

# Cover-up alleged in student's death

## UPD and coroner say 20-year-old committed suicide, but his parents say otherwise

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Posted: 2/19/09

VIDEO - The Johnsons tell their story

An autopsy report states that SJSU student Gregory Johnson Jr. committed suicide, but his parents allege that the Santa Clara County Medical Examiner-Coroner and the University Police Department are covering up a homicide.

Johnson, who was a junior kinesiology major and a member of Sigma Chi Fraternity, died on Nov. 22, the report states. He was 20.

"It's an unfortunate situation," said UPD Chief Andre Barnes. "We're doing an investigation, and we have not found anything to suggest it was anything but suicide."

Pat Lopes Harris, director of media relations at SJSU, said Wednesday that UPD intended to finish the investigation and release a report in about three weeks.

According to the autopsy report, UPD officers told Patra Albrecht, an investigator for the coroner's office, that a fraternity brother found Johnson hanging in the basement of the Sigma Chi Fraternity house, 284 S. 10th St., about 2:45 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 22.

"A fraternity brother went down into the basement and found the decedent hanging from a cord affixed to a ceiling water pipe," wrote Albrecht, who reportedly arrived at the scene at 5:10 p.m. "He took the decedent down and called for paramedics who pronounced death upon arrival."

Johnson's parents, Denise Johnson and Gregory Johnson Sr., said the manner in which their son reportedly hanged himself was almost impossible.

Gregory Johnson



< Back | Home

"I'm 5-foot-6, and I could touch the pipe," Denise Johnson said. "He was 6-foot-2, he weighed 220 pounds, and he was 220 pounds of muscle; he was in good shape. There's no way that he hung, and they said they found him in a seated position with his legs out in front of him."

In the autopsy report, Albrecht wrote that police officers measured approximately 70 inches (5 feet, 10 inches) from the floor to the bottom of the water pipe.

"The fraternity brother said the decedent's knees were bent and he was almost resting on the floor," she wrote. "The fraternity brother unrolled the ligature cord and placed the decedent into a nearby chair."

Albrecht further noted that when she arrived, Johnson's body was "slumped back in an office chair" and an electrical cord was nearby.

The Johnsons said their son's neck showed no marks of hanging.

Denise Johnson has photographs she took at their home in Clearlake, Calif., after first viewing the body on Dec. 1, before cosmetics were applied, she said.

"They say he was hanging for an hour and half," Denise Johnson said. "It would have been embedded deep in his neck."

Albrecht wrote in the autopsy report that two ligature furrows surrounded Johnson's neck.

"The width is comparable with the orange electrical cord found next to the decedent," she wrote. "At the front of the neck, the two ligature marks go horizontally. At the left and right sides of the decedent's neck, the ligature mark elevates toward the ears."

The Johnsons said they were denied a viewing of the body until Dec. 1, because it had already been identified by fraternity members and a driver's license, and they were upset that the coroner's office did not allow them to view it at an earlier time.

"Right from the beginning, it's like they were covering things up," Denise Johnson said. "I got the feeling they didn't want us down there."

According to the autopsy report, Johnson's body was "tentatively identified" on Nov. 22 by his driver's license and "his fraternity brothers with whom he lived for two years," and it was "positively identified visually" by his mother on Nov. 24.

Denise Johnson said she did not view the body in person and was shown a black-and-white photocopied picture of her son's body on Nov. 24.

"You can't see much in black and white," she said, "but you can see that there are no marks on his neck."

The coroner's office does not authorize the viewing of a body once it has been identified and identification can be made by someone viewing a photograph, a spokesperson for the office said. Denise Johnson said she was suspicious about the condition of her son's neck when the body was delivered to the family on Dec. 1.

She said her son's head was supported by a block, and when the block was removed, the head fell back.

"His neck was broken all the way through," she said.

After UPD releases an investigation report, the case will be turned over to the Santa Clara County District Attorney's office, said Nick Muyo, D.A. public information officer.

"We look at the evidence they present to us," Muyo said. "We look at the coroner's report. We do have the option to ask (UPD) to do some follow-up, to interview more people if that's what we think they need to do, or we can assign one of our investigators to do that."

No suicide note was found, according to the autopsy report and Lopes Harris.

Nick Wright, chapter president of Sigma Chi, said the Fraternity would have no comment.

#### Parents criticize police investigation

The Johnsons said they were told by UPD that the San Jose Police Department would not handle the case because the fraternity house was in UPD's jurisdiction. They said that UPD Chief Barnes told them that UPD was not prepared to handle a homicide and would turn such a case over to SFPD but that the case was determined a suicide.

In addition to their claims that there were no ligature marks on their son's neck and that he could not have hanged himself under the reported circumstances, the Johnsons say they have other reasons to suspect a cover-up.

Denise Johnson said the fraternity members were treated as witnesses to a suicide but should have been treated as suspects.

"I thought when the police came in and found a dead body, it was treated as a homicide until proven different," she said. "Why was his case so different?"

After police had arrived at the scene on Nov. 22, fraternity members were offered grief counseling in a Campus Village meeting room, Lopes Harris said.

When family members arrived at the fraternity house on Nov. 23, fraternity members had removed crime tape from the front of the house and had begun to disinfect the basement, Denise Johnson said.

"The police allowed the frat brothers to come in, take down (crime) tape, turn who they wanted to away, to just basically handle the scene," she said. "And it should have been a police matter, and it wasn't."

The Johnsons said some of their son's belongings were missing from his room, including DVDs, clothes, hats and jewelry.

UPD has not found any missing property, Lopes Harris said.

Denise Johnson said that she would seek justice in her son's death until her dying day and that she was spending seven to eight hours a day on the telephone contacting anyone who could help in her pursuit. "He meant everything to me, everything, and I will miss him for the rest of my life," she said. "And I will never rest until there's justice for my son. ... He deserves justice, fair treatment. That's all I'm asking for."

**About Gregory Johnson Jr.**

Gregory Johnson Jr. graduated in 2006 from Lower Lake High School in Lower Lake, Calif., where he was the student body vice president, an athletic trainer, an academic decathlon team member and a regional finalist for the Lion's Club Student Speaker Contest, according to a letter to the editor sent to the Spartan Daily on Feb. 12 written by Arm Nolasco, Jan Fiedler and Karen Ness, teachers at Lower Lake High School.

He was licensed as a minister at Trinity Baptist Church in Honolulu, Hawaii, where he lived for four years, and he was ordained as a preacher of the Gospel in 2004, according to a program for his Dec. 4 funeral at Praises of Zion Baptist Church in Clearlake.

"He was a leader, not a follower," said Gregory Johnson Sr.

Denise Johnson said her son was excited about the near future. He was scheduled to participate in a judo tournament a week after his death, was planning a trip to Las Vegas for his 21st birthday in March, and was a year-and-a-half away from becoming the first in his family to graduate from college, she said.

"He just had so much stuff going for him," she said. "I knew in my heart, deep in my heart, that something was wrong with what (UPD) said."

The Johnsons said their son had never shown any signs of depression.

At a memorial service on Nov. 25 at the Barrett Ballroom in the Student Union, more than 600 people attended and nearly 30 people spoke.

"He was a source of comfort during the hardships of life, and never fake about it," one speaker said.

Another speaker said, "Whatever got him to do this - for someone so happy to do something so drastic - I wouldn't wish that on anyone."

Members of Sigma Chi declined to provide names of speakers in the days following the memorial service.

Kevin Victorean, a deacon at Praises of Zion Baptist Church, said members of the church, "every last one of them," did not believe that Johnson had committed suicide.

"It was out of character for Gregory," Victorean said, "the way that boy loved life."

In the aforementioned letter to the editor, Nolasco, Fiedler and Ness wrote, "It is very difficult to believe Greg committed suicide. May his case remain open until more information is revealed that leads to the truth. We pray that anyone that knows any information will come forward."

The autopsy report states, "University police officers interviewed many of the fraternity brothers who said the decedent was very social and had no problems at the fraternity. The fraternity brothers said the decedent showed no signs of depression and never had any suicidal ideations."

It also states that Johnson had lunch with a "former girlfriend" on Nov. 22.

"We don't even know who they're talking about," Denise Johnson said. "The autopsy said he had no food in his stomach. Where did he eat? We would like for her to come forward and tell us who she is."

According to the autopsy report, Johnson told his former girlfriend that his father used the family's money and resources to support a drug addiction.

"His situation with his father was fine," Denise Johnson said. "We had just visited him and he hugged and kissed his father goodbye and gave him a hat. They are making it up. ... They used anything they could."

#### Parents turn to NAACP

The Johnsons, who are both black and whose son was black, contacted the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to help them find out how their son died. Rev. Jeff Moore II, president of the San Jose/Silicon Valley branch of the NAACP, said he had looked into the case and spoke with Barnes, but that the organization cannot further pursue the case until the family files an official complaint.

Neither parent explicitly said that race had anything to do with their son's death, the death investigation or alleged cover-up, but Denise Johnson said, "Tell me if it had been a black fraternity and it had been a white boy laying on the floor, tell me that everybody wouldn't have been arrested and held until they found out what happened."

#### Suicide Statistics

According to a 2005 National Center for Health Statistics study that sampled 100,000 cases, 10 percent of people between ages 15 and 24 committed suicide. In all age groups, men were four times more likely than women to commit suicide.

Suicide is the 11th-leading cause of death among all people, according to the National Center of Health Statistics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The top ten leading causes of death are, in order: heart diseases; malignant neoplasms; cerebrovascular diseases; chronic lower respiratory diseases; unintentional injuries; diabetes mellitus; Alzheimer's diseases; influenza and pneumonia; nephritis; nephritic syndrome and nephrosis; and septicemia.

In the United States, homicide is the leading cause of death among black men and second leading cause of death for black women ages 15 through 24, according to the same sources.

The suicide rate among black males ages 15 through 24 has doubled in the last 20 years, according to the American Association of Suicidology.

In 2004, 23.4 percent of all suicides were by hanging, according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The National Center for Health Statistics study showed that among the 50 states, California had the eighth lowest suicide rate, 8.9 of every 100 people.

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, "Although most depressed people are not suicidal, two-thirds of those who die by suicide suffer from a depressive illness."

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