

OMAR JOHNSON

Family Roots

My name is Omar Johnson and I believe that Teachers make ALL professions possible. When you take a moment to think about that statement you realize it is very powerful. It places an awesome responsibility on those who are Teachers. It can also strike fear in the hearts of some who may aspire to become a teacher. I was born into an extremely large family. My grandfather, Fred Douglas Johnson, was born in 1919. My grandmother, Mary Ethel Mays, was born in 1924. Both were born in small Southern towns in Mississippi. They married in 1940. They had eleven children; three boys and eight girls. My mother was the seventh oldest in the family. She was also the fourth girl. Our family was very large so we often times leaned on each other for support as well as encouragement. My eldest aunt, Freddie, is the “rock” of our family. My mom and I moved to Chicago when I was three years old. My eldest aunt, Freddie, was already living in Chicago for a few years and let us live with her for a few months. My mom eventually met and married my step-dad Hayward Johnson. My immediate family growing up consisted of my mom (Dorse), my younger sister (Michelle), and my younger brother (Hayward III).

When I was growing up we spent a lot of time with my cousins. We often would spend the weekends together at my aunt Freddie’s house. Many of us were around the same age so we had similar interest. One game we played that was very popular was simply called “school.” There were enough of us to have a school with several classrooms! We would take turns being “the teacher” and “the principal.” At the age of 11 I had nine cousins who were younger than me. At any given moment I was the “responsible” one during our playtime. I believe that it was during moments like that I began to develop patience. I was always looking out for my younger siblings and cousins.

I would make sure everyone finished eating ALL of their food before they were allowed to play outside. We all had some sort of chore to get done so I would make sure everything was cleaned up before we went outside to play. I figured out at an early age that in order to keep the “grown-ups” off my back I stayed on my little cousins’ backs.

I lived on the West Side of Chicago until I graduated from elementary school in 1986. My mom has ALWAYS been my role model. She has been a constant positive influence in my life. She taught me as well as my siblings the importance of seeing yourself in the shoes of someone else. My mother is not a woman of many words because she let her actions speak for her. My mother was involved in an abusive relationship when she was married to my stepdad. She showed me through her strength just how strong I am. Regardless of the difficulties she was dealing with regarding her marriage she continued to have a heart of service. She would do anything she could to help a neighbor in need. I remember an older couple who lived on our block. Mr. and Mrs. Holmes were probably the first people to move onto Carroll Street. Our address was 4346 W. Carroll. The Holmes lived on the first floor of the first house on our block. I remember the odd thing about Carroll Street back then was that there were only houses on one side of the street. When we got home from church on Sundays my mom would make a plate of food to take to the Holmes couple. I was volunteered to help my mom carry the food. I noticed that Mr. Holmes was confined to a wheelchair and Mrs. Holmes was legally blind. My mom would take the time to make sure that everything was in order so that they could enjoy a nice home cooked Sunday dinner. This was an example of the selflessness shown by my mother that I took to heart.

One day I came home from school and Mrs. Holmes was sitting at our kitchen table. My mom was helping her write out her bills and make sure that her finances were

in order. And I just stood off to the side and watched my mom. I was amazed and proud of my mom. She showed yet another example of kindness and service. She later told me that you never know when you could be a blessing to someone. She also reminded me of the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. My mother has a heart that is rooted in kindness and service. My mom helped me to understand the value in the reward that comes with service.

My Journey to the Classroom

My first summer job was working as a tutor in Mayor Daley's Summer Jobs Program. I was 14 years old and I had just graduated eighth grade. I was working at a summer school program tutoring sixth graders. I still remember my first check was for \$167.50 every two weeks. I also remember being confident that I could help those students who I was responsible for. My confidence came from the fact that I knew that I knew the subject. Also, I felt like I could relate to the kids who were just a couple of years younger than me. It felt good to share in the success of kids who I helped refine a set of skills that could aid them in the near future. The following two summers I worked as a tutor for children ages 12-14. We would give the students a pretest to determine their weaknesses and develop a plan to work on improving their skills. I was good at tutoring, but at that time, I never thought about becoming a teacher.

During my junior year in high school I decided to attend college outside of the state of Illinois. My mom and I went on a tour of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). I fell in love with the campus of Florida A&M University (FAMU) and in the fall of 1990 I enrolled. I was a general education major. In the spring of 1992 I found out that my mother was very sick and she needed surgery. My mother had always put her children first and she never complained. I decided to stay at home and

get a job to help my mother. I began to take an evening course as I worked at UPS. My mother's surgery was successful and I remained at home to help her recover.

At this point in my life I had no desire to be a teacher. I needed to make money and as much of it as I could. I learned from a family friend that there was an open position at an elementary school. I had experience working with children so I applied for the job. The position was for a school aide. Basically I would be available to assist any teacher at any time. I interviewed for the job and I was offered the job the same day. I began working at Ronald H. Brown Academy in September of 2003. Again, at this point in my life I had no desire to become a teacher.

The first teachers I worked with at the school were Ms. Taylor and Ms. Harris. They were special education teachers. I was able to make a connection with the students and get them to take their work seriously. Many of the young men in the special needs classes could do the work. They were just bored and therefore became behavior problems. I was blessed with a particular set of skills, which allowed me to reach out and get these young people to respect me, and ultimately trust that I had their best interest at heart. One day I was in charge of the upper grade special education class. The teacher was at a staffing. The education administrators from the Chicago Public School (CPS) network were doing a walkthrough at our school. When they came into my classroom I had to assume the role of the teacher. The next day before I punched in, the principal asked to speak to me. She said that my ears should have been ringing all night. At the time, I did not understand what she was saying. I found out later that after the walkthrough many of the educators from our network thought I was actually the lead teacher. She said they had several positive things to say. It was at this point I began to entertain the thought of becoming a teacher.

In the fall of 2006 I was assigned to work with the Head Start Program for children ages three to five years old and I jumped at the opportunity to work with the little people. I believe that to educate means to bring out that which is within. Being assigned to the Head Start Program gave me an opportunity to have a positive effect on the lives of children at an early age. I wanted to spark a desire and thirst for learning. My goal was to make school the coolest place to be. A majority of the brain's growth occurs between the ages of three to five years old and I wanted to establish a foundation for future learning that was as fertile as the Nile riverbed.

Joining Grow Your Own (GYO)

I knew I had the ability to teach but I needed to find the proper path to get my teaching degree. One of the teachers I worked with in the Head Start Program was Ms. Sims. She had been with CPS for 35 years. She saw me working with a student whose name was Timothy. Timothy had Down Syndrome. I had no experience working with special needs children, but for some reason, Timothy became attached to me. He would only work with me. Ms. Sims noticed the bond Timothy and I had developed and she suggested I look into a program that was looking to help people who wanted to become teachers. The name of the program was called Grow Your Own (GYO). After several attempts I was able to contact Imelda Salazar from Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP). We arranged to meet and she explained the purpose and goal of the GYO Teachers Program. She explained that there was a serious lack of Teachers of Color within the CPS system. The main purpose of the GYO program was to help close the achievement gap and staff failing schools with people who are from the community. Children respect those who they relate. A Teacher of Color who is from the community has a better chance of reaching and teaching a child who is also from that community. I

expressed my desire to be a part of GYO program and my commitment to educating the children of today. After meeting with Imelda, I was certain I had found my path to my teaching degree. I would call Imelda every few months just to let her know that I was serious about being in the program. Two years after our initial conversation I received a call from Imelda and she informed me that I was accepted into the GYO program.

Unspeakable joy that cannot be given nor taken away by any man is what best describes how I felt when I heard the news of my acceptance into the program.

Despite the current financial crisis that has GYO funding suspended I am hopeful that I will achieve my goal to become a teacher. In the fall of 2015 I began my 13th year working within the CPS System. Two years ago I was blessed to see some of the children who started school in my Head Start Program actually graduate from eighth grade.

Although I am not a parent I felt like a proud dad. A dad of one of my former students came to my classroom to introduce himself. He admitted that he had been incarcerated the past couple of years. He told me that he just had to meet Mr. Johnson. It seems as though every time his son came to visit him all he would talk about was Mr. Johnson. Once the mother assured him that I was his teacher the dad wanted to meet me! He thanked me for helping him be a better father. And it starts with him being at home and not locked up. He shared with me how much it hurt him to hear his son speak so highly of another man.

I believe that I was born to teach. A teacher inspires, encourages, praises, instructs guides, mentors, and ultimately believes in the GOOD for the future. One of the things that inspires me every day is a song by Harold Melvin and The Blue Notes. The song is “Wake Up Everybody.” The song begins by saying, “Wake up all the teachers time to teach a new way, maybe then they’ll listen to what you have to say. Their the ones whose

coming up and the world is in their hands, when you teach the children, teach them the very best you can. The world won't get no better if you just let it be, we got to change it, just you and me." If I can help at least one child realize their full potential or help one parent to make changes and recommit to the full development and education of their child then my service is my reward.

Wake Up Everybody!