

Grieving mother's advice to Bush: 'Bring our boys home'

By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice
WASHINGTON (NNPA) — The mother of an American soldier killed in a recent missile attack on a CH-47 Chinook helicopter in Iraq has a message that she says President Bush needs to hear.

"If I could talk to the president myself, right now, I would tell him, 'Find a plan to bring our boys home,'" says Harriet Elaine Johnson of Cope, S. C., the mother of U. S. Army Specialist Darius T. Jennings. "They're telling us, 'We're going to kill your

American soldiers,' and it doesn't seem like the American leaders are listening... Let us not use our babies at the expense of the country to try to prove some kind of power struggle."

Jennings was one of 16 U. S. Army soldiers killed when the helicopter was shot down Nov. 2 by a missile near Fallujah. His death came less than two weeks before his 23rd birthday. Ironically, last Saturday, the day of Jennings' funeral, two American Black Hawk helicopters collided in midair and crashed near

Mosul, killing at least 17 American soldiers who were aboard.

"I feel quite sure if they had some kids over there, they would have already come up with a plan," Johnson says. "From my understanding, I think all of [Bush's] kids are living. So, he cannot feel what I'm feeling... He'll never be able to feel my sympathy until he walks in my shoes."

Pentagon Spokesman Maj. Steve Stover says the military understands the suffering of families of loved ones killed in the war.

"I know a lot of people ask us, 'Well, what do you think about being there?' Well, you know what? In those respects, we don't," he says. "We're soldiers. We go where we're told. If the president tells us to go, we go. We trust our elected leaders, not only the president, but our Congress, who makes those decisions. We don't second-guess them."

Not only has neither Bush nor many Congressional leaders not walked in Johnson's shoes, they didn't take the risk her deceased son took,

either.

Rather than serve on active duty, Bush joined the Texas Air National Guard in 1968.

And he has denied widespread reports that he didn't report for drill duty from May 1972 to April 1973 while he lived in Alabama and worked on the U.S. Senate campaign of former postmaster general Winton M. Blount. Bush says he fulfilled his guard service locally on weekends.

Vice President Dick Cheney used student and marriage deferments to avoid

military service. None of the top Republican elected leaders served in the military. Neither Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Senate Majority Whip Don Nickles, House Speaker Dennis Hastert, nor House Majority Whip Roy Blunt served in the Armed Forces.

On the Democratic side, Senate Democratic Leader Tom Daschle served three years as an intelligence officer in the U. S. Air Force Strategic Air Command, but neither House Democratic

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Former student's death traumatizes teachers

By Robin King-Clarkson and Kevin Alexander Gray
Special to Sentinel-Voice

ORANGEBURG, SC (NNPA) — For Joseph Williams, the former science teacher of U.S. Army Specialist Darius T. Jennings, it represented his worst fear.

"I did not want to speak over the coffin of one of my students," Williams said at funeral services here for Jennings. "I did love Darius like he was my son, and this hurts me in my heart."

Another former teacher, Dorothea Boyd, said Jennings taught her "it was not just enough to give the required curriculum. It is also necessary to care about and embrace the student — to nurture with love."

There was nothing but love shown here last Saturday for Jennings.

On Nov. 2, Jennings was one of 16 soldiers killed in the downing of an Army Chinook helicopter carrying him and other troops to the Baghdad International Airport for transport back to the states for some well deserved leave time. Jennings was the third graduate of Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School to die in Iraq. Before him were Army Sgt. Anthony O. Thompson, 26, and Pfc. Vorn J. Mack, 19.

Jennings joined the Army after graduating from Orangeburg-Wilkinson High School in 2000. His parents and school guidance teachers said he wanted to be a soldier. He had also told his family that he eventually wanted to go to college, become a photographer and mentor young people.

Like most kids he joined the United States Army in June 2001 to get ahead.

Jennings, 22, stationed at Fort Carson, was assigned to the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment. When the United States went to war, his unit was deployed to Iraq.

"We were worried about him from day one, ever since he went over there," said his father, John Johnson. "He was over there a couple of months before we heard from him."

About two weeks before his death, his mother, Harriet Johnson said Darius told her "he was ready to come home." "Before, he had often started his sentences with, 'Mama, when I get home...' but in his more recent call, he was plain. He said, 'I'm tired, I'm not used to this.'"

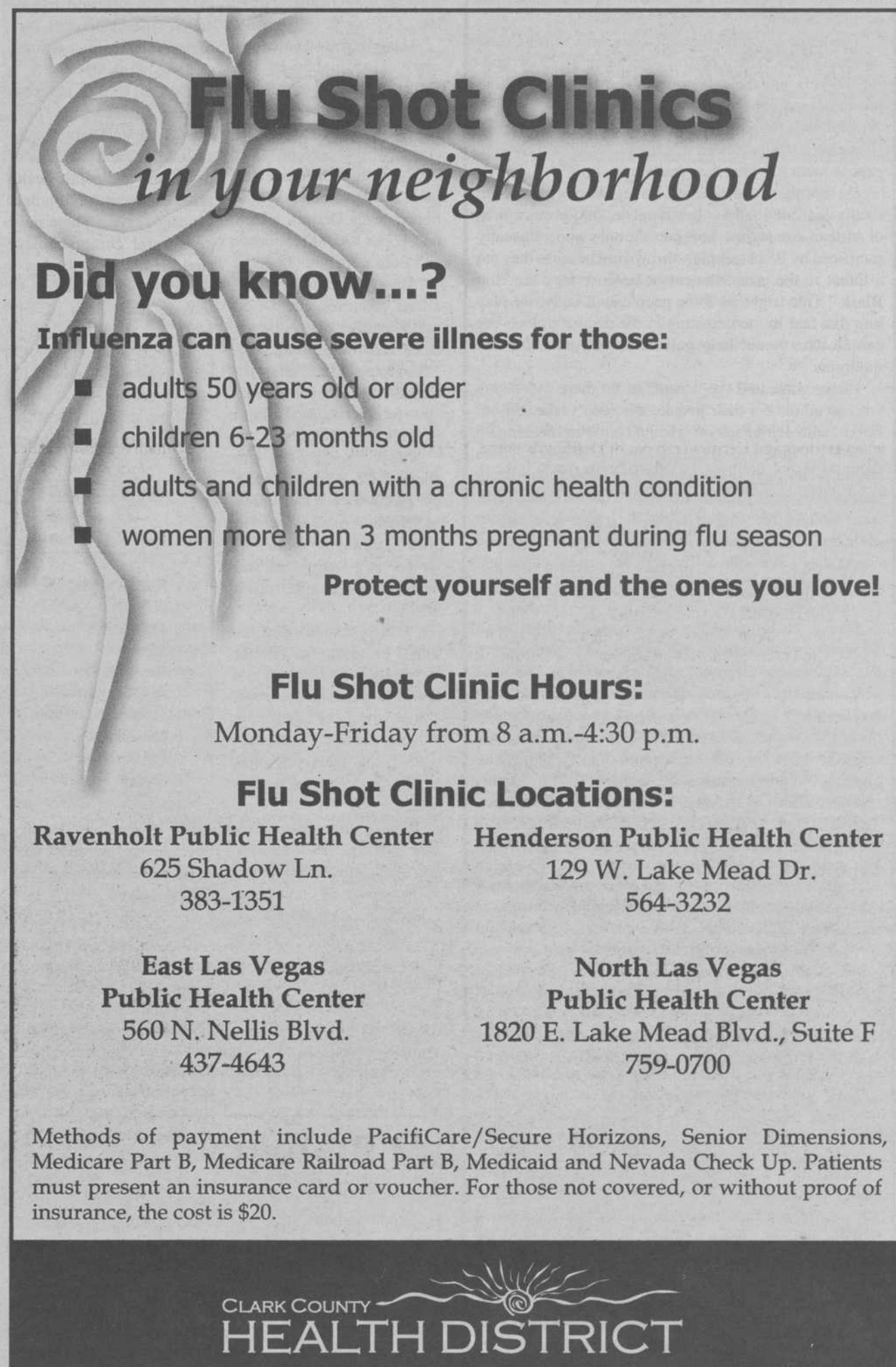
Jennings is one of 10 South Carolinians killed in Iraq since the conflict began early this year. Army Sgt. George Edward Buggs holds the unfortunate distinction of being the 1st South Carolinian killed in the war. The Barnwell native was killed March 22, 2003.

Thus far, of the 10 South Carolinians killed in action, 6 are African American and 4 white. Others killed in action: USAF Staff Sgt. Patrick Lee Griffin, Jr.; USNG Pvt. Algernon Adams; USA Pfc. Michael Adams; USA Spec. Orenthal J. Smith and USMC Pvt. Nolen R. Hutchings.

Also buried on Saturday was Army Staff Sgt. Paul Neff, II, 30 of Fort Mill who died when his Black Hawk Helicopter was shot down by a missile attack. Neff's burial was held in Michigan.

As of this week, more than 400 Americans had died in the Iraq war. Of those, 58 have been African-American, representing

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