

# 'Family Affair' child star Johnny Whitaker survived drug and alcohol abuse, now helping others

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*Johnny Whitaker is seen in this headshot*

Johnny Whitaker played Jody, the freckle-faced, adorable orphan on the sweet sitcom "Family Affair," which ran from 1966-1971. Unfortunately, Whitaker struggled as an adult with drugs and alcohol, but has been clean for close to two decades. The 56-year-old sometime actor has a new passion - helping prisoners and prison reform.

**FOX411:** Tell us about your work with prisons.

**Johnny Whitaker:** I'm doing a documentary on the Portuguese drug policy. Portugal has taken the drug problem out of the Ministry of Justice and put it where I believe it belongs, in the Ministry of Health. So a year ago I was working at the California State Prison Lancaster as a counselor helping inmates, we call students, return to real life and prepare them for that. We were in the prison doing that and seeing the way in which our prisons treat inmates and the way the United States prison industrial complex works which is inhumane and unfair, unprecedented throughout the world. I believe we need to talk at other successful drug deterrent programs, other than throwing people in jail for a mental health problem.

I've met some decent people that worked there (in the prisons), but most of them aren't, and the biggest thing that just broke my heart is when the students said, 'You guys are the first people in 10 years to treat me like a human being. Everybody else treats me like I'm a dog or an animal.'

Anyway in Portugal for the last six months I've spoken to government entities. I've interviewed basically the drug czar of Portugal. I've been in a treatment facility and met with the patients there.

**FOX411:** How did you get interested in this?

**Whitaker:** Well I myself am a person in long term recovery. I just celebrated 18 and a half years. For the last 13, I've been a drug and alcohol counselor and the last six been an advocate for change both in Washington D.C and Sacramento.

**FOX411:** You were adorable as a kid. Do you realize how cute you were?

**Whitaker:** Oh absolutely!

**FOX411:** Did you want to go into acting as a kid?

**Whitaker:** I did not know that it was uncommon for a child to get up at 6:30 in the morning, be on the road at 7:30 and work at 8:00 and be there until 5:00. I loved it, I enjoyed it. There was never a time it felt forced.

Annissa Jones who was Buffy, my experience with knowing her and her situation - she didn't like it. I do remember doing a Christmas show in 1969 in New York and they did not have child labor laws in New York and we did a 90 minute special that we had to do in three days. We had to work from 8 in the morning till 3 in the morning. That was actual child endangerment and very wrong and wouldn't happen today. That's the only one time I remember.

**FOX411:** Was it hard to transition from child star?

**Whitaker:** When I was 14 I was the star of my own television series. I was an associate producer, I was at the top of my game and making quadruple what my father made and I made a decision to leave show business to serve a mission for the Mormon Church and when I returned they would accept me again but they didn't. That was very difficult, not to be accepted back into the brotherhood.

As a 56-year-old man today I believe I've done a lot of good. I still do acting jobs here and there. I continue to act but it's not my number one focus. I think it was Christopher Knight from 'The Brady Bunch' who said, Hollywood loves its puppies but once they became real adult dogs they kick them to the curb.

I went to Brigham Young University University for directing and producing and unfortunately Utah, which I thought would open their arms to me as being a brother, did not do so with my 17 years of experience and didn't accept me so I went back to California. I type 110 words a minute, so I started working and had to survive with my wife.

I started a business in Utah for my wife and then she turns around and says, 'I don't love you anymore and I want to marry the man who gave you your bachelor party.' So with that I lost my faith in God and man and the world. I didn't ever have a thought of suicide but I did the second best thing which was to drop into sex, drugs and rock and roll. That lasted about seven, eight years and then my family said you have a choice between getting clean and sober or getting excommunicated from the family.

**FOX411:** Did that work for you?

**Whitaker:** It did thank goodness. It woke me up, gave me the wake up call that I needed and got clean and sober. And found a new passion which is helping people in recovery.

**FOX411:** Still a member of the Mormon Church?

**Whitaker:** Due to my actions and was married in the Temple I was excommunicated. It's been a long road for me. For a good 13 years I wanted nothing to do with God or religion. I'm currently singing in the choir in my congregation and working towards getting reintegrated. I know God loves me and I'm a Christian and Jesus is my savior.