



Korey Johnson

Founder and President
Korey Johnson Foundation

SHINE
THE
LIGHT

Some conversations stay with you. In a discussion among colleagues about the troubled youth of St. Louis, Korey Johnson was asked, “What are you doing for kids in your community?” The successful medical professional who’d climbed the ranks at Barnes-Jewish Hospital from cafeteria worker to histology technician couldn’t shake the question. “I wanted to change the conversation about our young people from complaining to helping and decided to do my part,” he says.

Johnson says his first inclination was to focus on education and began collecting and distributing school supplies. But knowing that education is much more than what happens in the classroom, he sought to give youth experiences that would help shape their character as well. Arranging with a North County bowling alley owner to rent out half of his building, Johnson organized a bowling party before the start of the school year that was open to kids in the neighborhood and their families. Admission was three canned goods, which gained entrants four hours of bowling and a new backpack full of school supplies. The food items were donated to The Haven of Grace, a home for pregnant and homeless young women.

“It’s teaching children about giving and receiving,” says Johnson. “I would tell them, ‘By bringing food, you guys are helping someone worse off than you.’ There is always someone who needs more.”

After a few successful bowling parties, an opportunity opened up in 2011 with St. Nicholas Catholic Church in the city, which converts its gymnasium into a skating rink for open skating and private parties. Johnson turned his annual bowling party into a fun night of skating, and the Can Skate

event was born. Eventually moving to the historic Skate King in Pine Lawn, the back-to-school event is a tradition that families look forward to, says Johnson.

“We’ve had people waiting hours to get in, and it’s amazing to see all the social interaction between residents,” he says. The ask is now five non-perishable food items, which are given to local food banks; families can skate for three hours and every child aged 5 to 13 receives a new backpack and supplies. Completing its eighth year in 2018, the event has donated more than 2,300 backpacks to students in need, who have in turn given back over 25,000 food items. Parents are so grateful, says Johnson, that many have become regular volunteers of the Korey Johnson Foundation, which received its charitable status in 2014.



Johnson continues to seek out ways to show young people how to take ownership of their futures and communities. Through the P.O.O.L. program, an acronym for Providing Opportunities Otherwise

Lost, the organization teaches youth life lessons along with the game of billiards. "There are so many attributes you need for the game that translate into real life, such as confidence, determination and respect," says Johnson. Participants in the program pay an annual registration of \$20 and bring five food items each month. "Again, it's highlighting the importance of giving and receiving, with an emphasis on giving." On a lot he owns in the city, Johnson has started a community garden, which his "Korey's Kids" plant and tend. "There are a lot of analogies I can share with them about nourishing the seeds of an idea and taking action where you'd like to see change," he says, explaining that he hopes to create more gardens in areas considered food deserts.

Johnson adds that the garden idea would not have come to fruition without the help of an acquaintance, who brought many of the supplies and taught the group all they needed to know about urban gardening. "I've been blessed to do a lot of things for a lot of people because of the many supporters that have stepped forward," he says.

It was in a time of need that he was connected to The Little Bit Foundation. Johnson says he often gets calls about needs that fall out of his scope, so a co-worker suggested he get in touch with Little Bit since the organization receives some items it can't use. "I'm happy to take these off their hands and make sure they go to the charities and families we support," he says, adding how impressed he is with the lives being touched by Little Bit. "You don't find many nonprofits that are deep in the trenches."

Johnson says he hopes his message of respecting life and loving one another is getting through. "You're never too young to show compassion," he says. "I know a young man who was 4-years-old

when he witnessed his mom being gunned down. He talked about it often and said he would sometimes 'see' his mom. He's seven now and makes Christmas ornaments for children who have lost someone to gun violence. That young man has taught me to overcome any obstacle with a smile. Just goes to show you that you're never too old to learn from a child."