

The faces behind the fight

East Alumni leading the fight for DSM BLM

Kylea Tackett, Multi-Media Editor

Imagine this: you are sitting at home with your family watching the news just like every other night, when suddenly you see some familiar faces. These are the faces of Jassmaray Johnson, Jalesha Johnson, Matthew Bruce, Tiana Warner, and LaShon Winfield. What are they doing? Leading the fight for the Des Moines Black Liberation Movement. Together. Bravely and Passionately. So, what is so familiar about these young men and women? They are all East High School graduates. This goes to prove one thing: For The Service of Humanity.

Jalesha Johnson graduated from East in 2016. She spends her time teaching children how to express themselves creatively in classrooms. She is also Des Moines BLM head of culture. This means she is applying inclusivity and art influence into activism. In short, Johnson is all about spreading love everywhere she goes.

“I want to continue to be as kind and cautious as I can about what my intentions are and what my impact is in the city of Des Moines,” Jalesha Johnson said.

As a Black woman living in America, Johnson shares that the story of Breasia Terrell is one near to her heart. Breasia is a young girl from Iowa who has been missing since July. There is little knowledge or information being spread about her case.

“I’ve always understood the fact that Black women go missing and the world doesn’t care. But to understand that this happened in the place we live. And it could have been me. It could have been my younger sister,” Jalesha Johnson said.

Johnson reflects on the fact that many people like to stay in their own safety bubble out of fear for the unknown. But she wants people to understand that the world cannot continue business as usual until everyone is free. She says East did teach her one thing about activism: If you stand tall, and gain support, no one will stand in your way.

Johnson shared a heartbreaking moment that took place at the capitol on July 1. She recalls that her and around 23 other activists from the community were arrested. For many, including Johnson, it was their first time going to jail.

“There was a girl being arrested on top of my chest. We were both on the ground and I was on my back and she was on her stomach. She was on top of me. I was struggling to breathe. It was scary for me because I’ve seen so many videos with so many moments where Black people were saying ‘I can’t breathe.’ Understanding that they lost their life, and I could have. It was surreal to me. I will never forget that moment,” Jalesha Johnson said. If anyone remembers one thing from this, Johnson wants it to be that love is powerful. And if you have the power to love, you have the power to do anything.

“When we learn what love looks like politically, communicably, in our work, in our neighborhoods, in our organizations, that’s when we realize we have the power to change things. Because we have the power to love,” Jalesha Johnson said.

Matthew Bruce spent his life on the East Side of Des Moines, doing what he enjoyed most. He grew up very interested in sports, as well as history and music.

“My time at East was very special and important in my life. It was my first time being a part of a community. From there I became a full-time activist,” Bruce said.

Bruce has many goals that he hopes to achieve through his activism. His goals include getting the Des Moines Police Department defunded and disbanded, as well as establishing different community programs for Des Moines BLM. Including Drug Harm reduction programs, policing the police programs, etc.



“Black people and the issues around us need to be organized. Whether it is solidarity with indigenous people, with the poor and working class, LGBTQ community, with those experiencing houselessness. We need to be organized in order to improve our lives,” Bruce said.

Bruce recalls a night that was special for him and many other BLM organizers. This was the march that began at East and continued throughout downtown. He explains that someone was taken by police at the beginning of the march and they were able to come together beautifully after that. “We had a demonstration that was a little more special and expressive. Being able to go through downtown and have our voice heard throughout the entire downtown area was really special. Laying our demands out to the whole city,” Bruce said.

For the future, Bruce hopes today's BLM organizers are passing down a polished movement to keep fighting for and keep working towards. He says we cannot let this become a memory. We need to remember why it started.

“I hope that the next generation has some kind of institutionalized struggle to inherit. We didn't have that. We had to build this struggle and movement from scratch. I hope we are handing them off a movement and a struggle that is strong, sophisticated, well developed, and mature,” Bruce said.

Jassmaray Johnson is a sophomore at Iowa State University. She is double majoring in psychology and communications with a minor in African American studies. In her free time, she enjoys cooking and doing poetry. At East, she was heavily involved with Movement 515.

“I want to create my own mentoring program when I graduate college. I want to make six figures. I want to graduate from grad school. And I obviously want to work towards prison reform and abolish the police,” Jassmaray Johnson said.

Johnson finds comfort in the fact that so many people in the community are coming together towards this common goal. It gives her confidence that movement is working and there will be a change for a better future.

“The movement means a lot to me because it builds community and makes me feel safer in my community knowing that there is people who are fighting for the same things I'm fighting for and want to see the changes I want to see. It makes me feel comfortable and confident that there can be a change in the future. Because it's not just me and a few other people, it's a whole community working to get things done just like I am,” Jassmaray Johnson said.

Lashon Winfield is an East graduate, class of 2016. He describes himself as a man just trying to do what he can to make the world a better place. His goals include getting people to vote and changing the whole system.

“One of my short-term goals is getting as many people out to vote as possible and educating people on the voting process. More than just the presidential election. There are many elections we need people to vote at. My ultimate long term goal is to change the system to work better for people of color,” Winfield said.

Winfield wants people to know that no matter what hate is thrown towards BLM, the movement isn't stopping, and it won't ever stop until the demands are met. He says he is surprised at how people can hate those advocating for nothing more than human rights for themselves and colleagues. “I know racism has always been prevalent in the country. But it's still surprising to see how people can sit in hatred for something that is nothing more than equal human rights,” Winfield said.

Tiana Warner is an African American studies major at The University of Iowa. She graduated from East in 2017. She poet and a writer and mentions that she is an avid music listener. Her favorite genre being rap. Her biggest goal is for prisons to be completely abolished and replaced with rehabilitation techniques.

“Essentially, I'd like for prisons to be abolished. I want to help black people who leave prison get readjusted to life because there are so many barriers that we don't think about economic, housing, related to education that block those folks, so I've always wanted to start a non-profit that helps them re-enter society,” Warner said.

On June 22, Warner was arrested at a protest. She spoke about how the shared goal of Black liberation brought so many people together.

“The people I was in the holding cell with kept me strong. We were talking. Talking shit about the police who arrested us, talking crap about the system, and just building connections. I knew that those people were legitimately people who cared about me because we all had one passion.” Warner said.

When asked about a story that affects her most, she speaks about Bruce, who she knows personally. She says that when Bruce was arrested in Iowa city, he was racked with unnecessary charges he did not deserve.

“I think he was charged with nine felonies that night. One felony for anyone creates barriers. One felony for a black man, if any of those follow him for the rest of his life, he won't be able to access education as easily, housing, or jobs, and that is messed up because Matt is not a person who deserves that.”

Warner wants people to realize that the fight isn't over and might not be over for awhile. Even though you feel like you must always be fighting for Black liberation, take time for yourself. You cannot care for anyone else until you care for yourself.

“I think that as people who identify as black, we feel so obligated to continuously be out there, to continuously be doing something for the fight. You have to take care of yourself. If you do not take care of yourself, you won't be able to fight, period,” Warner said.