johnny
Carson School of
Theatre and Film**



Journalism graduate student Trevor Hall interviews Conan O'Brien in his office for the Johnny Carson video.

Film, journalism students team up for Carson tribute

BY JOEL GEHRINGER

As an entertainer and television star, Johnny Carson was a legend. He was a master of comedy and of good TV, and he seemed to have his crafts perfectly honed every night.

But before all of that, he was a student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he fine-tuned his skills in entertainment, theatre and broadcasting.

Toward the end of his life, Carson decided to help give students at the university a chance to experience the same useful les-

sons he did. Carson died in 2005, but in the summer of 2007, four students became the first beneficiaries of an endowment supported by Carson's gift.

The four students, two from the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film and two from the College of Journalism and Mass Communications, worked together on a 20-minute film project that commemorated the life of Johnny Carson and his significance to the university. The film, "Johnny Carson: Student of Comedy," debuted at the Carson School dedication ceremony in October 2007.

As part of an initiative by the Hixson-Lied College of Fine and Performing Arts, the College of Journalism and Mass Communications and Nebraska Educational Television, the students—Josie Azzam and John Albrecht, both junior film and new media students; Trevor Hall, a graduate journalism student; and Justin Peterson, a senior journalism student—worked as interns with NET to create the film.

The internship allows students from both schools to work at NET in a professional environment and get valuable experience working on real projects for broad-

CARSON FILM



Photo by Kelley Hascall, UNL College of Journalism and Mass Communications

Jeff Sotzing with students John Albrecht, Justin Peterson, Josie Azzam and Trevor Hall at the dedication of the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film.

cast.

The initiative began as part of the university's strategic planning process. FPA Dean Jack Oliva, COJMC Dean Will Norton and NET General Manager Rod Bates recognized each other's desire for interdisciplinary cooperation.

The colleges wanted to be able to get students into real-world situations and provide them opportunities to get used to the updated technologies available at NET. At the same time, NET had an interest in developing new talent and getting a chance to work with the best and brightest at the university.

"I didn't know that was coming (from the deans), and what was astounding was that I had the same thing in mind," Bates said, "and that was a surprise to them."

From there, a discussion began and developed into the student internship program.

"You couldn't have scripted it any better," Oliva said.

With the internships in place, Oliva,

Norton and Bates chose the Carson film as the first project for the student interns to tackle. Both the internship and the film would allow journalism and film students to bring their respective talents together.

"The idea was to mix those personalities and these kids who would normally never be in the same room together and develop the idea," said Paul Steger, director of the Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film.

The students said they got the feeling the project needed to stand out from other Carson tributes, and they decided their project should take a different direction from other Carson videos they had seen. Theirs would examine Carson's early life and education and show how he used those experiences throughout his career.

"Most everything else you see is about the 'Tonight Show' and stuff like that, and you don't see much on his childhood and his early career," Albrecht said.

With the 2007 spring semester coming to a close, the students began work on the

project, deciding to create a documentary-style video which would include insight from both those who knew Carson before he was a star and those who were affected by his work and legacy.

They brought together skills learned from both the film and broadcasting programs to brainstorm ideas, write scripts and develop a plan for executing their vision.

"All four of us were co-producers, so we all had a say," Hall said. "We worked together on everything from who to interview to the final script."

Bringing the students together seemed to have the intended consequences: They said they had to take time out to learn about each other's methods and techniques in order to produce the best possible project. Sometimes their different backgrounds in broadcast or film resulted in disagreements, which all four students said they found enlightening.

"The main thing was that we didn't agree on how to light interviews and stuff like that," Peterson said. "It was an eye-opener in the fact that we did stuff differently, and so we had to talk out why we did it our way and why they did it their way."

In addition, Hall noted the students had varying levels of experience with different aspects of film production. He said everyone had his or her own strong point, and he saw the benefits of working with film students, whom he said were skilled in editing.

"There was a lot of heart and passion in their work," he said.

Bates said the challenges were beneficial to the students and that their respective backgrounds probably weren't as different as the four originally thought.

"Storytelling is storytelling," he said. "I think the art of storytelling crosses technology, whether it's on film or video."

The students also faced a challenge in learning about Carson's life—all but Hall were too young even to remember watching Carson's show on television.

"There was so much to know and say about Johnny Carson," Azzam said. "We had no idea where to start or where to end."

In the summer of 2007, the students split up to interview people who might

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help provide them insight into Carson's life. All four spent time in Nebraska talking with classmates and co-workers from Caron's early life.

Peterson and Azzam also traveled to Los Angeles to interview TV writers, producers and stars, including Jay Leno and Ed McMahon. They also interviewed Carson's brother, Dick.

Albrecht and Hall traveled to New York for similar interviews with the likes of David Letterman, Conan O'Brien and Dick Cavett.

The students said they received much help and constructive criticism from NET and from Jeff Sotzing, president of Carson Entertainment Group and Johnny Carson's nephew. He gave them access to seemingly any Carson footage and material they wanted.

"We consider Jeff our executive producer," Hall said. "He probably had as much say in the project as anyone else because we knew he knew Johnny Carson better than anyone. He believed in what we were doing."

Toward the end of the summer, the students worked with NET to bring hours of footage into a 20-minute video, a task that sometimes seemed impossible.

"How many times during the summer did we hang our heads and say, 'This is never going to work?'" Azzam said. "But I'm really proud of the end product."

The project was going through revisions until the last minute, and some of the four didn't even see the final version until it screened at the dedication ceremony. But their six months of work seemed to pay off—the film evoked plenty of laughs and tears and received a standing ovation after it premiered.

"They were doing the most important project they have ever done, and it really was a professional job," Norton said, "and I think the audience recognized how good it was, because it seemed like they applauded for 10 minutes after the video."

In addition, the students received kind words from members of the Carson family.

"It was beautiful," Dick Carson said after seeing the video. "Johnny would have loved it."

The success of the video has done much



Film and New Media junior Aaron Nix films the halftime presentation to the Carson Family at the Cornhuskers football game on Oct. 13. Nix and College of Journalism and Mass Communications senior Allison Wilson-Adams worked as media interns for the Carson Dedication as part of the NET internship program.

to strengthen the administrators' views of the program, and while there are no other projects currently in the works, Norton, Oliva and Steger said there undoubtedly will be soon.

"It would be foolish not to have more projects like this," Steger said.

Norton said more collaboration between the schools is needed to better develop well-rounded students.

"You get a chance to meet a different kind of cat," he said. "It brings diversity of perspective. I'm hoping a lot of our students will take film courses, and I'm hoping a lot of their students will take our courses. I think this place will produce among the best documentary specialists in the country."

Oliva said he hopes the internship opportunity will help those involved make the transition into real-world jobs and situations.

"I personally feel very strongly that what will set our programs apart from those that are strictly academic will be opportunities

to connect in a meaningful way to the real world of work and particularly putting students in collaborative situations where they have to make decision together, because that's the way the world works in the business they're going into," he said.

In addition, Bates said the staff of NET learned as much from the students as the students did from the NET staff. For example, he said the students seemed more comfortable than NET veterans with NET's new digital equipment.

"There's no doubt we want this continue," he said. "The trick will be getting sustainable funding."

Hall said he felt proud to help build confidence in the students from the Johnny Carson School and the journalism college.

"I feel like with this project we put a lot of trust in the system," Hall said. "If this is what's going to happen, think about the next thing. The opportunities are going to get greater. To students considering doing any future projects, I say do it, and enjoy it." ■