

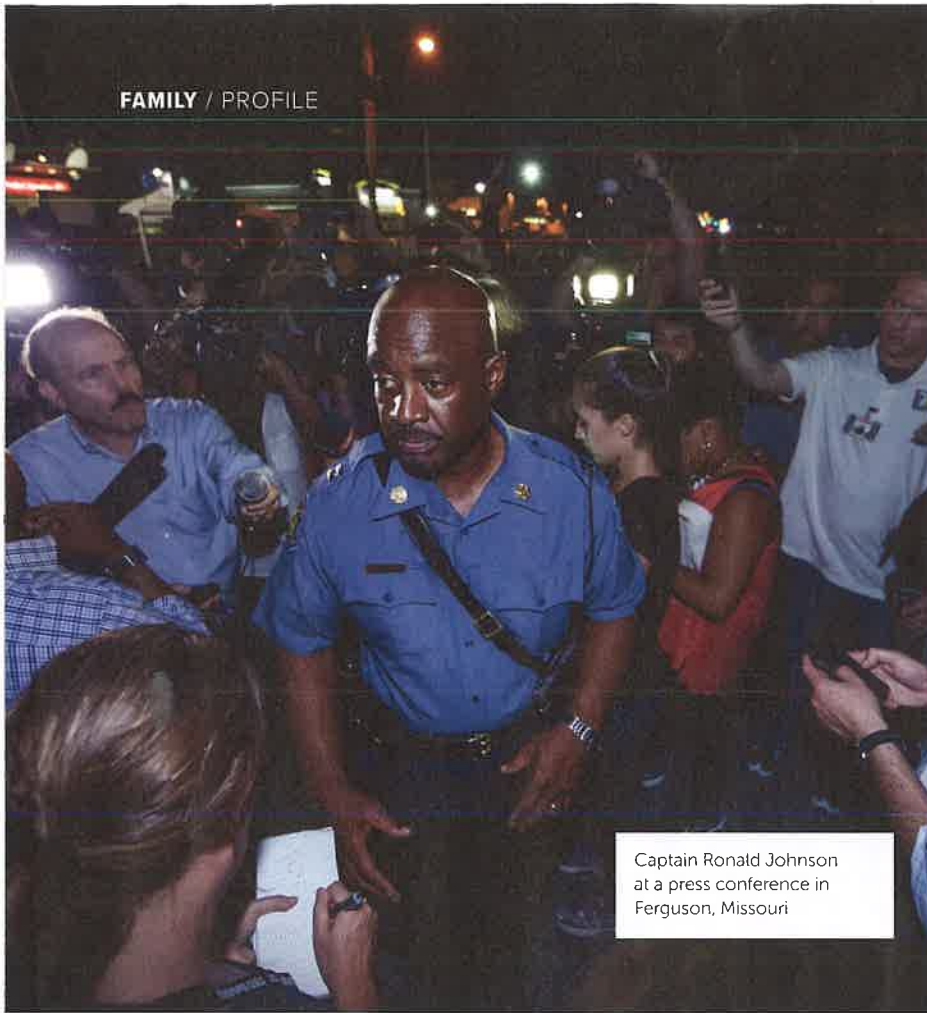
family

'THERE'S ALWAYS A BETTER TOMORROW'

How Capt. Ronald Johnson's faith helped him navigate racial tension in his community and family

BY BENJAMIN HAWKINS

Captain Ronald Johnson and his wife, Lori, (middle) with their children and daughter-in-law Amanda, Collette and Bradley, (left to right) and their granddaughter, Aina



Captain Ronald Johnson at a press conference in Ferguson, Missouri

CAPT. RONALD JOHNSON

of the Missouri State Highway Patrol panicked as he pulled into his driveway. It was shortly after 3 a.m. on Aug. 20, 2014, yet lights shone out from every window of his home. He raced to the front door and pushed it open. There, in the entryway with her arms crossed, stood his wife, Lori.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "There is something wrong. You know I watch the coverage. People are shooting at police—shooting up police cars—and you're out there on the front lines walking without your vest?"

On that fearful night, Lori pulled her husband close, and they held each other tight.

Eleven days earlier, on Aug. 9, African American teenager Michael Brown Jr. had been shot to death by white police officer Darren

Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. His death ignited an outcry against racial injustice throughout the nation. Protesters marched through Ferguson by day, and rioters wreaked havoc each night.

Where other law enforcement officials had tried to beat down the tensions in Ferguson using riot gear and armored vehicles, Johnson—himself an African American—instead reminded officers and protesters alike what they had in common. Each of them was someone's child or parent, brother or sister, husband or wife.

Amid violence that threatened to pull the community apart, Johnson's family clung to their faith and to one another, even as they asked tough questions and struggled to find courage. "Faith keeps us going forward," Johnson says, "and lets us know there's always a better tomorrow."

Questions but no easy answers

On the day of Brown's death, Johnson came home to find Lori and his two children grieving over the teenager's death.

"I had been a policeman for about 27 years when the incident happened," Johnson says. "But when I got home, and after all the chaos was on the news, my kids were upset. My kids had a problem with the profession that I love."

Then his 21-year-old son, Bradley, asked, "Dad, what if that was me? What would you say?"

The words pierced Johnson's heart. "I began to ask myself, *What if that were my son?*"

For Johnson, that moment became a lesson in parenting. "As parents," he says, "we see ourselves as the teachers for our kids, to provide them wisdom throughout their lives. We try to hold on to our kids as long as we can and see them as kids." But in that moment, he began to see his children as young adults, and they tested him to re-evaluate his role as an officer of the law. Johnson couldn't ignore the questions raised by Brown's death.

If he didn't do everything he could to make Ferguson better, Johnson told his children, then who's to say they wouldn't one day suffer as the Brown family was suffering.

Bradley says his father "had to show the world that an African American police officer can exist in this world, that a good police officer can exist in a city that thinks all are bad. And he had to show them that every police officer has a heart, and the vast majority are good officers, good people."

Bringing change

Four days after Brown's death, Johnson saw only fear and unrest

on the streets of Ferguson. Rumors spread that the governor would call in the National Guard and declare a state of emergency. Meanwhile, as darkness fell upon the town, some rioters lit up the streets with Molotov cocktails, while others fired guns or threw bottles and rocks. Something had to change.

The following day, Aug. 14, Missouri Gov. Jay Nixon called a press conference to announce that the Missouri State Highway Patrol would now lead law enforcement efforts in Ferguson. And, at its head, he placed none other than a Ferguson native—Capt. Johnson. Without warning, Johnson was pulled to center stage, face to face with the governor. “I believe you’re the guy for the job,” Nixon said, shaking Johnson’s hand.

Johnson told the press, “We are going to have a different approach, the approach that we are in this together.”

We’re in this together

So Johnson and a handful of his troopers walked into the mass of protesters with little protection should someone attack. The crowds immediately closed in around Johnson, many people reaching out to shake his hand or pat his back.

Then, he met a young man his son’s age wearing a hooded sweat-shirt and a bandanna across his face. The young man shouted the same questions that had burned on Bradley’s mind after Brown’s death: “Why has this happened to us?”

Johnson had no answers to give.

“Some of those things you’re asking me,” he said, “I don’t have a *why*. I don’t. But I want to tell you, when you say ‘speak for *us*,’ you know what *us* should be? I know you don’t believe it today, but *us* should be *all of us*. Not two counties. Not two

Missouris. Not two United States. *All of us*.”

“We have to find value in each other,” Johnson says, reflecting on the incident. “Too often, we think we’re so different from one another, but if we just bring it down to the very core, we’ll find that we’re really alike.”

“*All of us*” included Johnson’s family. Especially as violence increased on the streets of Ferguson and morale declined among his officers, he looked to family for support.

“We were a part of this,” Bradley says. “We knew that we had to rely on each other and support him. We became closer and required nothing of him when he got home.”

And Lori became “the rock that our family leaned on,” Johnson says. Even on fearful nights when rioters shot at police vehicles and when Johnson rushed down Ferguson’s

streets without a bulletproof vest, she was a constant source of support.

During those 13 days of crisis five years ago, Johnson experienced the pain of being caught between the Ferguson community and his fellow law officers. He remembers getting on his knees, praying, “God, I’m all alone.” At that moment, he sensed God say, “You’re not alone. You just have to understand who’s with you.”

On one particularly rough morning, Johnson’s daughter, Amanda, sent him a text message to draw him back to his faith. “Remember, Daddy,” she wrote, “when Peter failed, Jesus picked him back up.” Johnson would reread that text often to remind himself that he wasn’t alone; his God and his family were with him. ●

Benjamin Hawkins is a freelance writer and associate editor of *The Pathway*, the news journal of the Missouri Baptist Convention.



Listen to our broadcast as Capt. Ronald Johnson describes what happened during the 13 turbulent days he spent calming racial tensions in Ferguson. FocusOnTheFamily.com/Johnson



mandla rises up

With no parents to depend on, a teenage boy refuses to let his family fall apart

BY THOMAS JEFFRIES

WHEN MANDLA WAS 10, there was still hope.

Back then, in 2009, at least his family had food and a place to live. His mother was a domestic laborer, one who worked hard to put meals on the table for Mandla and his sisters. But she was pregnant again, and this pregnancy was different from the five that had come before. This time South African authorities jailed Mandla's mother for killing the child after giving birth.

"We became orphans whilst our mother was still alive," he says.

But what of their father, you ask? As Mandla will tell you, "It's complicated."

It's complicated because Mandla's mother had children with four different fathers. It's complicated because his two older sisters have their own dad, who passed away before Mandla was born. Mandla and the sister who came after him share the same father, but they have never met him. They know neither his name nor any details—nothing that could help identify this man should they attempt a search. To them he is dead,

even if he lives.

The other two fathers are known but take no responsibility for raising their children. That part's not complicated at all.

With no parents, there was no income. With no income, there was no food. With no food, there was only a phone call placed to social workers who took the siblings—one of whom is disabled—to a local children's home.

Thus began the cycle: place to place, home to home. Sometimes the siblings were well fed and cared

for; mostly they were not. Some days they were sent to school, but mostly they were just demeaned, abused and neglected. And even when a home was reasonably safe, it was always temporary.

THEIR MOTHER was released in 2010. After all, *somebody* had to take care of these hungry kids. Mom took the brood to a relative's house in the South African countryside—some say an aunt, some say a grandmother; it's not completely clear. Either way, the kids' living situation soon deteriorated again.

"[Our aunt] called us names and would beat us like slaves," Mandla says. "Grant money that was meant to be used for taking care of us was instead used to buy the things needed to build the house for her and her family. We had no proper clothes, and we went to school on empty stomachs."

Their mother couldn't help, didn't help, because she was hardly around. The siblings learned she was ill—and pregnant again. Eventually, they lost

contact altogether.

"My aunt hated my mother," Mandla says, "and because of that, we fell victim to all the abuse." The children had no one to turn to; even the social workers stopped visiting.

Mandla's mother died in 2012, shortly after giving birth to an HIV-positive daughter. The family's oldest sister, who'd moved away several years prior, somehow heard about their mother's passing and returned to arrange the funeral. The siblings begged their sister to take them in, to liberate them—no matter that her living quarters were far too small.

"We couldn't wait," Mandla says. "We just wanted to go."

The whole bunch, including their new baby sister, moved into a single-room home. They didn't mind—it was still better than the beatings.

Their eldest sister sent them back to school, and the family was safe and happy at last. And once again, it was only temporary.

Mandla's eldest sister, the breadwinner, fell ill and died in 2015.

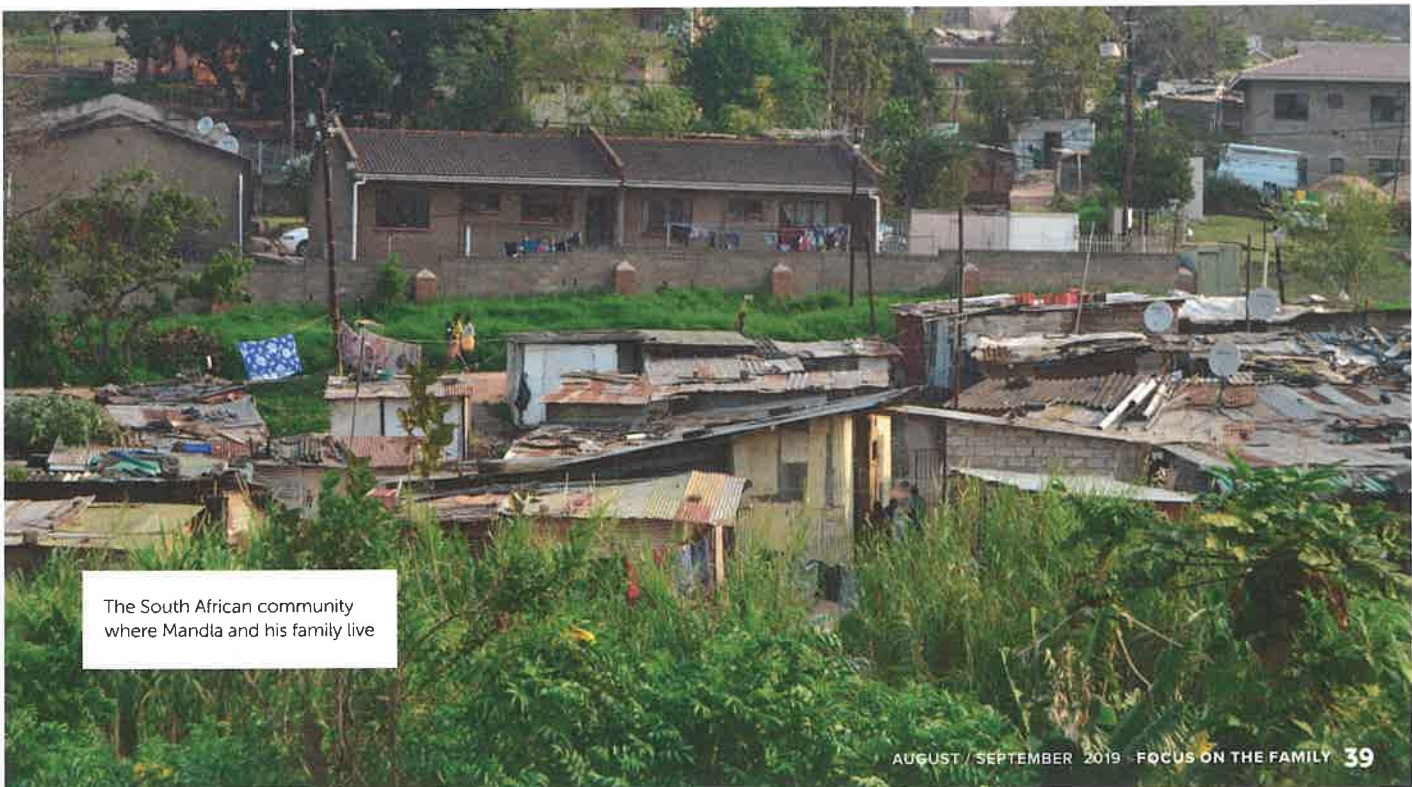
That's when Mandla determined that his present would not control his future. "I decided that no, no, no—I will never allow my sisters to go back to our aunt! Instead I will rise up."

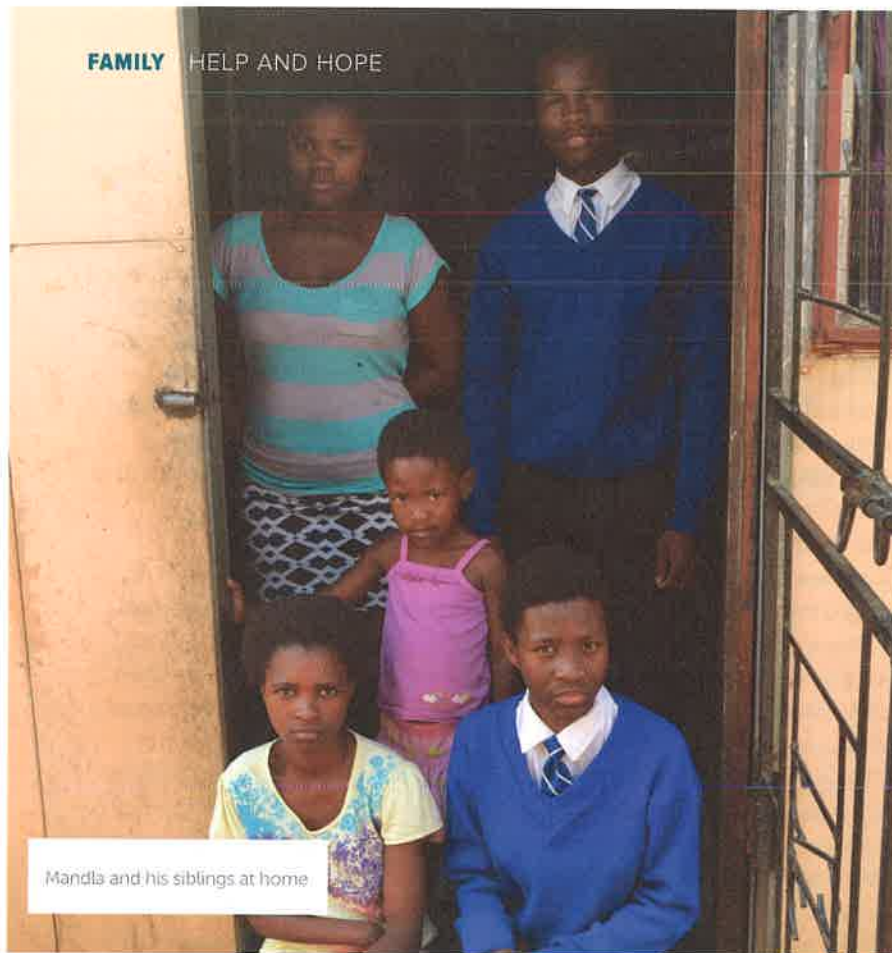
Was Mandla worried? Absolutely. Was he prepared for the responsibility of caring for his four siblings? Absolutely not.

"I was afraid," he says, "but I had to stand up, no matter what."

HOPE APPEARED in the form of Noluthando Moshesh, a qualified social worker and program specialist with Focus on the Family Africa. Noluthando was going from school to school, telling students about a new Focus initiative called Tales of Hope—a program to help families living without parents or guardians.

"Mandla was the only one in his school brave enough to come out as a child-headed household," Noluthando says. "He shared his story, and I was completely blown away by this young man's inner strength. . . . I couldn't wait to start working with him." >>>





Mandla and his siblings at home

Tales of Hope began in 2015 with a group of 20 child-headed households; today the program has worked with nearly 200. The program helps those who, by all rights, should be playing with friends and focusing on their classes instead of watching over a wheelchair-bound sibling and administering antiretroviral drugs to a now-6-year-old girl.

“Mandla cares for his 24-year-old disabled sister and the three others,” Noluthando says. “Every day he makes sure there is food, he oversees their homework and even helps them get ready for school.”

Tales of Hope workers helped Mandla apply for the social grants that he somehow stretches into a month’s worth of food. The program supplied uniforms for school and furniture for their home. Mandla was taught the importance of education, of budgeting and of choosing friends wisely, and he heard about a

God who loves him unconditionally.

Along the way, he also learned to grieve . . . and forgive. He learned to forgive a father he’s never known and a mother who left him and his sisters at the mercy of others. Sure, he still gets angry sometimes, but he’s learned to pray when the burden seems too great.

VALERIE GOVENDER first met Mandla a couple of years ago when Mandla worked in Focus Africa’s offices during a school holiday.

“He spoke with such wisdom for his young age,” says the ministry’s communications director. “He changed *everything* I believed about orphans.”

After Mandla’s first day at Focus, Valerie went home that evening and wept before the Lord. In that moment, she says, she repented for taking so many things, so many comforts, for granted.

“Knowing that his home was an informal shack, with no running water or electricity . . . that he cared for his sisters without an income and shared a communal bathroom with everyone in his community, *but still* exuded the love of Christ—I was in awe.”

Mandla and his siblings still reside in the same single room where they’ve lived since their eldest sister’s death. They’ve spent years on a waiting list for larger housing, yet Mandla never stops dreaming of better days ahead. As of this writing, Mandla was just granted a scholarship to study at a local university; and when he needed new clothes for school, he knew just where to turn.

“I have hope that God is with us,” Mandla says. “Discovering Focus Africa, as well as Tales of Hope, has changed our future.” ●

Focus on the Family Africa is one of several associate offices that serve families around the world. All associate offices depend on donor support to provide help and hope for those in need. To help support our global ministry, visit FocusOnTheFamily.com/donation