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From poverty and illiteracy to CEO: Michael Johnson inspires as the head of Dane County's Boys & Girls Club



Michael Johnson knows he's a lucky man. After all, as CEO of the [Boys & Girls Club of Dane County](#), he's doing his dream job. But long before he could even think about inspiring young lives, he had to salvage his own – and luck had very little to do with that.

"I share this story all the time," said Johnson. "When I grew up in Chicago, the elementary school that I graduated from, out of 23 young people who graduated with me, only four of us are still alive as of today, and I'm in my mid-30s. And so the common thread that the four of us have together, we were all members of the Boys & Girls Clubs, we were all connected to a community of faith, we all had mentors in our lives, and we all came from single-family households."

Tragically, the first and most shocking chapter of Johnson's life story – growing up in poverty surrounded by gangs, drugs, and prostitution – was more predictable than any

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13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31	01	02

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of his achievements, including his graduation from college, the M.B.A. he later earned, and his rise to the top job at a respected Madison nonprofit organization.

Among the early obstacles he needed to overcome was illiteracy, and even though a football scholarship to the [University of Minnesota](#) gave him what appeared to be a leg up, he simply didn't have the academic background he needed to succeed in the classroom.

"I just couldn't compete at a collegiate level," said Johnson. "So I ended up going to a junior college in Chicago, and it took me about four and a half years to graduate to get my associate degree. I had to take two and a half years of preparatory courses, because I just struggled in reading. Going to elementary school and high school in Chicago, I think I was socially promoted and just wasn't prepared. So in junior college I took all these preparatory courses, and when I got my reading up to par, I pretty much excelled, and after about eight years, I got my bachelor's degree from [Chicago State University](#)."

"Even though I was going off to the University of Minnesota, I was so afraid. I'd never really been out of my neighborhood in my life, and it was a cultural shock to me. But my mentor at the Boys & Girls Club made me believe that I could be somebody, and so they provided inspiration for me and they kept me off the street." – Michael Johnson

Throughout his schooling, Johnson thought back to his days as a vulnerable kid who leaned on the stability provided by the Boys & Girls Clubs, and he looked forward to a time when he could repay some of the support and compassion he'd received through the program.

Without the Boys & Girls Clubs, "I think I'd be dead or in jail," said Johnson. "My mentor

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made me believe. Even though I was going off to the University of Minnesota, I was so afraid. I'd never really been out of my neighborhood in my life, and it was a cultural shock to me. But my mentor at the Boys & Girls Club made me believe that I could be somebody, and so they provided inspiration for me and they kept me off the street. So even though I lived in that environment, I went to school every day. The Boys & Girls Club was open until 9 o'clock every night. They were open on Saturday, and I found myself there all the time.

"That kept me out of trouble. ... So I really owe my life to the Boys & Girls Club and those volunteers that supported the program."

Pursuing a dream

After completing his undergraduate work, Johnson set his sights on working for nonprofits, and all along, the goal of running a Boys & Girls Club remained in the back of his mind.

He decided that the best path toward success was earning an M.B.A. He signed up for the M.B.A. program at the [University of Phoenix](#), which offered him the flexibility to work full time.

"When people asked, 'What do you want to be?' I always said, even when I worked for the city of Philadelphia, the city of Chicago – I worked with [Arne Duncan](#), who's the current U.S. secretary of education – I always told folks that I wanted to be a CEO of a Boys & Girls Club," said Johnson. "So I knew that when that opportunity arose, that I had to have strong business skills, and I wanted to know how to market programs, I wanted to know how to balance budgets, I wanted to learn organization dynamics and how to build teams, and so when I looked at the University of Phoenix program, they had all those courses.

"I had done my research and learned in interviewing other nonprofit executives that the reason some executives fail in their roles is because they don't know how to manage the business component of the nonprofit, and so I just decided I wanted to get all my degrees in business."

Buoyed by academic success, Johnson eventually found success in the professional world as well. He has served as deputy recreation commissioner for the city of Philadelphia, executive director of Lutheran Child & Family Services of Indiana and Kentucky, special assistant to the CEO for both Philadelphia and Chicago public schools, and executive director of the [Monsanto Family YMCA](#) in St. Louis. In recognition of his work, the *St. Louis Metro Sentinel Journal* named him Non-Profit Executive of the Year and the mayor of St. Louis proclaimed February 24, 2007 “Michael Johnson Day.”

But his career arc was destined to bring him back to the Boys & Girls Clubs. Even when corporate America came calling, Johnson kept his eye on his long-cherished goal. A national oral health care company recruited him for an executive position, but he was determined not to let that last obstacle to his dream – temptation – get in his way.

“It was a very lucrative salary, about three times more than the one I’m making now,” said Johnson. “[And the man recruiting me] said, ‘Mike, I would love to have you serve as my executive vice president,’ and he was pretty much lobbying, trying to get me to stay in Pennsylvania to work for his company. And you know what, I thought about it, and I had the Boys & Girls Club offer, and I talked to my wife, and she said, ‘Mike, you’ve been talking about this for *years*.’ And I thought about it and I said, ‘I need to follow my passion and not money.’ I’m not passionate about oral health care. I love to brush my teeth and make sure I got good oral hygiene, but that’s just not a field that I’m passionate about, so I turned it down.”

Now, in his role with the Boys & Girls Club, Johnson sees the impact that decision has had – just as clearly as he can see the influence the organization had on him in his youth.

“When I look at the work that we do at the Boys & Girls Club, we’re providing these kids with a lifeline,” said Johnson. “We’re providing these kids with inspiration. I’ve been here almost two years now, and in my two years at this club, in our college preparatory program, 100% of our kids have graduated. Last year, 90% went to college. This year in our graduating class, 100% of our kids are going to college.”

And as someone who has overcome major obstacles with the help of community support, Johnson knows that having proper guidance is key to any young person's future.

"I think it's very important," said Johnson. "I was the first in my family to graduate from college, and I didn't really have any role models. I couldn't really point to anybody and say, 'I want to be like Uncle Rob or Uncle Steve or the guy next door, because people in my neighborhood didn't go to college. So I think it's very important for kids in our community to connect to role models, to be exposed to college opportunities. I think it's critical."

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This article was posted in [August 2011](#).

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