

"I beat the odds."



On the day that JonDez and his siblings were due to be reunified with their mom, tragedy struck, and each child bore witness to an awful and life-changing experience. "We lost my mom to a massive asthma attack; she died right there in front of us," explained JonDez. "They couldn't bring her back."

Parenting was difficult for his mom due to many societal factors, prompting the Department to provide years of support and services. JonDez's extended family continuously offered unconditional love and support throughout these tumultuous times.

After his mother's death, JonDez remained with his grandmother until he was twelve years of age, at which time DCF transitioned him into traditional foster care settings. He later spent time in a residential treatment facility, and group homes. Torrance Jennings, who has been JonDez's DCF Social Worker for the past seven years, recalled that day in court JonDez was committed to the Department.



The presiding Judge stated to his grandmother that she had done the best job she could possibly do with JonDez, and the "state will take care of him now." This marked the beginning of his years in state care.

JonDez spoke with absolute adoration for his grandmother. "Caring for me took a huge toll on her health, but she was my everything; she was my #1," he explained. His grandmother shared that same adoration for JonDez, admitting that he, too, was her #1.

Monica, JonDez's cousin, spoke candidly about their relationship. "When my grandmother was at the end stage of her dementia, she made a family announcement - calling us all to her bedside - confirming that JonDez was her favorite grandchild and there was nothing anyone could do about it," Monica laughed, adding that everyone knew he was her favorite, but it was nice to hear her admit it.

Monica recalls moments when she was a parent figure to JonDez, sometimes disappointed with his behaviors and choices, but recalled her being his go-to for help when he needed that help. Now, despite the nearly ten-year age difference, Monica sees him as her go-to for help. She values his friendship and support, helping her navigate difficult decisions. Monica sees JonDez as kind and caring and very in tune with other people's feelings and believes his musical talent has been a true gift from God and a saving grace.



JonDez spent time in the foster home of Edith Peters, who welcomed a candid conversation about JonDez, affectionately referring to him as “my son.” She cared for JonDez as a single mom with the help of her adult nephew, who was a strong father figure for JonDez during this influential time in his life. JonDez recalls that moment when he met Edith. "I was at Waterford Country Day School and felt like I had been forgotten. I saw kids coming and going, but God placed me where he wanted me to be," he stated. "That’s when I met Edith."



Edith and her nephew co-parented him through some challenging behaviors and loved him like a child of their own. Still, when her brother had a family emergency in California that caused him to move away, it was best for JonDez to transition into another family.

JonDez stays in close touch with Edith. He visits their home often and they spend holidays together. Edith considers him a brother to her daughters and a cousin to her grandchildren. JonDez acknowledges that during this placement he exhibited many self-sabotaging behaviors and doing “stupid teen-aged things” consistent with adolescent behaviors. "I could only stay for two years, but the love and acceptance that I have received from Edith and her family made a big difference and still does," JonDez stated.

A self-taught musician and artist and a leader within the DCF Youth Advisory Board (YAB), JonDez values his role and responsibilities. “These opportunities have provided me a platform to speak and use my voice to create change, and everyone gets along well,” he added.

Sharing a recent opportunity to perform his music at a Black History Month event and the Juvenile Youth Summit this past summer, JonDez feels that music can be therapeutic for him. See him perform here: [JonDez performs.](#)

Acknowledging JonDez’s innate talents, his social worker, Torrance, explained that the support and encouragement he has received made him “popular” and improved his sense of self.

JonDez loves music and is a gifted artist. JonDez attributes his love of music to his mom. “I think that because of my mom’s talent, as a singer and sketching artist, the arts are just in me,” he stated. "I’ll do anything to help develop my talent, just listening and teaching myself, playing by ear and drawing.”

JonDez also works full-time for Our Piece of the Pie (OPP). As a youth, he was involved in the program and said he always dreamed of working there.

“OPP gives me something to live for. My work allows me to help youth. To be an example and role model.” He added, “There was a time when losing my mom and recently, my grandmother made me want to give up, but being able to help others gives me a sense of purpose and steady happiness.”



He also attributes finding his younger sister as a true blessing that gives him a greater purpose in life. The two had been separated many years ago and adopted by a local family. They are now in close touch and are a big part of one another's lives.



When asked to reflect back on defining moments over the last seven years, JonDez spoke of Torrance sharing, “Sometimes I call him dad, and he’s cool with that.” JonDez explained that Torrance has been there for him through the good times and the bad. “He has never given up on me, not once, and he is the reason why I am getting my own apartment in a few weeks.”

Torrance recalls difficult moments for JonDez, with placement disruptions and slow engagement to others. “He would frequently refuse to go to school, and I would, at least once to twice a week, go to the group home, snatch him up out of bed, and tell him I was taking him to school.” Throughout those early years, Torrance explained, “We bonded,” noting a pivotal moment when Torrance had experienced a sudden loss, and JonDez showed empathy and compassion.

JonDez is currently living in his own apartment and receives continued support from the Department.

Reflecting on the interview, he notes that he has “quite a story” but that he never let it define him.

He followed his passions and leaned on the support of his social worker, his birth family, and his chosen family.

“I beat the odds,” he said.