

Johnny Johnson sought refuge in baseball throughout life's hardships

FIGHT TO SURVIVE

From being born with a broken collarbone to being diagnosed with cancer at age 21 and given seven days to live, Katyite Johnny Johnson shares how he defied the odds

Written by Johnny Johnson | Select photography by Sara Isola



Johnson with his doctor when he was diagnosed with lymphoblastic, T-cell, stage 4 lymphoma

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My father left when I was 2 years old. I didn't have a dad in my life so I replaced him with heroes; ones that I saw gearing up on the mounds and dusting off their cleats ready for a home run.

Baseball played a big role in my life. I used to ride the bus into the city with my buddies to watch the Yankees and Mets, getting to the stadium hours before the game looking for autographs. I was the kid falling over himself to get someone to respond to me and sign something. Once I was thrown out for climbing on top of the dugout to get an autograph.

Early Struggles

My struggle began early. I was born three months after my mother's water broke as a "blue baby," born feet first, with a broken collarbone. I like to tell folks I came out running the bases. At two months old I had emergency surgery for a skull fracture. You could say I toughened up early.

I was "that kid" on the field, the small one, playing my heart out with boys much older than myself. My mom was working two jobs to make it on her own with four children, so we moved often. I went to 14 different schools, including four high schools, but I worked hard to make a new baseball team each year.

My dad even came to see me play once, but he was drunk and passed out. I have grown to understand that my dad loved me, but just couldn't give me what he didn't have to give, or what alcohol took away. Baseball gave me something during those tender years that nothing else could. It provided acceptance and surrounded me with "fathers" who happened to be coaches. I found consistency, a love for baseball, and the coaches who gave me much of the male guidance and approval that I was not able to receive from my dad.

But then at age 21, I was faced with something I couldn't have predicted. My survival instincts kicked in as I faced the

diagnosis: lymphoblastic, T-Cell, stage 4 lymphoma. They told me I had about seven days to live.

A Miracle Baby

There was no survival rate for my diagnosis and as a result of treatment, no fertility rate. Doctors told my wife, Kay, and I that it would be impossible for us to have children. I defied the odds of survival, but we suffered through 14 years of infertility and seven failed artificial inseminations before experiencing a miracle; the natural birth of our son in 2002, Jackson Johnson, a healthy, baseball-loving young man. NBC even came out and filmed the birth of our son for a news special.

Jack wanted a baby sister and he even included his request in his nightly prayers. We lost six pregnancies after Jack, but God gave us a beautiful baby girl, Zoe, through adoption and prayers. Many of my dreams have come true, although adversity precedes, accompanies, and follows those dreams.

Facing Adversity

I have much to be thankful for. I've grown to understand

that we aren't defined by the actions of our parents. I'm thankful to have been raised by a mom who was there, providing for me and sacrificing. I have fond memories of mom throwing batting practice and hitting grounders. I'm thankful for her insistence that we attend church and play sports which kept me out of trouble.

I am the responsible person I am today because adversity saw to it that I had to be.

Mom had to work, so I learned how to be independent as a latchkey kid, riding the bus home with my house key pinned inside my pocket, coming home to an empty house with chores to do including making dinner so it would be ready for mom when she arrived. My brother was 13 years older than me and my hero. He played baseball and fathered me as best he could. I wanted to be just like him.




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Building a Dream

After two years of my son playing baseball in Katy, I realized we needed more fields. I talked about the dream of building a field with my son's coach, Ryan Baker, who pitched for the Marlins and Braves. I was looking for the successful edge when I thought to myself, "Who could get behind this idea and make it successful? Why not Pete Rose?"

Our plan was to offer batting cages, fields, even an indoor driving range for parents who want to practice golf while their son is practicing. Most importantly, we would offer the best coaching; that of Pete Rose and other experienced and celebrated baseball greats. Pete liked the idea and signed the contract. We broke ground this fall.

I'm still climbing over stadium seats but now my baseball heroes are calling me. It's like living in a dream. I'm sure adversity won't quit calling on me, so I'm pushing forward with my best and giving God the rest. As long as it includes sunflower seeds and days at the ballpark, I'll keep showing up. KM

EDITOR'S NOTE: Katy Magazine would like to thank Johnny for sharing his story of triumph over adversity. If you have an inspirational story to share, email us at editor@katymagazine.com.

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