

# Mike's Aura: "Be Comfortable In Your Clothes"

By Kerrie A. Johnson

*Editor's Note:* This article is from Sergeant Johnson's wife who gave a speech at the Police Academy last spring. You will notice pictures of Kerrie Johnson in other parts of this magazine attending the conference of Concerns of Police Survivors (COPS). Sergeant Johnson was tragically killed in the line of duty on Father's Day 2003.

*From a speech presented to the Vermont Police Academy graduating class:*

Congratulations, good morning, and hello. Thank you for asking me to be here, I am honored, even though the circumstances which brought me to be here are not pleasant. Before I begin with my main topic I am going to bore you with a little background about Mike and me. It will help to dispel some of the rumors out there. I won't go into how we met, because I promised Maurice that I would only take about 5 minutes today.

Michael was stationed in the Colchester barracks when we met in January 1991. He then transferred to Rutland, just before we were married, in July 1991. I was teaching elementary school at Sherburne, in Killington, at the time. Our daughter Reilly was born in July 1994, (she is only 9; Trooper Smith told the media she was 12, which would have meant she was born before we were married). Our son Grady was born in November 1995, and our third child, McKendrick, was born December 1997, two months after Michael was promoted to sergeant in Bradford. Now I have a funny little story that really has nothing to do with my topic today, but I think you will all appreciate it.

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As many of you know Michael was killed on Interstate 91, June 15, Father's Day, by a runaway drug dealer. Those of you who know me know that this (as Mike would have said ) "is not my style." Speaking in public would have been a piece of cake for Michael as he was comfortable in any situation, even drawn by, or energized by, a large crowd. The bigger the better. For me it is a little tougher as I am used to speaking to classrooms full of children, not gymnasiums full of adults.

I am sure you have heard a lot about the incident (some call it an accident, I prefer to call it a felony), but I would like to take a minute tell you my story about that day. Michael was very excited to have been named the new Oxbow High School basketball coach. On that Sunday, June 15th, he held an open gym for his team. Even though he had been called out the night before and hadn't gotten in until 3 a.m., he was "up and at 'em" early, eager to meet the boys at the gym. After this workout he stopped at the Village Store to get his usual coffee and newspaper, and then came home to receive his Father's Day gift from the kids. Now he was tired, but he went running to get his workout in and then came home to collapse on the couch and watch the sports channel, happy to have the remote in hand. This is how he wanted to spend his Father's Day. Around 3 p.m. he put on his uniform, said goodbye to the children, and gave me a kiss goodbye. (Even when I was extremely mad with him he would always insist on kissing me goodbye, saying anything could happen and that I would feel terrible if I hadn't. He also told me that I would never have to worry, unless one of the troopers showed up on my doorstep in person.)

So after he left, the kids and I piled into the car to go to the grocery store. Sounds like a pretty ho-hum boring kind of story, eh? Well, here's the interesting part. While we were in the check-out line at the P&C, a friend of mine was behind us in line. She asked me if Mike was working and I looked at my watch and said, "No, not yet, but he will be signing on in about 15 minutes." It wasn't quite 5 p.m. I paid for our groceries and the kids and I left the store and drove home. As we were pulling into our driveway the children and I instantly felt that something was not right. Our front and side doors were both wide open. There was a cruiser and an unmarked car in our yard. It was the unmarked car that gave it away. You can guess the rest. Many days later I discovered that my grocery bill at the P&C from that Sunday had come to \$91.91, and the printed time on the slip was 4:46 pm, the exact time Mike was pronounced dead.

Overwhelming numbers of people have reached out to my kids and me. They all want to know how the children are doing. I tell them they are doing as well as they are because of the incredibly strong father they had as their parent and role model. Some people have asked how I would feel if my children were ever to become police officers. Of course this idea scares me, but they are so young right now, that on any given day they could change their minds and say they want to do something else. However, should my children decide to go into law enforcement, I will have this advice for them. Be comfortable in your clothes. Don't let your uniform change who you are. Be true to yourself. Dad was comfortable being who he was. His ►

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personality never changed when he put on his "green and gold." There was no "I'm going to go and kick some butt attitude." He said it jokingly. Your Dad was confident without being arrogant. He loved and respected everyone and they respected him back. His disposition was the same whether he was wearing his uniform or sweatpants. Wearing a torn pair of sweatpants your father would say, "It's just part of my aura." He didn't care how he looked; he was comfortable being himself.

Besides the torn sweatpants, here are a few more of Michael's aura examples. In uniform Mike's buddy, Mike Smith, would tell him his badge had clouds. M.J. would say, "What do you mean clouds?" His brass? Well. His shoes shined? Smitty said Mike would come in ripped, untucked, and bunched up, and that Michael had no idea what a military tuck was. I guess there are those who felt he took his "Aura" to the protocol limits. Anyway, the point being that Mike was Mike, in uniform or out. People loved and respected him for it. Trooper Smith (Smitty) told me that M.J. was the only trooper he knew who could arrest someone and be thanked for it afterward.

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I have boxes of cards and letters from people who wanted me to know how their brief encounters with Michael affected their lives. Whether it was a speeding ticket, roadside assistance, DUI arrest, or a teenager in crisis, these people remembered Mike because he never stood above them. He never acted like he was better than anyone.

Mike had an incredible enthusiasm for living. It was his main objective with family, friends, work and coaching, to lead by example. He would not expect anything from you that he couldn't do himself. On the basketball floor as a coach he had a rule about swearing. If you swore on the floor you had to do so many suicides. Likewise, if he was caught swearing, he would run the suicides too. He wanted to be a good role model. This summer he was really working on running

a lot and building his stamina because he didn't feel he could ask his team to run hard if he couldn't.

I am happy and proud to say that Mike's role modeling rubbed off at home as well. One day my children were having a discussion in the car concerning "the incident." My 9-year-old daughter, Reilly, commented that Eric Daley's parents must be really sad. The boys, 7 and 5, agreed that they were going to teach their children right from wrong and to not ever do drugs. I found this fascinating, that at their young ages they weren't talking about their own futures, but of the futures of their unborn children. It was reassuring to know how clear they are about themselves. Their Dad lead by example.

Somebody at the funeral spoke about everyone needing to be a little like Mike. Yes, we all need to appreciate this life and be more positive. To you, the next graduating class of the Vermont Police Academy, I caution you: Don't let the suit speak for you, speak from within your suit. Be yourself and your colleagues and community will respect you for it. When Mike was in uniform, people saw a friend. He let his uniform symbolize his dedication to protecting and serving others. Be comfortable in your clothes. Let your uniform symbolize peace, hope, love and YOUR courage to protect and serve. Let go of the power. Mike did. Michael was nicknamed "Happy Johnson" at the Bradford barracks. Isn't that a better nickname than the ones we have all heard for police officers?

So once again I would like to congratulate all of you. I want you to know that you are all individually special. By entering the world of law enforcement you are becoming a part of a brotherhood that is unique — a family you will always be able to depend on. Believe me, they're there when you need them. I can't thank the law enforcement brotherhood enough. I don't know where I would be without you.

Now ask me how I feel when my children express interest in becoming police officers? I say, I feel proud. □