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Golden: Texas ex Derrick Johnson's community activism a product of mother's great example



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Key Points

Texas football legend's foundation is heading an initiative to aid AISD elementary school libraries

Oak Springs Elementary has received over \$58,000 which will go to refurbish its library.

Johnson played 13 seasons in the NFL and earned a reputation as a strong community activist in KC.

He moved back to Austin in 2019 and his current initiative will aid 16 local school libraries.

Derrick Johnson earned a great living making tackles on a football field, but the impact he has made in his post-NFL career is much bigger than anything that happened between the lines.

Johnson, the 2004 Nagurski and Butkus award winner at Texas, enjoyed a distinguished 13-year NFL career, all but one coming with the Kansas City Chiefs, where he quickly earned a reputation as not only a team leader but a community activist whose charitable endeavors in that city and in his hometown of Waco have affected thousands of young people and their families.

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Now Johnson is bringing the power of giving to the 512.

Johnson's 10-year-old Defend the Dream Foundation has teamed up with the Austin Independent School District and the Austin Ed Fund to transform 16 area libraries and

unused areas into Discovery Dens, which will be used to encourage literacy and an enthusiasm for learning for kids in the inner city and beyond.

The foundation has already donated nearly \$58,000 to Oak Springs Elementary that will help bring needed bookshelves, flexible furniture, flooring and a reading list that reflects the diversity of the student population.

“This project will not only give students in libraries across the district comfortable spaces to read and learn, but also a new inventory of books where they can see themselves reflected in the pages,” Austin Ed Fund Executive Director Michelle Wallis said.

All told, Johnson's nonprofit foundation has already donated more than 20,000 books to area schools, with more to come.

When I asked him last week about what drives him to give so much of his time when he could be playing golf every day or enjoying retirement as a millionaire resident of Spanish Oaks, the married father of six uttered two words.

“My mother.”

Johnson, 39, grew up in a teacher's household. Beverly Johnson was a popular middle school math teacher in the Waco school district for nearly 40 years before she retired in 2012, only to go back as a district trainer for another handful of years because of the unquenchable desire to aid in the education of young people.

A single mom of three sons and a daughter, she imparted to him the value of an education and faith-based lifestyle as the blueprint to becoming successful in life.

“I didn't realize the impact she had on my life until I was able to give back and had the means to give back,” Johnson said. “I've always served the community. When I was in Waco, I was always involved in the church because of her. She was that rock, that pillar.”

Johnson's mother raised four kids and sacrificed for the family. The Johnsons weren't poor but lived on a teacher's single income. Beverly tutored before her classes and after school to make ends meet. During the summers, she taught as many classes as she could.

A young Derrick once asked her why she didn't take the summer off like some of her co-workers, who would kick back and go on family vacations every year.

“Didn't you get new school clothes?” she asked. “What about those new tennis shoes you have? Have you ever missed one meal?”

“I kind of got it after that,” Johnson said. “I realized the sacrifices she was making to make sure we had everything we needed, and I so appreciate her for what she did for us kids.”

Beverly Johnson was not only a full-time teacher and mother, but also a faithful member of Waco’s St. Paul African Methodist Episcopal Church, where her children — Dwayne, Dwight, Daphanie and Derrick — were encouraged by the church elders to live a life of faith, love and charity.

“I was the youngest,” Derrick Johnson said. “And she said, ‘Hey, no matter how good you are in sports, I’m going to keep you in church. I’m going to make sure your identity is in Christ first. And then I’m going to make sure, educationwise, that you’re set up so you can have success in the future.’ Because that’s all she knows.”

The preteen Johnson quickly became a popular figure in local churches, particularly during Black History Month, when Beverly would take Derrick to services, where he would recite the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.’s famous "I Have A Dream" speech to standing ovations.

The Johnson kids said, “Yes, ma’am” and “Yes, sir,” because Beverly Johnson was all about respecting one’s elders and making the community better by your actions over words.

She also was the neighborhood mom. Kids flocked to her house because they knew there was good food coming along with fun and games with the Johnson kids. She even took in Derrick’s 7-year-old classmate Deadrian when his mother — her best friend and church youth director Gail Thomas — was killed in an automobile accident.

More: Golden: Bob Bowlsby didn’t leave the Big 12 cupboard bare, but huge challenges await

“We were devastated,” Beverly Johnson said last week. “I had lost my mother to a car accident when I was pregnant with Derrick, so this hit hard for all us. I knew (Deadrian) and him were best friends, and I wanted to help him through a tough time.”

Deadrian still calls her Mom to this day.

Derrick Johnson and Pro Football Hall of Famer LaDainian Tomlinson are the greatest football players to come out of Waco. Johnson was the defensive stalwart on the 2004 Texas team that beat Michigan in the Rose Bowl, one year before Vince Young and Co. captured the national championship over USC.

More: Bohls: After a decade of success, Bob Bowlsby's legacy as Big 12 commissioner looms large

When Johnson left college, he was armed with everything he needed to make a successful go of it in the NFL. Big brother Dwight played parts of two seasons with the Philadelphia Eagles and New York Giants, giving him a firsthand look at what it would take to forge a long career at that level. Baby brother also had the talent and the drive to make it and, most important, the spiritual base instilled in him from his early childhood.

The 15th overall pick in the 2005 NFL draft, Johnson appeared in four Pro Bowls with Kansas City. He left the organization in 2018 as the Chiefs' all-time leader in tackles and one of the city's most cherished citizens due to his philanthropic efforts.

Johnson and teammates such as Alex Smith, Tamba Hali, Eric Berry and fellow Longhorn Jamaal Charles would appear at one another's charity events, from football camps to housing fundraisers to mentorship initiatives. In his final season with the Chiefs, he hosted Derrick Johnson Celebrity Waiter Night, where Chiefs fans packed a local steakhouse and were served by Johnson and his teammates, including a young rookie backup quarterback by the name of Patrick Mahomes.

More: 'I'm not done yet': Texas' Austin Todd works his way off injury report, back into lineup

During his Chiefs tenure — he played six games with the Oakland Raiders in 2018 and then called it quits after signing a one-day contract with the Chiefs — Johnson did a little bit of everything in the community, but after a few seasons, he felt as if he was being stretched too thin.

“I hadn't found my niche yet,” he said. “But it always felt good to help young people. I'm the son of a teacher, and I just love being around kids. So that's where my passion ended up.”

Growing up in an educator's household taught him the value of a good education, the extreme importance of literacy and the hopelessness that has befallen illiterate young Black people over the decades.

“I read that half of inner-city kids who are not on grade-level reading by the end of elementary school will not finish high school,” Johnson said. “Where does that leave them? It's why I believe my foundation could do its part to help.”

Founded in 2012 while he was in Kansas City, his Defend the Dream Foundation's mission is “to provide low-income and inner city young people with opportunities and resources to reach their full potential.”

It was a hit in Kansas City, and now Johnson, who moved back to Austin in 2019, has the same goal for the young kids in our area. To his credit, he isn't just adding his name to a charitable cause while others do the heavy lifting. He's on the front line doing what has to be done to make it a success.

Johnson, wife Brittini and fellow Longhorn Norman Watkins raised more than \$30,000 at a recent fundraiser in Austin attended by representatives of several high-powered companies who brought their appetites and their checkbooks.

Johnson wants to leave a legacy for his six children that extends well beyond sports. He returned to UT and graduated in 2020 with a degree in applied learning development. It was an important box to check because he wanted to send the message to his own children about the value of education. He also had promised his mother that he would graduate from college before he ever arrived on campus.

Johnson quite simply followed the blueprint that his mother laid out. Her lessons and life example have molded him into the family man and community supporter he is today.

The word legacy gets thrown around too much these days, but it's appropriate in this case. This mother's life of giving became one of her family's most treasured heirlooms, and her children are passing it down to her grandchildren. In Derrick Johnson's case, he's also sharing her vision with his community.

"It feels amazing to see that sweet spirit in Derrick," she said. "I'm not boastful, but people tell me I have done a marvelous job with my children. I am not only proud, but I'm grateful that the Lord has blessed (me) with some wonderful kids. I'm so thankful they're all healthy and successful in life."

Football isn't forever, but one can spend a lifetime in service to others.

Beverly Johnson taught Derrick Johnson well, and our community is beyond blessed to claim the title of proud beneficiary.