

# Choking crimes should be taken as sign of worse to come

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**ST. LOUIS** • Sarah Billingsley-Walker was strangled, and two young women who did not know her — or each other — had the same reaction when they heard the details.

"That could've been me."

They said that they, too, had been choked by Leonard Johnson Jr., 17, who is charged with first-degree murder in the killing of Billingsley-Walker in March. She was Vashon High School's homecoming queen and co-valedictorian.

Darius Conner, 17, said that Johnson attacked her at another school just two months before the murder. Another woman, 19, who said she was afraid and did not want her name published, said Johnson tried to choke her on a school bus about a year earlier.

Both filed reports with St. Louis police. Both said they never heard anything about their attacks again. Both knew that nothing had happened to Johnson as a result.

Now, the women wonder whether they could have saved Billingsley-Walker by pressing authorities to take their assaults more seriously.

Domestic violence experts say it was the judicial system — not the victims — that faltered when it failed to recognize the deadly significance of someone being choked.

A California prosecutor's study, they say, shows that choking victims are eight times more likely to be choked again — and seven times more likely to become a homicide victim.

The system, experts say, should have treated the women as if they had survived a shooting or stabbing.

It's a reality that Missouri already embraced, on paper. In 2000, it was among the first of now 32 states to declare choking a felony. Illinois has not.

These cases demonstrate that Missouri's hard-line law may be in need of added awareness, said Gael Strack, chief executive officer of the National Family Justice Center Alliance and former city attorney in San Diego.

"This was a preventable homicide," Strack complained. "Had the system taken the first case, even the second, seriously, you wouldn't have had a dead girl because he would have been held accountable and something would have been done."

Johnson himself reported to police in 2009 that his father had tried to strangle him. Not until three years later — after Johnson was charged with killing Billingsley-Walker — did police try to seek charges against the father.

## **EARLY WARNINGS**

Billingsley-Walker's family believes she met Johnson during the three months they attended Vashon together, in late 2009.

Johnson declined to be interviewed for this story, as did his attorney. But police reports, court documents and school records show he had a violent home life, bounced between schools and ran away at times. His mother told police he was bipolar.

On New Year's Eve 2009, Johnson, then 14, told police that his father, Leonard Johnson Sr., had tried to strangle him during an argument. Reports say police tried

to arrest Johnson Sr. at his job, "which was to no avail."

There appeared to be no continuing attempt to arrest Johnson Sr., who according to a police report had been contacted by authorities about 20 days later, after his son tussled with Vashon safety officers.

Johnson Jr. was moved to an alternative school and enrolled in the fall of 2010 at Sumner High School. That's where he met the first girl who claimed he choked her. They rode the same school bus and had music class together.

"He thought he was my boyfriend," she said.

She didn't.

On March 8, 2011, Johnson allegedly confronted her on the bus after seeing her hug another boy. She said he grabbed her by her neck, choked her and stomped on her glasses, according to the police report.

She said she was choked three times before the driver stopped and Johnson fled through an emergency exit.

Her mother pushed her to file a police report, which she did the next day; two witnesses corroborated her account. That March 15, police arrested Johnson, but released him.

The victim said she didn't know what had become of the case. She said she was too scared to testify against him — a decision she now regrets. The only available information from the juvenile court is that he was not convicted in the incident.

After that, Johnson enrolled at another alternative school, Fresh Start South, and met Conner.

She said she had heard about the bus incident but wondered if it was true because he seemed to suffer no consequences. They exchanged numbers in

November.

After she told him she was too young for a serious relationship, she said, he confronted her about it under some stairs in the school basement. It was Jan. 24. Again, she refused to commit. She said his jaw clenched before he put her in a choke hold. Everything around her started to turn black.

"No, I'm not going to let this guy do this to me downstairs where there are no classes and no cameras," she said she thought.

She kicked him. He loosened his grip enough for her to scream. He snatched her cellphone and ran, according to the police report.

Conner ran after him and flagged down a passing police officer. Johnson ran from the officer, who reported him as wanted.

Conner said Johnson had urged her to drop the complaint, so he could go to school without being arrested. "He kept saying, 'I ain't never gonna get caught,' so I was like, 'We'll see what happens,'" she recalled.

About seven weeks later, Conner saw news reports about a teenage girl found dead. She recognized the address in the 3700 block of North 21st Street as Johnson's.

"I knew exactly how he killed her," she said.

## **KILLINGS WITH SUBTLE CLUES**

Alice Burns called police about 9:40 p.m. March 12 after finding Billingsley-Walker, 18, lifeless in her son's bed. With no outward sign of trauma, the death was initially declared suspicious. An autopsy later showed strangulation.

A lack of apparent injury in some choking cases is just one hurdle in building a case, said Strack, a former domestic violence prosecutor for the San Diego city

attorney. "You can strangle someone to death without leaving a mark," Strack said. "That's the main reason why you've got to have training, so officers know what to look for."

When Johnson Jr. had reported the attack by his father, officers photographed the teen and noted red marks on his throat. They also looked for telltale broken blood vessels in his eyes.

After the school bus attack, the investigating officer noted no visible injuries and the victim refused treatment.

In the Conner case, an officer took note of a minor scratch on her neck. She refused medical treatment but said her throat hurt for about a week. That officer obtained a written statement from Conner, referred her to the nonprofit Domestic Violence Intervention Partnership and listed Johnson as wanted for second-degree assault — a felony.

He searched for Johnson, but didn't find him.

Johnson was never arrested in that incident.

The circuit attorney's office was not consulted.

In Johnson's own complaint against his father, it was three years before police proposed formal charges. Circuit Attorney Jennifer Joyce's office refused to file them April 13, and would not discuss why.

But in an interview last week, Joyce said her office recognized the special significance of choking cases and didn't know why police did not forward the earlier ones involving Johnson Sr. and Johnson Jr. to her.

"The police department has a commitment to the issue of domestic violence, but I want to figure out why this happened and prevent it from happening in the future," Joyce said.

Had such cases reached her office, they probably would have gone to Assistant Circuit Attorney Christine Krug.

She said between half and two thirds of domestic assault cases that came to her team involved choking, and about a third to half of them resulted in charges.

"We see choking cases more than any other assault," Krug noted. She said prosecutors sometimes issued charges within hours of an attack.

Joyce said that despite victims who were often uncooperative, good evidence could make a strong prosecution. "A lot of it is how the case is worked up by the police."

Inquires to the police department were referred to Lt. John Harper, commander of the Domestic Abuse Response Team, who said he could not discuss specific cases.

He noted that choking was covered in a four-hour academy class for recruits. It was among topics discussed in a four-hour refresher on domestic violence in the spring of 2009 and is currently a topic in a course about stalking.

St. Louis County police Sgt. Craig Kriska, whose unit reviews every domestic violence report in that jurisdiction, said his agency watched each for red flags. "If we see the magic word of 'choke' on there, you're done," he said. "We don't take it for granted; when we see the word 'choke,' it automatically escalates it for us."

## **CHOKING AS A WARNING**

The murders of two teens by boyfriends in 1995 prompted the San Diego prosecutor's office to study its handling of 300 attempted strangulations, said Strack, then with the office.

The finding: The lack of physical evidence caused the criminal justice system to treat many cases as minor, when they were often precursors to murder.

"The conclusion was that we missed the boat, we did not know how lethal and dangerous choking was," she said. "We treated it as if someone had slapped them in the face. But we owned up to it."

Strack also oversees the federally funded National Strangulation Training Institute, which strives to spread the word to everyone who deals with domestic violence.

"Judges must be trained as well because they could be thinking, 'What's the big deal? You are getting way too carried away with this case,' when setting bail," Strack said.

Juvenile court judges often don't take teens' domestic violence complaints seriously enough, said Eugene Hyman, a retired judge who teaches about the subject at California's Santa Clara University. "The first problem is one of perception and that it's puppy love, so it's not treated as seriously," he said.

Police in St. Paul, Minn., with about 285,000 residents, credited a felony strangulation law passed in that state in 2005 with reducing domestic homicides. But a study by a nonprofit called WATCH found the law was inconsistently applied, with some crimes still charged as misdemeanors and others plea-bargained to lesser charges.

Strack urged use of domestic violence fatality review committees to look for problems and answers. "Any time a victim dies, every community should be reflecting on what happened and what went right and what went wrong," she said. "Because usually something went wrong when a victim dies, and there are clues all over the place."

Meanwhile, Johnson waits in jail, held in lieu of \$850,000 cash-only bail pending trial. Billingsley-Walker's family waits too, and wonders whether Johnson choked others.

After he was charged, someone called the dead teen's sister, Lavonda Walker, to say the caller had been a victim too. "She said she wanted to testify against him,"

Walker recalled. "But I don't know if she ever told the police."

Elisa Crouch and Jennifer Mann of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.