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Beach trip tragedy hits home

By BOBBY HORECKA, Managing Editor, April 22, 2004 | Posted: Thursday, April 22, 2004 12:00 am

Will you come back to us? We hope so.

Will you hear the crying because you're missed? We hope so.

Will you just walk up the shore and say hello? We hope so.

Ashley McCoy scrawled those words in a notebook Sunday afternoon, just one day after what she called the best day of her life - prom.

Ashley writes poems, hundreds of them, say her parents Dawn and Willie Ivy. "She's got notebooks of them," they say.

But this one's different - it was written on Matagorda Beach while rescuers combed the churning bay waters for her friend, a friend who saved two people's lives before exhaustion and the steady pull of tides claimed his own.

And one of those lives saved was hers, Ashley said, just one day after Yohance Johnson joined her and a group of friends in Sealy for the prom.

Rescuers had still not found the 20-year-old's body as of Thursday press time, though Matagorda County Sheriff's Department officer vowed they wouldn't give up until Johnson was found.

"It's amazing how one can go from such an emotional high to the lows of lows in such a short time," Ashley said of the mere hours between her senior prom and the fateful beach trip when she visited with the newspaper Wednesday. She sat in her living room, feet tucked under her, often staring off to some place far beyond the walls of the house.

Her beach trip had begun simply enough - Ashley, Johnson and friend Tammy Eastman, another Sealy High School senior, took off at about 9 a.m. Sunday. They reached the sands of Matagorda about mid-morning and later decided to hit the waters for a swim.

But that's when the trouble began.



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Although only in waist-deep waters, the waves were choppy and the current was strong, Ashley recalls.

"We were just getting hit by wave after wave," she said. "Then Tammy started to drift off, and then me..."

Ashley said Johnson wasted no time in going after them. He spotted a boy in the water with a boogie board and swam to the two girls, letting them grab the float and then pushing them to shore.

But the waves continued to pound him, Ashley said, and before long, he, too, began to drift away.

"He shouted at us to keep swimming - just keep swimming - and then he was gone," Ashley said.

She ran up the beach screaming for help, and ultimately placed the call to rescuers at 2:17 p.m. Sunday, April 18. The friend she had known for only a short time never resurfaced, but had succeeded getting the two girls to safety.

And Ashley wrote.

We know that you did your best

And by doing so saved the lives of your friends.

You left this world so we could stay

And for this no words can express our happiness and pain.

"We wouldn't be here right now if it weren't for him," Ashley said. "That's why I had to write this down. There are just some things you can't bring yourself to say out loud."

Her parents shared an equal loss for words.

"Before they left for prom, I told him to take care of our girls," Willie Ivy said. "And he did. To sacrifice his life to save our daughter, most people won't do that. And that says a lot about him.

"And I can't even shake the man's hand to say thanks..."

Johnson was a native of Jamaica living in Houston with his mother and stepfather. Eastman, who declined an interview, met him there while she was taking night courses. He planned to gain a few credits before moving on to the University of Texas at San Antonio where he planned to study business.

Family and friends describe Johnson as an athletic and kind-hearted individual, always willing to help others. He was swept away into the bay doing just that, the same way his father died in Jamaica when he was younger, Ashley said.

A private memorial service will be held at Johnson's mother Collette Schloss' home in Houston. The Yohance Johnson Memorial Fund has also been established for those wishing to help his family at Washington Mutual Bank off Westheimer in Houston.

Matagorda County officials have also said they plan to award Johnson with a medal of honor for his acts of heroism at the cost of his own life.

"He's definitely a hero in my book," Ashley said. "And I could never thank him enough for what he did. Wherever he is, I just hope he's happy and safe."