

Anthony Johnson, 125208
Parole eligible since 1986

Despite a stack of reference letters from prison staff attesting to his character and accomplishments, the parole board does not consider Johnson safe to release.

Anthony Johnson's early days in Benton Harbor were hardly promising. One of seven sons, after his parents separated Johnson spent most of his time with his father. At age 11, he was placed on probation by the juvenile court for breaking and entering and carrying a concealed weapon. While on probation he faced more charges for burglary, possession of stolen property and felonious assault. At age 13, he was sent to Boys Training School for 15 months. A week after his 16th birthday, Johnson knocked down an elderly woman and took her purse. He was tried as an adult and sentenced to 2-10 years in prison.



Anthony Johnson

When he was released on parole, Johnson married, fathered two children and worked at a factory. On April 23, 1973, when he was 19, he, his youngest brother, a cousin and a friend of theirs were out riding around and drinking wine. According to Johnson, when they ran out of money they attempted to pawn a shotgun. The owner of a pool hall wouldn't take it, so they went across the street to a neighborhood grocery store. Johnson had known the owner, 55-year-old Sam Baum, for years and knew that Baum took items in pawn. Johnson,

his brother and cousin entered the store. Johnson says he was holding the gun when it accidentally discharged, killing Baum with one shot.

There was not enough evidence to prosecute until 1977, when the friend, who had been waiting in the car, was granted immunity in exchange for his testimony. Although the prosecution theory was felony-murder, there was no evidence of robbery and all three defendants were convicted of second-degree murder.

When Johnson started serving his sentence he took classes in drafting and blueprint reading. In the early 1980s he began working in food service. He obtained his GED in 1982, then began taking every course available related to institutional food service management, nutrition, the preparation of special diets and the teaching of food service skills. He completed the State of Michigan's food service management certification program in 1984, was certified by the U.S. Department of Labor as an apprentice chef, completed a University of Florida independent study course for dietetic assistants in 1985 and received his associate's degree in 1987.

Since the late 1980s, Johnson's work with the dieticians and food service supervisors at several different prisons, his instruction of other prisoners in food technology and his willingness to volunteer to prepare food for special activities have garnered him more than two dozen letters of support from staff. In 1988, Warden Emmett Baylor took the unusual step of personally forwarding a packet of letters to the parole board chair.

MDOC staff praise not only Johnson's knowledge and skills, but also his character.

Mr. Johnson has accepted the responsibility of assisting me in completely reorganizing our dietary department. He has been Head Diet Cook

No Way Out: Michigan's parole board redefines the meaning of "life"

since April of 1982, . . . a position which was created solely due to his dietary expertise...He has worked on much of our improvements on his own time...

—Donn Newhouse, Food Service Director, 1984.

. . . I was stunned by his perseverance...[and] personal growth . . . I have seen few people handle frustration and adversity as maturely.

— Prof. Raymond Ventre, Northern Michigan University, 1988

His talents and willingness have made him an exceptional role model. His integrity and honesty have led students and staff at E.C. Brooks Correctional Facility to have outstanding respect for him.

— John Brewer, Food Technology Instructor, 1993

He completely organized the Therapeutic Diet line, trained Diet Cooks, and used his vast knowledge to make our Therapeutic Diet line the best one in the state.

— Barbara Price, Assistant Food Service Director, 1997

Equally impressive is this 1988 evaluation by psychologist Charles Harper:

Mr. Johnson has been in group therapy for the past year. During that time his therapist reports that he has literally carried the group . . . He is especially capable of abstract thinking, conscientious and dominated by a sense of duty. He is attentive to others and can be relied on to complete assigned tasks. He seems to have developed

the ability to be self-reliant and realistic . . . It is doubtful that further incarceration would serve any rehabilitative purpose for Mr. Johnson or society.

Despite these assessments from people who know him well, and despite the fact that his last misconduct citation was in 1982, the parole board has shown little interest in Johnson. In 1993, then-board chair Stephen Marschke noted that he could support parole at the next interview if Johnson's behavior remained positive, but the 1998 and 2003 interviews resulted in routine "no interest" notices. Johnson is next scheduled for review in May 2008, when he will be age 55 and have served 32 years.

In December 2007, a public hearing was scheduled by the parole board but the judge objected, and the hearing was cancelled. A hearing was subsequently held in connection with a commutation application but the commutation was denied by the governor.