

Kansas City Star, The (MO)

2007-09-14

Section: FRONT

Edition: 2

Page: A1

Precious Doe's mother pleads guilty to felony murder

JOE LAMBE, The Kansas City Star

A nameless, decapitated little girl who made all of Kansas City care about murdered children received a little justice Thursday, more than six years after she died.

Michelle M. Johnson -- the mother of the girl long known only as **Precious Doe** -- admitted her role in her daughter's murder.

Johnson pleaded guilty to felony second-degree murder, endangering the welfare of a child, abandonment of a corpse and tampering with physical evidence -- all related to the death of 3-year-old Erica Green.

As part of her plea agreement, Johnson, 32, is expected to testify in the February death penalty trial of her husband, Harrell Johnson, 28. He is accused of inflicting Erica's fatal injuries inside the Kansas City house where the Johnsons allegedly let Erica slowly die before dumping her body in nearby woods.

In exchange for Michelle Johnson's plea and testimony, Jackson County prosecutors will recommend a 25-year sentence.

Johnson wore jail-suit orange with shackles and answered yes Thursday to questions describing her crimes. She admitted she did not seek medical help for Erica after Harrell Johnson kicked the child in the head and put her into a coma for hours. She admitted leaving the decapitated corpse and helping hide the head.

Assistant prosecutor Tim Dollar asked her, "You understand but for your agreement to provide testimony, the state would not have entered into this agreement?"

"Yes sir," she said.

Circuit Judge John O'Malley will sentence her after she testifies against her husband, whom she married in Oklahoma about a year after Erica died.

After the plea, Jackson County Prosecutor Jim Kanatzar and others gathered outside the courtroom to speak about the horrible crime that Kansas Citians never will forget.

The plea deal will help convict Harrell Johnson and reflects that his wife was less culpable, Kanatzar said, adding: "It holds her accountable."

Alvin Brooks, a former city councilman, called the plea a step forward in a case that affected not only the Kansas City area but also the nation.

"Anytime a baby is tormented like this and ends up being a murder victim, it should touch all of us, and it did," he said. "It touched the hearts and the very being of everyone who heard about it." **Precious Doe** may not have had a name for years but she was far from a nameless murder victim -- she made people care about murder, said Alonzo Washington, an anti-crime crusader who helped keep public interest in the case alive.

It made people realize, he said, that "when we throw away our children, we throw away our future."

Police Sgt. Dave Bernard, who worked on the case to the point of obsession for years, praised prosecutors for "a critical step to get this witness on board."

The plea is the latest development in a case that rallied an outraged community.

Police officers searching for a lost elderly man found Erica's body April 28, 2001, near 59th Street and Kensington Avenue. Three days later, a volunteer searcher found Erica's head in a trash bag.

Community members distributed fliers about the case, came up with the **Precious Doe** nickname and demanded to know the girl's real name and who killed her. Artists produced likenesses of her face in an effort to help identify her. Hundreds attended her burial in December 2002. But the mystery continued.

Police exhumed her body in July 2003 to create a new bust of her likeness -- the fourth image police released, and the fourth that failed to generate key tips.

About a year later, in July 2004, a tipster from Oklahoma started calling police and telling them that his grandson's wife, Michelle Johnson, had told him she was **Precious Doe's** mother and that her husband killed the girl. The tipster called police again and again -- about 50 times -- before also responding to a newspaper advertisement about the case in spring 2005. After that, detectives finally took the tipster seriously and broke the case in days.

So the community finally learned the name of the child Michelle Johnson gave birth to in prison -- a girl raised for her first three years by her Oklahoma foster mother, Betty Brown.

Two years ago, Brown said her life changed when she learned of Erica's murder. She cried every day thinking of the girl's final days of abuse, she said.

"The hurt is still there," she said. "I miss my baby. ... Nothing can replace her."

Brown said Erica loved eating cereal as she watched "Teletubbies" on TV, loved the color pink and ate whatever food was put in front of her.

"She didn't cry unless she wanted something. The minute she got what she wanted, her crying was over."

Harrell Johnson is charged with ending her crying forever.

According to court records:

Michelle and Harrell Johnson drove Erica to Kansas City where they stayed with friends. One night when Erica would not go to bed, Harrell Johnson, high on PCP and alcohol, struck Erica and knocked her head against the floor. The couple -- who did not get help as the girl lay dying for about 10 hours -- later sneaked the body out of the house, cut off her head with hedge clippers and dumped the body in the woods.

It was four long years before anyone knew her name.

In that time, Bernard became so obsessed with investigating the case that his family even set an extra plate for the unidentified girl at holiday meals. His wife said he suffered nightmares and worked relentlessly to solve the case as family members stood by, helpless.

Bernard and his 19-year-old son helped carry Erica's white casket from the hearse to her grave when Erica was reburied at Memorial Park Cemetery in August 2005. Bernard's wife, Marla Bernard, wrote a poem that she read during the service.

"She's lived with us every day," Marla Bernard said then.

For years, the little girl known only as **Precious Doe** lived with many others in Kansas City, too. A **Precious Doe** timeline

April 28, 2001: Police officers searching for a missing elderly man find a young girl's decapitated body in woods near 59th Street and Kensington Avenue. Three days later, a volunteer searcher finds her head in a trash bag about 100 yards away.

May 3, 2001: Outraged members of the community begin calling the unidentified girl **Precious Doe**.

Sept. 14, 2003: Police release a fourth likeness, a soft-clay bust, of **Precious Doe**.

July 2004: A tipster from Oklahoma begins calling Kansas City police to report that Michelle Johnson is **Precious Doe's** mom.

May 4, 2005: Following renewed calls from the tipster, Kansas City detectives head to Oklahoma to interview Michelle and Harrell Johnson.

May 5, 2005: Police announce that Erica Michelle Marie Green, age 3, was **Precious Doe**. Authorities charge her mother, Michelle Johnson, and her mother's husband, Harrell Johnson. Thursday: Michelle Johnson pleads guilty to second-degree murder and other charges.

Feb. 25, 2008: Harrell Johnson's capital murder trial is to begin in Jackson County.

@ Go to KansasCity.com for video of the case.