

Learning to let love lead: A family's journey to accept their transgender daughter

By [Adrienne Broaddus](#), CNN

Updated 5:41 PM ED

As an ordained Christian minister, Ontay Johnson's faith teaches love is patient and kind. After one of his children [came out as a transgender woman](#), the husband and father of three has had to practice what he preaches.

"This hasn't been an easy transition as a father," Ontay told CNN of the experience of his 25-year-old daughter, Kiah Naomi Johnson.

"I told Kiah, 'There's a difference between agreement and acceptance.' For me, nope, I don't agree. I do accept because that is my baby.

"I had to really dig deep to understand love. I thought I knew but my baby has taught me to really reevaluate and reimagine love and what love is." As the nation celebrates Pride across the country, in a suburb of Indianapolis, Indiana, Ontay and his wife, Gina, [are still working on accepting](#) Kiah's truth. At times, Ontay says the journey has been turbulent.

"But... the Lord spoke very audibly to me and said, 'Ontay, you've got to let love lead.' And I wrestled with that," Ontay told CNN. "How would Jesus handle this? And so that's really challenged my theology, my perspective, and my psychology around this. I'm still growing."

"Jesus didn't always agree with some decisions that I made and some things that I've done but he still accepts me just as I am. That has brought me peace. We have had some turbulent times, but we're human and we're walking this thing out."

Kiah Johnson, who now lives in Los Angeles, California, said she suffered in silence for years, fearing backlash from her family and extended relatives.

"When I was a little boy, people would always call me gay. I didn't even know what that was," Kiah said, fighting tears. "I am a human. Forget the trans (label), I'm just a human that just wants to live their life freely."

Not only is Kiah's father a minister, but her mother also toured and sang with Gospel legends like Edwin Hawkins, known for the song 'Oh Happy Day.' The Johnson family was "very much raised" in Christianity, according to Ontay.

"That's why I struggled coming out. It was me putting my parents before my own feelings, wanting to just make them happy and not ruin the household," Kiah said.

Kiah previously identified as a gay man. But last March, someone she knew outed her as transgender to her mother, Gina. A month later, the same person outed her on social media before Kiah was ready to go public – and that's how Ontay learned his child was a transgender woman.

Ontay, with Gina beside him, went live on social media after hearing the news.

Ontay said he didn't want the negative feelings from the moment of Kiah's outing to erase her "brilliance," so he used the platform to talk about Kiah's achievements, like receiving a standing

ovation at Carnegie Hall during a concert in 2016; Kiah singing for Kenny “Babyface” Edmonds; Kiah performing a solo before a Toni Braxton concert before the age of 21.

“Because I knew at that moment my baby was vulnerable and feeling hurt and crushed by being outed. And so, what I said, ‘Let me put your resume out here. It’s a reminder for you, but it’s also a reminder to the world of how brilliant my baby is,’” Ontay Johnson said.

But Kiah also remembers her father saying being transgender “isn’t normal” during that live and referring to her repeatedly as “a man,” which sparked criticism from her friends and thousands of followers.

“People were wanting me as a father to pivot with, you know, the pronouns and all that,” Ontay said. “It’s like, whoa, whoa. I am just learning this.”

That live has since been deleted by the family and the Johnsons have learned and changed in many ways since. Ontay says he’s still not sure he’ll be able to call Kiah his daughter.

“It is something I am praying about and working through. That is the best I can say,” he said, adding that he’s talking about it with a colleague who is transgender and studying religion. “I am doing my research and my homework.

Kiah acknowledges that this has been hard for her dad, too.

She added: “Nobody chooses this. I wouldn’t choose to be gay. I wouldn’t choose to be trans. If I had a choice, I would not choose (this) because of all the hell that I’ve gone through. I was extremely suicidal.”

“Oh my Jesus, I’m losing my son,” was one of Gina’s first thoughts after learning about Kiah’s gender identity, she told CNN. “And then, the last thing I wanted to do was to see my baby with some heels on and a skirt. Kiah took me through phases.”

Gina said she knows acceptance will come to her husband in phases, too.

“I said, ‘Kiah you have to give your dad time because that’s a hard pill to swallow. As a father, you’re thinking, oh my son is going to be a basketball player, et cetera. but this didn’t happen in our life,’” Gina said.

Gina is still looking for a support group for mothers of transgender children, she said. “I want to talk to mothers about how they’re feeling,” she added. “There’s so much fear out here every single day.”

Part of that fear is knowing that many bills [targeting the LGBTQ+ community](#) could become law across the US, she said. Some of them already have.

So far, this legislative session nearly 500 bills [across the country](#) have been introduced targeting this community, according to the ACLU. That also includes a record number in Indiana where the Johnsons live.

“It is sickening,” she said. “If we are supposed to be a country of freedom, they should have their choice of being who they are. It upsets me, why do we have to have so many issues with the trans community?”

It’s a point of frustration for Ontay, too.

“There are people who are voting and who are passing legislation to dismiss people that look like my child,” Ontay said. “It is foolishness. How can you be a Christian and believer but you’re not on the side of justice? So is justice just for some people and not for everybody?”

Earlier this year, Kiah and her mom traveled to South Korea for gender-affirming treatment – a big step

for Kiah and her family.

Gina recalled being afraid of what people would say about her and Ontay as parents, and Ontay as a Christian minister.

“I grieved the whole month we were in Korea,” Gina said. “The day when we went to consultation, it hit me that I was losing my son and there was no way I could talk to Kiah about it. I was just silent.”

But, Gina added through tears, “You have to let your children live and you have to let your children do what they want to do.”

For Kiah’s part, all she’s ever wanted from her parents is their love, she said.

“And they do love me,” Kiah said. “Even before I came out as gay or trans, I was just prepared to lose my family. It happened to all my peers. I was like, I’m going to have to be ok with just being alone. But obviously my parents changed that for me, especially my mom.”

Ontay didn’t travel with his family to South Korea, but told CNN one of the first questions Kiah asked when arriving back from South Korea was, “Dad, how do I look?”

Ontay’s response was simple: “You were beautiful before. You are beautiful now. Love must start within...Do you love yourself? Because you can do all of this stuff on the outside and you will never catch up if you don’t love yourself.”

Ontay said this “let love lead” journey has revealed that love never gives up. He also expressed his concern for fathers who have walked away from their children who identify as LGBTQ.

“The data talks about when children are abandoned, they’re not loved,” Ontay said. “They’re committing suicide; they’re doing abusive things. I don’t want that for my child.”

Ontay said he feels society has come to a point where if people don’t agree, “there is no opportunity for anything.”

“Sometimes we, as parents, we get so stern and strong ... my way or the highway. All of that is nonsense if you’re losing your child,” Ontay continued. “And for me that’s non-negotiable. I’m not going to lose my child because of these things. My love is unconditional.”