

Father Knows Blessed

BY JEANNINE AMBER · ESSENCE · DECEMBER 16, 2009



BLACK AMERICA'S FAVORITE FAMILY SAW THEIR FAITH TESTED LAST YEAR BY THE DEATH OF THEIR NEWBORN DAUGHTER. HERE RAPPER TURNED REVEREND JOSEPH "RUN" SIMMONS AND BELOVED WIFE JUSTINE TALK EXCLUSIVELY TO JEANNINE AMBER ABOUT HOW THEY WANT TO INSPIRE OTHERS ON

When Joseph Simmons and his wife, Justine, agreed to put their lives in front of the cameras on MTV's *Run's House*, the buzz was that this was something different. While other reality shows relied on the zany and at times clearly disturbed behavior of their casts to keep viewers engaged, *Run's House* featured five well-adjusted children led by a protective patriarch and a sweet-tempered mother. The show was most notable for what didn't happen: no temper tantrums, no screaming matches, no catfights. The conflict rarely escalated beyond anything that couldn't be resolved with a family meeting and prayer. To see such wholesomeness was a novelty. More surprising, this lovefest took place in the home of a rapper, complete with a private pool, an indoor basketball court and a silver Rolls Royce parked out front.

For two seasons, Simmons, the former front man of the legendary hip-hop group Run-DMC and now an ordained minister, who was mentored by Bishop Jordan of the Zoe Ministries, lectured, cajoled and hammed it up with his kids while Justine campaigned to have another baby. Midway through season two she became pregnant. It was all so perfect—a new child, just in time for season three! The audience was thrilled right along with the couple, making their show the highest-rated cable program among 12-to-34-year-olds in its time slot.

Then, in late September, two days after MTV started filming the program's third cycle, which begins airing this month, Justine went into premature labor. The baby girl, named Victoria Anne, did not survive. In their grief the couple faced a dilemma: When reality becomes this intimate, this wrenching, do you still keep the cameras rolling?

GIRL OF HIS DREAMS

It's late February and Rev Run, as Joseph Simmons is now known, is sitting in the light-filled Zen Room of his five-bedroom home in Saddle River, New Jersey. The room features a waterfall and a floor made of river stones Justine picked out from Home Depot and shellacked herself. But instead of peace and quiet, the room reverberates with the sounds of the couple's sons playing basketball in the half court on the other side of the wall. Run leans back into the white sofa. "I'm here to do something special besides what I did with Run-DMC," he says of his life. "I'm here to show the conduct of the Black American family, how we should be. This isn't arrogance; this is the gift God gave me to give the world."

Run and Justine, who have been married 12 years, first met at a roller skating rink in Roosevelt, Long Island, where Run was performing with Kurtis Blow. That was 25 years ago. After the show, Justine and her three girlfriends asked Run for his autograph. In response he showered them with kisses. "My friends and I ran to the girls' room and started freaking out we were so excited," Justine recalls, laughing.

At the time, Justine was a beautiful 15-year-old; Run was a year older. He got her number, courted her over the phone, and gave her a prized snapshot of himself in a long black coat holding a basketball trophy. The problem was, he lived in Queens and she lived in Long Island. For teens in love, that might as well have been across the globe. The distance took its toll, and the relationship fizzled, but Simmons never stopped thinking about the girl from the rink. "Then I became part of Run-DMC," he says, "and in the ego of my mind I was like, I hope she knows I'm the Don Dada. I hope she recognizes."

Twelve years after their first meeting, Run got his chance to win Justine back. He was going through a breakup with his then wife, with whom he had his eldest three children, when his cousin Pep, who was working security at a school in Long Island, ran into Justine's little sister. Pep began bragging, "Run's my cousin," the way he often did, to which Justine's sister replied, "So what? My sister used to go with him." Pep called Run to confirm, and Run seized the opportunity to reconnect. "I'm thinking, Perfect!" he recalls. "I just needed to lose five, ten pounds before I called her, which I did. The rest is history."

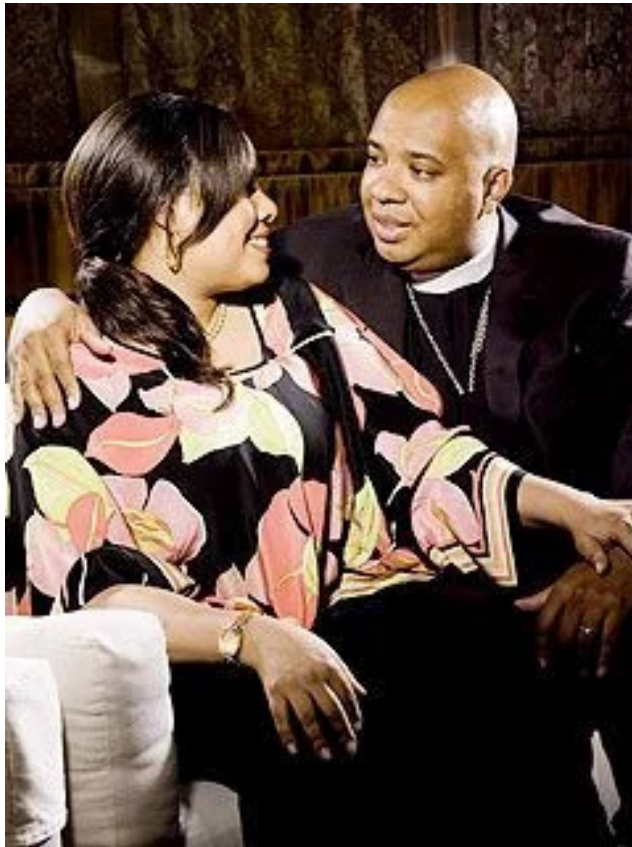
Justine beams while her husband tells this story. "As soon as I heard him say 'Hi,' I just melted," she says. "He sounded so sweet and innocent. I just wanted to take care of him. Then he introduced me to his kids, and, gosh, I just fell in love." Run says the feelings were mutual. "Justine is so warm and selfless, these kids were running into a daggone hurricane of kisses and hugs and putting on their mittens," he says. "Nothing against their mother, but with Justine it was just love, love, love, love, love, love."

PRAYING FOR A MIRACLE

Justine's water broke in the early-morning hours of September 26, 2006, one month ahead of schedule. Run called the MTV crew to meet them at the hospital, but when the baby was born, it was clear that something was terribly wrong—her internal organs had developed outside her body. When she died, a little more than an hour later, the crew's first inclination was to turn off the cameras.

"I got a call from the producer in the field and we said, 'Okay, let's just give the family some room to grieve and get through this,'" says Mike Powers, vice-president of series and production development at MTV. "The next call I got was to let me know that Rev really wanted us to continue. He felt like the show was about his family and he could use this to teach the viewer more than just how to deal with a daughter's graduation or a son failing his driving test. He could also teach about getting through the unimaginable with grace and the power of faith and family."





Heartbroken, and with the cameras rolling, the couple shared the news with their children that their little sister had died. Diggy, then 11, clasped his mother's hand and the family prayed. It's an excruciating moment captured on film. Justine says there was really no other way to do it. "How could we bring you in to enjoy all the fun," she says, "but then during bad times say, 'This is private'?" Besides, she is certain that this too was part of God's plan. "In allowing me to get pregnant during the filming of season two, He obviously wanted the world to know that I was having a baby, and He wanted the world to know that I lost her."

What the episode doesn't reveal, and what may be the greatest testament to the couple's faith, is that during Justine's fourth month of pregnancy, they had been warned that something might be wrong with their unborn daughter. When Justine's doctor told her he detected a problem with the way the baby was developing, the couple traveled from their home in New Jersey to Long Island to seek the opinion of the obstetrician who had delivered their youngest sons. But he too gave them a grim prognosis.

It was news the couple refused to accept. "We heard the doctors' reports, and then we heard God's report in our minds," says Run. "We are real saved, sanctified, crazy church people. God can do a job! That is the type of believers we are. Yes, it hurt some nights. I cried some nights, worried and wondered some nights. But don't tell me God can't make this right!"

Resolved in their faith, the couple told no one the news except their bishop, feeling that would only invite sadness into the house. "I didn't need sad," Justine says now. "I needed to know that my miracle was going to happen, that the baby was going to be fine. That's what got me through. I was carrying a prayer." Justine was so convinced that the baby was going to be okay that when she was met at her local New Jersey hospital by staff who had never treated her before (she couldn't get to her regular doctor in Long Island when her labor began), she never mentioned that there might be a problem with the pregnancy. "I didn't say anything," she says, "because I was still hoping for my miracle."

HOW FAITH HEALS

Upstairs in the Simmonses' home is a pink-and-white room decked out with gifts from Justine's baby shower. There's a bassinet, a crib and an armoire filled with tiny pink dresses. "Aren't these cute?" says Justine, fingering the fringe on a pair of toddler sweaters.

The nursery remains intact as a way of looking forward to the child they plan to adopt. "I always wanted to adopt, but every time I mentioned it my husband would say, 'Why not have your own baby?'" recalls Justine. "We take for granted that we can just have a baby. But I couldn't. Maybe part of the reason God let this happen is because He wanted us to adopt."

Justine's face lights up when she speaks about the baby girl she has yet to meet and about how thankful she is for the children she already has. But when her husband leaves the room to see about ordering food for the kids, she grows somber, talking quietly about the hour Victoria Anne survived. "I got to hold her," she says. "They dressed her in pink. She was so beautiful, and she had this amazing little clear sac with all her organs inside." Tears well up in her eyes. In an instant she is transformed from a woman planning her future to a mother carrying the unbearable weight of losing a child.

Then Run returns. As he enters the room he eyes his wife wiping tears from her cheeks. "This is what I wanted to avoid," he says. "The Bible says 'Look forward.' Why experience these feelings when you are just going to have to carry them throughout the day?"

"I'm not going to carry it," his wife protests. "I'm fine."

"It's like opening wounds," Run says, turning his attention to the reporter. "There's no healing in crying about it. There is no healing in her feeling that pain over and over. There is no healing in showing your weakness when you are in the public eye."

The way Run sees it, his family's darkest days are an opportunity to show others the power of faith. "That's what he does," explains his brother, Russell Simmons, coexecutive producer of Run's House, from his office in Manhattan. "He's a reverend, his podium is MTV, and he preaches by example. Rev Run is just doing his job."

It's the only approach that makes sense to Run and Justine. "People are inspired by champions," Run says, his voice rising with conviction. "I'm not going to be an inspiration by asking over and over, Why? There's no answer to why. The only answer is to show people you can be strong and courageous, because if Rev Run and Justine can go through this and still stand in faith, you can do it, too."

