

## Johnson

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Wilson, N.C., charged with taking part in the brutal kidnapping, robbery, rape and murder of Brittany Willis, whose life ended two days before her 18th birthday. An acquaintance of Johnson's, Kenneth Meeks, told investigators that Johnson helped him kill Willis, a star soccer player who had just graduated from high school and was headed to Raleigh's Peace College. Like the Darryl Hunt case, the female victim in this case was white and the suspects are black. Those facts created racial tensions in Wilson, about 50 miles outside of Raleigh, as they did in Winston-Salem after the murder of Deborah Sykes, the woman Hunt was accused of killing.

## Johnson snitches

The credibility of Meeks, just 16 at the time, was never rock solid, according to Johnson's many supporters. Johnson admits that Meeks drove Willis' car to his home after the killing. Johnson says Meeks admitted to killing the teen and insisted that Johnson go with him to the site where Willis' body was left. Afterward, Johnson says, Meeks washed the car in an attempt to destroy evidence. Johnson contends that he went with Meeks because he feared that Meeks would harm him too if he refused.

Eventually Johnson and Julian Deans, another teen that Meeks had confessed to, told Johnson's father, Arthur Johnson, about Meeks' confession. Arthur Johnson took the boys to the police department so that they could tell their stories to authorities.

Barber says that Johnson should have been treated as a hero for speaking up and helping the police bring closure to the Willis family.

"James broke the 'no snitch' rule of the streets," said Barber.

But instead of medals to hang around his neck, Johnson found himself with a capital murder charge hanging over his head. Meeks was arrested and implicated Johnson as an accomplice. Johnson's supporters believe that Meeks made the charge because he was angry that Johnson turned him in. Nevertheless, Johnson was arrested and charged and spent nearly three years in jail waiting for his day in court.

Barber says it's unfathomable that Johnson was ever arrested and charged.

He said, "This case is 10-times worse than what happened in Jena," where six black teens at one time faced attempted murder charges for what was essentially a schoolyard fight with a white classmate.



Brittany Willis



Photo by Kevin Walker

The Rev. Seth O. Lartey greets Beverly Johnson, as her son, James, stands by her side.

The Johnson case surpasses Jena on the injustice meter, according to Barber, because there is no physical or DNA evidence linking Johnson to the crime and Johnson passed two polygraph exams. Earlier this year, Meeks, who pleaded guilty, admitted that he lied about Johnson's involvement and that he acted alone. Even after that admission, prosecutors still did not drop charges against Johnson, creating even more outrage among blacks in Wilson and religious and civil rights officials.

The state NAACP stepped up its efforts — expressing its desire for Johnson to be released from jail to state legislators and even Gov. Easley and Attorney General Roy Cooper.

U.S. Rep. G.K. Butterfield, a native of Wilson whose First Congressional District includes his hometown, has also voiced his concerns about the case to state and federal officials, including Michael Mukasey, the recently-appointed U.S. Attorney General. A former member of the N.C. Supreme Court, Butterfield knows a thing or two about legal matters.

The mounting pressure likely played a hand in Johnson's bail being reduced from \$1 million to \$60,000. In September, Johnson took his first breaths of freedom since the summer 2004, after his parents put up their property in order to bail their son out of jail.

## Forsyth DA involved

There is still the chance that Johnson's freedom may be short-lived. Prosecutors in Wilson have agreed to recuse themselves from the case because of an overwhelming perception that they are biased. The N.C. Administrative Office of the Courts has appointed Belinda Foster, an assistant prosecutor in the office of Forsyth County District Attorney Tom Keith, to serve as a special prosecutor. Foster will investigate and determine if there is significant evidence to charge Johnson with a crime.

As the work of the special prosecutors goes on, the NAACP is working to make as many

people as possible aware of the case, which Barber says is a textbook example of the legal system's callousness toward African Americans. Barber is taking the Johnson family on a statewide tour to publicize the case and raise funds for James Johnson legal defense funds. Stops on Sunday in Winston-Salem also included a visit to Emmanuel Baptist Church, where Hunt and his wife, April, came to show their support. Hunt — who now fights for reform in the criminal justice system through his non profit, The Darryl Hunt Project, for Freedom and Justice — has been one of Johnson's staunchest supporters.

At both churches, Barber made mention of the case's local connection. He asked churchgoers to pray that Special Prosecutor Foster truly works as an independent entity and is not swayed by her colleagues in Wilson. Barber also acknowledged this city's criminal justice past, both the good and bad.

"This is the city that did (jailed) Darryl Hunt, but this is also the city that eventually let Darryl Hunt go," he said at Emmanuel.

DA Keith was not in office when Hunt was originally prosecuted, but critics say that Keith put on blinders when evidence casting doubts on Hunt's guilt surfaced. A call was placed to Keith's office for comment about his office's role in the Johnson investigation, but was not returned by press time.

Stephen Hairston, the president of the Winston-Salem branch of the NAACP, has had his disagreements with Keith prosecutorial style and choices. But Hairston, who was on hand at Goler and Emmanuel Sunday, says he has faith that Keith's office will do the right thing in regard to the Johnson case.

"I think they will be fair," he said. "Tom Keith has always been open with me and has addressed my concerns."

## Cautiously optimistic

James Johnson did not speak publicly at either church. Barber said lawyers have advised Johnson to limit his comments



Keith



Darryl Hunt

because his case is still pending. Affable and boyishly handsome, Johnson appears a far cry from a murderer. Like Darryl Hunt, Johnson is a man of few words. He sat quietly during the church services, sometimes lowering his head, sometimes whispering to his parents. With a big smile Johnson, a former high school soccer standout, greeted every well-wisher that shook his hand.

The Rev. Seth O. Lartey, Goler's pastor, said far too many young, bright and attractive black men are behind bars.

"We could easily have GQ magazine done from prison," said Lartey, who told his flock that Wilson was racially-charged when he lived there in the 1980s. "There are some of the most handsome men, right there in prison."

The Rev. John Mendez, Emmanuel's pastor, told his members that they should be outraged by what has happened to Johnson. Mendez said those that believe in justice cannot afford to rest or celebrate when they win a victory, such as Hunt's release.

"We can't keep quiet because we have one free and that's the end of it," said Mendez, who, as the social action chairman for the General Baptist State Convention, has made the Johnson case a top issue.

Speaking to The Chronicle on behalf of his family, Arthur Johnson said he is keeping the faith about his son's future but is wary as well. It's hard to blame him for that. He never expected his son to be locked away for three years when he took him to the police station.

"He didn't take a lawyer because he wasn't guilty," Barber said, referring to that day in 2004 at the police station. "He didn't ask for immunity, because he wasn't guilty."

Arthur Johnson thought that he was doing the right and moral thing by prompting his son to tell the truth. Now that he has seen that the criminal justice system can play by a different set of rules, Arthur Johnson says the family is praying for the best yet bracing themselves for the worst.

"It is still up in the air," he said of his son's case. "As African Americans, we always have to be on our toes. We still have some fighting to do."

The NAACP has set up a Web site with more information about the James Johnson case. The site, [www.ncprosecutorialmisconduct.com](http://www.ncprosecutorialmisconduct.com), also includes a petition. To give to the defense fund, send donations to The James Johnson Legal Defense Fund, 514 Deans St., Wilson, N.C., 27893. Family and friends have also set up a tribute site for Brittany Willis at [www.thebrittany.org](http://www.thebrittany.org).

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