

## The Pits

*By Shelia Johnson*

Someone famous once said: “Life ain’t been no bowl of cherries!”

September 12, 2012, Michael B. Johnson, an African American male, who held the roles of spouse, father, son, brother, uncle, and friend suffered a hemorrhagic stroke (hemorrhage: outpouring, depletion, bleeding of fluid) and created a new “normal” for his immediate and birth families. As a community leader, he had a diverse love for the community-at-large that encapsulated over forty years of service and made contributions to small and woman-owned businesses, LGBT employees and clients, and Church. Often the life of the party, Michael, Big Mike, or Dad Johnson was known for his broad smile, generous spirit, competitive athletic ability, hard work, love for travel and gaming, golf, and his gift of “meeting no strangers.” In describing his life, Michael would often say, “I like to work hard and play hard.”

Unfortunately, Michael’s passionate combination of work and play and his lack of self-care led to a fateful stroke which robbed his family, friends, co-workers and, clientele of a truly beloved presence which cannot be replaced even in the best of circumstances. Only God knew that September 11, 2012 (when much of the world was remembering September 11, 2001) would be the last day that Michael, and his family and friends, would experience the person that we once knew. Our nine-week ICU journey included: AVM-arterial vascular malfunction (brain bleed), pneumonia, seizures, bed ulcers, eight surgeries, tracheotomy, feeding tube, clot catcher, and shunt implant. Our journey beyond ICU included: several weeks in acute care, rehabilitation, TIAs (mini strokes), and long-term care in a group home.

This roller coaster taught us to cope with a transformative man who was not fully aware of his surroundings and struggled with short and long-term memory. We filled voids left by his absence in our places of family and celebration. It was difficult to understand the physicality of his weakened body, confused speech, and emptiness of his gaze. I often tried to understand why Michael consistently refused to take his medication, continually consumed substances high in sodium content, ignored physical abnormalities that signaled a hypertensive disaster, didn’t listen to caring individuals regarding his stress level, and why he didn’t love himself more. Probing for answers to these questions, medical evidence and personal testimonies of others reveal that Michael was not alone in his predicament; strokes brought on by poor lifestyle choices, heart disease, and unregulated management of high blood pressure occur in communities across all income, cultural, and social strata.

I truly believe in silver linings; our oldest daughter kept us focused on self-survival and day-to-day celebration, and believed that the activity of his brain cells ensured his joy. Our youngest daughter lent phenomenal massages and listening ears. Our son left California, returned home to run the family business and regulate domestic finances. I was focused on overseeing his care and comfort. We are amazing creatures of love and compassion. Family, friends, and communities of faith have shown miraculous love and support on many levels. Yet, at the end of the day—every day, we were all experiencing anticipatory grief—a funeral without a casket.

Michael Bates Johnson passed on July 24, 2014 and left behind many wonderful memories and lessons to be learned about self-care and health responsibilities. We are all moving forward at different paces, picking cherries of life as we go, gleaning on the beauty of LIFE, and knowing that our bowls have more room to be filled with the sweetness of life as we throw out the pits.