

NAIFA's

advisor Today

Creative strategies and business advice for insurance and financial advisors

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Four Under Forty



Ronco Johnson



Anna Marie Downs

In our search for successful NAIFA members under 40, we discovered these four advisors whose dedication to serving their clients has enriched their personal and professional lives.

Congratulations



Robert Hendrickson



David Simkowitz

When the Lights Go Out

After 'flatlining' at 38, Ronco Johnson's goal is to lead a life of significance.

Ronco Johnson was once a dead man. Back in October, he was rushed to the hospital with tachycardia—an out-of-control heartbeat often brought on by heart defects, an overactive thyroid, or in Johnson's case, stress. "To make a long story short, they had to reset my heart," he says. "Basically, I flatlined on October 4 at 5:45 at 38 years old," the father of one recalls.

It was an experience that Johnson, the president of L.R. Johnson and Associates in Cartersville, Georgia, calls a "lights out moment," and it's what he's spent the last 15 years preparing others for.

Born in Cartersville and raised in Marietta, Johnson comes from a working-class family—"humble beginnings," he says. A promising athlete, he played NCAA basketball for Georgia Southern University for a year before transferring to a college in Nebraska, where he earned a degree in radio and television broadcasting.

He later transferred back to Georgia to play basketball for Kennesaw State University and earn a mass communications degree. When he graduated, he was recruited to play professional basketball overseas, but he never got the chance to collect his first check—during one of his last college games, he ruptured his patella tendon while doing a layup.

"That left me a few hours from amputation from my right knee down," Johnson remembers. At 23 years old and with life quickly going in another direction, he had to make a career choice.

With his education to fall back on, Johnson took a job as a marketing coordinator at an Atlanta radio station. He describes the job as "carrying crates for radio personalities." But people soon noticed his low, smooth-as-silk voice, and after just two or three years he had become the voice of jazz radio in Atlanta.

He mingled often with entertainers and athletes, but "those folks were making real money and I was making radio money," he laughs. "Radio money means that you can get in any club you wanted to—you just didn't get the check to support where you were going and who you were hanging out with."

So when an insurance agency happened to try to recruit Johnson's wife one day, the light bulb went on. "I thought about the idea that my voice has always been a talent, but I do have a brain," he recounts. "I figured that I had a lot of friends who were making not-so-wise choices with their money." If the insurance business didn't work out, he reasoned, he could always go back to radio.

Johnson became an agent with New York Life. He spent the next nine years learning the business but he had a goal, carried from childhood, of "owning his own way." So on April 26, 2009, L.R. Johnson and Associates, a full-service insurance and financial-services consulting firm that specializes in minimizing taxes for athletes, entertainers, business owners, and affluent individuals, was born. Thankfully, he had insurance. He borrowed \$50,000 from a policy to get started.

The road to success

Johnson first used some of the money to hire a business coach, who helped him change his perspective. "I looked at myself differently; I looked at myself as a business owner, not as an insurance salesman," he says. Within his first year of business, Johnson had paid back the loan and made MDRT. The next year, he made Top of the Table.

It wasn't easy, though. "One of the biggest sacrifices of being a Top of the Table agent or being in the top 4 under 40, at least for me and my story, my testimony, is the fact that I worked 20-hour days. That means I've sacrificed time with my spouse, taken away time from my child. Anything and everything I talked about was this industry," he says.

Johnson's time in radio and sports may seem irrelevant at first, but it proved extremely valuable. "I think I was very blessed to identify what my niche market was very early," he explains. "Being that I was a former athlete, I understand how they think; a former entertainer, I understand how they think; and now a business owner, I understand how business owners think."

"I think everyone knows that the upper 85 percent of athletes who play at a professional





level go broke within five to seven years of the end of their career,” he notes, adding that youth and financial illiteracy are huge factors for those clients. “From a very young age, there are a lot of trust issues that you have. People want to get next to you for the obvious reasons. But when you’re 21, 22, 23 years old and you come into a large sum of money—we know retirees and successful businesspeople who don’t understand taxes. Whether you make \$100 or \$100 million, you show me a rich person, I’ll show you a rich person’s tax problem.”

The importance of NAIFA

Johnson, who is president of NAIFA-Cartersville, says NAIFA helped him succeed. “Being a member of NAIFA is important simply because as a young agent, we don’t always understand the behind-the-scenes of what makes our industry so important,” he notes. “But when you start dealing with rules and regulations at a higher level as it pertains to Congress and legislative reports and stuff like that, you know you want to be a part of it.”

“Our group is an interesting group of professionals,” he says about his chapter. “A lot of them have been in the business many more years than I’ve been alive. It makes for having some expertise and some legacy behind how they do their business practices. And that makes it interesting when you get a chance to talk to them and you try to implement some of the things that have been successful for them and discard the things that don’t work so well.”

Johnson has undoubtedly built a thriving business over the past 15 years, but his definition of success has changed since the day his heart stopped. “If we had had this conversation about seven, eight months ago,” he says, “I’d have given you a different answer. I would’ve said it was a matter of just being hardworking, 20-hour days, so and so and so and so. It was the trips and the monetary rewards, but today it’s not about that. It’s about understanding that when the lights go out, I was ready.” It’s one of the reasons Johnson

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wrote his forthcoming book with a similar title: *When the Lights Go Out, Are You Ready?*

“That’s what I love about the industry,” he continues. “I don’t want to work with everyone. It doesn’t have to be an athlete or an entertainer, but we have to have something in common. I understand that it’s OK not to take every phone call. For those who don’t understand, I take a moment to explain to them: On October 4, I passed away. Anything that happened after that wasn’t going to be taken care of by me if it had happened. I realized that you can take things a little more slowly. You can give people more of your time. You can enjoy life.”

Now at the peak of his career, Johnson is looking ahead. “Eventually, you give it away,” he says, referring to the Ronco Johnson Foundation for Financial Literacy, which he founded in 2009. “People who are starving for help are getting answers. And when they get answers, they act. And when they act, they respond. And once they come out of their situations, they become advocates, and that’s where the rubber hits the road for us.”

“My goal at one time was much different; it was to be successful. I’ve been successful. Today, it’s a little different,” he says.

“My goal is not to be successful; my goal is to be significant.” □

