

Gilbert Johnson

My name is Gilbert Johnson. I was born and raised in the west side of South Central, Los Angeles and I currently live in the heart of it. I've experienced violence ever since I can remember. My father ran out on my mother before I was born, and I've never met or talked with him. My mother was on drugs while she was pregnant with me, in and out of institutions, prostituting--the whole nine yards. It caused a lot of anger and trauma at an early age...all the abandonment, trying to find my way, growing up with insecurities, looking for love and acceptance in the wrong places.

I grew up in a home where just about everybody had been impacted by substance abuse, the crack cocaine epidemic, and the war on drugs. Several family members cycled in and out of the carceral system. Alcoholism, drug abuse, fights at family gatherings, there was a lot of family dysfunctionality.... I was raised by my grandmother, who was birthed born in Oakland. She aligned with the Black Panther Party, and believed in tough love. Tough love was me not getting the nurturing and care a baby with cocaine fetal syndrome needed, but getting whippings, spanked.

I had to deal with that my entire childhood; I was somewhat of a problem child. If I did something wrong, she'd be the first one to beat and punish me. Then I'd go to my uncle's house and get torn up over there, then my other uncle's house and get torn apart over there. I feel like it was common in the Black community. You do something wrong, something you know you're not supposed to do, you have to suffer the consequences. You get whipped. I get it now but it was traumatizing.

'That doesn't happen in other communities.'

A lot of that childhood stuff led me to the violence I experienced when I started getting incarcerated at 16. I started using drugs at 14, 15--marijuana and alcohol, not the hard stuff yet. I used to get drunk at school in middle school and high school and was in a gang at 17. I made it to college by the grace of God (but) that's when I was introduced to a whole other world of drug activity, some larger-scale stuff. I was fighting a lot.

Growing up in South Central or South LA, I always knew something was wrong. My first drive-by was at Van Ness Park where I was playing t-ball. I'm like, I know that doesn't happen in other communities. I was a ward of the court, too. So I'd go to different spaces and participate in programs geared towards foster youth. I was seeing other areas (compared to) my neighborhood. I don't see police on every corner. I don't see liquor stores and crack dealers and crack addicts on every corner. I don't see parks that look run down and dilapidated buildings like our schools.

When I was expelled from LACES, an affluent school on the westside of LA, in the tenth grade for marijuana possession and sent to Crenshaw, it was like night and day: the level of education, quality of books, quality of investment from teachers, quality of the equipment and amenities and buildings...it was a huge step down.

'I got connected to trauma-informed healing.'

I've been on a journey of reciprocity and redemption. I gave my life to God and started walking by faith. I put my faith in God. I haven't been in a fight in 10 - 12 years; I haven't been incarcerated since 2009. I got connected to healing work with a world-renowned healer...resilience training, trauma-informed training. It's shaped my frame of mind around healing and helping others to heal and stopping the cycles of violence that I grew up in and was accustomed to with my own children. I was released in 2009 and made a commitment to no longer go back to that lifestyle. I was homeless. I was battling drug addiction. I was contemplating suicide and by the grace of God, I didn't do that.

I was able to overcome a lot of that because I was given an opportunity to have a livable wage and gain meaningful work. That work was at a community organization in the heart of south Central, Community Coalition. They didn't hold my long criminal background record against me. They just saw me as somebody that was standing before them that needed a chance, an opportunity. I took it. There's been exponential growth and elevation ever since.

Now I can identify different ways of communicating. I'm able to have heart-to-hearts (conversations) and use active listening and different things that I had no clue about. I was introduced to a lot of new concepts. We have healing circles at a park up the street that's been known to have a lot of community violence, domestic violence, and sexual violence. At that org, we've had healing circles with the youth and with our elders. That's really what's helped me navigate out of the rut I was in and into this newfound space of liberation and joy. I'm here doing work with folks I never thought I'd be doing. So it's been a journey, and I'm glad to be here.

'There's a stigma about seeking help.'

When I think back to when I was 16 up to 21, I'd advise myself to seek mentors and positive role models. What I'd advise other people depends on what type of violence they're dealing with. I live on Figueroa and there are a lot of sex workers and women out there. So many are dealing with sexual molestation and

violence. They don't see themselves as redeemable. Somebody may have been jumped (assaulted) at a young age and their heart got hardened, but they really don't want to be in that place.

There's a stigma about seeking help; it's seen as a sign of weakness, of not handling things yourself. I was taught not to cry growing up. We're men. We're Black men. We don't cry. We step up to the plate.

We poke our chest out and stand up straight. I don't know if it's just in the Black community...it's in communities that have historically been disconnected and disenfranchised from services. They haven't had access to drug treatment and mental health treatment facilities.

Had there been somebody there to listen to why I was acting out, that conversation would really have helped me. Like having one-on-ones with folks, peer-to-peer support. A key thing is that it should be folks that you can actually relate to and connect with. When I was put on probation at 16 because I was expelled and sent to my home school, Crenshaw High, I had to go through the courts. I had some psychologist guy try to talk to me, but there was no connection. It was like, you don't know what I'm going through right now. You can't.

I'd say connect to a culturally-competent resource for help. There are more available now than when I was going to school. The gang interventionists I work with now, I didn't see when I was going to LACES or Crenshaw; they weren't housed on campus like they are now. Growing up in a gang-infested community and seeing dudes with money and women, in fast cars...that lifestyle was attractive to me. But had there been more people that said, "Nah, you're not really that. Don't go over there. Let's go have a talk. What do you want to be?" ...that would help.

We need to de-stigmatize help and mental health. Let folks know that it's all right...that there are people here that genuinely care and love you and want to help you. You just have to seek out the right program, the right avenue.

"I started understanding structural racism."

Once I got to [the community-based organization], I started understanding white supremacy and white capitalism, institutional and structural racism. Why my community looked the way it did and suffered from the issues we suffer from that other communities didn't. Policy makers and government failed us. If you go way back, slavery allowed the accumulation of generational wealth. You had laws like redlining and restrictive covenants designed to keep Black people out of home ownership, having a stake in the land. We never got our 40 acres and a mule. We got the so-called right to vote, but even when that passed, there was still deep opposition from white folks.

We've been having a lot of conversations about racial equity within the past several years in LA County. It's grounded in identifying the needs and resources in communities most heavily impacted by poverty, poor education, poor quality of health care, little to no access to healthy food, poor park programming, after-school programming, over-reliance on policing This conversation needs to be driven through an equity and racial equity lens. (We need to) support policies like those at the Office of Racial Equity. I ask myself if this work is going to have positive material impacts in the communities that need it the most? That have historically been disinvested in or overlooked by government and elected officials?

We have Black Lives Matter--the movement for Black lives. There's movement around ADOS--American Descendants of Slaves. You have the Contract with Black America that talks about righting the wrongs that this country imposed on Native Americans. All policy needs to go through that type of framework.

'Lived experience is key to this work.'

When we talk about preventing violence, I've been taught that prevention is better than cure. We should have been implementing a public health model from the get-go. But we're still seeing significant pieces of the budget and resources go towards "criminal justice" and mass incarceration. Move away from that, to really get to the root causes of the crime, the addiction, the poverty, the violence. You have to listen and engage with the people that have been through it. That (lived) experience is key to this work.

Voicing our issues is healing. That's why I'm so glad about the Office of Violence Prevention (OVP). I believe it's a huge first step toward addressing various forms of trauma. In my work, I'm holding a lot of other people's traumas and violence and what they've dealt with, too. Data has its purpose, but data is numbers and facts; stories are what bring the data to life. I believe in the power of our stories because the stories move hearts and connect folks.

I approach this work from a place of love, empathy, compassion and understanding because I've been there. That's the difference between the approach that government has taken historically and where we are now with the OVP, the Office of Racial Equity, and with Measure J and Prop 47 57...to give folks a second, third chance, fourth chance. That work needs to be funded much more. I'm excited to be in this work because I'm expecting real, transformative change and healing to come out of it.

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