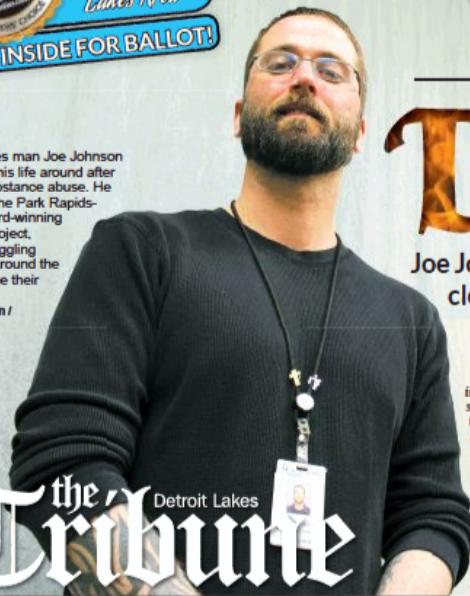




Detroit Lakes man Joe Johnson has turned his life around after years of substance abuse. He now leads the Park Rapids-based, award-winning FATHER Project, helping struggling dads from around the area become their best selves.



'A BIG DEMON'

Joe Johnson shares his story of addiction, getting clean, and the changed man he is today

By Marie Johnson
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Editor's note: This story is the sixth in an eight-part series of feature stories written in conjunction with the ongoing "Inside Out" community campaign to normalize mental illness. This week's "Inside Out" video by Leighton Broadcasting features Kristina Story talking about her battle with addiction.

“I used and I used and I used. Didn't matter what it was. I hid, and I ran ... My wife and kids were afraid of me... I wasn't a good man.”

JOE JOHNSON

the Detroit Lakes Tribune

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MN Supreme Court rules in DL case

By Nathan Bowe
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An employee experiences back problems and is no longer able to do the job they were hired to do in a safe manner. Does an employer always have to find ways to accommodate them?

Turns out, not necessarily.

The Minnesota Supreme Court has ruled that an interactive process between an employer and an employee seeking accommodation for a disability is not required by the Minnesota Human Rights Act.

The case stems from a long legal battle between Team Industries, which has engineering and manufacturing plants in Detroit Lakes, Audubon, Park Rapids and other cities, and Thuleaha McBee of Frazee, who worked as a machine operator at the Detroit Lakes plant.

She sued Team in Becker County District Court, alleging violations of the state's Human Rights Act and workers' compensation act.

The job required her to be able to operate, maintain and repair heavy machinery, move heavy metal parts, and lift objects weighing 30 pounds or more.

In February 2015, McBee sought medical attention for severe pain in her hands, back and neck, including numbness in her hands and arms. In March 2015, McBee's doctor gave her a 10-pound lifting restriction due to disc narrowing, a bulged disk and bone spurs in her vertebrae. She was

warned that she could face serious injury, even paralysis, if she further damaged her back.

On March 10, 2015, McBee informed her supervisors at Team of her lifting restriction, who then instructed her to discuss the restriction with human resources. McBee's supervisors placed her on a machine that produced parts weighing less than 10 pounds, and she finished her shift.

The next day, McBee met with human resources to discuss possible accommodations. None were found: Team terminated McBee on March 12, 2015, due to concerns relating to her medical restriction.

The district court granted Team's motion for summary judgment, essentially dismissing the case, and an appeals court upheld that decision.

The State Supreme Court, however, said the district court erred in granting summary judgment, stating that "a factual dispute precludes summary judgment on an employee's accommodation claim (and) a factual dispute precludes summary judgment on an employer's serious threat defense."

So while the Supreme Court upheld the appeals court ruling that a company does not have to engage in an interactive process to keep an injured worker employed, it said that summary judgment should not have been granted, and remanded that portion of the case back to district court for trial.

Joe Johnson did not have a happy childhood.

Born in Rochester, Minn., he was placed into the state foster care system at a very young age and was then bounced from foster family to foster family around the Detroit Lakes area until he turned 18. Not all of those families provided the loving and caring environment that they should have.

Over and over again as a child, Joe was the victim of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of the very people who were supposed to be protecting him. He felt abandoned by his biological family, betrayed by everyone else, and forgotten by God.

Other than his brother, who he fiercely protected and "loved more than life itself," Joe felt utterly alone. And he was full of rage.

"When I was little, I hated everybody and everyone," he recalls. "I was seething and brewing with a

visceral anger."

He was told by one of his foster mothers that "no one should waste their time" on him, that he was "worthless." And those words, he says, "took a fight out of me."

"That was a big demon," he says. "There was a hole inside of me after that. I felt this worthlessness inside of me, and that's not who I was, but it's what I believed. When you get told hurtful things as a child, it can destroy your life."

The only place where Joe consistently felt safe was in his therapist's office, which he visited regularly throughout his childhood and adolescence. He was diagnosed with manic bipolar disorder, which causes extreme shifts in mood and energy level. He'd be "up for a few days," he says, "and then down in the abyss for weeks."

JOHNSON: Page A7



Submitted photo
Johnson, third from right, joined Goodwill-Easter Seals staff at the Minnesota Capitol in 2017 to speak to the House and Senate jobs committees on behalf of the FATHER Project. They are pictured here with Sen. Mark Koran, fourth from right.

Go fast or fall spectacularly

Detroit Mountain's Pond Skim makes a splash Sunday



A snowboarder easily skims across the pond

By Kaysey Price
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The rules at the Detroit Mountain's annual Pond Skim event are pretty simple: Go fast or fall spectacularly. Either way, the hundreds of onlookers who gather around to watch are entertained.

The Pond Skim is the Mountain's annual season-ending event, which they put on each year. This year, the weather fared well, and snowboarders and skiers did their best to make it a splash.

Joe Jaszowiak, of West Fargo, has participated in the Skim three years, now. This year, he dressed in a dinosaur onesie. Though he didn't quite make it across the pond this time around, he says that's not necessari-

“If you fall over, make it a spectacular, big splash.”

JOE JASZOWIAK, West Fargo participant

ly the goal.

"If you fall over, make it a spectacular, big splash," he said.

Everyone who signs up for the Pond Skim gets their few minutes of fame, testing their balance and flipping skills on the few-feet deep pool at the base of one of the mountain's steep slopes. They only get one shot, so they do their best to make it across or make it a wipe out worth remembering.

Many dress in ridiculous costumes to catch attention, whether they fly across or fail. Those who brave the pond and make it across win a season pass to the Mountain.

People of all ages tested their luck, and many struggled to actually work up the speed to make it across the pond. Detroit Lakes local, Lief Erickson, who usually ends the event with a splash decided to slide down the hill in a Batmobile sled this year, though he didn't quite make it to the end of the slope before losing all speed and skidding out, missing the pond altogether.

Hundreds of onlookers gathered around the edges

POND SKIM: Page A8

On the stage
Spring plays gets ready to 'shine' at DL High School
Page A2

Season preview
DL softball aiming for program history this year
Page B1

Forecast

TODAY Sunny High 39 Low 25	THURSDAY Cloudy High 44 Low 35	FRIDAY Partly Cloudy High 49 Low 36	SATURDAY Cloudy High 54 Low 44	SUNDAY AM Showers High 54 Low 35
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Every day is a news day
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JOHNSON

From Page A1

He was in a lot of pain, a lot of the time. To try and escape that pain, he turned to whatever mind-altering chemicals he could get his hands on. He was just a kid when the substance abuse began. Drugs, alcohol, household products... whatever was within reach that could get him high, he'd find it and use it.

"It's easier for me to say, 'What didn't I struggle with?' than 'What did I (struggle with)?" he says. "If it could be abused, I abused it. It didn't matter what it was. If it got me out of my mind... at least I didn't have to deal with the demons."

Joe thought things might be different once he turned 18 and got out of the foster care system, but instead, his addictions got worse. "I likened my childhood to 18 years of incarceration, and now the cuffs were removed," he explains. "But there was no program for me to learn to live as an adult... to cope with the sudden responsibility... So then it was harder drugs and alcohol...crank, coke, meth...if I could get high, I did it, full throttle."

There were some bad years when the bills didn't always get paid. When he would sink his money into drugs while at home the power was getting shut off. There was always tension around the house then, and he became "a yeller" around his wife and kids. There were also some better years, when he managed to hold down good jobs and the collection letters stopped. But even then there was always some substance abuse going on.

Joe says he was a "master manipulator," and he hid his addictions very well. If he did get caught, he'd lie and make false promises to never do it again.

'We run and we run and we run'

For awhile in his early adulthood, Joe's life looked pretty traditional. He married his high school sweetheart and they settled down, bought a house and had two kids. His father-in-law "saw potential in me that I didn't know existed," he

says, and thanks to the unconditional love and support of that man — the first positive male role model Joe had ever known — he discovered religion, and got closer to sobriety than he had ever been.

He stopped using hard drugs and started behaving in less destructive ways in general, and yet, "I never really ever was fully clean," he admits. "It was a rough road."

"Every time I thought I'd get a hold of my bills, get a better job, get myself together, I remembered when that woman called me 'a worthless piece of ----,' and that was an excuse to keep using, because I didn't want to face any of that stuff."

Always, always, he was running from his pain. "Anyone who's struggling from addiction knows, there's something we're running from," Joe says. "And we run and we run and we run, and there's no finish line... I was afraid of that. I was afraid of those demons catching up to me."

They did catch up to him, though, eventually. In 2008, Joe's brother, the person he had adored and felt personally responsible for since his youth, died at the age of 29. The loss threw Joe into a pit of despair. "I went through hell the following year," he says. "That up and down manic, it just stayed down. I was living in the shadows of my brother's death. I was consumed by agony."

For five months, he hid out in his garage every day, isolating himself from everyone, screaming and breaking things and taking whatever drugs he could scrounge up.

"I used and I used and I used," he says. "Didn't matter what it was. I hid, and I ran... My wife and kids were afraid of me. I never abused them physically, but emotionally, verbally... I wasn't a good man."

Over the next six months, Joe lost his job, the house, and nearly his marriage. The one year anniversary of his brother's death passed, and he continued to use "way, way too many stimulants."

Then, while laying in bed one day, Joe says, "my world shifted." He felt his heart racing, and couldn't catch

his breath. He knew right away what was happening — his heart was failing; the result of prolonged drug abuse. "I had been using too many stimulants, for too long," he explains. "I felt like the Grim Reaper had his hands around my neck."

In that moment, he looked up toward the sky and cried out for God, and his brother. He begged for his life, for another chance to do better, to be better. He didn't want to die.

'My awakening'

Lying on a hospital bed a short time later, Joe had a profound experience that to this day he can't really explain. A voice spoke to him, he says. It told him he had two choices — to continue on the destructive path he was on, which could only lead to death, or choose a new, productive path, one that was already laid out in front of him.

Joe says he was unable to hear anything else at that voice spoke. The beeping machines in his room, the nurses busily walking and talking in the hallway... everything went completely silent, except that mysterious voice. And his ears were scorching, like someone was sticking a "hot poker" in them.

"It scared the hell out of me," he admits. "That was my awakening." He started making some major life changes after that. He cleaned himself up, started shaving and dressing nicely again, and got a good job. He and his wife started rebuilding their relationship, and they found a new home to make a fresh start in.

Most crucially, he committed to dealing with his pain — without drugs.

"I stopped running and turned to face the demons, and you know what I saw? Me, in the mirror," he says. "All this time, I'd been running from myself. I just had to face that. It was hard. It wasn't my wife. It wasn't my kids. It wasn't that woman that told me that (I was worthless). It was me. Within me laid the secret, the tool, the key to change. I had to say, 'Hey man, I love you, and I forgive you. And we're gonna do this now, every day. Every single day.' ... It's the greatest decision

I've ever made, other than becoming a husband and father."

Joe has been sober for 10 years now, and has found his calling as a mentor and role model to other men who are struggling with their own demons. It turned out that there was, indeed, a second path laid out before him, just as that mysterious voice had said.

'Hope dealer'

Today, Joe is the leader of the local FATHER Project, a program of CHI St. Joseph's Health in Park Rapids. Launched in 2011, the program teaches healthy parenting skills to fathers in Hubbard, Becker and Cass counties, while also helping them overcome barriers — such as addictions — that have prevented them from providing emotional and financial support for their kids. Hundreds of local fathers have gone through the program, and have become better parents, and citizens, because of it.

Joe has been with the FATHER Project since its inception, and it's grown and evolved under his leadership. He's developed it into a nationally recognized model for family service programs in rural areas, and in 2017, he received the national Outstanding Professional of the Year award in recognition of his work with the program.

Joe says the biggest thing he does in his role is "exchange life stories" with the other fathers. He prioritizes compassion and kindness in his

interactions with people, and has a natural talent for remembering little details about everybody he meets. He's learned how to love himself unconditionally, he says, and that's given him the ability to love others in the same way.

"I love everybody I work with, everybody I talk to," he says. "I don't discriminate in who I love. I don't hide it. I let them all know that they're valuable... If you truly live to help people, they will not forget that. These guys know that I don't condemn."

His goal is to help guide fathers to become "great," so they'll "break the chain" of generational childhood trauma. Joe feels like he's doing exactly what he was meant to do, and that he wouldn't be where he is today if it weren't for "being burnt by the flames of addiction, of pain, of death."

Though he's not proud of everything he's done in the past, he says he is proud of the man

and father he is today. He's 38 years old now, and he's able to look at his kids and feel happy and confident that "the chains are broken" within his own family. Unlike he was at their age, his kids are not headed down a path of self-destruction. Instead, he says, they "reflect goodness and joy."

Physically, Joe will forever bear the scars of his years of substance abuse, in the form of chronic health problems ranging from intestinal ulcers to sleeplessness. But emotionally, he's made peace with his past and said "so long" to his harmful habits.

He has no desire to return to his old addictions, he says, as they've been completely replaced by one big new addiction — hope.

"I'm still an addict now, but here's the deal: I'm addicted to dealing hope," he jokes. "I'm a hope dealer. I deal in large and small quantities... I also deal hugs."

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