

Mothers overcome children's deaths

Written by Ivan Phifer

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The group gathered to remember victims through an event called Gospel & Jazz on the Lawn on Sat., Aug. 18 at the Gardens of Alafia Place, a new non-profit in North Minneapolis. The event featured performances by Robert Robinson and Sam Reeves & Friends.

Pictured: From Death to Life, hosts Gospel & Jazz on the Lawn

The event was hosted by Brian Mogren, CEO of Alafia Place, 900 16th Ave. N. Alafia Place provides affordable housing to people who are dedicating their lives to establish innovative and transformative community initiatives. Alafia is a Yoruba greeting, to convey tranquility, wellness, calmness and good tidings.

From Death to Life's mission is to end violence through healing and reconciliation between families impacted by homicide. It offers support groups empowering parents to come to terms with the impact of homicide through emotional, spiritual and mental healing. In addition to supporting healing groups such as Two Mothers and Many Mothers One Love, From Death to Life sponsors an annual prayer walk, community gatherings that celebrate life and talks that invite others to witness the healing power of forgiveness.

"We need deep love at the center of everything to make it work," said 5th Ward City Councilman Don Samuels.

From Death to Life was founded by Mary Johnson in 2005. She did so in efforts to heal herself spiritually after visiting Oshea Israel, the killer of her son.

"My only child was murder in 1993," said Johnson. "In 2005, I went to prison and met with Oshea. I decided to go (to the prison) to make sure I still did not have hatred for him. I viewed him as an animal and wanted him locked-up for life. That was justice for me at that time."

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Johnson said the defining moment was when Israel asked if he could hug her.

"As I was falling, he had to hold me up. He whispered to me, 'I think you will be the person to help me cry,'" she said. "Men need to learn to cry, there is some deliverance you can have if you shed some tears."

Israel, since that time, has grown spiritually.

"It has been a beautiful journey to know where we come from and see where we are now," said Israel. "She was able to be vulnerable in my presence. Through my vulnerability, I dug deep enough to console her and make that promise I would never hurt her again. The power of a hug leads to forgiveness. Had I not asked to hug her, there is no telling what would have happened."

"Big" Sy Huff, announcer for the Minnesota Lynx, who also works with youth to reduce violence, said he is inspired by the love Johnson and Israel share.

"It speaks volumes, not just how compassionate people could be if they reached out to one another, but the bond is creating relationships for other families and victims in the community," said Huff.

In September of 2011, Johnson and Israel appeared in the Heroes Among Us section of People Magazine. Following that story, they were interviewed on ABC's The View by Sherri Shepherd and Elisabeth Hasselbeck. Their story has also been featured in other major news outlets, including CBS Evening News, National Public Radio's Story Corpse and documentary titled "SMOOCH."

"Every time I hear (their) story it seems like it's brand new," said Huff. "There is no way I could have told that story."

For all the group's efforts to speak out against violence and providing community leadership, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak has declared Aug. 18, 2012 "From Death to Life Day."

Israel left Stillwater in 2009 and now lives next door to Johnson. She now claims him as her "spiritual son."

From Death to Life meets at St. Jane House on the first, third and fifth Saturdays of the month, from 10 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. The St. Jane House is located at 1403 Emerson Ave. N. For more information call (612) 965-9446, or visit www.fromdeathtolife.us.