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Issue 184

Vanessa Johnson



Above: Enrica D. Hall, Vanessa's sister with Down's Syndrome graduating from high school. Enrica passed away at age 42. Right: Vanessa's sons Devan and Edwin Johnson. Below: Vanessa, one of 11 children, with her brothers and sisters.



Family is...
Everything

By LAKEISHA FLEMING
PHOTOS BY MARIE THOMAS

Dr. Vanessa Johnson has never met a challenge she couldn't overcome. She was barely out of her teens when she helped to raise her brothers and sisters. She forged a path into military service, despite difficult circumstances. She obtained two master's degrees and a doctorate. Yet in spite of her many accolades, she will tell you that her greatest accomplishment is her family.

Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Vanessa was the fourth of 11 children. Her home was full of love and laughter.



Vanessa's granddaughters Erin, Jamie, and Cayla Johnson

"We used to jump off the top of the house with an umbrella ... just craziness, I guess," she says. "When we grew up, we found things to do to be happy and have fun."

One of her favorite games to play with her siblings was school.

"When I played school, I wanted to be a principal," she says.

From a young age, education was Vanessa's passion.





Vanessa and Ed at their high school prom in 1970.



The Rev. Ed and Vanessa Johnson



In high school Vanessa was voted *Most Versatile*. She was a cheerleader, took part in Honor Society and participated in sports.

In high school, she was a cheerleader, took part in Honor Society, and participated in sports. Her first job was teaching tennis for her coach in 10th grade. Coach Alex Johnson was a mentor, and helped her obtain a tennis scholarship to pay for college. After graduation from L. B. Landry High School in 1971, she attended Dillard University.

Vanessa's experiences with her mentally handicapped sister, Enrica, along with her love for children, moved her to pursue dual majors in special education and elementary education. She enjoyed college life.

During her sophomore year, however, life as she knew it changed dramatically.

"I got this call from my older sister. She said, 'Mom's sick.' And I said, 'What's wrong with her?' She said, 'Well, she just got weak in the knees. We're taking her to the hospital.' So, she went to the hospital, and that night she passed away."

Vanessa's mother died from an aneurysm at age 42. It was one of the most difficult challenges Vanessa faced.

"I was actually going to quit school at the time, and my dad said 'no, she wouldn't want you to quit school,'" Vanessa recalls. As the first one in her family to graduate from a four-year university, Vanessa felt an obligation to continue her studies. But she also felt an obligation to her family. She decided to move forward with college while also helping out at home. The one thing that she put on hold was her love life.

Vanessa and her high school sweetheart, Edward Johnson, discussed getting married.

"She said she had a greater responsibility to take care of her brothers and sisters," Ed notes. "She asked to delay the marriage. However long it took, I was willing to wait," he adds.

"I stayed on campus and then on the weekends I would go home, which was across the river from Dillard University," Vanessa notes. The household didn't miss a beat. "We just kept going as if my mother was still there."

"Vanessa has always been a nurturing mother and sister," Ed says. "She spent a lot of time not only with Enrica, but also her other brothers and sisters, teaching them things about life."

She graduated Cum Laude from Dillard University with a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Elementary Education and Special Education in 1975.



In 1978 Vanessa traveled to Atlanta with the New Orleans Public Schools group to attend the PTA. She sat on Peachtree Street and said "I am coming back here." She did just that in 1994.

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– Dr. Mae Jemison



Lieutenant Commander Vanessa Johnson



Her first teaching job was at Adolph Meyer Elementary School. That position allowed her to peer into her future. She traveled to Atlanta for a National PTA Convention along with several parents and educators from the school system in 1978. During her time in Atlanta, Vanessa made a declaration.

"I sat on Peachtree Street, and said, I'm coming back one day."

Her immediate future, however, contained marriage. Vanessa and Ed were married on January 13, 1979.

"And the next day we actually went to Pensacola, Florida, because he was in flight school in the Navy."

She had just started teaching at Warrington Middle School when she learned Ed would be transferred to San Diego. She realized she needed to receive certification to teach in San Diego, and that whenever they moved, she would have to repeat the process. She didn't like that thought.

About that time, some of Ed's naval buddies talked to Vanessa about enlisting in the Navy.



Johnson family portrait while in the military 1991. From left: Ed, Vanessa, Edwin, and Devan

"The next morning, Ed asked, 'Well were you serious about joining the Navy?' And I said, it was sounding pretty good. What do you think? He said, 'You won't even pass the test.' So I decided, 'okay, I'm going to prove him wrong.'"

She passed the officer's test and packed her bags for Newport, Rhode Island, for training.

Ed says he didn't know if Vanessa could handle the military lifestyle. However, when he saw his wife's determination, including learning to swim to pass the test, he was amazed.

"She overcame those challenges, received her commission and became a naval officer less than a year after I did."

"He knows not to challenge me anymore!" Vanessa laughs. She was commissioned an Ensign in the U.S. Navy in December 1979. She was then assigned to San Diego, where Ed was stationed, as an Educational Service Officer and Legal Officer.



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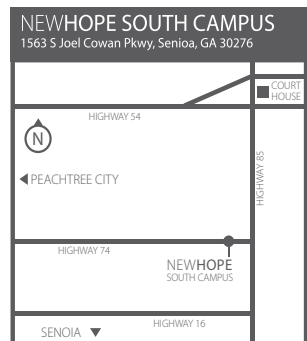
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SUNDAY WORSHIP
9:15 AM

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Through all the challenges Vanessa faced, her faith in God never wavered.

She remembers early in their marriage when she and Ed needed a refrigerator. He managed to get tickets to The Price Is Right game show. She was thrilled to hear Bob Barker call her name, and excited to come home with a refrigerator! She says she has always relied on God to provide for her.

As her military career grew, so did her family. Vanessa gave birth to their first son, Edwin, in December, 1980. In 1983, she transferred to another base in San Diego and worked as Director of the Interior Communications Schools, Service Schools Command. Vanessa began considering her future. "Someone told me when I first joined the military, start doing things that will help you get a job when you get out."

"My goal was to get a master's, and the Navy offered post-graduate education to officers who met their qualifications and were accepted by certain universities," she continued. Vanessa was pregnant with her second child when she started her studies at San Diego State University in January, 1986.

"I can remember going into labor while I was in a statistics class. And I was like, oh my goodness, if they don't hurry up, I was going to be a statistic!" she laughs. Her son Devan was born that February. Vanessa jumped right back into her coursework, earning a Master's Degree in Educational Administration in 1987. She also acquired a subspecialty in Education and Training Management from the Navy.

Vanessa was assigned as Assistant Director, Technical Training, Recruit Training Command in San Diego, subsequently becoming Director, Standards and Evaluations.

"After my tour of duty at Recruit Training Command, I was selected to go to the Naval Command and Staff College at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island."

Ed was also selected to attend Naval War College. The family headed across the country. Vanessa received a Master's Degree

in National Security and Strategic Studies in March 1991. They then moved to the Armed Forces Staff College in Virginia.

Following that brief stint, the family faced an unfamiliar situation.

"My joint duty tour was served in Tampa, Florida and Ed was sent to Charleston (South Carolina). That was the first time we'd ever been split up."

She handled it with her characteristic determination. Now a Lieutenant Commander, she served as Commanding Officer of the Tampa Military Entrance Processing Station. She made time for her sons, seeking out activities for the boys. She loved eating dinner with the children, always lending a listening ear. Ed often commuted on weekends, until he was stationed in Tampa 18 months later.

While in Tampa, Vanessa received an opportunity she couldn't refuse. She was offered a position as the Executive Officer of the Atlanta Region, Navy Reserve Officers Training Corps (NROTC) Unit, which included Georgia Institute of Technology and Morehouse College NROTC units.

"That was my dream job!" she exclaims. She migrated to her present home in Fayetteville,

with her boys in tow. Ed stayed in Tampa to finish his tour of service.

With the relocation, Vanessa started working on her Doctorate at Clark Atlanta University. She also made a pivotal career decision. Noting that Edwin was entering ninth grade, Vanessa felt it was time to focus on his college plans. She decided to retire from the military in October 1995, and moved into civilian work. She became the Coordinator of the Center of Excellence at Morehouse College.

She also brought another passion to fruition. She started a company, VanEdge, in 1995. Her company developed workshops and educational presentations for parents and students. She enjoyed the work, but felt a yearning to do more. With support at



Rev. Edward Johnson, Vanessa, Joy, Edwin, Erin, Jamie, and Cayla Johnson

home following Ed's move to Atlanta, she sought other ventures.

Vanessa came on board as the Senior Naval Science Instructor at Frederick Douglass High School in Atlanta in 1997. A short time later, she emerged with her Doctorate in Educational Administration from Clark Atlanta University in December 1999.

In 2000, Vanessa became the Assistant Principal of Crabapple Middle School in Roswell. The drive was long, and she desired to work closer to home. A couple of years later, she became the Assistant Principal at Parklane Elementary School in East Point.

Her professional life wasn't the only thing evolving during this time. Ed expressed that he believed God called him into the ministry. Now, as he answered to that call, he was adding another title to Vanessa's full plate -- "First Lady."

Ed pastored New Mount Carmel AME Church in Sharpsburg for three years, before becoming pastor of Flat Rock AME Church in Fayetteville in 2003. Vanessa was by his side.

In 2003, Vanessa became principal of Liberty Point Elementary School in Union City, where she remained until she retired in 2013.

Continuing in her love of education, she started the ESTEAM program in 2015. ESTEAM stands for Self-Esteem, Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics. She reached middle school girls with the summer program, eventually expanding to after school offerings and including boys.

"She was responsible for educating thousands of children, training hundreds of teachers, and shaping the minds of many,"



Son Edwin with wife Joy and daughters - Cayla, Jamie, and Erin.



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notes her friend, Rev. Judy T. Ware, Co-Pastor and First Lady of Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Fayetteville.

"She utilizes her gifts to make others around her better," Judy adds.

Vanessa also pours those gifts into FACTOR Family Connection as a board member. This Fayetteville organization encourages members of the community to collaborate in various ways to improve the community. Becky Smith, Executive Director of FACTOR, has observed Vanessa's love of helping others.

"She's a strong woman with total confidence in her abilities. She knows the value of collaboration, working together, and valuing everyone's input."

Vanessa enjoys other volunteer involvement, including work with Fayette Visioning and Reach Services Inc., Fayetteville's Head Start program.

Fayette County benefits from Vanessa's wisdom through her husband as well. He became the first black City Councilman elected in Fayetteville in 2011. He made history once again in 2015 when he was elected as the city's first black Mayor. Each time Vanessa was by his side, offering insight and support.

New opportunities are on the horizon for Vanessa, as she steps back into career mode. In July, she starts a new position as Head

Below: Vanessa won 6,000 at Ideas Challenge to use toward ESTEAM program.



of School at Arlington Christian School in Fairburn. "I really wanted to do something else and give back to the community," she states.

While this new job means she will step away from her work with FACTOR and Reach, she will stay involved with other community groups.

With such a demanding professional life, it would be easy to understand Vanessa's sense of accomplishment coming from her many degrees, her church involvement, or her naval career. However, the challenge that means the most to Vanessa involves her family. Her own mother was the greatest influence in her life, and always encouraged her to do her best. In turn, she did the same for her boys.

Vanessa treasures Sundays after church, when the entire family gets together for dinner. Edwin, his wife Joy, and their three daughters, along with Devan, gather for times of bonding, laughing and loving, not unlike those Vanessa experienced many years ago.

"I think my most important job is to be a mom. My goal and prayer was that I'd be able to raise my children because my mother didn't have an opportunity to raise her children. And

now that they are raised, and are successful, that's what I'm most proud of."



LaKeisha Fleming is the founder and president of Vision 2:2 Productions, LLC, a multimedia production company creating content for television, film and the internet. She is also a prolific writer, and her company provides magazine article, blog, script and press release writing services, among others. She's a loving wife and a proud homeschooling mother. Follow her blog at www.andthatsmyreality.com.

Right: Ed taking the Oath of Office after being elected Mayor of Fayetteville.

