

# For 15 years, Clinton man's cards showed he cared

## Daughter plans documentary about dad's ties to ill girl

By Shelly Birkelo

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### BELOIT

Once director Mark Davis made his final adjustments to the lights, camera and microphones, he was ready to begin filming.

"I'm gonna roll on that," he said as the room fell silent.

Peering through the lens of his camera, Davis asked the main character of the film her first question: "Joni, how are you?"

"I'm fine," she answered, following her response with a giggle as she sat on a bench in front of her dining room table.

Davis and his wife, Clinton native Jan Jensen, were in Beloit on Saturday filming Joni (Vorass) Lillard and her decades-old greeting card collection that came from Jensen's late father, Bob Jensen.

The couple will spend the next two weeks filming a variety of people, and an estimated 10 hours of raw film will be edited down to a 15- to 30-minute short by summer. The documentary then will be entered into a film festival before eventually being posted online.

The New York City couple own and operate Tin Boat Products, a small independent company that focuses on documentary filmmaking. Topics focus on what they find interesting—conservation, dying art forms, stories they feel should be told, plus inspirational stories such as the long-term friendship between Jan's dad and Lillard, who has had 41 surgeries since she was born.

When Bob died unexpectedly in March 2014 from a massive stroke Lillard popped into Jan's mind.

"She was a big part of my dad's life. He was a big part of her life," Jan said.

Jan, who hadn't seen or spoken with Lillard for more than 20 years, contacted the Beloit woman to let her know what happened.



**Above:** Clinton native Jan Jensen, center, and her husband, Mark Davis, conduct an interview Saturday with Joni Lillard inside the kitchen of her Beloit home. The couple is working on a documentary film about Jensen's late father, Bob Jensen, and the 1,000 hand-drawn greeting cards he sent Lillard as a child. **Below left:** Jan Jensen, left, and Joni Lillard, look through some of the hand-drawn greeting cards Jensen's late father made for Lillard when she was a child. **Below right and bottom right:** Some of the cards Bob Jensen sent Lillard.



When Lillard began reminiscing about Bob and explaining the importance of the cards, Jan learned Lillard had saved every one of them. "They're just so special to me," Lillard said. "I couldn't imagine throwing away any of them."

Bob, who was school superintendent in Clinton, had been sending cards to ill children for almost 30 years. He learned of Lillard's illness in 1986 through a news item her teacher had placed in the local paper.

Then 7 years old, Lillard was in a Boston hospital recuperating from surgeries related to a birth defect known as



Vater syndrome. The affliction causes problems with the esophagus, severe bladder and kidney defects, curvature

of the spine and bowel complications.

Bob, who taught art for eight years and had illustra-

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**Joni Lillard, talking about Bob Jensen**

tions published in a book teaching the French language, began mailing Lillard daily get-well wishes. The notes came steadily for 2½ years before tapering off gradually. Still, she received them for a total of 15 years.

Bob also sent birthday cards to Lillard's siblings, Steve and Angie, and mailed art supplies to all three children at Christmas.

"We already found cards from 1986 through 1992 and still have another box to go through," Jan said Saturday. Every card—close to 1,000 of them—will be photographed for use in the film, she said.

"We're also hoping to recreate some cards from some of the illustrations and try to sell them as a fundraiser for Joni and as a way to have my dad's artwork get out there and pay it forward," Jan said.

Lillard, 36, is a mother and pharmacy technician who lives in Beloit. She faces at least one more surgery.

She attributes Bob's greeting cards with getting her through her mental and physical challenges. She says that is why she agreed to be part of this documentary.

"I want to be able to share my story about him with everyone," she said. "I want to let whoever sees it know how great of a person he was, and to inspire someone to be as thoughtful and caring as he was."

So do Jan and her husband, advertising professionals who have a combined 35 years of experience with offices in both New York City and the Catskills.

"We would like people to watch the film and be inspired to do something nice for somebody else," Jan said.

That's why the couple loaded their SUV, drove 892 miles one way and are staying in Rock County for up to three weeks to conduct all of the interviews for the documentary.

They'll film Lillard, her parents, Debbie Fischer and Steve Vorass; her brother and sister; her grade school teacher; Bob's two brothers and a woman with the foreign language book company for which her dad drew illustrations.

The documentary is "a labor of love and an investment of our time. We just want to put films out there we think other people will like," she said.

More important, Jan wants to draw attention to Lillard in hopes of inspiring people to help perfect strangers, just as her father did.

"My Dad tried to make a difference in Joni's life, and I think he did," Jan said.

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