

HUMANS OF YearBeyond

● ● ● BE INSPIRED.

From School Leadership to Advocating for Youth Justice:

How Personal Responsibility and Community Support helped shape Keasha Johnson's Vision for Change.

Building a community of support for young people to feel seen and validated is crucial for fostering a future where they can confidently express themselves and actively contribute as citizens. While many youth are disillusioned by the country's state of affairs, some consciously strive to rise above by seeking hope within themselves to make a positive impact.

Growing up in a community where the concept of a functional nuclear family is important but a rarity, Academic YeBoneer Keasha Johnson considers herself fortunate to have been raised in a household with supportive parents. Residing in a community plagued by teenage pregnancy, alcohol abuse, and unemployment, she was determined in her commitment to making a difference. Keasha's mom and dad made great efforts to ensure that both she and her younger brother had everything necessary to excel in school and society. The demanding nature of their jobs often led to late shifts, and therefore Keasha and her brother found themselves alone at times. This circumstance instilled in Keasha a sense of responsibility, prompting her to "grow up quickly", all of which has shaped Keasha's perspective on responsibility and the importance of familial support.

Her small circle was further solidified by her love for school and her compassionate teachers, two of whom she still talks to years later. Her business and Afrikaans teachers encouraged her potential and became people she could count on when she needed to talk or seek advice.



Former YeBoneer Keasha Johnson at the 2023 GoBeyond: Shape your future conference

As a shy child, she struggled with doing oral assignments, but this didn't stop her from taking the steps to conquer her fear. When she was encouraged to participate in a business public speaking competition, she fell in love with presenting herself in front of people and feeling like her voice mattered and was heard. While she was a top-performing academic, she maintained a busy schedule. She soon discovered what would become the beginning of her relationship with after school programmes at a Women Community Action programme based in Eersteriver. The programme encouraged children and youth to play instruments. Keasha immersed herself in learning to play the keyboard and signing, while her brother focused on mastering the drums.



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Keasha running an After School Programme with her learners

She enjoyed discovering her musical talents, but Keasha found fulfilment in her role as part of the school's executive body, experiencing the impact of her leadership not only at home but also in school. As someone who had to work hard to voice her opinions, she was thrilled by the idea of having her voice be heard.

Her passion for law was sparked by this newfound interest in public speaking and her love for law-based TV shows. She appreciated how lawyers were portrayed as change-makers and fighters of injustice. This perception allowed her to envision herself transcending the challenges in her community, aspiring to become a beacon of hope for the children around her. She applied to study law and unfortunately did not find placement.

“I am not used to doing nothing, I needed to keep busy and do something with myself.” Having experienced the value of being a beneficiary of a programme that kept youth engaged and off the streets, it felt natural for her to join the teacher's assistant programme. YearBeyond's Academic Programme where she felt most tested. Unlike the older children she initially worked with, she found working with younger children to be the most rewarding. Placed in a school where the children came from disadvantaged backgrounds, she felt a deep sense of purpose, believing she could truly make a difference. Observing that these children were grappling with hardships and challenges from home and their community, Keasha felt she was again the bigger sister she was to her brother while they were alone.

One moving moment occurred when she heard a learner reflect on a difficult weekend at home, where their parents were in conflict. Witnessing the impact on the child, Keasha realised the profound effects of the challenges that so many of our learners face.

The YearBeyond Programme had placed her in an environment where she felt she could make meaningful change. As someone who knew the impact support can make in and out of the home Keasha wanted to create a space of safety and care for young children, so they that they too can feel like there are people to hear and look out for them. She admits to experiencing conflict in her volunteering experience, struggling with maintaining the boundaries between herself and the learners, as she became very close to the learners. With access to a mentor and the Future Fit sessions Kesha used the advice and skills to balance her work and empathy, an experience that pushed her further into wanting to become a professional in this work.

As she continued working with learners, she began thinking about how she could leverage her studies and experiences to ignite the change she had longed to see. In many schools lacking a formal social work structure, she noticed that children looked to their teachers and fellow YeBoneers as listeners, a small act that could immediately make a huge difference in a child's demeanour and performance at school.

As a youth, she felt like these were the gaps that even her peers had identified needed filling in the community. “I feel like the system is corrupt and processes, where children can feel safe, takes too long. I could use my law degree... to advocate and be the voice of these victims”. No matter where her journey will take her, this is going to be her goal.

