

US Veteran and acclaimed actor, writer, producer and motivational speaker, Frank “Sean” Johnson, has a story that itself seems straight out of a Hollywood drama. Johnson, who served his country in Desert Storm as an Air Force Mental Health Specialist, provided counseling to other veterans who were suffering from a myriad of conditions such as Depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Johnson understood firsthand the perils of the Gulf War, and he worked hard to help fellow soldiers envision better days ahead. An eternal optimist – a self-described “Master of the Silver Lining” – he would use this outlook to instill hope and to encourage others to discover the silver linings within their individual circumstances. Little did he know that he would soon need every bit of this optimism to guide him through a dark chapter of his own. In 1993, shortly after returning stateside, Johnson was shot twice in the back by a group of teenagers during a random dispute in his hometown of Philadelphia. He was instantly paralyzed from the waist down, with doctors informing his family that he would never walk again.

But Johnson was not one to give up easily. Even early on, while he was still in the hospital being treated for his injuries, he experienced his first glimmer of that silver lining. He was sharing a room with a man who was a quadriplegic – paralyzed from the chest down – when he learned a lesson he has never forgotten. “I never heard my roommate complain one time,” says Johnson, “so I had a real-life illustration in front of me of what I considered ultimate gratitude. Whenever I feel like a victim I think of my roommate, and I am reminded that things could always be worse.”

Throughout his journey towards healing, Johnson drew on his faith and strong will. He was determined to prove the doctors wrong and two years later he did just that, walking for the first time and making huge strides toward a total recovery. However, Johnson would be challenged yet again when an infection set in due to complications from his initial injuries. To save his life doctors told him that they would have to amputate his right leg below the knee. Many may have given in to defeatism at this point, but not Johnson. Instead, he has used the totality of his experiences to “become a lover of life.”

As he told GetBackUPToday in a recent conversation, “I am grateful for the little things, and I acknowledge what I have control over and what is out of my hands. I’ve learned that my presence here on Earth – like everyone’s – is precious. Most importantly, I believe that God is ultimately in control.”

Johnson has since parlayed his infectious enthusiasm and indomitable spirit into a life full of incredible experiences. You may recognize him from one of his numerous TV and movie appearances, having played roles in shows such as Madam Secretary, MacGyver, The Walking Dead and FBI as well as in movies that include “The Drummer”, “1805”, “Nomad” and “Welcome to the Land of Misfits” where he won his first award for Best Supporting Actor.

When not on the set, Johnson has a passion for Adaptive Sports including Wheelchair Basketball, Tennis, Softball, Track & Field and Swimming. He is a member of Wounded Warrior Flag Football Team, a national team that travels cross-country playing games against NFL alumni from their respective cities (they are currently undefeated at 19-0!) and Johnson is also a member of the Magee Sixers, a wheelchair basketball team co-cosponsored by Magee Rehabilitation and the Philadelphia 76’ers.

And, as if his life wasn’t already full of career commitments and sporting events, Johnson has never really stopped serving his country as a trained counselor. Only now, rather than serving as a military Psychiatric Tech, Johnson is busy volunteering as a Peer Mentor helping newly injured patients at the VA and at the rehabilitation center where he lived after the shooting incident. Johnson also makes time for students from grade school to college with appearances as a motivational speaker helping to guide them towards good decision-making. Through **Think First**, a national organization with a mission “to prevent traumatic injury through education, research and advocacy,” Johnson speaks about the importance of not compromising your standards. He shares his personal experience of the 1993 shooting, including some of the decisions he made leading up to it, and reminds everyone to keep in mind “The 3 P’s: People, Places and Purpose.” Says Johnson, “It is important to make good choices about who we spend our time with, where we spend our time, and how we use our time here on Earth.”

As with all of our featured Inspiring People, Johnson too depends on assistive devices to help restore the highest quality of life. And, like many in our GetBackUPToday community, his path to finding what works best for his needs has spanned nearly 10 years. Johnson received his first prosthetic leg in 2013, and he's now had nearly as many legs as he's had acting roles! Over the years he's worn 10 different versions (from 4 different manufacturers) and is currently using 3 models that allow him to participate in his many activities and professional pursuits. He says that he recently found a device that helps him transition between these more easily, it's called **iFIT** and it helps when various conditions affect how his prosthetic leg fits. Says Johnson, "When participating in wheelchair sports, my stump tends to swell. The iFIT allows me to wear my leg immediately without having to wait for the swelling to subside; it has been the best fit for me when it comes to adaptability and comfort."

When asked what advice he would offer to those of us living with mobility challenges, Johnson says "My advice is simple, keep it simple. Find small things throughout the day that you can be proud of. Stay positive and exercise your faith for those things that are out of your control."

It's easy to see why Sean Johnson is someone who inspires us. We are so grateful to him for sharing his story and his time with us, and we look forward to seeing him on the courts, on the field and on the big screen somewhere soon!

Frank "Sean" Johnson lives in Philadelphia when he's not busy working, playing or mentoring across the US. He has 2 adult children, Javon and Ayana, and one adorable grandson. When asked to name 3 quirky facts about himself that may surprise people, he answered "I was afraid of dolls until I was 18, I trained myself to not be ticklish and I don't like Gus, the second-most famous groundhog in Pennsylvania." He left us with one of his favorite quotes from Wayne Dyer, "Change the way you look at things and the things you look at change."