

Recovery

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He didn't know it at the time, but he was a full-blown alcoholic by his 18th birthday.

"I didn't see myself living past 30," Johnson recalled. "That's a weird, kind of morbid thought, but I guess I always thought I would die young."

That deadly cycle only accelerated after he left the military at the age of 20, just before 9/11. Over the course of two decades, he racked up multiple felonies, all the while destroying relationships with his mother, stepfather, brother and son. Johnson identifies as an alcoholic, but during those years he also used, sold and manufactured illicit drugs. An endless cycle of homelessness and incarceration dominated his 20s and 30s.

Then in 2021, he met a case worker from Volunteers of America Mid-States, who helped him take the steps he needed to stabilize his life, so that he could focus on his sobriety. Nearly five years later, he's still sober and now leads classes for other veterans in the earliest stages of their recovery, as a way to pay forward all the help he's grateful he had in his own journey to sobriety.

Twenty-five years after his alcoholism began, he can't believe he's alive — let alone someone who is employed full-time, a recent college graduate and engaged.

"If you would have told me any of this ... I would have laughed," Johnson told the Courier Journal in an interview in the weeks leading up to Veterans Day. "And not just a 'ha ha.' I would have hysterically laughed."

A functional, safe, accountable life never felt possible to him, because he never believed he could achieve that on his own.

Then he finally asked for help, and his whole world changed.

'You're somewhat lost' after U.S. Army discharge

No two cases among veterans are the same, but many experience similar challenges after returning to civilian life that can lead to homelessness or mental health issues, said Anyah Hoang-Ansert, chief operating officer for Volunteers of America Mid-States, 570 S. 4th St.

The military revolves around structure and routine, and sometimes veterans struggle when that stability disappears after discharge.

"A lot of times, you're somewhat lost," Hoang-Ansert explained. "Especially, if you don't have social supports, and if you don't have the means to integrate back into the community."

At least 2.8 million veterans, which is 14% of all U.S. veterans, reported having at least one substance use disorder in 2022, according to the 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health. At the end of last year, the VA News reported the number of unhoused veterans was just under 33,000.

Today, the VOA offers programs that help combat housing and mental health issues for veterans, but resources like that weren't on Johnson's radar when he left the military in 2001.

Instead, he returned to his hometown of Bowling Green and discovered his social life from three years before had shifted dramatically. Some of his friends from high school were married and starting families. Many of them had careers and owned homes.

Johnson couldn't relate to any of that.

So, just as he did during his service, he used alcohol as a coping mechanism to fit in with a new crowd. His party-forward lifestyle eventually led him to drug use.

"And very, very quickly I found myself on the other side of the law," he said.

For years, he lived out of a duffel bag and often couldn't hold down a job. From 2003 until this year, he was either in prison, on parole or on probation.

In December 2020, right before Johnson made parole for the final time, his teenage son, Caiden told him, "If you go back one more time, I won't be here when you get out."

The threat of losing that relationship felt like a baseball bat to his stomach. Even so, he came dangerously close to doing exactly what his son warned him not to do.

The court granted his parole on the condition he'd go to The Healing Place for Men, 1020 W. Market St. in Louisville, for substance abuse treatment. Instead, he returned to Bowling Green and lied to parole officers in town, insisting he was in the right place.

In a matter of days, Johnson began using drugs and alcohol again, and simultaneously, he ruined any remaining relationship he had with his family.

After about a week of chaos, Johnson's brother, Jonathan Johnson, a former Kentucky State Trooper, was fed up. He put his younger brother in his cruiser and drove him 120 miles north to Louisville.

When the car stopped outside The Healing Place, Jonathan yanked him and his luggage out of the car.

"Don't call me," Johnson remembers Jonathan telling him. "Don't call your mom, until you get your s*** together."

His brother drove away before he even had a chance to go inside.

"And that's where he left me," Johnson said, as he recalled that day. "And thank God. Thank God that he could do that."

Substance abuse often ends in jail, institutions or death

After 20 years of pain and uncertainty, Johnson hit the proverbial rock bottom as he watched his brother drive away.

Over the years, he'd tried 12-step programs. A couple of times, he stayed sober for a few months, and once, about a year. But sobriety felt more stressful than being high or drunk.

"Problems start to pile up," Johnson recalled. "You start stressing out. You don't know how to deal with that, but you know how you used to deal with it, and that's what you do."

He'd heard more than once in programs that substance abuse often ends with users in jails, institutions or an early grave. He'd already hit two of the



Veteran Mike Johnson at his house that he is in the midst of working on. The house is sort of symbolic of his new sober life. MICHAEL CLEVENGER/COURIER JOURNAL



Mike Johnson poses with his son, Caiden. Johnson battled alcoholism and drug use for nearly two decades. In December 2020 when Johnson made parole for the final time, his son told him, "If you go back one more time, I won't be here when you get out." He hated the idea of losing that relationship to substance abuse. PROVIDED BY VOLUNTEERS OF AMERICA MID-STATES

three stops before his 40th birthday — and the third wasn't an option.

"I knew that I didn't want to die, and that's where I was headed," Johnson said.

This time, his sobriety needed to stick.

At The Healing Place, he began the detoxing process and a 12-step program. Johnson met others at the recovery center, who loved and supported him, until he could figure out how to love and value himself.

He tapped into his spiritual side, and even though he's never been the church-going type, took comfort in the idea of God and that everything happens as it should. Johnson found a sponsor, and thrived in a group of other people in recovery who helped keep him accountable.

Once he finished detox, he moved onto the floor for military veterans at the The Healing Place, where he could stay free of charge until he figured out what came next.

Stepping into society without that structure felt overwhelming to him at the time. The act of balancing sobriety alongside apartment hunting and making meet ends could have sent him over the edge. On top of that, being a convicted non-violent felon made finding a full-time job seemingly impossible. He never thought he'd have enough money for a deposit on an apartment, let alone enough to keep up with rent.

"The pressure was just on him," Hoang-Ansert, with VOA Mid-States, said. "Our staff are trauma-informed and person-centered, and they knew that his situation was a crisis, which is just a moment in time."

Johnson enrolled in Jefferson Community & Technical College as an automobile technology student and worked temp jobs to save money. And through the VOA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families, which aims to help unhoused veterans and their families obtain safe and permanent housing, his case manager, Marchelle Anderson, helped him find an apartment. Up until that moment, at age 39, he'd never had a utility bill in his name. The VOA funded the apartment deposit, so that he wouldn't have to penny pinch and when the time came to move in, Anderson and her team brought him furniture, dishes and cleaning supplies.

That home gave Johnson the cushion he needed to alleviate his stress and provide a foundation to build a new, sober life.

"This was beyond anything I could imagine at the time," Johnson said. "I really thought I was destined for prison and the streets for the rest of my life."

A veteran finds his footing after years of substance abuse, prison

The VOA couldn't make all of Johnson's problems go away, but Anderson, and that home, kept him grounded.

He applied for as many as 50 jobs before he found a company that fit his skill set and was open to hiring someone with a record. Johnson started working at The Mower Shop as a mechanic, and the company has since promoted him to work in transportation. Having a stable job, and a steady income, set the stage for him and his now fiancé, Ali, to buy a house.

They first met at a meeting for people in recovery.



Mike Johnson poses with his fiancé, Ali. The pair met in a program for people in addiction recovery. After they both finished their 12-step programs, their friendship turned into a romance.

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Need help battling addiction?

The Healing Place has campuses for men 1020 W. Market St. and women at 1020 W. Market St. in Louisville. There is also a campus for men in Campbellsville, Kentucky. For more information, call 502-585-4848 or visit thehealingplace.org/contact-us and fill out the contact form.

Are you a military veteran in need of housing and mental health services?

Volunteers of America Mid-States has a Supportive Services for Veteran Families program geared at helping unhoused veterans and their families, as well as veterans with imminent risk of becoming unhoused, obtain safe and permanent housing. These programs provide eligible veteran families with outreach, case management, and assistance in obtaining VA and other benefits.

The organization also offers a Moral Injury and Preventing Suicide program, which provides case management to connect veterans, active-duty members, and first responders to mental health services.

For more information on VOA's programs call 502-636-077, email info@voamid.org or visit voamid.org.

She was listening to the discussion while he was playing on his phone.

And she called him out on it.

"That was attractive to me," Johnson remembered. "It was attractive that she cared enough about her sobriety and my sobriety that she didn't care about hurting my feelings and called me out."

From there, they built a friendship, which turned into a romance after they both finished their 12-step programs.

Johnson put time into rebuilding relationships with his family. Now that he had his own apartment, his son, who lives in Virginia, finally had a safe place where he could visit his father. He reconciled with his mother. He and his older brother, who had always been his biggest cheerleader, were finally able to build a strong, solid relationship now that Johnson was sober.

Johnson enjoyed that for a few years, until the biggest threat to his newfound sobriety occurred.

His brother died in an off-duty car wreck in Warren County in April 2024, and they buried him the same day Johnson graduated from Jefferson Community & Technical College.

His champion — the same man who left him on the sidewalk outside The Healing Place in 2021 — would never root for him again.

But by that point, he'd spent three years building relationships with other people in recovery. And that's who he turned to after his brother died. He gives a lot of credit to his sponsor, who always picked up the phone whenever he was in crisis.

The support of the recovery community made Johnson realize the joy and relief he could find in helping others. In his weakest moments, he clings to his desire to guide others through the darkest parts of addiction.

"When you can help other people, it can take a lot off your plate," Johnson said. "Someone helped me get sober, and they didn't pass judgment. They didn't take any BS either. They made me be accountable for my actions."

That's part of the reason he teaches classes on the veteran's floor at The Healing Place. He's forever grateful for the men he met there, who loved him when he couldn't love himself. He's forever grateful for the men he met there, who loved him when he couldn't love himself. Johnson says he recognizes that all the wonderful things he has now are because of his caseworker at the VOA, the staff around him at The Healing Place and the recovery community that never let him waver.

This upcoming February, Johnson will celebrate five years of sobriety.

For the first time in two decades, he's not in prison, on parole or on probation. He's building his life instead of tearing it down.

"We're not promised any of these things," Johnson said. "But sometimes we get lucky, and if you're doing the right thing, God will give you some of that (goodness) back."

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