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THE NEEDIEST CASES

Along With a Résumé, an Unusual Disclosure

By JENNIFER MASCIA



Paul Taggart for The New York Times

Michael Johnson at an exterminators school. The Neediest Cases Fund helped pay the tuition.

Every time Michael Johnson applies for a job, he clips a letter to his résumé.

“I have been convicted of a nontheft, nonviolent felony over 11 years ago,” it reads. “I take full responsibility for my actions and have succeeded in turning my life around. I understand the stigma that is attached with a felony and will make it my mission to prove that I am trustworthy, dependable and hard-working.”

He does not have to be so forthcoming so quickly, but he feels it is best to be upfront about the drug sales that landed him behind bars. The reaction among prospective employers, even for menial jobs, varies, said Mr. Johnson, 45. “Some of them, you can tell in their face, and some of them, you can’t really tell,” he said. But his candor — and his record — have cost him “quite a few” jobs, he suspects.

His transformation from a teenager growing up in Jamaica, Queens, to a felon disappointed his parents. “It wasn’t like I came from a home that wasn’t together,” he said, adding that his parents have been married for 46 years. “It was a peer thing — all my friends were doing it. They had the nice sneakers, nice clothes, and I wanted that too.”

His first arrest, at 19, was for selling a \$10 bag of crack cocaine. After 18 months behind bars, he participated in a work-release program, securing a six-month clerical job. It was at that office that he met his companion of the last 17 years, Judy Allison, with whom he shares an apartment in Lefrak City in Queens.

“I was his supervisor,” Ms. Allison recalled. “He was a good worker; he caught on quick. And one thing I liked about him: He asked for more work as soon as he was done.”

Who asked whom out?

“She did,” Mr. Johnson said.

“I did not!” Ms. Allison protested.

Was it love at first sight?

“Basically, yeah,” Mr. Johnson said.

Ms. Allison is older, but refuses to say how much.

“I’m a cougar,” she said, then laughed. “I never thought that would happen.” In 1997, when Mr. Johnson re-entered the criminal sphere, hanging around with friends and dealing crack again — “I knew better,” he says now — Ms. Allison waited while he completed a two-year sentence. And again, when Mr. Johnson violated his parole in 1999 and served 90 days, Ms. Allison, though disappointed by his criminal relapse, nevertheless waited for his return.

“I actually got my G.E.D. when I was away that time,” Mr. Johnson said, referring to a high school equivalency diploma. Ms. Allison “was a big encouragement,” he said.

“I sent him a lot of books,” she said.

“Her biggest thing is, ‘learn something,’” Mr. Johnson said.

After his last prison stint, Mr. Johnson found work at a car dealership. But he was laid off in the summer of 2008 because of slumping sales, and decided to pursue a career as an exterminator, seeking to enroll at the Advani Pest Control School in Elmhurst.

But since work was sporadic — he occasionally cleans office buildings for \$60 a day — he could not afford the class, which cost \$440. To pay the tuition, Mr. Johnson turned to the East River Development Alliance, a job-training center and partner agency of the Community Service Society, one of the seven beneficiary agencies of The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. If he can pay a \$550 fee by mid-January, Mr. Johnson can take a pest control licensing test. Being licensed could raise his pay to \$25 an hour, from \$10 an hour as an entry-level exterminator. In a year, he could go into business for himself.

Ms. Allison still works in the office where they met, and shoulders the couple’s \$1,100 rent while Mr. Johnson gets back on his feet.

Keeping their romance fresh is not easy, Mr. Johnson said. “We know each other too well,” he said. “I don’t even try to lie anymore because she knows me too well.”

“I’m an open book,” Mr. Johnson added. “I’m not proud of it, but I did my time.”

“From where he was and where he is now, he’s grown a lot,” Ms. Allison said.