



A Grandmother's Gracious Love

By Mike Heath, Lead Resource Specialist

“Growing up, I didn’t even realize that I was in the system,” says Johnathan, age 23. Johnathan was placed in the care of his grandmother when he was a young boy growing up in Milwaukee. Johnathan’s mother was unable to care for him and his three sisters due to her issues with alcohol and other drugs.

Johnathan loved his mother and he knew that his mother loved him. Consequently, he never gave up hope that he would be able to live with his mother again. He would one day live with his mother, but not in the way that he expected.

Growing up with Grandmother

Johnathan’s mother was unable to care for him, but his maternal grandmother was willing to care for Johnathan and his three sisters. She loved them. She was there for them. She reached out to them. She protected them. She was their rock. She was their saving grace.

Growing up with their grandmother meant that their family celebrated many cherished traditions with one another. Johnathan fondly remembers the first Friday of every month, which was known as Family Fun Night at their grandmother’s house.

This was the time that everyone looked forward to playing games and watching movies together.

They also celebrated all of the holidays together. Johnathan specifically remembers the Fourth of July celebrations because that was the time that his grandmother would pack a picnic lunch and off they would go to laugh, play, and eat together.

Family Matters

Johnathan’s grandmother always stressed the importance of family, which meant the world to her. She taught the importance of family to her grandchildren every day, and she did everything she

could to reunite Johnathan and his siblings with their mother. Unfortunately, their mother could not win the battle against her drug addiction.

Johnathan is grateful that his grandmother prepared them for the day when they would be living on their own and how she taught them how to cook and clean at an early age. She taught him to be independent and successful in all areas of his life.

“She taught me everything I know,” says Johnathan. “She is where I got my toughness, my smarts, and my survival skills.”

He goes on to say, “She would give us the shirt off of her back if she had to.”

“The only rock I know that stays steady, the only institution I know that works, is the family.”

~Lee Iacocca

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Making Family Connections

Johnathan has three sisters—one is 21 and is a student at UW-Madison, the next one is 20 and has earned a Certified Nursing Assistant degree. His youngest sister is 17 years old.

Johnathan is close with the two older sisters but unfortunately, he has lost contact with his younger sister. He doesn't know where she is, but hopes to reconnect with her.

Johnathan has never met his father and has little information about him—although he does know that he has spent a considerable amount of time in prison. Johnathan recently connected with his paternal grandfather, and he is in the process of making arrangements for Johnathan to meet his father. Johnathan is looking forward to that.

Role Reversal

"My mother always taught me not to take things for granted," Johnathan explains. He would soon discover the true meaning of those insightful words.

When Johnathan was 20, he received the news that would change both of their lives forever: His mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

Johnathan was determined to be there for his mother, and he was there for her when she needed him the most. This was his opportunity to reconnect with her and he dedicated his life to taking care of her the best way he knew how,

through love and affection. Johnathan made certain that all of his mother's medical needs were taken care of.

"My mother loved all of us and she did the best she could to be there for us," Johnathan says. In turn, Johnathan was there to do whatever he could for his mother.

In the midst of reconnecting with his mom, Johnathan was offered a basketball scholarship, but he turned it down to take care of his mother.

Losing the Ones You Love the Most

Johnathan took care of his mother for two plus years. Her health took a turn for the worse, and she passed away at age of 40. Johnathan is grateful for the time that he was able to spend with his mother. He recalls how his mother tried to make up for the lost time with him, even though her health was deteriorating. He will always treasure the time he was able to spend with his mother.

Johnathan not only lost his mother but he also lost his grandmother, who passed away at the age of 54. He lost the two most important women in his life and had to reach for the strength to help him endure the tremendous feelings of grief and loss.

He misses his mother and grandmother dearly. "I felt as if I had lost two moms," Johnathan says.

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His mother and grandmother both had a tremendous impact on his life

and they surely would be proud to have raised such a thoughtful and compassionate person.

A Bright Future Ahead

Johnathan is currently attending Milwaukee Area Technical College and is studying Broadcasting Telecommunication. His long-term goals are to graduate from Milwaukee Technical College and then pursue a Bachelor's degree.

Johnathan is excelling at school. When he's not studying, you can find him playing basketball. He plays on MATC's basketball team and hopes to pursue a professional basketball career. If he isn't able to fulfill that dream, he plans on pursuing a career in sports broadcasting.

Besides his involvement in athletics, he participates in the Milwaukee Youth Advisory Council and is also the president of the statewide Youth Advisory Council. He is a strong advocate for change for youth who grow up in care (including in the care of relatives).



Johnathan has spoken on numerous panels and he has advocated for change at the capital in Madison and also at the capital in Washington D.C. He exemplifies the notion that with hard work, you can achieve great accomplishments. Most of all, he has given back what was his family taught him.

Johnathan has had to overcome a great deal of hardship in his life and has persevered. He possesses the inner strength to work through whatever of life's obstacles are thrown his way.

His grandmother was there for him when he needed her, and in turn, he was there for his mother. Family has been a strong influence, and his current success is directly attributed to the two most precious women who graced his life, his mother and grandmother.

