

1 GVP 59 Alderman Cavalier Johnson

2 D: So, can you tell me a little about yourself? If you could begin with your name.

3 C: Sure, my name is Cavalier Johnson. I currently serve as Alderman of the second district in the  
4 City of Milwaukee. It is a position I have held since April of 2016. I was born and raised in  
5 Milwaukee. I went to Milwaukee public schools K-12. When I was growing up my parents had  
6 separated when I was three years old or so and had since been married to other folks, my step-  
7 parents, and I lived with my mom for the majority of my life and we moved around a lot, a lot.  
8 As I look at a map of the city it's sort of like a tale of who I am because whether it was the far  
9 Northwest side to 53206, I've lived in neighborhoods from post to post and in between, all over  
10 the place we moved around a lot, and as relates to schooling I went to, as I said MPS K-12, and  
11 been to schools as almost as far North in the city as you can get, and almost as far South in the  
12 city as you can get. I went to a number of elementary schools on the Northwest and South sides,  
13 went to middle school on the Northwest side, and ultimately graduated from Bay View High  
14 School on the South side and when I was a younger person I had the opportunity to be involved  
15 in a pre-college program called "Sponsor a Scholar," it was at the time with the YMCA  
16 metropolitan of Milwaukee but after the YMCA had its financial difficulties from a couple of  
17 years ago, the program shifted over to the Boys and Girls Club where it is today, and the  
18 program provided an opportunity for people like myself, low-income kids from Milwaukee  
19 Public Schools, to have the opportunity to have mentorship and a college scholarship. And it  
20 really pressed us to think about our future in those terms to be the first people in our family to go  
21 off to college and to come back and to give back to our community. The other part of that  
22 program was giving back, was public service, and although some of my peers didn't necessarily  
23 enjoy waking up on Saturdays to go to do the service projects that we did, I relished it. I fell in

24 love with it at 14 doing that, and so that's the first part of how I got to be sitting in this chair right  
25 now, was falling in love with service through the program at the YMCA. In that same year that I  
26 got involved with the program, 9/11 happened, and at 14 years old I knew that I had to know  
27 what was going on in my community, in my state, in my country, and then the world. So, I  
28 started watching national news and I saw President Bush go to the World Trade Center and just  
29 sort of bring people together and I just had this light bulb that went off in my head that you know  
30 I could continue on delivering service to people that I really enjoyed. Government could be the  
31 vehicle in which I do it. I can come into work, have a career everyday where I got up and help  
32 people and serve people and that's ultimately how we got here. I am married, my beautiful wife  
33 is named Dominique and we've been married since 2016 as well. We have a 9-year-old son. His  
34 name is Oliver. And we have twin daughters that are just under 2. They'll be 2 in March of 2020,  
35 and their names are Madison and Bella.

36 D: Oh, that's beautiful. How old are you?

37 C: I'm 33 years old, I just turned 33 earlier this month.

38 D: (laughs) And Happy belated birthday!

39 C: Thank you.

40 D: And what race and gender are you?

41 C: I'm an African American male.

42 D: Okay, and you described the neighborhoods that you've lived in, what area do you live in  
43 now?

44 C: I live on the North-West side of Milwaukee in the Capitol Heights neighborhood, near  
45 Midtown Center.

46 D: Okay, and how long have you lived there?

47 C: Since 2016.

48 D: Okay, can you share with us your story or experience with gun violence?

49 C: Absolutely, so, I guess I should probably sort of back up and tell you, outside of the  
50 experience that has been more noteworthy since I have been an elected official, some of the other  
51 experiences that I've seen or had in my time here, and that I remember when I was a younger  
52 person, a kid, and I started traveling around. I started getting out of the city. You could sort of  
53 tell the difference, I mean even now if you take a drive at night and you, choose a suburb, choose  
54 a direction to go, and things get quiet the farther out you travel, but when you come into the city  
55 it's just beaming, not just with lights, but with life and with activity, and sometimes for too many  
56 kids, and I was one of these kids too, that energy is sometimes negative energy, and a lot of times  
57 there are kids in cities like ours, not just here but across the country, that are lulled to sleep by  
58 the sound of gun violence, they don't even think to call the police, or parents don't even think to  
59 pick up the phone and say, "Hey somebody's shooting rounds off in my neighborhood,  
60 somebody may have gotten shot and wounded or killed in my neighborhood", and so that's  
61 something that I've dealt with my entire life. And I remember when I was in college, at UW  
62 Madison and I would come back every weekend or so and I mean I'm a college kid so I'm at  
63 home, I'm staying up late one weekend and I just hear this barrage of bullets just, just going off  
64 and I'm in the living room of where I'm living at the time, this is in 53206, and I look out the  
65 window and I see somebody across the street just unloading, just unloading. I think he shot up, it  
66 was close to ten rounds that were, that were just let go. What or who he was shooting at I don't  
67 know, but I was right there. Another incident that happened, you know again, I was a kid that or  
68 a person that grew up being lulled to sleep by the sound of gunfire so it was sort of secondhand,  
69 not something that you really thought about. Just were glad that it was in the distance and that it

70 was not close to you, or not that close to you, that nobody was aiming at you when they were  
71 shooting off those rounds. And because of that I never really hit the floor, you know? I just  
72 didn't do it because the sound was just so familiar. And I remember one time in particular, I was  
73 home, and I was showering, and I heard the shots ring out and these were, for me, I'm probably  
74 in my twenties at the time, early twenties. The loudest shots. The closest shots that I had ever  
75 heard, that I have ever heard, and to the point that I had actually hit the floor in the, you know, in  
76 the shower it was just like "Wow, that's just really close!" And then as I rush to get out, come to  
77 find out that my cousin who was sitting on the porch at the time was mistaken for somebody  
78 else.

79 D: Oh no.

80 C: And, and he was shot, not once, not twice, not three times, he was shot 5 times, right on the  
81 porch of the house that I lived in at the time. So, that's something that I've seen and dealt with  
82 and over the time we've continued to have issues where we hear those sounds. And I've tried to  
83 be vigilant with calling that information in and encouraging my constituents to do the same, but  
84 it's still an issue, it's still an issue. Fast forward to the time that I had the opportunity to work in  
85 the Mayor's office before I got elected here myself. Mayor Barrett and I had worked together to,  
86 along with the Office of Violence Prevention, to sponsor a gun buyback, which we did a couple  
87 years ago. We were able to take a couple hundred guns off the streets, which I think is a good  
88 thing. Especially considering the environment in which we live, and so we worked to combat  
89 those things that way. Fast forwarding to this year in August I was home, the common council is  
90 on a recess in August, and it provides me an opportunity to not be so busy here and provide my  
91 wife some much needed relief cause I said we've got three kids under ten. So, I'm at home  
92 letting her do her thing and I'm at the house with all three kids and fortunately my daughters

93 were down for their nap but my son who had just celebrated his birthday, just got a brand new  
94 bike, was in his bedroom and he was playing with his Kindle that he had also gotten for his  
95 birthday, and somebody, for whatever reason, came up to my property and fired shots. And these  
96 shots again, they were so close, they just sounded so near to, not just me and my home, but my  
97 kids, my three little children, and, and it was scary, you know? My son came from his room and  
98 he was afraid and he started to cry, and he hit the floor because, because somebody decided to  
99 act irresponsibly, somebody who should not have had a gun, I mean, quite frankly, should not  
100 have had a gun, had access to one and pulled shots on my property. I don't know who or what  
101 this person was, was firing at but I would be surprised if one of the bullets did not hit the house  
102 just across the alley from me. One of the, one of the bullets did hit my personal vehicle to which  
103 I'm still driving around, as sort of a reminder about the issues that we face with gun violence in  
104 Milwaukee. And my son, my poor kid, he, as I said he had just gotten a bike, but then he felt  
105 unsafe to go outside riding his, his bike, he's not even 10 years old and somebody robbed my  
106 kid, and so many other kids. You know my son was just scared, but there are kids who are dead  
107 right now. Somebody decided to pull a trigger irresponsibly and robbed my son of the idea that  
108 he is supposed to be safe, in his own neighborhood. That he is supposed to be safe in his own  
109 home, and that's not right, it's not fair and even before this incident happened to me, I, look, I of  
110 course don't like for people who should not have guns to have possession of them, because they  
111 do irresponsible and dangerous things that threaten lives, like what happened at my house. So, I  
112 have been fighting on these things since before this, right? Since it did happen, I have been  
113 trying to reach out to members of the legislature in order to get their attention to this, but I've not  
114 been met with, I've not been met any response really. After the incident happened, I did a press  
115 conference here at City Hall, it was widely covered by every media outlet in Milwaukee, media

116 outlets that I'm sure reach to Rochester, Burlington, wherever Robin Vos is from, and reach over  
117 to Juneau, where Scott Fitzgerald, the Senate majority leader is, is from, and there was nothing.  
118 I'm an elected official in Wisconsin's largest city. There was no outreach. Not from them, not  
119 from their staff, nothing. I released an op-ed in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, it was carried by  
120 other in print outlets in Milwaukee as well. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel is the state's largest  
121 newspaper. If you don't get a physical copy in your office you're probably looking at it online.

122 D: Right.

123 C: And still, there was nothing from the speaker of the assembly, or the senate majority leader, or  
124 anybody in majority in the legislature on this issue of gun violence in Wisconsin. I released an  
125 op-ed in the Madison area papers, the Capital Times, more specifically, which I would assume in  
126 the capital they probably get a physical copy, or probably read that online too. There was  
127 nothing. There was no outreach. Not from them, not from their staff, not from anybody in the  
128 majority on this issue of gun violence in Wisconsin. I sent a letter to Speaker Vos, I sent a letter  
129 to Senator Fitzgerald about the incident that happened. There was nothing. There was no  
130 response, there was no write back about the issue of gun violence that we have in Wisconsin. By  
131 the time I sent the letter, a member of the State Government, a correctional Sargent I believe, at  
132 the Milwaukee Secure Detention Facility, a DOC employee, who was teaching her son to drive  
133 and got into a minor car accident, she was hit. Another person who should not have had access to  
134 a gun, was irresponsible, took her life, a state employee, and I have yet to hear anything from  
135 them on that, when their own employee was killed by reckless gun violence. The Governor,  
136 Governor Evers, which, you know, I'm very pleased that he did this, called a special session on  
137 guns just recently and it was kind of interesting because during the, the, the, time frame here,  
138 they had an almost exhaustive conversation about the naming of the tree in the capitol rotunda,

139 but they devoted all of 30 seconds, if that, to the issue of gun violence in Wisconsin. They  
140 essentially gaveled in and gaveled out without even taking up the issue, even though 80% of  
141 people in this state believe that there should be more restrictions on access to guns. That's not an  
142 urban thing or a suburban thing or a rural thing, people around the state are being affected by  
143 this. Whether you live in a city like Milwaukee or Racine or some others around the state, and,  
144 and people are using guns to mow down others, or if you live in a rural area and you're a farmer  
145 that's suffering the consequences of the trade war and you're your peers are closing up, or you're  
146 facing foreclosure or having to close your farm that may have been in your family for  
147 generations yourself, you may think about inflicting a deadly gunshot wound to yourself. You  
148 may think about committing suicide, this is an issue that effects all corners of Wisconsin and  
149 they devoted no time to it, even though the clear and vast majority of people in the state request  
150 them to do so. So, they gaveled out, and when Governor Evers declared that and they gaveled out  
151 of session, almost right away, I saw the writing on the wall, I knew they that would behave the  
152 same way that they did because of the responses they'd, that they'd given me, an elected official.

153 D: (laughs)

154 C: So, I released a statement on that, on their behavior during the special session on guns, I also  
155 attached to that statement that was made public, the letter that I had sent to both Speaker Vos and  
156 Senator Fitzgerald, and we're almost at a week since then, almost two weeks from the special  
157 session, and again, there has been no response, no outreach from Speaker Vos, from Senator  
158 Fitzgerald, or from their staff. So this, so this is where we are, we, we are in a position where the  
159 City of Milwaukee is unable to control gun law because it's a matter of the state, and other  
160 communities as well are not able to control gun law because it's a matter of the state, and the  
161 leadership in the state government right now refuses to act on the will of the, again the clear and

162 vast majority of voters in this state. Folks might ask why that is, well, when you look at the way  
163 our legislative maps are drawn, the advantage for Republicans, is so deep, it's so deep, that  
164 people like the Speaker of the Assembly and the Senate Majority Leader, they don't have a care  
165 in the world, other than somebody more extreme, more right wing running against them in a  
166 primary. That's the only political consequence that they're worried about, I mean just look at  
167 some of the more recent elections here, Democrats in some elections have won the state of  
168 Wisconsin, overwhelmingly, sometimes with over 200,000 more votes than members of the  
169 Republican party in the assembly, yet Republicans continued to hold deep majorities in both  
170 houses. Just look at the 2018 election itself, every statewide constitutional office was won by  
171 Democrats yet, Republicans continued to hold majorities in both houses of the legislature. That's  
172 not democracy, that's not fair, they've gerrymandered the maps that they so that they have these  
173 unfair advantages and it's been that way since the last census in 2010.

174 D: But even if we all voted to, against the encumbrance would that override the gerrymandering?

175 C: Well if Democrats, if Democrats were able to have the majority or, if Democrats were given a  
176 fair shot, then we could see some different actions but, the way that it is right now, if every  
177 Democrat, it, it's likely that if every Democrat showed up and cast their ballot, Republicans  
178 would still win, they would still have the majority because they've drawn the maps so, that no  
179 matter what, they will be in power. It's a rigged system, and it doesn't have to be that way, and  
180 by the way, look, I'm fair in my assessment of this, okay? I think that it is wrong when  
181 Wisconsin Republicans draw these maps, they give them an unfair political advantage, because  
182 then the sensical, middle of the road, common sense, candidates for office who are more attuned  
183 to the desires of regular voters across the state, they can't even break through. They can't even  
184 do it. So, when Republicans in Wisconsin do it, gerrymandering that is, it's wrong, it's unfair



185 and it's wrong, and when Democrats in New Jersey or in Maryland do it, well guess what,  
186 they're wrong too, they are wrong too. It's supposed to be that the electorate voters are able to  
187 select their own representatives, not the other way around, but that's, that's what is has been, and  
188 that's unfortunately what it continues to be, and we suffer the results of that. There are so many  
189 other issues beyond just guns even, that's a very, very important issue but there are so many  
190 other issues in this state that we are not able to address because the majority in the legislature  
191 right now chooses not, not to even acknowledge them, not to even touch them. They've decided  
192 to use their legislative powers and be bullies, and the consequence is that, as it relates to guns,  
193 people are dying. You know there are kids like my son that know what's going on, my kid's  
194 smart, without me even prompting like, he'll watch the news himself, he sees what's going on,  
195 right? He understands what's happening. And there are kids in this state that know that instead of  
196 members of the legislature putting 100 million dollars towards hardening schools as targets, and  
197 forcing our kids to partake in code red drills, to prepare for an active shooter, they know that  
198 these same adults that are doing these things, they could be doing more to protect them and  
199 they're not doing it, and they're not. These kids understand that.

200 D: So, what can we do to change this?

201 C: What I requested my constituents to do to change this is not just reach out to their elected  
202 officials at the state, because if you live in the city of Milwaukee, you know a lot of times, your  
203 elected officials are understanding and side with you on these issues anyway, right? And I know  
204 that's certainly true for my personal elected officials in the legislature, representative of David  
205 Crowley, State Senator LaTonya Johnson, they get it, right? They understand, and the others do  
206 as well that represent Milwaukee too, to a large degree. What I've tried to encourage my  
207 constituents to do is not only to reach out to your state, their own state elected officials, but also

208 to send your complaints, and your phone calls, your letters, your messages on social media, send  
209 those also to Robin Vos. Send them as well to Scott Fitzgerald, because it's, at the end of the day  
210 those are the guys that are calling the shots in the legislature, and it's too bad that for my  
211 constituents, their voices get drowned out in this because those guys are in a cocoon. They're in  
212 a cocoon where they really can't be reached, so we have to start trying to chip away the, at the  
213 cocoon. That's why I encourage my constituents to call them because they expect us to deliver  
214 service, and I want to deliver those services, but there are some things that we cannot do without  
215 permission or intervention from the state, that's the way that it is, but it's hard for us to get that  
216 message across when people who need to hear it have plugs in their ears. So, again my request to  
217 my constituents has been look, you see me, and I know you're going to complain to me about  
218 certain issues in the neighborhoods, including gun violence, that's fine, I'm willing to take them,  
219 I'm powerless, I'll do what I can, and I've been doing what I can on that, but send those  
220 complaints upward and not just to your own elected at the state but send them as well to the, to  
221 the people who are in the majority.

222 D: Is there anything you'd like to add?

223 C: Only just that, I just, it doesn't need to be this way, it really doesn't. This, this city and the  
224 state overall could be a much better place, it really, really could be. But the direction that the, the  
225 majority is taking us in, I feel like it's a benefit to a very small and selective sliver of people or  
226 groups and not what's best for the overall populous of, not just this city, but this entire state and I  
227 wish that, on issues like this, and others, that they would sort of get out of their own way,  
228 because Milwaukee as it is, and I'm sure will continue to be for a long time, is, is Wisconsin's  
229 cash cow. Milwaukee helps to fund the rest of the state, we are an exporter of tax dollars to the  
230 state, we're not the burden, we're the supplier of, of funds that help this state go, we're the

231 economic engine, we're the, we're the heart, we're the, we're where the economics are, we're  
232 where the population center is, we're where the diversity is, and the more the state allows us to  
233 grow and thrive, then that's, that's better for the state. That means we can be those things but we  
234 can be better at being those things, whether it's, as it relates to economics, population, diversity,  
235 all those things bring value to Wisconsin and if the state were to just allow us to continue to  
236 focus on those things without putting up these barriers that stop our ability to do so, that stop our  
237 ability to be safer, that stop our ability to fund the services that we need to fund for our  
238 constituents and our visitors, Milwaukee and therefore Wisconsin would be in a much better  
239 place, but it takes the leadership in Madison to recognize that, and to, and to get out of the, and to  
240 get out of the, get out of the way on that. It's kind of disheartening when you look around to  
241 other large cities in America and how they are treated versus how we're treated. Robin Vos was  
242 talking about the residency rule that Milwaukee had instituted for 75 years, that compelled  
243 employees of the city to actually, to live in the city, which is a good thing, it's a good thing  
244 because that means that know the, the people who are providing for your middle class lifestyle,  
245 the people who are paying you a decent salary, the people that are allowing you to buy a house,  
246 the people that make sure you have great benefits, they get better bang for their buck when you  
247 buy your house in the same neighborhoods, in the same community as they live, because then  
248 you helped to stabilize those neighborhoods, you become a stabilizing force. Robin Vos was  
249 saying, "Oh, you know with the residency rule gone, now Milwaukee is able to choose from the  
250 best and the brightest", as if they weren't here or weren't willing to come here for these jobs  
251 anyway, they were! They continue to be, even for positions in law enforcement, and I know  
252 they're the ones that really pressed for the residency rule to be, to be dropped.

253 D: It shouldn't have been.

254 C: It should not have been and we never had an issue. There were still waitlists, waitlists for  
255 people to come and do those jobs in this city. Even with the residency rule in place, okay? So,  
256 Robin Vos had said, "Oh, Milwaukee's got to get out of its old way of thinking, well and allow  
257 for people to allow for a bigger pool." Well one, we didn't need it and two, and talk about an old  
258 way of thinking. I mean, look at how states across the country treat the largest city? Our issues,  
259 whether it be gun violence or any other things are different and unique they're not how in, far up  
260 north or up west and they need to be treated differently, they need to be treated as such. So,  
261 counter and say, that the legislature is the one that is taking us back to an old way of thinking,  
262 you got to allow your large town to be more flexible, more nimble, and I sort of think about it in  
263 these terms as well, it's like, as I said I got three kids, a 9 year old and two one year olds' and I  
264 don't treat my 9 year old, I don't treat my big kid like I treat my babies.

265 D: Of course not.

266 C: Like I treat my smallest children. But Wisconsin is the parent and that's what they're doing  
267 here, they're treating Milwaukee, the adolescent, the big kid in the room, they're treating it like  
268 the baby, like the little kid but you, you can't do that, you shouldn't do that, you know? And I  
269 just wish that they would recognize that, on gun violence and so many other issues.

270 D: Thank you.

271 C: Yeah, absolutely, thank you.