

Papa Joe Bradford

Elijah's Heart

Papa Joe Bradford has overcome poverty, discrimination, prison, and kidney disease. After being forced to move to the “projects” due to unavoidable financial hardship, Papa Joe and his wife, Denise, discovered children who were desperate for someone to love them and care for them. Music became the gateway to the hearts of the children they met and their broken families in this all but forgotten community.

Through *Elijah's Heart*, Papa Joe and Denise are able to continue their effort to reach underprivileged children and their families through music, provide for basic needs such as food, and become an advocate for a crowd of people so marginalized by society that they are often dismissed before ever being given a chance.

Papa Joe's Story

Papa Joe Bradford, like many African-Americans in the south during the 1960s, grew up poor. He reflected, “We were so poor we didn’t have our own outhouse.” But everyone around him was poor, so no one knew any different.

Joe’s father left his mother before he was born. Joe, his sister, and their mother lived with their grandmother. Living in a segregated community, Joe grew up watching two buses drive by his house on the way to school: one for white children and the other for African-American children. But Joe’s mother was convinced that he needed to ride the bus with the white children to learn about the real world.

As time went on, Joe reached past the discomfort of feeling out of place. He eventually made friends and went on to earn the citizenship award in the eighth grade. Earning good grades became a primary focus for Joe. He knew he had the ability to do well in school and watched closely the habits and practices of other students who did well in the classroom.

Joe’s love for music started early. He started playing an instrument in a school setting in the sixth grade. While he wanted to play the trumpet at first, a wise music teacher encouraged him to try the saxophone. Joe had a gift for music and went on to win awards and earn statewide recognition for his ability to play both the alto and tenor saxophones.

Martial arts were also part of Joe’s life thanks to his grandmother’s encouragement. She knew life would be difficult for Joe and wanted him to be able to defend himself if he ever needed to. This never replaced her emphasis on

education. She would often tell Joe, “A man ain’t nothin’ without an education.”

With both school and music, Joe was drawn to the discipline of practice. He learned he was very good at martial arts and often daydreamed, as many young boys do, of one day being a Samurai. Joe said, “I thought there was something in a Samurai that was the secret to being a hero.”

Joe’s high school years were filled with victory and accomplishments. He was the first African-American in his class to make the Beta Club, be elected as his graduating class’s vice president, and sit on the student council. These experiences affirmed that a good attitude, hard work, and discipline could overcome just about anything that life may throw at you.

Given all his accomplishments both in and out of the classroom, Joe rightfully earned a full scholarship to the University of Tennessee to study engineering, one of the most demanding inter-disciplinary areas of study. While at the University of Tennessee, he worked around computers. At that time mainframes produced by IBM were available.

During those days people had to schedule time to work on a computer. Joe recognized the opportunity to learn about programming and technology through the on-campus work-study program. With discipline and commitment, he learned all that he could about computer technology. He knew this was an opportunity of a lifetime, and he wasn’t going to miss out on it.

Part of Joe's drive was to prove to his dad, who he did not know and who had not been part of his life, that he never should have left him. This unresolved pain was soothed by achievement and recognition Joe received from others. Joe's discipline and commitment were really attempts to mask the unresolved hurt, pain, and resentment of feeling abandoned.

On a dare from a fellow classmate, Joe used all his knowledge about computers, programming, and technology and hacked into a restricted banking system. Joe says, "It's the things that you accomplish that sometimes hurt you." Joe believed his success made him invincible. He was arrested and convicted, but the judge allowed him to finish his senior year of college. On graduation day Joe walked with his class to obtain his diploma, only, instead of walking into a corporate job, he had to appear before a judge for sentencing. "The judge made an example out of me," says Joe. He was given the maximum sentence under the law. The next segment of his life journey would be dark but was a necessary catalyst for Joe's healing and experiencing a personal reset in life.

Being in the Knoxville jail during the 1980s was anything but comfortable. The prison was overcrowded, and Joe had to sleep on the floor for thirty days. Joe, as he had done before, eventually earned the attention of the leadership.

Joe became the most popular person in that particular jail. When the sheriff learned that Joe knew about computers, he asked him to help he and his staff learn how to use the newly installed ones in the jail. He even established a GED program for the inmates to earn a high school diploma.

He became a model inmate and was given the opportunity to earn a work-release. The only obstacle was that Joe would have to be moved to the prison system from the jail system. This step seemed harmless, so Joe agreed. Joe was transferred to a prison known for housing hardened criminals. In fact, he remembers seeing James Earl Ray, who was convicted of killing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during his time there. What he thought would be easy turned into a nightmare.

He was placed in the violent offenders section of the prison. Joe later learned that this was punishment for what his record stated as fighting a police officer. He says, “I didn’t mean to hurt anybody. When they discovered what I had done and came to arrest me, I got scared and broke away from the police. I certainly didn’t mean to harm anyone and didn’t even know I had done so.”

Joe quickly learned the rules of prison culture. He focused on survival and never backed away from the opportunity to defend himself, or others, when necessary. Eventually Joe could no longer avoid the inevitable. One of the primary bullies and his friends confronted Joe who was trying to defend another prisoner. All of the pent up rage was released in that moment. Joe not only defeated this men, he went after the bully himself. When he was finally pulled off the guy, he was not sure if the bully was even still alive. Joe knew he had lost control of himself.

He was given forty days in solitary confinement for his behavior. What was supposed to be a six-day visit, turned into a much longer stay. It was during those forty days that

Joe dealt with his anger about his father. He looked inward and recognized how he had gotten to this low point in his life. As many difficult circumstances often do, it was also the beginning of the healing process from all his anger that resulted from not understanding or accepting why his father did not love him and want to be in his life. “I was at the lowest point. There was only one direction left to go, and that was up,” says Joe. He made peace with God and became a Christian. Joe emerged forty days later a new man.

After being released from prison, Joe had literally nothing but the clothes on his back. He lived at a half-way house for a while, often sleeping in different places, even at some of the homes of his fraternity brothers. Life seemed impossible.

Soon Joe would meet his wife, Denise, while at work. Denise had also come from a musical background. Her uncle played for Ray Charles for more than three decades. Denise was a spiritual woman who knew early in their relationship that God wanted them to get married.

Joe was afraid to tell her about his past because he didn’t want to risk her rejecting him too. So he kept silent and avoided conversations that might have brought up the subject of his criminal past. But he knew that if their relationship was going to continue, he would have to tell her, but he wanted to postpone it for as long as he could.

Finally Joe realized he needed to tell her, yet she affirmed him rather than rejected him. This was confirmation for Joe that Denise was the woman of his dreams and the one he

wanted to spend the rest of his life with. Within two and a half years of marriage, they had two small children.

On Joe's thirty-fifth birthday, he noticed his leg starting to swell. The doctors eventually discovered that Joe had a rare kidney disease. It wouldn't be long before he experienced kidney failure. Joe's diagnosis and condition resulted in dialysis treatment for nine hours a day, every day, for fifteen months. This led to a series of medical complications. Joe needed a kidney transplant, and he needed one soon.

While Joe was enduring his daily routine, he had time to read his Bible, pray, reflect on life, and discover more about himself and God. It was clear that God was using this time to prepare Joe for what was next. There was a resetting of values and importance when every day was a struggle for survival.

A kidney eventually became available. It was a match but the antigen number was low. This is the rating system that doctors use to predict the success rate. The outlook wasn't good, and there was no certainty that Joe would survive, given how weak he already was from his condition. But the doctors decided to proceed with the procedure.

The good news is that the kidney procedure was a success. Joe's prayers and the prayers of his family had been answered. Yet the story wasn't positive on all fronts. Joe's dialysis had prevented him from working, which meant they had lost nearly everything they had in the process. There was no other option—he and his family would have to move to the "projects" and live in government-subsidized housing.

At first the complex didn't want to approve him because of his past. But thanks to a friend and a promise to start a choir for the children in the community, they were granted admission. Joe says, "I didn't know what God was doing at the time."

On the first day in their new home, a little girl around the age of ten showed up, and Denise gave her some candy. Joe was fearful of the expectation that had been set. He knew that one little girl would turn into many. Soon their home became a place where the children loved coming around. So many kids were playing in front of their home that it killed the grass. Some parents just dropped their kids off, knowing that they would be safe. Joe and Denise couldn't believe how fast these children learned who they were and felt comfortable and safe coming over.

Together, Joe and Denise started the children's choir they had promised the housing manager. About sixty children were preparing to sing for the National Day of Prayer event when one child, during a break in the practice session, asked Joe if he would be their daddy. Joe wasn't expecting that, but he also knew what was coming next. About thirty other children followed that one request. After all that Joe had been through, he realized his significance was to be a surrogate father to children who had no father and, for many reasons, little hope for a better future. From that day forward, Joe became "Papa Joe."

In 2005 Joe and Denise started Elijah's Heart as a way to expand their ministry to his community and invite more

people to be part of caring for the children and the families within the community. Today the children's choir continues to grow strong.

In addition to music, Joe and Denise invited the community to be part of "A Walk of Love." This is an effort to distribute food to families who likely wouldn't have any without this program. "We've never not had enough food to distribute," says Joe. "Elijah's Heart has been blessed by the generosity of others."

Joe believes and puts into practice that God's command to love others can only be accomplished when we put love into action. "The Lord purposely puts us in positions where His glory will be revealed. I believe God sets us up, so He can prove himself," says Joe. "The Bible teaches that the world will know Jesus' disciples by their love for others (John 15:13)."

If you could sum up the life philosophy of this man transformed by the grace of God into an instrument of peace, hope, and love, it would be this: Don't get angry. Don't judge. Just demonstrate God's love to others.

Discussion Questions

1. Papa Joe had to overcome a lot of personal challenges, but he never used them as an excuse to give up. What challenges are you facing today? Do you feel like giving up? Why or why not?

2. Financial hardship forced Papa Joe and his family into the projects. What unexpected twists and turns have you had to endure in your life? How have those obstacles shaped you?

3. Papa Joe and Denise recognized an opportunity to use their love and gifts of music to reach the hearts of the children in their community. What gifts has God given you that you could share with others? Are you using those gifts today?

4. Elijah's Heart provides for the practical needs of people in need. How can you leverage your abundance and excess to help others? Describe a time when someone helped you during a challenging time in your life.

5. Papa Joe has become an advocate for the poor. Who around you needs you to become an advocate for them? Who has been an advocate for you in your life at critical moments?

Contact Information

To learn more about this organization or to find out how you can help, please contact Elijah's Heart using the information below:

Web: www.elijahsheart.com

E-mail: contact@elijahsheart.com

Mailing Address:

2817 West End Ave #126-272

Nashville, TN 37203