How Is Michael Johnson Adjusting to Life on the Outside?

Released from prison 25 years early, the former college wrestler had been sentenced for failing to disclose his HIV.

August 13, 2019 By Caroline Tien

Released from prison on parole a month ago, Michael Johnson, a onetime college wrestler originally sentenced to 30 years for HIV nondisclosure, has spent the recent weeks assessing his professional prospects.

In an interview with Outsports, an LGBT sports publication, Johnson reported that he plans to go back to school to earn a master's degree in strength training and conditioning, with the goal of eventually becoming a coach. His time as a much-awarded college athlete, he said, left him with a sophisticated understanding of the high-pressure arena of competitive sports, one he is confident he can use to clients' benefit.

Johnson also wants to draw upon his experiences with the criminal justice system to advocate for other people with HIV/AIDS. His trial in Missouri, which tackled issues of race, homophobia and HIV disclosure and HIV criminalization in general—made national headlines. (You can read more about the saga of his case in POZ here.)

"If people learn from my story, they can be better than me," Johnson told Outsports. "If they learn from what I've been through, then they will educate themselves and they will take care of their own health."

He believes the virus is still widely misunderstood, especially among children and teenagers. This perception is backed by data collected as part of a 2017 Kaiser Family Foundation survey that showed that more than half of 18- to 30-year-olds would not want to room with somebody with HIV or eat food prepared by somebody with the virus.

"High school kids need to be educated on HIV and AIDS so they're not afraid of people with it," Johnson said. "They need to understand what the doctors are trying to tell people, but there are people who don't want it to get out there. We need to tell young people that HIV isn't a death sentence."

His ultimate objective is to get HIV criminalization laws—like the ones that landed him in jail six

years ago—repealed.

“The HIV laws we have now don’t represent the science we have in our country,” Johnson said. “We need to repeal and replace these laws. They’re not doing the job they originally thought they were going to do.”

After his release from Boonville Correctional Center on July 9, Johnson returned to his home state of Indiana, where he won a high school wrestling championship in 2010. He was accompanied by longtime friend and supporter Meredith Rowan, who was present for his March parole hearing. As a condition of his freedom, Johnson must check in with a parole officer regularly.

For a collection of POZ articles about HIV crime laws and efforts to modernize them, click #Criminalization.

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