

Alumni Spotlight - Tarik Johnson



By Jamie Kornegay
GSD Reporter

If there's one thing we hear again and again from prominent Grenada High School graduates, it's how they attribute their success in life to formative experiences they had while students in Grenada.

For instance, local attorney Tarik Johnson (Class of 1994), was so inspired by his family's strong work ethic and his high-school mentoring experiences that he moved back to Grenada after college to practice law with his father, Leon Johnson.

The Johnsons moved to Grenada when Tarik was five. He attended all grades at Grenada Schools and took his first job in high school on the janitorial staff at Heatcraft, Inc. He was offered a full-time position but opted to continue his education, attending Tougaloo College near Jackson and coming home during the summer to work. "Between those jobs and working with my dad, I picked up the work ethic to always do your best," says Johnson. "I guess that's why the guy

in janitorial service wanted to keep me. I did the work and didn't complain."

His parents believed in giving back to the community. His mother, Carol Johnson, was a social worker and formed Interfaith Mass Choir, a non-profit community mass choir for youth. The group gave nearly 100 kids the unique opportunity to travel and be a part of something bigger than themselves, performing all over the state as well as Washington, D.C. and Nashville, where they appeared on BET Network's *Live at the Bobby Jones Gospel Explosion*.

Johnson followed his parents' example from an early age. At Grenada High School, he joined a group called GQ, Gentlemen of Quality. While still a teenager himself, he volunteered to mentor younger kids at Grenada Middle School. "It was good for those kids to have someone closer to their own age to push them toward better habits," Johnson says.

His interest in mentoring carried over to college, where he became a peer counselor working with at-risk youth at Rowan Middle School in Jackson. He performed so well with the kids that Tougaloo sent him for further training. He became a certified peer counselor and started his own program at Canton High School.

After graduating from Tougaloo in 1998 with a bachelor's degree in English and a minor in pre-law, Johnson entered the University of Mississippi School of Law in 2001. He passed the Bar Exam and came home to join his father at Johnson & Johnson. His family's well-respected law firm has over forty years of experience in a variety of legal matters, from criminal cases and personal injury suits to bankruptcy and family estate planning. He also met his wife, Veronica, of Inverness, and they've been married for ten years.

"When I came home after college, one of my passions was to work in the youth court system," says Johnson, who

worked pro bono for a year to learn youth court practices.

Johnson developed a good reputation for his work helping kids through the legal system, and soon he was representing all the children who'd been abused and neglected in Grenada County. "I try to reunite kids with parents if possible. That's the key to improving the community. If we can deter kids from deviant behavior, then society as a whole can improve. It just takes education and morals."

The senior chancellor appointed Johnson to be the youth court judge in Montgomery County, where he helps rehabilitate the delinquent youth he encounters. For first offenses, he'll often sentence kids to community service and try to match them with a mentor. The punishments grow for repeat offenders, culminating in a stint at Oakley Youth Development Center, a correctional training school for delinquent youth. "I try a variety of options to deter the child's bad behavior before I send him to Oakley," Johnson says.

Johnson fondly recalls some of the teachers who made an impression on him at Grenada. Among his favorites was Mr. Nez Watson. "He kept up with me when I graduated from law school. He supervised the high school mock trial team and tapped me to come work with them."

Johnson helped coach the school's mock-trial team for several years, leading the Grenada team to state competition for the first time. Several students on the team went on to become lawyers in town, including Amanda Hargrove, law clerk for Circuit Court Judge Carol White-Richard, and Trey Baker, the current city manager. Even Charlie Worsham, the prominent Nashville singer-songwriter, showed promise as an attorney on the trial team. Johnson recalls, "Yeah, I believe I had Charlie torn between music and law at one point."

Another big influence at Grenada High was Johnson's band director, cur-

rent Superintendent David Daigneault. Johnson played tuba and was motivated by Daigneault's work ethic. "We had a history of being ranked at the top of the state, and it took a lot of work," says Johnson. "You had to be disciplined and organized. I remember being on the practice field, tired and sweating, and Daigneault would say, 'One more time!' That was his favorite phrase. One more time."

Like other Grenada alumni who have gone on to great success, Johnson touts a strong work ethic. "I often tell children to work hard if they want to become successful. Set goals for yourself. It can be as simple as doing your homework. Set that goal for yourself, and then when you take the exam, your grades should improve. When they improve, set bigger goals. Figure out what you want to be in this world. Talk to somebody in that field to find out what they did to become an attorney or a doctor. It's one thing to say you want to be a lawyer, and another to talk to one and participate."

Johnson adds, "The key is, once you become successful, then reach back and help someone else. Motivate someone else. I believe true happiness and success is when you can put a smile on somebody's face."

One of his favorite quotes that he learned at Tougaloo College is from an anonymous author: "Excuses are monuments of nothingness. They build bridges to nowhere. Those who use these tools of incompetence are masters of Nothing."

Johnson says, "I often tell children, regardless of their circumstances, They Can: become a doctor, become a teacher, become a supervisor, become an engineer, become anything that they want. 'You have No Excuses and I will not accept any excuses. You Can.'"

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