

'I HAD TO DO SOMETHING TO MAKE HER LIFE BETTER THAN MINE WAS'

YOUNG FATHER HAS TURNED HIS LIFE AROUND

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By *Justina Wang* –Staff Reporter



Octavio Donatlan is striving to be the best role model for his daughter Azjah.

The many twists and turns of Octavio Donatlan's short life come out in quiet and steady tones, between yawns that break up his sentences and inadvertent smiles that creep up his lips every time the conversation turns to his daughter.

At 19, he is both a statistic teachers use to illustrate the perils of becoming a teen parent, and a story of ambition and creating a better life.

Donatlan's father walked out of the house before he was five, leaving few lessons of discipline for him and his two younger brothers. By the time he was a freshman at West Aurora High School, he had a report card filled with D's and F's, several suspensions for fighting in school, and a truancy record for skipping class.

"I was pretty down on myself, because I didn't have a father, or he wasn't always around or there to teach me, and I used that as an excuse," Donatlan said.

One day toward the end of his ninth-grade year, he forgot his house keys and went over to a friend's place to see if he could stay inside until someone got home to unlock the doors. His friend was headed over to an after-school tutoring program at the Quad County Urban League and told Donatlan he could either go with him or wait outside.

Donatlan tagged along, and met then-Quad County Urban League Vice President Clayton Muhammad, who in one afternoon talked him into returning every week.

By his sophomore year, Donatlan had made a complete turnaround, brought home straight A's and told everyone he wanted to become a police officer. He joined Muhammad's Boys II Men Fraternity, an anti-gang organization, and met often with the group of teens who talked fervently about how to better their lives.

Things were finally on track for Donatlan during his junior year. And then his girlfriend gave him the news. She was pregnant.

Donatlan was 17 at the time. His girlfriend, Ashley Limas, was 16 - the same age as Donatlan's mother when she had him.

"I remember growing up, how hard it was for her," he said. "She told me how she wished she could have finished school, and if she could, she would change it. She had dreams, too."

Now staring at young parenthood himself, Donatlan worried if he would graduate, how he would pay for the expenses, what he would do now.

But the worst part was that he realized he knew better. They had talked so many times during the Boys II Men meeting about how they were going to keep their futures in line, how they weren't going to mess up, how they weren't going to be another statistic that came out of Aurora.

Ashamed and afraid, Donatlan sent Muhammad an awkward e-mail, separated himself from the Boys II Men and let his grades slip again.

"I was just, 'Oh my God, what's going to happen?'" he said.

But five months later, when he saw the first ultrasound of his daughter, something changed.

"I focused on it for a little bit, and I realized what was really happening," he said. "I decided I could go about this one way, or I could go about this another way."

That night, he phoned Muhammad and spoke for hours about the baby, his education, his life.

After the conversation, Donatlan went out and got two retail jobs at Premium Outlets Mall. The pay wasn't very high but if he took both jobs and worked 50 hours a week, he knew he could save up money for his new life.

The trick now was keeping his grades up at the same time. So he went to every class every day, worked from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, stayed until midnight on Fridays, and returned on the weekends from 7 a.m. until 12 a.m. He'd have to catch up on sleep later; he was too busy righting his wrongs.

His daughter, Azjah Onjolic Donatlan, was born on April 10, 2006, about a month before he graduated high school. By that time, he had cranked out a respectable report card with A's and B's, and made enough money to buy a car and hire a baby-sitter while he finished school.

That summer, shortly before he was going to take his police cadet test, Donatlan had another change of heart. He decided he would become a high school English teacher.

"When I first saw my daughter, I couldn't do nothing but cry - it was like she was a part of me. I can't even describe it; it's like a new type of love," he said. "I realized this one child can change my life so much, and I wondered how my life would change if I had a big group of kids."

He registered as a Waubensee Community College student just before the deadline and began taking a full load of classes this fall. He kept on retail job and picked up another delivering pizzas on the weekend.

This time, when he wasn't in class or working the 45-plus hours each week, he took care of his daughter.

"I have to do something to make her life better than mine was," he said.

Donatlan began his second semester at Waubensee last month, and said he's determined to bump up the B's on his report card. He knows he still has a long way to go before he straightens out his life.

But once he's there, he plans to straighten out some other lives.

"I want my grades to be the best they can be," he said. "There are not many male or Hispanic teachers. I feel like if a young student could have a (role model) there, then maybe something will be different.

"I know that there's always going to be kids who have kids, but I just want them to know that where there's a will there's a way."



Donatlan (l) and his mentor, Clayton Muhammad, share a special moment on the night Azjah was born.