

Mary Johnson

Moving from Death to Life by Forgiving and Loving the Murderer of Her Son

Are you able to forgive? How easy is it for you to do so? What steps are necessary?

What if a person very dear to you was murdered? Could you forgive the one who did it? Accept and love that person? That is just what Mary Johnson, an amazing woman striving to live her Christian faith to the fullest, has done and continues to do!

Only Child Is Murdered

In the early 1990s, her 20-year old son and only child, Larmiun Byrd, was involved with gang members and drugs. In 1993, another gang member, then known as Marlon Green, had a serious altercation with Larmiun at a house party in Minneapolis. As Marlon described later, he killed in a futile attempt to kill something in himself, something that he abhorred, yet resulting in even more pain and guilt.

At Green's trial, Mary saw him as "an animal, an animal that needed to be caged." Her anger was being directed not only at Marlon but also at his mother, Carolyn Green. Marlon was sentenced to 25 ½ years. Once a respected

conflict resolution student, with potential and no previous criminal record, Marlon found himself in jail, hating himself more. At the same time, Mary's great bitterness and anger burned for more than 10 years.

Nudged by God, Weight Lifted by a Hug

While Johnson struggled with her feelings toward the man who murdered her son, she also felt nudged by God in many ways, including:

- Jesus' admonition to forgive "seventy times seven"
- *The Parable of the Lost Son* being welcomed back with open arms by his father after years and years of wasting his gifts and inheritance
- Learning about "restorative justice"
- Finding the poem, *Two Mothers*, an imagined conversation between the mother of Judas Iscariot and Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Reflecting deeply on this poem and trying to live her deep Christian faith more fully, Mary felt called to form healing groups for parents whose lives were drastically changed by homicide. Before she could do so, Johnson needed to visit (in Minnesota's Stillwater State Prison) the one who took her son's life. She had learned that Green had changed his name to Oshea (*meaning deliverance*) Israel, to signify his new beginning.



After several requests, Oshea agreed to her visit. Restorative justice groups helped prepare both Johnson and Israel for the meeting. Mary started the conversation, acknowledging that neither of them really knew each other, and told Oshea about her son. Amazingly, as they finished sharing, Oshea and Mary ended up hugging each other!

After that, Johnson felt a huge weight being lifted off of her. She realized that she was forgiving the killer of her son. Mary knew she was not doing so for Israel but for herself. She realized that the anger, hurt, and bitterness that she had experienced so deeply, like a cancer, had been harming her, not Oshea.

Mary discovered that forgiveness was setting *her* free!



Oshea and Mary



Mary's locket with her and Larmiun; on other side, Oshea (Marlon).



Celebrating Oshea's new life in grand style at St. Jane House!



community that has given him a chance to be “all that he can be.” Mary’s love and acceptance is helping him to gradually forgive himself for an action that he wishes, with all his heart, that he could take back.

Mary and Oshea give presentations to schools, prisons,

churches, and community organizations. One shares about the journey from hate and bitterness to love and acceptance...the other from guilt and remorse to transformation and redemption.

A Joyous, Warm Welcome at St. Jane House

In March 2010, shortly after his release from prison, Mary introduced Oshea to her supporters: From Death to Life Advisory Board Members, Visitation Sisters, and other friends and community members. Each one introduced her/himself and shared ways that they could support Israel’s transition from prison to new life.

All are striving, with creativity and shared efforts, to heal relationships, reinvigorate neighborhoods, and build a just, peaceful and sustainable community.



Oshea and Mary sharing their inspiring story.

Founding From Death to Life

After being able to forgive Israel, Johnson started **From Death to Life**. It is a restorative justice effort “dedicated to ending violence through the facilitation of healing and reconciliation between families of victims and perpetrators.” Participants strive to know each other and to build bridges of understanding and acceptance and healing rather than chasms of hatred, bitterness, and more violence.

The home base for From Death to Life is **St. Jane House**. It is an urban retreat center and house of hospitality started by the **Visitation Sisters of Minneapolis**.

Over the course of his remaining years in prison, the relationship between Johnson and Israel continued to grow. Mary adopted him as her “spiritual son.”



Oshea with his two mothers, Carolyn and Mary.

New Life at Alafia Place

Currently, Oshea and Mary live side-by-side at **Alafia Place**. They love and care for each other like mother and son. After trying for some time, Oshea found a recycling company ready to employ him. In the evenings, Oshea attends college, for he wants to be able to give back to the

Johnson’s inspiring story with Israel is one of the first to be included in **The Smooch! Project**. Many others have featured Mary and Oshea, including: **CBS Evening News**, **StarTribune**, and **National Public Radio**.

Mary is living her faith, healing and being healed, as her Christian faith calls her to do. She continues to live, ever more fully, the two greatest commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself!”