



Life After Loss

BY KIMIKO DUGAN

How this veteran mother found life for herself and her son after her husband's death by learning the art of massage therapy.



Sarah Johnston's husband died December 25, 2011, leaving her to raise their son, Connor. Today, Sarah and Connor live in Syracuse, New York, minutes from many of her family members.

On Christmas Day 2011, families across the globe woke up together, opened presents and breakfasted together in warm family homes. On this same day in Fort Worth, Texas, Sarah Johnston lost her husband, and their son, Connor, lost his father, Chris Johnston.

“I begged him to put the gun down,” said Sarah Johnston. “I was holding our son, telling [him] I loved him. He wouldn’t [put it down].”

Chris suffered an undiagnosed mental illness that emerged shortly after he was honorably discharged from the U.S. Navy.

“He started getting paranoid,” said Sarah Johnston. “He would disappear for days at a time. He was spending our money and lying about going to work and missing work. We didn’t know what was going on.”

According to the Congressional Research Service, more than 16,000 active duty service members have died from 2006–2018, leaving spouses, parents, children and other family members behind.

“When we lose someone close to us, we have to rebalance and find a new sense of hope and purpose,” said Sarah Johnston. “For me, it is my son. He is my source of strength and my life has taken direction from providing the best possible life that I can provide for him.”

Today, Sarah is a massage therapist at The Art of Massage: Spa at 500, but prior to her work in the field, she also served her country in the U.S. Navy.

“I joined the Navy to find direction and get my life on track,” said Sarah.



“I hadn’t really been doing anything in terms of a long-term career – in short, I joined out of pure boredom.”

After graduating boot camp, Sarah Johnston worked as an aviation boatswains mate handling technician, and reported to her first duty station at Newport, Va., where she met her husband, Chris.

“I was working on the USS Carl Vinson while it was up for a complete

overhaul,” said Sarah. “Before I knew it, along came this lanky, pale, sarcastic and funny man. During the next few months, we dated, got to know each other and clicked on every level. A few months later, we were married by a justice of the peace.”

In the next few months, Sarah and Chris Johnston maintained their relationship from opposite coasts – Sarah serving at her duty station in



Virginia, and Chris in his work in San Diego, Calif.

“I moved to San Diego after I was honorably discharged so I could be closer to Chris,” said Sarah. “After his time was up and he got out of the Navy, we headed back to Texas with our [baby boy] and lived a few streets over from his parents.”

Life after the military was tough for Chris and their newly-established

household. Chris began to notice signs of addiction and paranoia, according to Sarah Johnston. When she reached out to her mother-in-law and father-in-law, they assured her that it was a phase of life that would pass.

“He was showing signs of mental illness; he was paranoid and clearly suffering something more than just what was on the surface,” Sarah said. “After the incident, I actually

Sarah, a Navy veteran, prepares lunch before beginning her shift at The Spa at 500, where she practices massage therapy and is the spa’s coordinator the Department of Veterans Affairs healthcare.



Sarah enjoys a quiet moment with her son before he leaves for school. Each day, the two await the school bus together, discussing plans, school projects and activities.

found out that he had reached out to his mother for help, and she had said, 'Let's just make it through the holidays.' Had I known that, everything could be different. Connor might still have a father, and I might still have a husband."

On the eve of the Christmas Day that would change everything, Sarah and Chris wrapped presents on what would seem to have been a normal holiday together.

"Something in his head just snapped," said Sarah. "He broke all the windows, he tore up the presents and he disappeared. He didn't show up until the next day. When he saw what he had done he was [distracted.] I begged him to get help and told him that we could fix everything and he wouldn't listen

to me. He started destroying what was left in our house, he smashed my phone so I couldn't call anyone and he grabbed his gun out of the trunk of his car."

Chris Johnston returned to the house and forced Sarah out onto the front lawn.

"He held the gun to my head and said that he wasn't leaving without me," said Sarah. "I begged him to stop, and told him we could get him help and that I was not leaving our son. Then he held the gun to his own head."

A nearby neighbor called the police, and when they arrived, they deemed Chris a danger to himself and the others in the neighborhood.

"In the end, he couldn't kill himself, and he didn't kill me," said

Sarah. "He still had the gun, so the police shot him on the front lawn on Christmas Day while I held my son in my arms."

In 2012, Sarah moved to Syracuse, New York, to be closer to her family and to begin a new chapter of life.

After re-establishing herself in her hometown, Sarah began studying massage therapy and bodywork and discovered the practice to be a form of self-healing.

Her work in the industry began at The Art of Massage: Spa at 500 in downtown Syracuse.

"When I am in a massage session, everything else in my life goes away," said Johnston. "I am in my own little world with my client. My energy is focused toward healing the other person and I heal a little, too. It is so



During a mother-son photoshoot and interview, Sarah coaches Connor on how to salute for a portrait made in memory of his father's naval service.

rewarding to feel their body relax and know that I have helped them take a step toward healing in body and mind."

In addition to beginning a new chapter of life, moving to Syracuse has been a way of keeping Connor connected to his family.

"Most of my family lives nearby," said Sarah. "Connor spends time with his grandparents and my sister, and he plays with his cousins. He's a really bright kid, and he stays upbeat most of the time."

Connor Johnston spends his free time playing sports such as soccer and basketball and enjoys spending time with his family.

"My husband is still with me in [the form of] my son," said Sarah. "Sometimes, it's like he's speaking through him. He will bring up some

deep thoughts beyond what you would ever expect from a nine-year-old, and I find myself lost in it."

In her spare time, Sarah attends Connor's extracurricular events, which include basketball, soccer, and math and science programs.

"My mom is basically my best friend," said Connor. "We do everything together when she's not at work and I'm not at school."

In addition to her work as a massage therapist and manager at the spa, Sarah has helped bolster the relationship between the spa and the Veterans Administration healthcare network.

"One of my favorite things about my job is working with veterans," said Sarah Johnston. "There is a bond between veterans that can't really

be [quantified], but the feeling of knowing I have helped them take a step toward better physical and mental health is priceless. It's the other 'why' behind what I do. Second only to Connor."

For the past few years, Sarah Johnston has studied and practiced massage therapy under a limited permit. In October, she earned full licensure as a bodywork therapist and has taken on a management position at the spa where she works.

"Sarah has been working so hard in the time I've known her and long before," said Ed Griffin-Nolan, a massage therapist and owner of the Spa at 500 and the building that houses the practice. "The world had better get out of the way, [because] there is no stopping her."



Sarah and Connor relax while choosing a movie to watch on a Sunday night. The two spend the weekend playing games, watching movies and spending time with family in the area.



Now that Sarah has earned her full licensure as a bodywork therapist, Griffin-Nolan has expressed interest in her furthering her career.

“Ed is trying to get me to buy the practice,” said Sarah. “I keep feeling myself hesitating. I want to do the best I possibly can for my son and for myself, but the fear of failure hangs around me. I just want to make sure I am building the best possible life for Connor. It means a lot of hard work and it’s exhausting, [day after day] but seeing the young man he is becoming is a true reward. I know his dad would be so incredibly proud.”

Sarah Johnston plans to remain in Syracuse and keeps her husband present in her and Connor’s life through mementos and tokens of his memory, such as a memory quilt made of their favorite clothes.

“If I could tell my dad anything, I would tell him that I have a good life,” said Connor. “I have a dog and a cat and Mom and I are taking care of each other. She doesn’t always tell me, but she misses him. She’s doing so [well] though. She doesn’t let anything stop her. She’s my buddy, best friend and, obviously, my mom.”

Johnston hopes to use massage therapy to continue to improve the lives of people seeking to better their physical and mental health.

“Life scares me,” said Sarah. “It’s all big, scary, ugly and dangerous ... but it is also complicated and beautiful and rewarding. My hope is that anyone who has the opportunity to help another person takes it. I look at my career and what I do now and all I can think is, ‘If I knew what I knew now, maybe I would still have a husband. Connor would still have a father.’ My hope is that if someone needs help, that people would turn right around and help them before their life and the lives of their loved ones are changed forever.”