

DEAR

THE NATION AND THE WORLD PROTESTED GENARLOW WILSON'S CONTROVERSIAL PRISON SENTENCE. BUT IT WAS HIS MOTHER WHO PULLED HIM THROUGH THE FIGHT FOR HIS LIFE

MAMA

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEITH HADLEY

"Go get that laundry out of the washer and put it in the dryer for me."

"Ok, I'm about to do it in a minute."

"You need to do that now, so that it can be done."

"Okay, I'm going."

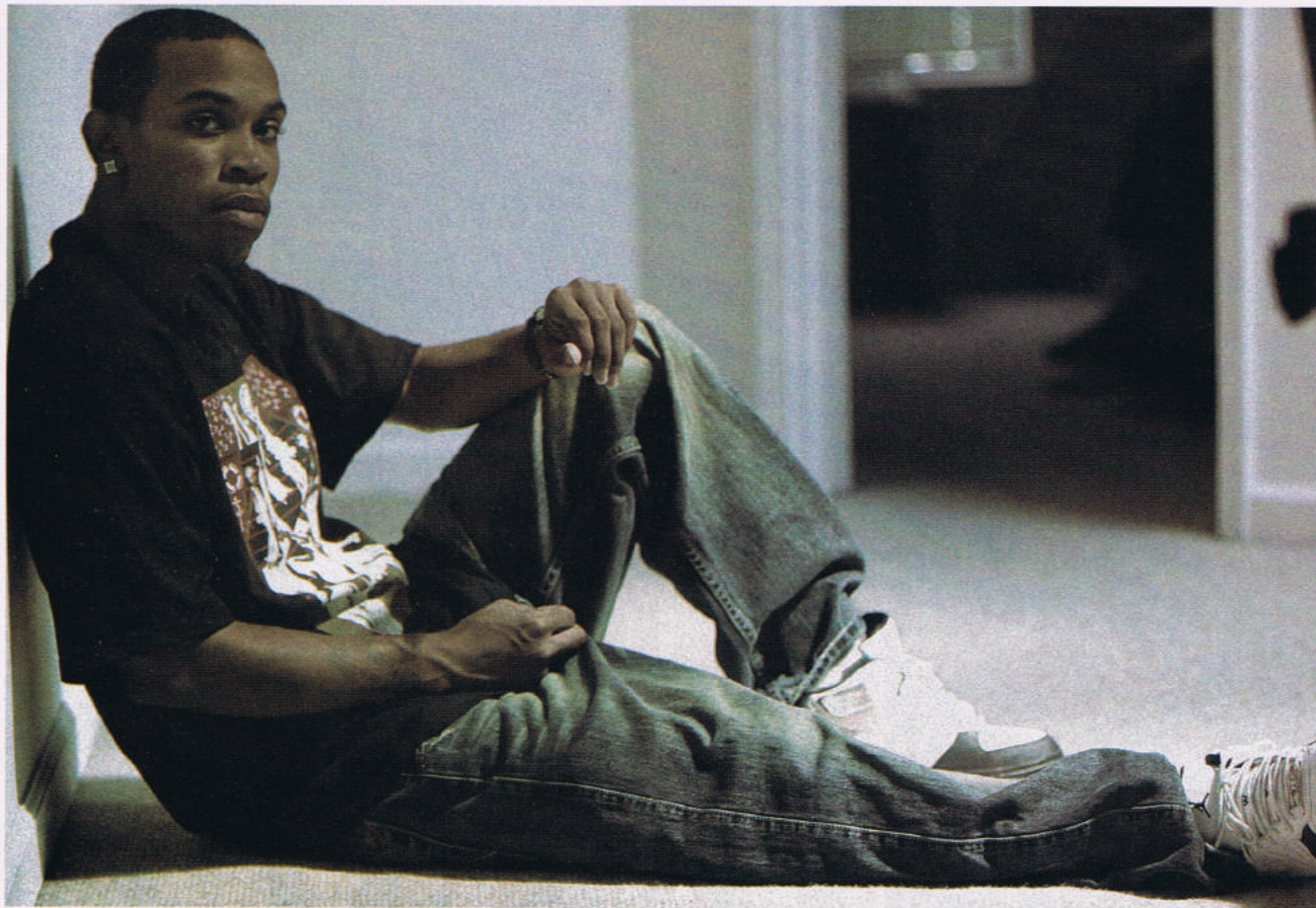
"You need to do it now!"

"Alriight!"

It's a typical exchange between mother and son; one that many parents take for granted. But not Juannessa Bennett. Her son, Genarlow Wilson, made international headlines after his controversial 10-year prison sentence for having consensual sex with a 15-year-old girl when he was 17.

On this sunny Monday afternoon, the 30-something single mother is perched on the edge of her bed watching her 9-year-old daughter, Jiaya, do algebra homework as she fixes a mother's glare on her now 21-year-old son. He is home from Morehouse College, where he enrolled weeks after his release from prison, thanks to a scholarship from syndicated radio personality Tom Joyner's foundation.

Dressed in pink polka dot pajama pants and a T-shirt with the words "Pray or Die" plastered across the front, Bennett is visibly agitated, but there's an undeniable sense of peace in her face, one that did not—and if you let her tell it *could not*—exist while her son was behind bars for nearly three years. Wilson, a high school football star, B student and home-



A NEW BEGINNING | After being jailed from February 25, 2005, to October 26, 2007, Genarlow Wilson began putting his life back together and is now attending Morehouse College. The 21-year-old student enrolled after getting a scholarship from radio personality Tom Joyner.

coming king was the poster child of one-size-fits-all-justice gone bad after a state law relegated him to a mandatory 10-year prison sentence when, at 17, he was convicted of child molestation for receiving consensual oral sex from a 15-year-old girl. Under Georgia law, which has since been changed, oral sex between teens was a felony, though intercourse between teens was a misdemeanor. The fact that the incident, at a 2003 New Year's Eve party that played out like scenes in a seedy hip-hop music video—marijuana smoking, alcohol drinking and salacious sexual activity—was caught on videotape by a partygoer left jurors in Douglasville, a sleepy community just off Interstate 20 near Atlanta, no choice but to convict Wilson in February of 2005.

He and five other teenage boys charged at the party had all been pressured to take plea deals that would have slashed years off the decade-long sentence but would have also required them to live as registered sex offenders for the rest of their lives. Eventually the five others accepted deals, but Bennett stood by her son's decision to fight the pedophile label that came with the state law meant for adult molesters.

The reality of that arduous decision began with Bennett sobbing inconsolably February 25, 2005, in the Douglas County courthouse with only her young daughter to cling to as her son was led away in handcuffs; it ended last Oct. 26 with tears of joy welling in her eyes as she embraced him outside the Al Burruss Cor-

rectional Training Center in Forsyth County, Ga. The world cheered like she was taking home Olympic gold that day when the Georgia Supreme Court ordered Wilson's release, proclaiming his sentence "cruel and unusual punishment." That jubilant moment marked a critical milestone in Bennett's painful journey.

"They used to call me 'that crazy lady,'" she recalls with a laugh. "Then after Genarlow got out I was that 'strong woman.' Afterwards a lot of people admitted that they never believed that I had a chance. I hope my story inspires others out there fighting for their children caught in the system."

A lot has changed since that October night when Bennett and her precocious but demure daughter shared a quiet reunion night together with Wilson at their quaint two-bedroom suburban Atlanta home over a celebration dinner of hot wings and french fries.

"I didn't want to go anywhere but home," says Wilson, now living on his own while attending Morehouse. "I just wanted to place myself in the comfort zone with the people I love."

Nearly three years earlier, while Wilson was settling into life behind bars, Bennett, who still makes a modest living working overnight as a bar manager, petitioned high-profile and *expensive* Atlanta attorney B.J. Bernstein to take on her son's case.

"I was working crazy hours trying to make money to pay her," says Bennett of Bernstein, who also worked on the case of Marcus

Dixon, a Black Georgia football star and honor roll student whose identical 10-year sentence for having sex with a 15-year-old White schoolmate was also overturned by the Georgia Supreme Court. "I was killing myself. After a while B.J. said, 'I can't take any more of your money. I'm going to do this case pro bono.'"

Bennett and Bernstein initially made rounds at local radio stations and church rallies trying to raise awareness, but an in-depth Atlanta Magazine article tipped off producers of MSNBC's *The Abrams Report* and ABC's *Prime Time Live*. After segments aired on both networks, the case that had never been mentioned in Atlanta's daily newspaper was getting national buzz.

"They told us that they had never gotten such a massive response to any other segment," Bernstein says of the *Prime Time* report. Bernstein used the momentum to lobby state lawmakers to adjust the law to make exceptions for teenage sex.

Details of the case spread rapidly on Internet chat rooms and before long the media-savvy Bernstein and Bennett, who before her son's case had never been inside a television station, was on the media circuit with interviews on the *Today Show*, *The Tom Joyner Morning Show*, *The O'Reilly Factor*, CNN, *The Michael Baisden Show* and *Court TV*. Coverage in ESPN The Magazine, The New York Times and on the HDNET and British Broadcasting Corporation networks followed. Amid the demands of her media campaign, Bennett maintained her overnight job and



THE SUPPORTERS | At the Supreme Court of Georgia, Genarlow's mother, Jaunnessa Bennett, and his 9-year-old sister, Jiaya, are joined by B.J. Bernstein, Genarlow's attorney.

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I just did
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I knew I was
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—Jaunnessa Bennett

continued serving as mom and *dad* to her daughter while providing motivation and money to her incarcerated son as he struggled with prison life.

"Some days I just didn't get sleep," says Bennett. "I just did what I had to do for my son. I knew I was all he had."

Bernstein says she enjoyed observing Bennett's transformation from soft-spoken mom to media maven. "This experience was rough on Jaunnessa; she has a young daughter, she's a single parent, but that's what gives her such beauty and strength," says Bernstein. "She's not perfect, but she's real."

Georgia State Sen. Vincent Fort, who supported Bennett's efforts from the beginning, describes her as a "real hero."

"She went up against a determined district attorney, and most elected officials wouldn't touch the case," says Fort. "For her to resist all of these forces against her and support her

son's decision not to take a bad plea deal is nothing short of extraordinary. I have no doubt that Genarlow would still be in jail if it weren't for his mother."

In front of the cameras, Bennett and Bernstein maintained a unified front, but Bennett admits their relationship, like most relationships, was strained at times. Her son, she says, was the tie that bonded them together, during the many challenging times. Wilson feels indebted to both.

"I am forever grateful to B.J. for all she did for me, but without my mom there would not have even been a lawyer," says Wilson. "[She is] more than just my mom. She made this all happen. My mom was the centerpiece of this whole operation."

Now that her son is back home and in college, Bennett is striving to regain a sense of normalcy in her life—paying bills, dating, finding personal time for herself—but she admits it's challenging after so many years focused on gaining her son's freedom. She also grapples with the perennial parental challenge—trying to protect her child while allowing him to grow into his manhood. She's painfully aware that the stakes are higher for her son.

"My prayer was answered; now I pray for him to take full advantage of this second chance at life," says Bennett, who bought her son a car and continues to pay his auto insurance and cell phone bills. "It's just tough to let him go, because I know there are a lot of people out there who want to see him fail. I just try to stay prayed up."

Wilson, who's thankful for the opportunity to study at Morehouse, says now his main focus is making his mother proud.

"I know she'll always be there for me," he says, before heading to get those clothes out of the washer. "She was there for me when no one else was."

—Chandra Thomas was named *Journalist of the Year* by both the Atlanta Press Club and the National Association of Black Journalists Southern Region after writing the first in-depth story on Wilson's case.