

My Unsung Hero

Decades ago, a dusty lot was nothing more than open dirt. The ground was left with only tire marks and footprints. There were no clear borders or structures, just earth and sky, raw and unfinished. But to someone, it was never just empty ground. They saw it as a project, a jobsite in the making. Where others saw only unoccupied land, he saw potential. A vision.

My grandfather, Wally Johnson, was a skilled owner of the business, W Johnson Construction, Inc, which meant he turned ideas into real, working spaces. He explained it to me like this: His role wasn't just physical labor, but it was planning, scheduling, bidding, coordinating people, and finishing projects on time so they could actually be used. "There was no typical day. Every day was different because it could be a bidding day, could be pouring concrete at four a.m., or it could be having meetings with various people, so each day was different," he told me. He started college at ASU studying aeronautical engineering, but after hearing about different engineering paths, he realized construction was what he wanted to do.

Our history books often focus on changemaking figures from across the globe, like Alexander Hamilton or King Henry VIII, but tend to overlook people doing impactful work in their own communities. Some of the most lasting and meaningful influences are made far from the spotlight, through community development carried out by seemingly ordinary people.

Wally Johnson was one such a local superhero who built many Mesa buildings, including, exterior groundwork at Ishikawa Elementary School; projects at Washington Elementary; projects at Westwood High School; classrooms at Skyline High School; classroom buildings, Annex, and Performing Arts building and remodeling at Mountain View High School; Arizona

State University lining system in all underground refrigeration tanks; and roofing for the Mesa water reservoir.

Hard labor in construction didn't always mean physical strain for my grandfather, but it did demand constant time, focus, and flexibility. One of the most difficult parts, he shared, was "trying to coordinate projects, so they got completed in the scheduled time frame that various owners assigned." Managing time and people, and coordinating multiple projects to finish within strict deadlines, was no easy task. While the job was demanding, he saw how he was helping the city grow in quiet but powerful ways.

But he didn't do it alone. Engineers, architects, subcontractors, construction crews, and office staff all worked alongside him to bring these projects from paper to reality. Isidro Ochoa, for example, worked as a laborer under my grandfather for around 24 years. The skills, work ethic, and guidance he gained under Wally's leadership helped Isidro go on to work for Chase Builders, where he continues contributing to Mesa's development, including projects like the Mountain View High School bathrooms. In this way, my grandfather's influence spreads across generations, touching not just the structures in the city but also the people who continue to shape it.

As I was speaking with him, he showed me the impact he had on my family and the community around me. The reward he saw in his work didn't come from his daily paycheck or any city recognition, but from his family becoming a part of what he had built. His grandchildren, Audrey Davis (Mountain View High School) and Austin Davis (Mesa Academy), attend schools he constructed, learning in classrooms that once existed only as plans on paper. Other family members, Jeff Hall (Mountain View High School) and Jeff Davis (Arizona State

University), are teaching in buildings he completed. “Yeah, I felt happy. I felt a reward there. I felt a lot of things,” he reflected. Over time, his job turned into a legacy.

Wally Johnson turned the dirt lot decades ago into the colorful classrooms of Mesa Academy that are used to the fullest every day. By building schools and public facilities, he helped create spaces where teachers could teach, students could learn, and jobs could exist year after year. Each completed project meant more than a finished building; it meant classrooms filled, staff hired, and communities connected. The schools he worked on didn't just serve one generation, but they became places where families crossed paths, careers were built, and relationships formed. Through his daily work, he helped shape Mesa into a city that could support growing populations, stronger education systems, and lasting connections. He didn't seek recognition, but the impact of his efforts is clear, making him, truly, an Unsung Hero.