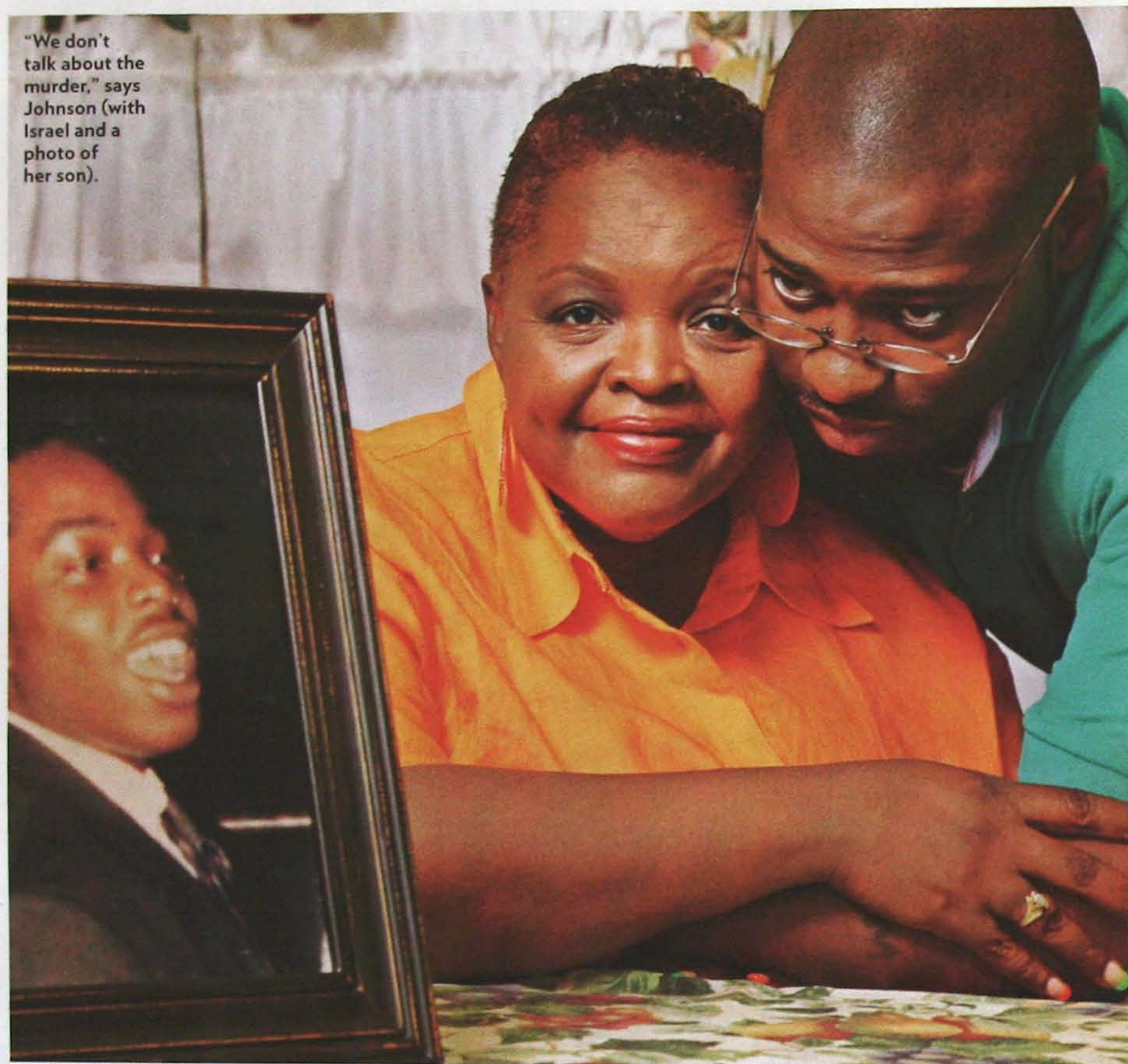


"We don't talk about the murder," says Johnson (with Israel and a photo of her son).

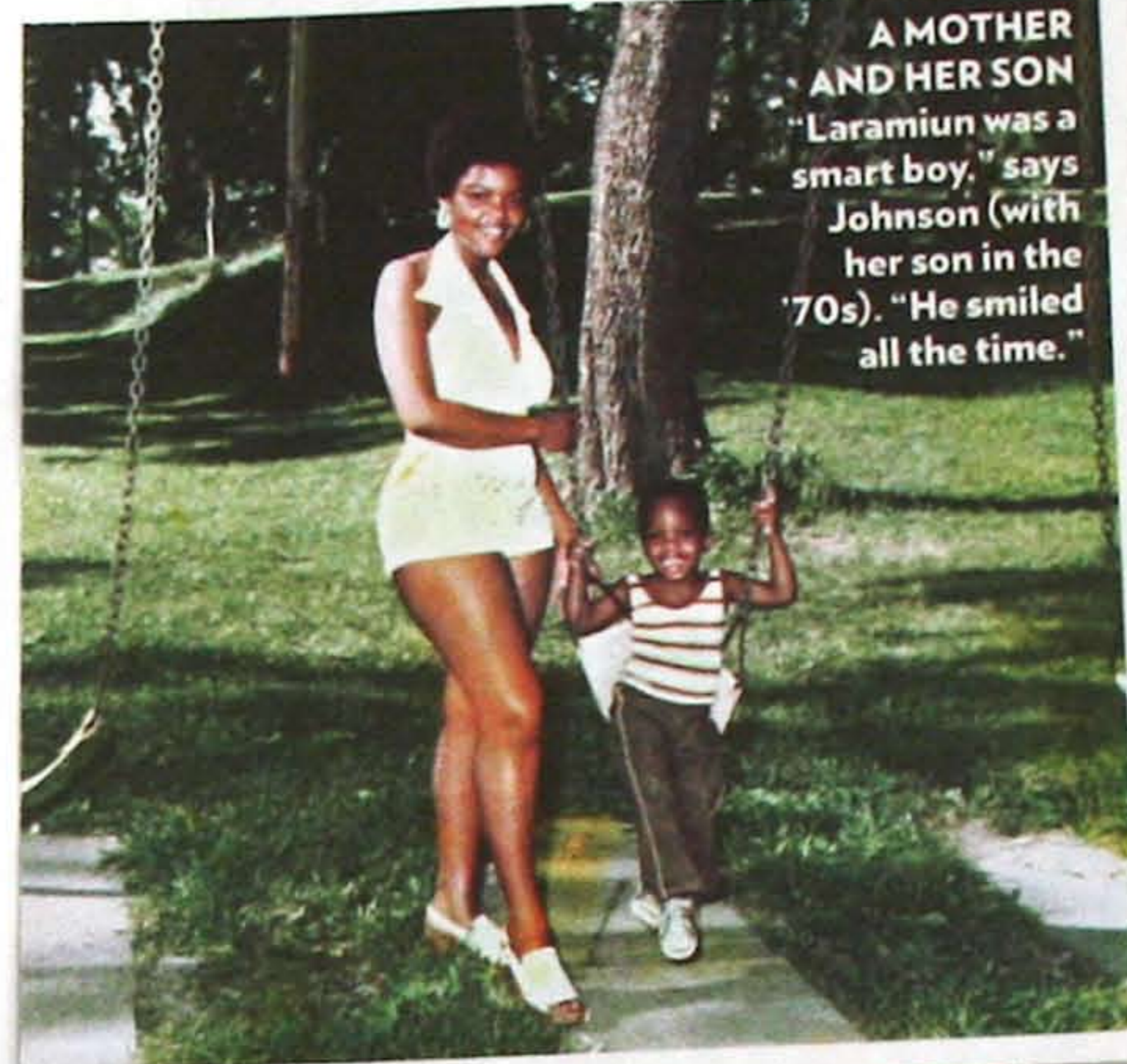


HOW I FORGAVE MY SON'S MURDERER

MARY JOHNSON, 59, Minneapolis

On Feb. 12, 1993, Oshea Israel, then 16, shot Mary Johnson's only son, Laramiun Byrd, 20, four times at a party in Minneapolis. While Israel was serving a 25-year sentence for the murder, Johnson, 59, contacted her son's killer after 10 years in hopes that she could move past her anger and forgive him. In time, she embraced him as her son. What follows is their remarkable story of healing and forgiveness.

Israel: I was 16 years old and we were at a late-night party at a home. I didn't know Laramiun and had never seen him before. But he was with his people and I was with mine. He made some threatening comments to a woman in my group. We argued, and neither one of us wanted to back down. So I pulled my gun. The thing that made it happen was the alcohol.



A MOTHER AND HER SON "Laramiun was a smart boy," says Johnson (with her son in the '70s). "He smiled all the time."

Johnson: My sister-in-law called and asked if I knew where Laramiun was. She'd heard he was dead and that his body was at the hospital. Laramiun was my only child. When he was a boy, I brought him to church every week dressed in a suit. But things changed when he became a teenager. He was expelled from school and began selling drugs.

Israel: I didn't think I'd be arrested, because there's a code: Keep your mouth closed. But a few days later, I was arrested. It felt like I was watching someone else.

Johnson: At the trial I hated Oshea. I thought he was an animal and he deserved to be caged. I was so angry when the judge charged him with second-degree murder, instead of first degree. I became a recluse and couldn't look at my son's photos.

Israel: When Mary first contacted me in 2003, I said no. I felt if she'd raised her son better, he would've behaved differently. But the next time she asked, I said yes. I'd changed and grown; I got my GED and stopped being in a gang. I had to be a man and communicate with his mother.

Johnson: After so many years I knew as a Christian woman I had to forgive

NEXT-DOOR NEIGHBORS "We meet up on the porch," says Israel, who lives next door to Johnson. "I check up on her."

"I NEEDED TO FORGIVE HIM, SO I COULD HELP OTHER MOTHERS IN PAIN" —MARY JOHNSON



him. I also wanted to know why he murdered my son. Before the visit I prayed and went on a 21-day fast. We talked for two hours, and I realized the similarities Oshea shared with my son. He wasn't a boy anymore; I was talking to a man now. I told him I forgave him and that "I let you go." It was over. As I was leaving, he asked to give me a hug. I cried and started to fall, but he held me up. I felt something move up my body—all of the hatred and bitterness left my body.

Israel: The meeting was amazing. I felt connected. A few months later we met again and talked about how much my life was like Laramiun's. We both liked sports and had dropped out of school.

Johnson: After I forgave Oshea, I started my nonprofit From Death to

Life (fromdeathtolife.us) to help others who lost children to violence. After 17 years in prison, Oshea was paroled in 2010. We now speak together in the community about forgiveness.

Israel: Mary and I live next door to each other now and see each other almost every day. She'll fuss if I don't call, and I take out her trash.

Johnson: Some people think I'm psychotic for doing this, but I view us as mother and son. I wear a locket—one side has a picture of me and Laramiun, the other side has Oshea. There's no act.

Israel: I see Mary as my other mom. I caused her pain, but we are loving each other through it.

By Margaret Nelson Brinkhaus and Lorenzo Benet

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