



**BY DEBRA
WALLACE FORMAN**

HOW FORMER NFL RUNNING BACK GEORGE D. JONES NAVIGATES LIFE WITH HIS TEENAGE SON WHO HAS AUTISM

Former NFL running back George D. Jones has faced a myriad of challenges in his life—a rough childhood filled with poverty, abuse, angst, and homelessness—and one that was missing the one aspect of his life that he yearned for: a father.

Growing up in Greenville, South Carolina, not only did Jones never meet his dad, he also never knew anyone from his paternal side of the family, and as a young boy, he and his mom lived in poverty, with his mother frequently unable to pay the electric bill.

Moving to the projects at age 11, life became even more perilous when he was exposed to street fights, drugs, crime, and more strife.

That was until, in what sounds like a made-for-TV movie, Jones met a boy who also loved playing football, and the boy's dad, Monnie Broome, and the boy's mom, Jackie, took him under their wing and transformed his life in countless ways. All of this led to Jones attending college and going on to play professional football.

Today, Jones, of Austin, Texas, is the nurturing father of three sons: George Jr., (16), Max, 14, (who has autism and Down syndrome), and Cooper, 11.

Not only is he a hands-on stay-at-home father, but he is also the epitome of *The Present Dad*, and he happily celebrates

his wife of 18 years, Katie, whom he calls “his rock” for supporting all of his endeavors, including staying home with their three boys and providing them with a positive paternal role model.

In fact, he is so committed to making sure that boys everywhere have a father, or father figure, as a positive role model in their lives that he established **The Present Dad Foundation**, a nonprofit to spread his important message based on his many life lessons from parenting.

He also wrote *The Present Dad*, a book released on Father's Day 2022, to help others with his inspiring life story of poverty and homelessness to a successful NFL career, a fulfilling family life, and making motivational speeches to students of all ages and other distinguished audiences.

Jones was also recently honored with two fatherhood awards at the International Fatherhood Conference held at the Pro Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio.

He has an overall message for parents and caregivers of children, teens, and adults with autism or other special needs. “You will have hard days, but you are not alone,” Jones said. “Give yourself a lot of grace. Take time for yourself, and don't feel guilty about it. Your child is unique, and you know your child the best!”

Read on for Jones' take on handling the roller coaster of life as an autism and special needs dad and how his experience can help others with their journey.

What are the joys and challenges for Max, your 14-year-old son with autism?

Max has the ability to light up a room wherever he goes. I find joy in watching others react to him. The impact he has had on me as a father, to make me a better father and, quite frankly, a better human being, is the greatest gift I could have been given. It took me a long time to grasp that. I really only saw the challenges when Max was born and diagnosed at birth with Down syndrome.

As he got older, we saw signs of autism, and all I could see were obstacles. There are challenges, and there are hard days. There are days when Max struggles in a restaurant or someone says “hi” and he screams at them in response. We have learned to adapt. He has taught us, as a family, to get over our insecurities and how to be in service of others, but most importantly, how to be in service to Max.

When you and your wife become overwhelmed with the challenges, what do you do to stay calm? Do you and your wife, Katie, have different techniques for dealing with Max?

Katie and I recognize there are limits



and when we need to “tap out” if we can. When Katie gets home from work, she will usually jump in, and I can take a breather. If we are both home, we are tag-teaming bathroom time and playtime.

If we are frustrated with Max, one taps out. Katie's strategy is laughter, cuddles, and playing while I am firmer. Sometimes Max responds better to Katie, and sometimes it is me, and sometimes it is neither one of us, and he just needs us to walk away and he needs to self-regulate.

How do you respond when you encounter naysayers at your son's school or in your community?

Everyone has their own opinion, but we know our son the best. We have a team of people with whom we trust their expert opinions, and we have met “experts” that we didn't. Katie would say she struggles the most with this, and it is when we are in public and people make comments if Max starts to yell or has an emotional reaction. We used to get up and leave, but now, more often than not, strangers around us rally support for our family. It is the most amazing thing. We are seeing more and more people normalize Max's behaviors.

How is being a Present Dad different when it comes to each of your three sons?

Each of our three sons is very different, and we parent them differently. Our oldest is a hard-core introvert and an

empath. He feels everything. So, we are very thoughtful about our word choices, tone, and how we approach challenging conversations. With Max, we are routine-based and structured. Max's verbal skills are fairly limited, so we are constantly observing his cues. Our youngest is direct and easy-going. So, we can be straight to the point with him. It is quite amazing how the same two people can create three totally different human beings.

What was the most helpful when it came to advice or techniques for dealing with your son's quirks or problems over the years?

We may have to try different techniques until you find what works for Max, and don't give up. Stick to the routine.

What are your hopes and dreams for Max?

We want Max to be happy and to be with his family. Our biggest joy is when we see Max's face light up. He is just starting to show interest in cooking. So, we will see where that goes. We are hopeful he can find his niche and contribute to society.

What have you learned from Max?

Max has taught me patience, and I didn't know anything about special needs before Max was born. I have learned a lot about fighting for your kids and making sure they are seen. Your My other boys, George Jr and Cooper are amazing

brothers! They are patient (most of the time) and very helpful. Max is all about being with his brothers. I think being brothers to Max has taught them a level of kindness that is very special. Our oldest son is friends with a boy who has Down syndrome, and they Facetime. They have a level of acceptance and understanding because they love Max.

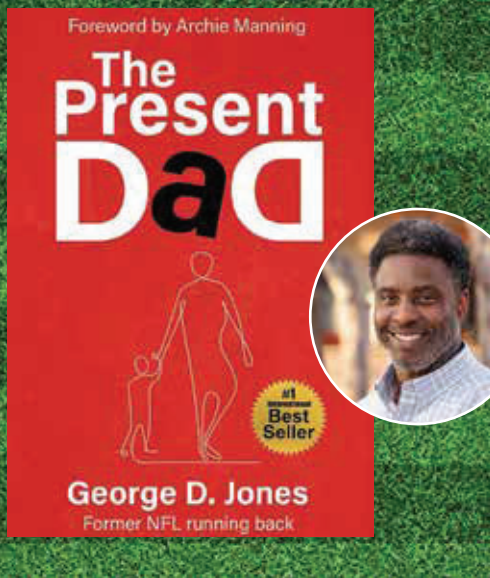
What kind of fathers do you hope your boys will grow up to be after following in your footsteps?

I hope they will be present and hands-on. They will be kind, patient, loving, and engaged, and they will be able to demonstrate a healthy relationship with their wives.

Talk about your special needs parenting journey.

Someone once said, “I would have loved to see you with a daughter.” But Max opened my heart in ways I never thought possible. He is the reason my wife and I cried together for the first time. We have had to stand side by side and fight the school together. He has made me appreciate the innocence of life. He has tried every strand of patience in my being; and he has brought the deepest laugh from my belly. I have seen Max do things we never thought possible. He is nothing other than a gift. This is a journey I never saw coming, but I am sure grateful that I am on it.

Continued on page 26



What is a Present Dad?

A Present Dad is somebody who is not just there in the physical sense, but he is also there for the emotional, spiritual, and mental aspects of every part of the child's life. Just being home is not enough if you have no idea what your child is doing in school or in sports. You must be present for everything the child is taking on and guide them in the best way possible.

Please tell me about The Present Dad Foundation.

I started this nonprofit in 2022 with a solid purpose. There is a curriculum, and there are seven pillars to try to help dads be more involved with their kids and become better, more engaged fathers.

I think for a dad, or a mother who is assuming the role of a dad, there are things they could be doing with their kids. I know the void of missing a parent growing up; kids today share that void with me when I speak in their classrooms, and I hope we can begin to change that.

Why do you encourage my readers to check out your Present Dad website and your book? What do you hope they will gain from them?

I grew up without a dad, and in my formative years, I didn't have any good role models. Most of my parenting, I learned once the boys were born from mentors. I am hopeful people can read *The Present Dad* and embrace fatherhood differently. It is not enough to be in the house; as a dad, you have to be truly present. Every child deserves that.

Have you spoken to other fathers and parents of special-needs children and adults? If so, what have you been able to share with them, and what have you gained from their experience?

I have. Most of the time, I validate the challenges and share that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. I think parenting special needs children can feel isolating, and it feels good to have someone to talk to and just share stories. I just try to encourage parents. If it is about the school system, I encourage them to advocate for what they want.

What life lessons do you have to share from fatherhood? From the NFL? From any other aspect of your life?

I made a lot of mistakes early on, and that shaped the father I am today. My biggest lesson was learning to ask for help. I was really struggling as a father, and once I asked other dads for help and learned from them, I became a better dad, and my relationship with all my boys and my wife became a thousand times better.

7 Top Tips from George D. Jones -- The Present Dad

1. Never be afraid to advocate for your child. We trusted who we believed were the "experts" in the beginning. We had a speech therapist start services with Max and told us the organization she worked for had done us a disservice and asked us why we hadn't been asking for more hours. We didn't know if we should or could. We trusted the process. Do your own research, talk to other parents, and remember that you are the expert on your child.

2. Celebrate achievements—the big ones and the small ones—theirs and yours. Achieving milestones is amazing, but sometimes we need to celebrate. We made it through that meltdown, we did a family outing, and sometimes we make a big deal out of something Max has done a million times. Don't forget to celebrate you; parenting a child with disabilities is hard! Celebrate you!

3. Seek support from others. Don't be afraid to ask for help in your communities, online, in support groups, or by talking to other parents. No one's situation is like yours, but talking to someone who is going through similar challenges and can listen was really helpful.

4. Build a routine. This was hard for us, as we are not routine people, and we fought hard on this. Once we adhered to a routine, Max's noncompliance really decreased. Total game-changer for our family.

5. Spend time alone with your children who do not have disabilities. Max needs a lot of our attention. We make sure to schedule outings and time with our other two children, GJ and Cooper, without Max. The first time we did it, we were shocked at how much we were missing during family time. We have also found that GJ and Cooper's patience and understanding increased when they spent focused time with Mom and Dad.

6. Remember to practice Self-care. Taking time for yourself or time together with your spouse is really important. You need to be able to reset.

7. Never forget that you and your child are brave, strong, and a team. This journey has its ups and downs. We face adversity and life's greatest joys. Max and I are learning together. He pushes me, and I push him. I thought I couldn't be a good father to a son with disabilities, but Max proved me wrong. I am a great father. He is an amazing son! ■

For more information, contact George D. Jones at: info@thepresentdad.org



Debra Wallace Forman is an award-winning journalist, editor, publicist, and the proud mother of a 17-year-old son with autism who has

taught her patience, kindness, acceptance, and inclusivity. Together, she and her son are helping to improve the world.