

A CONVERSATION WITH **Lakenya Johnson,**

FOUNDER OF F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement

NPi

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F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement currently provides educational opportunities to over 150 women in the Boston area. F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement workshops focus on a wide range of topics including self-esteem, professionalism, parenting, and financial education. Lakenya Johnson serves as the organization's primary life coach although she is currently working to bring on a number of coaches to join her. Through key partnerships with Revision House in Dorchester, Mass. and Bridge Over Troubled Waters in Brighton, Mass., F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement is expanding quickly, moving forward to reach more and more people in Boston area communities.

NPi • Tell me about F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement, how it began, and why you decided to start it.

LJ • F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement was God's purpose for my life. I never planned to be placed back in my past and allow it to be the foundation of my business or become therapeutic to me. Back in 2000, I was transitioned in a local shelter after traveling from home to home due to my mom's substance abuse and an unstable environment. In August of 2007, I decided to visit my old shelter, Bridge Over Troubled Waters. Speaking to the moms there about how I was in their shoes once and how now I'm able to aim higher taught me a valuable lesson about how important mentoring is, and it's just been uphill from then on. I now mentor at over five shelters in Boston.

NPi • What does your organization do? What service does it provide to the community?

LJ • F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement empowers moms, men, and women in transitional living situations by teaching self-worth and family values. We instill values such as forgiveness, acknowledgment, motivation, inspiration, and love within yourself.

NPi • What is a typical mentoring session like?

LJ • My mentoring sessions consist of parenting, role-playing on relationships, and games on building up character traits and self-esteem. They usually take place on weekday evenings in group sessions at local shelters. All participants have my direct contact info in case they need guidance or direction. I even spend time with girls one-on-one and maybe bring them to church with me or to my own mentoring session. Yes, I have a mentor! I need to be empowered as well. It's called Divine Women! It's not just mentoring that I do, but it's an ongoing support relationship. It's a movement in the family to end any generational recurrences. I'm also forming families in the shelters where people are constantly supporting each other



Lakenya Johnson, founder of F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement

and when they come out, continue to motivate themselves and each other.

NPi • What communities do you serve?

LJ • As of March 2009 we partner with shelters in Dorchester, Roxbury, and Brighton, Massachusetts.

NPi • How is the work you do different from other organizations in the same field?

LJ • We provide mentoring workshops focusing on both internal and external self-worth. We mentor individuals on everything from love for one's self to parenting to budgeting to even one's outward appearance. For example, we hold quarterly makeover events where women in shelters can get a free head-to-toe makeover in a fun, positive environment.

NPi • Can you talk about your approach to tackling this issue?

LJ • My approach only comes from my personal experience. I lived this life of being in a shelter, transitioning to my own place, raising my family up to strive for nothing but the best, and now I am giving back to where I once was.

NPi • Why have you decided to do things this way?

LJ • It's a healing process for me from my past hurt. I'm helping others forgive themselves and others and overcome their hurt and pain.

NPi • Have you ever done outreach to other organizations to share your knowledge and increase your social impact? Would you ever consider it?

LJ • Yes, but not as of today. I am looking to work with organizations like F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement to set a great tone for community building.

NPi • What impact does F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement have in the community? What are some of the successes you've experienced while doing this work?

LJ • I have impacted a lot of young women who were once lost by motivating them to not give up. F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement is not only about mentoring moms in shelters but also moms who have recently obtained their own apartments. I have collaborated with ABCD, a housing stabilization/shelter transition program, to help stabilize moms so they don't become homeless again. We have to end the cycle of poverty by helping someone else along the way. The best word to describe our outcomes is transition. It's an ongoing process to have upward mobility. So as long as we have motivation and inspiration from others and love within ourselves we can make it to the next level of success.

The best success was and still is seeing a mom progress internally with her self-esteem, externally with giving her child love and affection. And then

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moving out of the shelter and being able to support herself. That was a major process I've started within each mom. I think that's the success of F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement. You can see someone progress upward from a low place as long as they have the motivation.

NPi • What are some of the obstacles you are facing?

LJ • As I began giving back to the community I thought that my life was stable enough, but I realized that this



Lakenya Johnson at a F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement makeover event.

business starts with me. I was putting any leftover income into my business all the while trying to take care of my home. Eventually I ran into a snag. Every obstacle I have in life I use as a learning experience to strive higher. I've had financial struggles, but I've used that experience as a part of my workshops for budgeting. The organization is still forming, so our finances are the biggest obstacle.

NPi • What have you learned by doing this work? And what have you learned as an organization?

LJ • I am learning everyday it's going to be a movement. It's going to start with one mom at a time, helping them inwardly and outwardly, and then supporting them as they move on with their lives. I am also learning that change first starts within. Once people get the fact that it all starts with the love within they can then be better parents. And with myself, every time I speak with these moms it's a healing process from any past hurt I still have and a reminder to practice what I preach. I'm still young and focusing on this business is something that I've grown to love. I'm looking forward to better opportunities through

F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement and the support from my church family, immediate family, and friends.

(Action for Boston Community Development) – Housing and Homeless Services Prevention program to offer workshops to individuals placed in housing through ABCD.

NPi • What keeps you coming to work every day?

LJ • The funny thing is that I work in insurance during the day. I've had this thought that working in insurance is to indemnify someone's tangible belongings, but I've realized that God has given me the strength, wisdom, and knowledge to indemnify someone's heart, mind, and soul. Forming F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement gives me an inner joy of being able to see a smile on someone else's face. I've cried with these girls, and sharing my experience has placed more happiness in my life. My daughter is now nine years old, so as I'm mentoring to the moms my daughter is working and playing with the kids. I also have my sister, whom I've had custody of since I was 21, come and visit shelters with me. I'm making moves in my family as well as well as others' families.

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NPi • Where could you use help?

LJ • We're looking for volunteer mentors and volunteers to help with events.

NPi • Is there a service you'd like for your organization to provide that you aren't currently providing?

LJ • There are so many things I'd like to do better for our community, but I'd rather collaborate with other organizations in the community and become unified.

In May 2009 F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement hosted a free mother's day luncheon followed by a play production illustrating three major struggles moms face when going into shelters. F.A.M.I.L.Y. Movement will also soon be working with ABCD

The New Prosperity Initiative (NPi) is a Boston-based media organization that pairs storytelling with new media to publicize the efforts of people and organizations doing socially innovative work to end poverty and build prosperity. NPi stories take the shape of interviews, photo essays, videos, and podcasts and are distributed both in print and online. NPi connects community leaders in order to build a network of ideas and solutions that bring the best models, strategies, and leadership qualities to the places that need them most. NPi also hosts community dialogues for local leaders to discuss lessons learned, current projects, and potential collaborations.

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