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Small Talk: Raphael B. Johnson puts prison past behind him to serve city

*GEORGE HUNTER**The Detroit News*

Raphael B. Johnson rose from the lowest of lows -- serving a 12-year prison sentence for a murder he committed at age 17 -- to becoming a community leader who mobilizes hundreds. He spent years mentoring young people, appearing regularly in that capacity on the "Maury" show. His most recent project is Detroit 300, a group that regularly patrols the city's streets in an effort to curb crime.

Johnson, 35, recently withdrew his name from consideration for a seat on the Detroit Police Commission after it became clear the City Council had issues with appointing a felon to the board that sets policy for police and metes discipline to officers.

Johnson shared his thoughts on subjects ranging from the problems facing today's youth to his decision to remove himself from police commission consideration.

How is Detroit 300 coming along?

We average 50-70 people a night to patrol neighborhoods. We've been getting a lot of tips. People are tired of crime and want to take their streets back. We're out there patrolling every night.

What went into your decision to bow out of the commissioner's appointment? It was just time for me to move on. I'm trying to affect young people's lives; I don't have time to be wrangling over a position that's quite sensitive. I have more important things to do, and so does the City Council.

What's the most important message you think needs to be sent to young people? They need to know they can't depend on anyone other than themselves. They can't depend on weak, hypocritical politicians, who are motivated by campaign donations and public interest groups. They don't need a bunch of mumbo-jumbo or political rants ... Too often young people are looking to someone to help them out. They don't need that; all they need is guidance. As adults, all we owe them is guidance.

You've mentored a lot of young people; is there one in particular whose story stands out?

I spoke with a young lady who witnessed her father get killed. When it happened, her father was holding her baby brother in his arms; he went deaf in one ear from the gunshot. This girl was 13 years old and had already acquired two STDs. She wanted to get pregnant; she didn't care if it was from a wino or a crackhead -- it didn't matter. When I asked why she was so desperate to have a baby, she said, "I want to have a baby so I can have someone to love the way I wish someone would've loved me." That really hit home.

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