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Johnson family gets day in court Brother to sister: 'Honesty needs to come out of you'

By Patti Murphy
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HAILEY -- The brother of convicted murderer Sarah Johnson told his younger sister in court Wednesday that he never wanted to hear about her or the murders of his parents again.

"I think some honesty needs to come out of you," Matt Johnson said through tears. "And you need to plead to the court for some forgiveness."

Matt Johnson was one of 11 family members and friends of murder victims Alan and Diane Johnson who took the stand Wednesday during the first day of Sarah Johnson's sentencing hearing. Each of them were given the opportunity to read a statement or speak directly to Sarah about how the murders have impacted their lives.

"One of the ugliest and most horrifying things I've ever had to do, when we sold the house, is to go through and clean up blood, and tissue and hair so someone else could buy it and not be horrified," Matt told his sister from the stand.

He was referring to his parents' Bellevue home in which they were shot to death the morning of Sept. 2, 2003. In March, a jury found 18-year-old Sarah Johnson guilty of shooting her mother in the head while she slept and then shooting her father through the chest as he came out of the shower. Prosecutors said she killed them because they disapproved of her romantic relationship with an older Hispanic immigrant.

"Of all the things I miss, I miss their hugs -- their bear hugs," said Matt Johnson. "I lost the two best friends I ever had."

Then turning to 5th District Court Judge Barry Wood, Matt Johnson said, "Judge, I would like to see the maximum sentence because after tomorrow I don't want to have to hear about her or this event again. I feel she has no remorse and feel she would do it again, except she would do better planning and she would try to get away with it."

Sarah Johnson appeared in court in an orange prison jumpsuit, wearing handcuffs



DEV MUHK KHALSA/The Wood River Journal

Sarah Johnson, right, cries during testimony Wednesday at her sentencing hearing. She is joined, from left, by defense attorneys Bob Pangburn and Mark Rader.

and ankle cuffs during the entire proceedings. She has lost weight since she went through her six-week trial and looked tired. She is expected to speak today during the second and most likely final day of her sentencing hearing.

More than half a dozen of the jurors who convicted Sarah Johnson of the double murder were in the courthouse, but this time instead of sitting in the juror box they sat quietly in the gallery behind Johnson family members.

When asked by a reporter if they would agree to be interviewed, the jurors unanimously refused, with one saying, "We've already said everything we had to say during the trial," presumably referring to their unanimous verdict of guilty.

The hearing at the Blaine County Courthouse is to help Judge Wood determine what sort of sentence Sarah should receive for the crimes she's been convicted of. Several friends and family members who spoke at the hearing requested the maximum sentence for her, which is life in prison with no possibility of parole. According to Idaho law, she must serve at least 10 years for each count, and could also receive an additional 15 years for using a firearm in the commission of the crime.

Blaine County Prosecutor Jim Thomas questioned Blaine County Sheriff Walt Femling about the impact the double homicide has had on the small town of Bellevue.

"The mood in community right off the bat was fear," Femling said. "They didn't know what had happened, or if we had a killer loose in the community. So many people knew Alan and Diane."

Femling said that after seven weeks of investigation they finally had enough evidence to arrest Sarah Johnson, but in the meantime the community was afraid and concerned that no arrests had been made.

"This was one of the toughest cases I've been involved in emotionally," Femling said. "It was the most violent criminal scene I've ever seen, and to know the people made it even more difficult."

Bob Pangburn, Sarah Johnson's defense attorney, called two of his client's remaining friends to express their support.

Neasha Alder, who has known Sarah Johnson for 18 years, said that she has continued to visit Johnson after her arrest and said she is a "loving person and not the selfish monster that she's been painted.

"It doesn't make sense to me to sentence her to prison without chance of parole," Alder said, directly addressing the judge. "Her parents wanted the best for her. I just want to do that for Sarah. Let her show her parents she can move forward from this event and be a good person."

Another friend, Kathy Louise Bauer, said to the Johnson family, "This has been for all of you here, horrific. There is no measure to the loss you've experienced. Sarah and her nuclear family are no more, it's gone."

Addressing comments to Judge Wood, Bauer continued: "This is an extraordinary lose, lose, lose situation, but my hope is, your honor, as a spokesperson for impartiality, you will weigh into your decision the chance for her to do something good."

Other testimony Wednesday included two doctors who discussed Sarah Johnson's mental state and the medication she was taking the day of the murders.

The sentencing hearing continues at 9 a.m. today.

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Relatives speak to Sarah Johnson

"I hope your father looking into your eyes when he was shot will be burned in your mind forever." -- Debbie Davis, younger sister of Diane Johnson

"She is a spoiled rotten brat that thinks only of herself. I can't believe how she could kill the two people in the world who loved her the most." -- Lynne Murrill, sister of Alan Johnson

"How do I describe losing a sister and a brother at the same time, especially when their deaths were so senseless." -- Linda Vavold, sister of Diane Johnson

"Sarah, I'm not talking to the court I'm talking to you. I haven't talked to you since you were arrested. I need to talk to you now Sarah. We have been devastated by this. And the devastation was even worse when we came to the realization of who did it. We lost a daughter and now a granddaughter. We loved you." -- Pat Dishman, mother of Diane Johnson

"You are lovely young woman with so much potential and how you could throw it all away. Your mom and dad were loving people who cared about you, but you have to pay for what you've done. I pray to God that God will be with you in jail." -- Lorna Kolash, close family friend and Sarah Johnson's godmother