

LOST AND FORGOTTEN...

BY ANTWANN JOHNSON

My name is Antwann Johnson, and I was born and raised in the inner city of St. Louis, MO. I was the oldest of 9 children, 6 boys and 3 girls. My childhood was filled with many memories that are bittersweet due to the fact that I was forced to mature at a young age to take care of my siblings because my mother battled with addictions. In grade school, I had to wear hand-me-downs from the Goodwill because my mother couldn't afford name-brand clothes and shoes. This would bring teasing and bullying from the other children, and I didn't have many friends.

Early on, back when it was only me and my brother, we mainly lived with my grandmother while my mother was dealing with her own demons. I remember witnessing my mother be abused by the men that she was in a relationship with, but at the time I was too young to understand why she was being beaten. As I grew into a teenager, I would do a lot of the things that a typical teen would do such as sneak out of the house, smoke, and drink with the older kids. I remember my first run-in with the law came about from me joy-riding with a friend and the cops got behind us. Not wanting to go to jail, my friend attempted to flee but we were apprehended and sent to a juvenile detention center. I had a desire to get fast money and have nice things so I tried my hand at selling drugs, but I was unsuccessful and got caught.

I feel as if I never truly found my place in the world and couldn't seem to get a grip on life. One of the brighter moments of my childhood, though, is that by the time I was 15 years old I found a passion at a local boxing gym called Tandy's. This is where I met a coach named Mr. Haynes, and he began to train me to be a boxer. Learning how to box helped me find the confidence that I previously lacked, and I started to feel better about myself. Unfortunately, it was also around this time that I began to experiment with hard drugs and was introduced to heroin. I did not like the feeling it gave me; but it led to me trying cocaine, which would be the drug to drastically change my life.

Eventually my boxing career got derailed, and I again tried to turn to the streets for my source of income. The little odd jobs I got here and there never lasted long. My grandmother was becoming more and more suspicious about what I was doing in the streets and began to question me a lot. I would only give her enough of an explanation about my whereabouts and activities to stop her interrogation, but continued to travel down a negative path. By age 17 I was immersed in the street life, but not deeply enough to ever be involved in any serious crimes. I grew envious as I watched many of the local drug dealers drive nice cars, gain attention, and get all the girls because I also wanted that lifestyle for myself. I realize now that I was suffering from abandonment issues, inadequacy, and lack of acceptance. I felt that I never experienced the type of love I really wanted in my household, but I can say that my grandmother did her best to take care of us and shield us from the streets. By 20 years old, I had my first son. I was extremely excited to be a father, but still had not yet found a purpose or positive direction for my life.

By the time I was 21, my life would be shattered by being arrested for a murder that I did not commit. I can still remember all of the initial emotions I felt from being convicted and sent to my first prison as if it were just yesterday. When I arrived at Potosi Correctional Center, I did not know what to expect. There were men there on Death Row and all I kept saying to myself was,

"How did I get here?"

My first cellmate was a man named Jerome Mallett, who eventually ended up being executed. He would be the first person to tell me to fight my case and not to be consumed by the prison lifestyle. There is one memorable time I shared with him that will never leave my head: As the song *"I Want To Be Free"* by The Ohio Players was playing softly in the background, I noticed that Jerome had a needle in his thigh and he told me,

"This is how I maintain from one day to the next, Lil' Goldie (my nickname)."

There was another time when he came back in the cell, sat on the bunk, and began to cry. I did not know what to do. For the first time, I was scared to death because I was witnessing a Death Row inmate, who had just gotten off the phone with his attorney, break down in tears. What he told me would change my life. He said,

*"Lil' Goldie, fight your case. You're too young to have all of this time.
Get to know God. Only God can change your situation."*

He told me that he was guilty for his crime, but that he did not want to die. On the night he was executed, I sat in the cell by myself in the dark and cried. I recall talking to God for the first time and simply said,

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"Please don't let me die here..."

I eventually was in a physical altercation at that camp, and would be transferred to what was known as *"The Bloodiest 40 Acres"*, or *"The Walls"*. When I arrived at the camp, the sign at the entrance literally said,

"Leave All Your Hopes and Dreams Behind"

I would only stay at this camp for a little over a year before I was again transferred. I was now sent to Charleston, where I would begin to express the pain I was experiencing, but nothing could prepare me for the day that they told me my grandmother died. I broke down and said,

"Oh God, no!"

It was 2005, and I was torn apart mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I would be placed on medication because I could not sleep. I saw two inmates commit suicide because they could not handle their time. Then, my final appeal was denied. Again, in a dark room, I would cry out to God; but back then, I felt that He was ignoring my pleas for help. I was eventually sent to Bonne Terre prison, where I would be reunited with one of my brothers. After being there for a year, I found out that my father had died. Again, I sat in silence in a dark cell, but there was no tears shed this time because I didn't really know him that well. After his death, I felt I had reached a turning point in my life. This is when I truly began to pay attention to God directing my path. Bonne Terre was changing its custody level, so all of the level 5 prisoners had to leave but they gave us the option of choosing where we wanted to go. I picked a couple of different camps, but ultimately ended up being sent to Jefferson City Correctional Center, which is the camp that I currently reside at.

When I got here, I was placed in the cell with an old friend. Things did not work out, so they moved me into the cell with a guy named Tredell. He would be the one to really add fuel to the flames regarding my pursuit to prove my innocence. He told me some things concerning my case that only someone who was involved would know. I soon learned that this was because he said that he was arrested with the person who had really committed the murder that I was charged and convicted for. Eventually, I felt a real sense of hope; especially as I began to obtain pieces of evidence that he spoke to me about during our conversations. I would write letter after letter seeking legal assistance from a variety of places, including different innocence projects, but time and time again I was met with either no response or rejection. I grew frustrated because I had never felt so helpless in my life. Little did I know, God was working the whole time.

It became clear that my family had given up on me because I would reach out to them and my cries would fall on deaf ears. I would also seek correspondence with women, but none would reply. I felt that I had become one of the lost and forgotten individuals who get trapped and eventually abandoned within the legal system. This was the harsh reality that I had to come to terms with, and I realized that if I was going to make it through this storm I was going to need to rely on a power greater than myself. I committed to giving my life to God on October 22, 2015 and was baptized. I began to write more letters seeking help from the outside with a renewed sense of determination, but received more of the same; rejection or no response. I admit, I was more than a little disheartened, but I know it was due to the fact that I wanted things to happen on my time instead of having the patience and faith to know with surety that things would happen on His time. I sat in the still darkness of my cell once again, contemplating my life, and began to pray. While deep in prayer, Matthew 6:33 came to me, which says,

"But seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

I believe that's why God placed Sister Joye Gros and Sister Carolyn in my life. Also, I received a photo from Kate Germond over the holidays. She is the executive director of Centurion, Inc., and the picture had her along with the exonerees associated with her organization on it. Although they have not yet agreed to fight my case at this point, getting that picture made me feel as if I am truly a part of a family for the first time. I have faith that God didn't bring me all this way to abandon me.

As I grew closer to God, I found a real desire to want to help others. I volunteer in the TCU medical unit at this camp helping inmate patients with their daily activities. Some suffer from cancer, while others deal with similar life-altering illnesses. I can't put into words the sadness I feel from experiencing a person fight for their life while battling a debilitating disease. You can tell they appreciate us by the look in their eyes when we assist them. I live in the same Housing Unit with those who need help; and I am a wheel chair pusher, which is called a D.L.A. (or Daily Living Assistant). I do not get paid for my assistance, but I realize that in order for me to serve God I have to be of service to others. That is one of the biggest life lessons that I learned

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during my time as a facilitator in the I.T.C. (Intensive Therapeutic Community), which is a highly-regarded prison drug and alcohol treatment program. Now, I sit back and reflect on how God has been working in my life this whole time and trying to get my attention. I still, at times, feel low and forgotten because I am lonely and do not have much contact with people in the free world; but I believe that I am worthy of loving, and continue to ask God for the strength to carry me through my trials and tribulations. When I read my Bible, I see that God visited Joseph, Peter, Paul, and John during their hardships. Honestly? I don't know what my future holds at this point, but I will continue to hold firmly onto God's unchanging hand, because the Bible says,

"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and He shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3: 5-6).

I see that God was telling me all the while to stop putting my faith in man and rely on Him. What I learned about myself through this journey is that I used to be a fearful young boy who lacked the confidence to do great things with my life, but I believe God is using me as a vessel to give hope and inspire others around the world with my story; because

"Now I know that the LORD is greater than all gods" (Exodus 18:11).

I fully understand now that my response to a situation says more about me and my character than what I was originally confronted with. One who is committed to growth and learning will always find a way to rise and elevate above their current circumstances, regardless of how dismal they may seem. I'm also learning that not everyone is in a place mentally, emotionally, and spiritually where they are ready to grow and elevate. Some people choose to stay stuck because they are complacent or feel that it is safer for them than venturing into the unknown and having faith in God. I realize that those people are only put in my life for me to learn from, not to follow. Justice lies within the hearts of us all, just as good and evil does. If I could perform miracles like Jesus, I would change the hearts of men to be able to withstand and turn from the illusions of evil and maintain a firm grasp on truth and the capabilities inside themselves to express goodness in all the walks of life.

Perhaps it was simply my belief system that caused me to stay stuck as a prisoner within my own mind for so long. I never could understand why people placed birds in a cage when they were created to fly. I feel that my life is similar to that of a bird, I am being held back from achieving my true potential by continuing to be held captive behind these bars. So I'm asking you...

Have I, too, become one of the lost and forgotten?

*God Bless You All,
Antwann Johnson*

It is my responsibility to let you know that there are several Antwann Johnsons who are incarcerated.

What separates us is our prison numbers, mine is #524659.

This number is my name under the D.O.C.