

REVIEW

The Johnsons

AN AIDS STORY OF LIFE, LOVE AND COMMITMENT

*The Johnsons: An AIDS Story of Life,
Love and Commitment*
John Roach and Kathleen Iattarelli
(Co-Producers, Directors, Writers)
Product Marketing Department
Lutheran Hospital, LaCrosse, WI 54601
1-800-362-9567, X-4787
31 minutes, 1993.

“We dealt with our adversity and put other people’s needs ahead of our own.”

With those words, Michael Johnson sums up his and his wife Sherie’s effective, touching video odyssey about their continuing life as an HIV positive couple. And the message of this award-winning glimpse into their mission as HIV/AIDS educators is as simple as their white, Midwest, middle class up-bringing:

No one is safe.

As Michael explains early in the video, shortly after his old girlfriend dumped him, he falls instantly in love with Sherie as she walks through a shopping mall. Soon they are dating.

One afternoon at the apartment he shares with his brother, Michael’s old girlfriend calls: “My boyfriend is HIV positive; you should get tested,” she tells him. A bad joke from a nasty breakup, he thinks.

Besides, he tells himself, guys like me don’t get AIDS: “straight,” Wisconsin guys—no drugs, no needles.

He tells Sherie. To be safe, they decide, Michael should get tested.

Negative.

In June of 1989, Sherie and Michael Johnson marry, honeymoon in the Virgin Islands. He lands the job of his dreams in Dallas. Not long afterwards, he begins having minor health problems. So does she. But he explains that the ills were nothing that would alarm anyone; just regular stuff.

One day, rolling around on the ground with his dog, he develops a rash—poison ivy. His physician gives him a shot. Michael passes out from a serious allergic reaction to the injection. He shouldn’t react so severely. The doctor orders a battery of tests.

In tears, the physician, “a studly Texan kind of guy,” tells Michael that he is HIV positive. Stunned, Michael has to tell Sherie. Together, they have to tell their middle class Wisconsin parents.

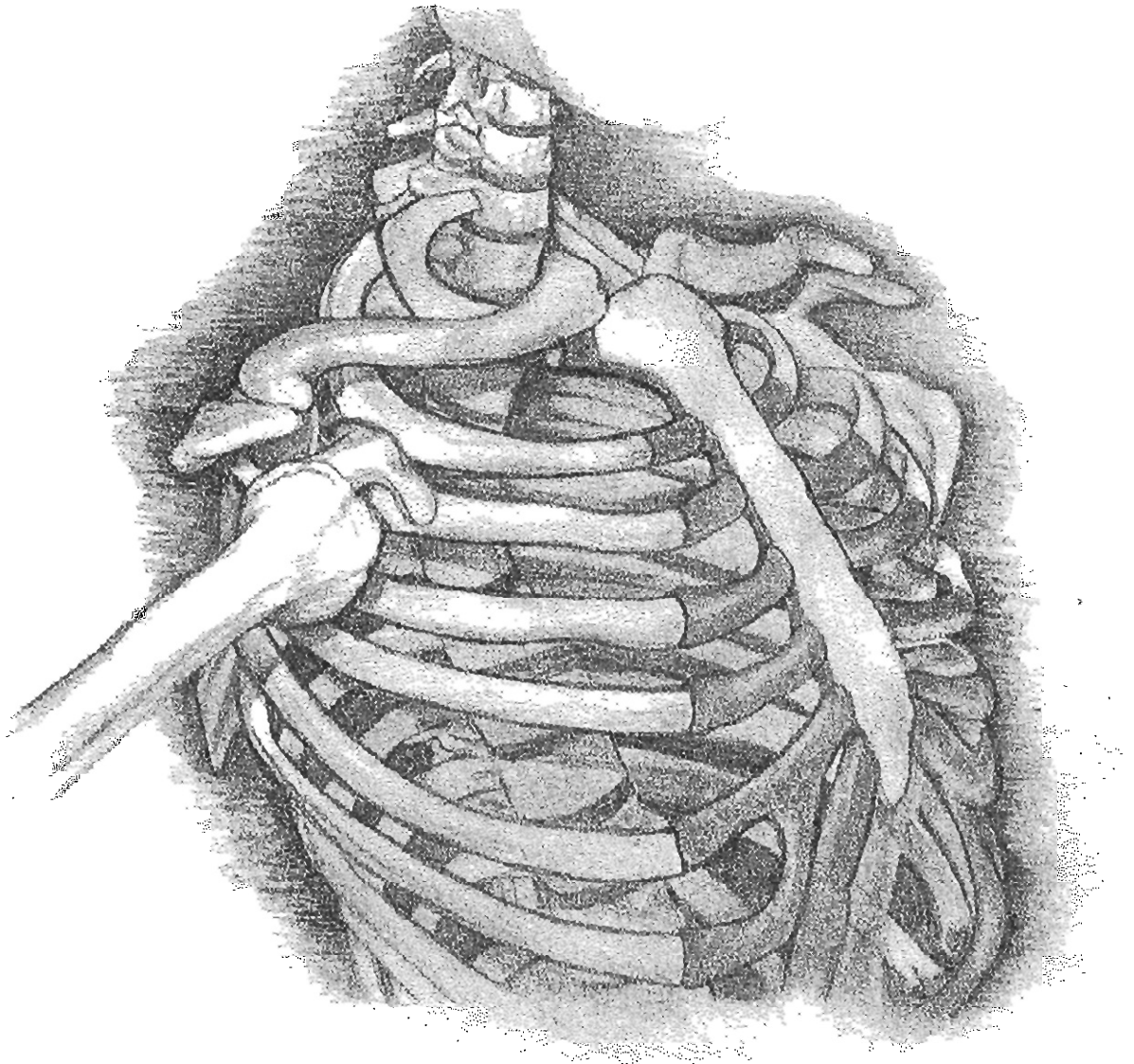
From the opening scene in their car as they jokingly sing the theme to “The Brady Bunch” with its implications of the joys of children never to be realized in this couple’s lives, the video gently but convincingly teaches its viewer the reality of the deadly HIV/AIDS threat.

The Johnsons speak bluntly, humorously, seriously with high school students about the dangers of sexual activity, of their recommendation of abstinence but at least condom protection, of the reality of contamination among heterosexuals, of the personal power over fatal HIV exposure: “You have the power to make sure you’re not in our shoes...Everything you’ve ever worked for, ever dreamed about...won’t mean diddly squat”

Medical visits with Dr. Frank Graziano, director of the HIV Clinic at the University of Wisconsin Hospital in Madison, reveal a progression in Sherie's disease that Michael is simply "not ready to deal with." As he tries to rationalize the drop in her "helper" cells, Dr. Graziano forces Michael to confront the reality of the disease's effects. "I'm just not ready to handle this," he says of the assault on Sherie's immune system. His guilt for infecting Sherie never needs to be verbalized; it plays across his face as he talks.

Michael's parents, Martha and Dick, wonder painfully if sex education in their home might have prevented their son from contracting the disease. Martha notes how they now confront others who talk about HIV as a disease only "those kinds of people," homosexual men, have.

Sherie recalls the painful moment when she had to tell her father Ken that she was HIV positive. "Wow! My baby," he responded, his pained bewilderment clear still in her face.



Together they wondered how to tell her mother, Marie.

What co-directors/writers/producers John Roach and Kathleen Iattarelli do so well is weave a collage of scenes from the lives of two young people who treat their disease as a mission, a commitment to focus their mutual love and support from their families and friends in order to place the interests of others before their own. In their humble, persistent way, Michael and Sherie Johnson decide to be heroes. Clearly they do not see themselves in that way.

The video's form mirrors the potentially fractured life of the Johnsons, a couple in their early 30s whose future could have shattered about them. Yet just as the Johnson's impose order over the fragmenting effects of HIV on their young marriage, Roach and Iattarelli's work demonstrates poignantly how Michael and Sherie's love, hope and commitment create profound meaningful service out of selflessness.

Out of the pain of the Johnsons' experience, Roach and Iattarelli produce a heart-touching educational video about the tragic lives of two kids so normal, so apple-pie, so untouchable that no viewer can remain untouched. By the video's end, no rational viewer can say, "Well, this couldn't happen to me."

This video has all of the strengths of its subjects. Not pushy, it is as persistent as Michael and Sherie Johnson's personal mission.

Not preachy, it conveys a clear message about

controlling this disease: Use the power within yourself so that what has happened to us does not happen to you.

Already the video has won acclaim and recognition in the healthcare community: first place in the Prevention/Wellness category with the American Journal of Nursing Company, Educational Services Division competition; and "best in category" in the Wellness/Health Promotion of the American Society for Health Care Education Media Festival.

"The Johnsons" carries a hefty \$149 price tag, even considering the accompanying discussion booklet. Nevertheless, given the video's objective, its effectiveness, and the insidious disease it discusses, the money should be spent. This video ought to find a place in any school system's health education video library, in youth organizations, public service clubs, and other public arenas wherever the HIV/AIDS warning needs to be broadcast.

In short, everywhere.

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