

Alice Marie Johnson: Spreading Light in the Shadows of Injustice

NOTE: *This is a longer lesson than usual and can be presented over 1-3 sessions. On day one, we advise presenting at least the introduction, the videos, and reviewing the virtues, along with whatever discussion questions time allows. On day two, consider giving students the optional day 2 review before diving back into the remainder of the questions.*

As usual, instructors should feel free to use whichever discussion questions and activities you think best for your class or group. We advise giving students the sheet with the definitions of the virtues before the discussion questions.

Lesson Goals

Help students...

- Understand that bad choices can have lifelong consequences.
- Learn the importance of taking responsibility for mistakes, and the vital role responsibility plays in recovering from mistakes.
- Empathize with the experiences of incarcerated individuals.
- Understand the importance of uplifting others and explore ways to demonstrate support within whatever community or environment we find ourselves.
- See how spreading joy to others can become a source of personal fulfillment and happiness, especially during our own difficult times.
- Be inspired to stand up for justice when we see something that is unfair.
- Discover how solidarity and tolerance among people who disagree or have opposing views can affect positive change when we unite together to advance a cause.
- Learn that expressing gratitude reaches its full potential when we continue the cycle of kindness by helping others.

Highlighted Virtues and Character Traits

Responsibility: accepting and meeting the demands of our duty in life, being accountable, pursuing excellence

Justice: fair treatment, due reward or punishment in accordance with honor, standards, or law. A just person works to give others the opportunity to have what they need to live with dignity and to improve their lives

Perseverance: trying hard and continuously in spite of obstacles and difficulties

Tolerance: realizing and appreciating that everyone has a right to different beliefs and opinions—as long as those beliefs and opinions do not cause harm to others

Caring: to help others; a caring person lives with empathy in trying to understand another person's situation, compassion in desiring to help others, and then with generosity in acting to help

Empathy: trying to understand another person's situation, entering into the feeling or spirit of others and imagining yourself in another person's situation

Hope: confident expectation of achieving a goal or wish; hopes are realized in building a strategy to achieve a goal and then implementing the strategy

Family Dedication / Support: complete dedication for the well-being of other members of our family, physically, emotionally and spiritually, motivated by love

Solidarity: unity from a shared common purpose and / or interest; active loyalty within a group; mutual support within a group; being present with others

Leader Introduction:

For Black History Month, this lesson features Alice Johnson, a woman whose life shows us the power of hope, perseverance, personal responsibility, solidarity and caring for others. Johnson was honored by the United Nations for her work to help women and recognized by Ebony Magazine as one of the 100 most influential African Americans in the United States. Johnson's journey has taken her from humble beginnings, through prison, and now being recognized across the globe. She is most famous for inspiring something called "The First Step Act," which is one of the most important changes to America's criminal justice system in over 30 years.

Johnson's life started as the daughter of poor sharecroppers during the Jim Crow Era in Mississippi. To put this into perspective, in a sharecropping system, a family works on a farm that they don't own, doing work in exchange for the ability to live on the land and receive "credits" for essential items like clothing and food, instead of being paid money. This system enabled owners of the land to "trap" their sharecroppers and in most cases restrict them from having the resources to move in search of better opportunities. However, Johnson's mother secretly saved money that she made selling plates of food at community events until they had enough to escape and start a new life.

Even though their lives were difficult, Johnson's parents made sure she knew the importance of hard work and getting an education. She followed their advice and by her twenties Johnson had a management job at FedEx, was married and for a while was leading a happy life.

Tragedy struck though when her husband abandoned her and their 5 children, and her youngest son was killed in an accident. Johnson started gambling as an escape and for the excitement and soon she became addicted losing all of her family's money. Johnson also was let go from her job due to her taking too much time off to gamble and due to her grieving. Desperate to provide for her family, Johnson made a horrible decision to become involved with a drug cartel as a "telephone mule." Her role was answering the phone for people selling and transporting drugs and her role, although small, led her to being convicted as part of a conspiracy to sell drugs. Shockingly, Johnson was sentenced to spend the rest of her life in prison.

Over two decades (or twenty years) passed with Johnson behind bars, but with the help of two very unlikely and famous partners - Kim Kardashian and former President Donald Trump - she was released. Now Johnson uses her story and experience to help change the criminal justice system and to inspire others to better their lives when they are going through hard time.

In fact, her story was so powerful that it inspired both President Trump and Kim Kardashian to continue their work together to pass "The First Step Act" in 2018. This law was a big step forward to make the justice system more fair and help people in prison have better opportunities for rehabilitation and reentry into society. Since its passing, it has brought several important changes.

One major change was the introduction of "earned time credits." These credits allow individuals to reduce the time they spend in prison for participating in education and job training programs. Prisons also expanded the amount of programs that they offered to help people in prison better themselves through education, social activities, and rehabilitation.

Similarly, “good time credits” are credits that reduce time people spend in prison for good behavior. The First Step Act allowed prisoners to earn even more good time credits than they previously could to further reduce their sentences.

Additionally, the First Step Act made it easier for certain individuals, such as those who are elderly or terminally ill, to request early release from prison. This can either be called “compassionate release” for those who pose low risk to society, or they may be allowed to serve the rest of their sentence in confinement to their homes with their families.

Another key factor of the First Step Act is its impact on sentencing rules. Before the law, some people, like Alice, received unjustly long prison sentences, even for minor offenses. Now judges have more flexibility in sentencing on a case to case basis, especially when the crime committed is nonviolent or a first time offense. This change helps to make sure that sentences are fair.

From 2018-2023 almost 30,000 individuals have been released from prison early because of the First Step Act. And nine out of ten of them have yet to reoffend or be convicted of another crime. Most of them, similarly to Alice, were in prison because of a nonviolent, drug trafficking offense.

Today we will watch two videos about Johnson’s story.

Lesson Videos:

Start first video at 1:33, end at 14:05

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVkx61gsxq4&t=93s>

Start second video at 1:52 and play through

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSLw5mlyqC8>

Leader Summary:

Alice Johnson has been through some really hard times, but she never gave up. She teaches us that even when things are hard, we can still be hopeful and kind. She shows us that taking responsibility for our own mistakes is a powerful tool for making things right, and perhaps most importantly, she also is a shining example that sometimes second chances are just what people need. The videos we watched share a lot of Johnson’s personal story, but we are going to talk more about the amazing kindness she has shown other people both during her time in prison and since she has been released.

Noted in the video, Johnson aimed to uplift the spirits of her fellow inmates by writing and directing plays and teaching dance lessons, which brought them joy and allowed them to feel successful, some for the first time in their lives. Her plays and choreography created more of a community within the prison, and allowed the women to feel free and happy, even in their challenging circumstances.

Johnson also established the Special Olympics for prisoners, which is where special needs people can compete in sports and other physical activities that they may otherwise be left out of because of their medical difficulties. This had never been done in a prison before!

She didn’t stop there though. Johnson helped her fellow inmates prepare for life after prison by finding them jobs, creating resumes, and preparing for interviews. She wanted them to have a chance at a better life, even when she wasn’t sure if she would get out herself.

One of the most touching things that Alice did was take care of people who were dying in prison. Many people who pass away in prison can't be with their families, so she spent time with them, held their hands, sang them songs, and made sure they weren't alone in their final days.

After her release, Johnson kept working to make things better for people in prisons. She created an organization called Taking Action for Good that fights for fair treatment of people in the justice system. Her efforts have started national conversations, led to big legislative (or law) changes, and freed many prisoners. She also provides mentoring programs for people after they are released from prison, so that they can find housing, jobs, and receive counseling. This helps them to live a crime free life and not return to prison.

Johnson's story, inspires each of us to take responsibility for our own actions, stand up for justice, and support those in need. Let's get into the discussion questions for Johnson's story and see how we can apply her lessons to our own lives.

Optional Day 2 Introduction:

We have already reviewed Alice Johnson's incredible story as the daughter of sharecroppers, through her hard times in young adulthood, over two decades spent in prison, and finally now as she runs her organization to fight for fair treatment of people in the criminal justice system. Can anyone remind me of some of the details of Johnson's story that make it so remarkable? *Allow students to answer, and guide them to ensure they mention: her ownership of her mistakes, the challenges she personally faced in prison, the compassion she demonstrated for others while in prison, Kim Kardashian's pivotal role to help release from prison, President Donald Trump granting her clemency, and her work to help other incarcerated individuals since being released from prison.*

Discussion Question Options: *(discussion prompts / answers are in parentheses)* Before beginning our discussion, let's read over the virtues and their definitions, found in the online lesson as a separate document.

1. What were some of the challenges that Johnson faced that pressured her to make the decision to work for the drug cartel?

(Her husband left her and her children, her son died, her home was foreclosed on, due to the gambling addiction wasn't able to afford necessities for her family)

What were the consequences of Johnson's choice to involve herself with the drug cartel? How did this choice impact her life and the lives of her family members?

(She was sentenced to life in prison, served over two decades in prison, wasn't present for her children, missed her grandchildren being born, wasn't with her mother when she passed and wasn't allowed to go to her mother's funeral)

2. In The Today Show interview, Hoda Kotb told Johnson, "I think we really all are one bad decision away from disaster. All of us. And people make those choices when they're in a bind." Johnson responded, "I knew what was going on, but I thought what I was doing was a minor thing. But I'm not trying to excuse myself... I made that choice... It was wrong. I would never make that decision under normal circumstances... but I did it, and I knew I would have to pay a cost for it. But I didn't know it would be life (in prison)."

What virtue does Johnson display in this statement?

(Responsibility in accepting and being accountable for her own decisions.)

Do you think it's important to take **responsibility** for mistakes that we have made, even

if we made them with good intentions?

How can taking responsibility for our own decisions help us?

(Acknowledging mistakes allows us to learn from them and grow as individuals to make better choices in the future. When we take responsibility we are more trustworthy and honest with others. Owning mistakes helps to show respect and consideration for those who have been hurt by us, helping to repair those relationships.)

Let's share some examples of when we made a mistake that seemed minor at the time, but had larger consequences later on. Let's share also what we learned from those mistakes.

3. Do you agree with Hoda Kotb's statement about all of us being one bad decision away from a disaster? Why or why not?

From Johnson's story and our own experiences, what are some things we can do and strategies we can live out to help us not make bad decisions?

(Don't choose to do something bad due to pressure from within ourselves or pressure outside of ourselves; speak to a trusted family member, friend or even teacher or coach if you are under a lot of pressure and don't see a way out; always place a strong value on doing what's right and never compromise on our values)

4. How did Johnson have a positive impact within her prisons? How did she exemplify the virtue of **caring** towards other incarcerated individuals?
(She wanted to bring joy to others by organizing plays, choreography in creating dance routines, starting Special Olympics in prison, helping those dying in prison through hospice care, becoming a minister and writing resumes to help prepare those who would soon be released find a job)
5. Johnson said, "When I saw other women being depressed...I started finding ways to make them smile. When I saw (their) excitement . . . and how they were blooming, it made me want to do more... it's an opportunity to restore other people's lives... This was something that made my heart leap to be able to do it." Johnson found purpose and fulfillment in caring for her fellow inmates. Do you agree with Johnson that in caring for others we often gain a sense of joy and purpose?

Let's share some examples of how we felt when we helped someone else.

Do you think that like Johnson we can better **persevere** and get through hard time when we care for others?

What are some simple ways we can empower and uplift those around us, even if we are facing challenges ourselves?

6. How did Johnson's family work to **support** her and show their love for her, even while she was in prison?

(They appealed with public officials for clemency to have her released from prison due to the time she already served and the minor role she played in the drug cartel; they remained present in her life calling her and encouraging her; her mother even told her how she was a gift to them by remaining hopeful even though she was in prison and this helped her family to not be too sad for her.)

Let's share some examples, large or small, of when **family support** helped us to get through a hard time.

7. Which celebrity eventually caught wind of Johnson's story and worked to support Johnson's efforts to be released? (Kim Kardashian)

Let's look closer at the definition of **justice**: fair treatment, due reward or punishment in accordance with honor, standards, or law. A just person works to give others the opportunity to have what they need to live with dignity and to improve their lives.

8. Johnson's lifelong sentence didn't seem fair to Kim Kardashian and she felt compelled to take action. What do you think Kardashian felt was unjust about Johnson's situation? (The duration of Johnson's sentence, life in prison, didn't seem fair relative to the small role she played in the drug cartel.)

9. Kim Kardashian openly disagreed with many of President Trump's policies and opinions, and President Trump likely didn't agree with many of Kardashian's views, but Kardashian said, "This has nothing to do with politics, this has to do with people." Despite their many differences, these two came together to support Johnson and change her life for the better and work to reform the criminal justice system. What virtues do the Kardashian Trump partnership and their work together show? (Tolerance and Solidarity)

Sometimes to accomplish a goal, you have to work with others who you might not agree with or even personally just don't like. What are some examples of when we should live with tolerance and work with and even help someone else who we may not agree with or just don't like?

(sports teams, clubs, our own families, working to promote a cause we believe in)

Do you think in our world and our own community we have enough **tolerance** and **solidarity** with others?

10. How would Johnson's life have been different had Kim Kardashian just shared her story on twitter, instead of being **caring** enough to take further action?
11. What legislation did Trump and Kardashian promote and pass to make the criminal justice system more fair and just? What did the new law change? (The First Step Act; more prison programming and education, early release from prison through compassionate release and home confinement for elderly/terminally ill individuals, the ability to earn "earned time credits" and more "good time credits," lowering required sentencing for crimes and allowing judges to make individualized sentencing choices on a case to case basis)

12. Johnson said that saying thank you to Kim Kardashian is not a big enough way to show her gratitude, but that she has to "walk it out." What does Johnson mean by "walk it out?" How has she done that?

Kindness and gratitude reach full potential when we allow them to cycle. When others are kind to us, it's natural for us to want to be kind in return, or to be inspired to pass that kindness on to others. Let's share some experiences of others being kind to us and how we can pay their kindness forward to help others in the same way.

13. Johnson's experience demonstrates the possibility of second chances and turning our lives around even after making serious mistakes. Why is it important to believe in the possibility of second chances, both for ourselves and for others?

(If we live in a society that allows for, and even encourages second chances, then when we are going through difficult times due to our own mistakes we will be more motivated to work to improve, knowing that we will likely be given another opportunity in life. This is better for us as individuals and for society as a whole.)

Journal Writing Options:

1. Think about a time you messed up. What happened, and why did you make that choice? How did you feel afterwards? What did you do to fix it and what did you learn?
2. Consider the importance of second chances. Do you think people deserve second chances? How can we support and care for others in our own lives that are asking for a second chance after they upset us or make a mistake?
3. Alice Johnson took personal responsibility for her bad decision in working for the drug cartel and acknowledging that she should have been punished. Write about your own sense of personal responsibility. Do you think you can improve in being accountable for and owning your own mistakes? If not, how specifically can you improve?

Extended Activity:

Arrange students in groups of 3-4. Ask each group to write and perform a skit that shows the importance of both personal responsibility and giving others second chances. Skits can be based on common situations such as personal disagreements among friends or within our family, or a bad incident involving two sports teams competing.