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## Humble Roots of N.J. Native

By Michelle Garcia and Michael Powell  
Washington Post Staff Writers  
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EAGLESWOOD, N.J., June 18 -- State Route 9 runs through the heart of Paul Johnson Jr.'s past, from his childhood home in West Creek past the high school to his mother's ramshackle trailer. It's here amid the scrub pine and ocean inlets that this working-class kid learned to build radios, drive dirt bikes, go birding and play chess.

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It's where he kissed his seventh-grade sweetheart, Debbie Fadde.

"He was my first kiss," recalled Fadde, now a principal in a nearby town. "He told me, 'Deb, whatever happens, we're going to the high school prom.' " And they did. But Friday came word that her lifelong friend was dead. Islamic extremists linked to al Qaeda beheaded Johnson, 49, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, after

kidnapping him last weekend. Johnson had lived there for 10 years, working as an engineer on targeting systems on Apache helicopters for Lockheed Martin.

On the telephone from her school Friday afternoon, Fadde sounded as though she were drowning in sorrow. "I'm sorry, I'm totally devastated," she said finally. "I feel like something in my life is gone."

Word of Johnson's death moved like an electric current through these small Jersey shore towns, as neighbors and old friends learned of his death on the radio, from a friend at the lumberyard or while selling corn and crabs at local stands. In the humid thickness of June, there was anger -- at al Qaeda, at the Saudis, at President Bush -- and disbelief that Johnson's life had come to this end.

"In the back of your mind, you know this could happen," said Debbie Joback, a distant relative. "But it's so senseless."

No word was heard immediately from Johnson's family. His 67-year-old mother, who is ailing, lives with Johnson's brother, Wayne, in a trailer park in nearby Stafford Township. His sister, Donna Mayeux, lives in Little Egg Harbor. Johnson's son, Paul Johnson III, traveled here earlier this week from Florida. He repeatedly went on television to plead for his father's life, most recently on al-Arabiya a few hours before the Dubai-based network reported

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Alissa Roark, 3, leaves flowers at the Florida home of Paul Johnson III, whose father, Paul Johnson Jr., was killed by Islamic extremists Friday. Also paying their respects are Alissa's sister Allyson, 6, and grandmother Brenda Kandall. (Peter Cosgrove -- AP)

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the execution. "Please release my father," said the son. "He is an innocent man. He loves Muslims."

FBI Special Agent Joe Billy said of Johnson's relatives: "They know that this was committed by extremists, and they know that the Saudi government and the U.S. government did everything possible. They knew the odds were not in the favor of law enforcement."

Johnson left his home town long ago, and friends intimated that he rarely wanted to look back. His father died when Paul was a teenager. His mother, brother and sister took it hard, friends said. Paul, then a tall, lean kid who loved to listen to music, was left pretty much to himself. He read -- joining the library club at high school in Manahawkin -- and tinkered and took up bird-watching.

His nickname in the high school yearbook was "Eagle," though it is unclear whether that was because of his bird-watching or his fondness for the rock group the Eagles.

His uncle, Bob Fischer, watched Paul navigate those years and shoulder so many of his family's troubles. "He kept the house warm and the food flowing," Fischer said. "Nothing really bothered him because he had been through so much."

Fadde has a simpler bottom line. "If the yuck of life makes you stronger," she said, "then Paul should be Hercules."

These are tightly knit blue-collar towns, and those born here tend to die here. Over and over, one hears a local saying: "Our creek may be shallow, but our roots run deep."

"Paul," Fadde said, "was willing to take the risk to leave this."

At first, he commuted by motorcycle to the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark so that he could live at home and help keep his family together. But at some point he joined the Air Force and left. "He knew where he was going and what he wanted to do in life," Fadde said.

Johnson never returned to live in New Jersey. He wound up in Saudi Arabia, equipping military helicopters with instruments that allowed them to fly close the ground and in the dark, his son said. He liked the desert heat and, according to the Associated Press, liked to scuba-dive in the Red Sea. He met a Thai woman and married her, and he was building a vacation home in Thailand. He stayed in touch with just a few friends and relatives, often by e-mail.

He returned home for the first time in more than a decade for Christmas in 2001. He took a bus from the Port Authority in Manhattan to Eagleswood. Fischer tried to persuade Johnson not to return to Saudi Arabia -- the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, were raw in memory, and the uncle worried for his nephew's safety.

Johnson shook him off and said he planned to renew his contract with Lockheed Martin. "He was good at his job, and he liked the guys he worked with," Fischer said.

By late afternoon Friday, Johnson's long-ago girlfriend, Fadde, was regaining her composure. She had an eighth-grade graduation to attend, with all the hope that implies. "I don't want to think about anger," she said. "I'd rather try to channel all of the unused love."

*Powell reported from New York. Staff writer Renae Merle and researcher Meg Smith in Washington and researcher Richard S. Drezzen in New York contributed to this report.*

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