

By Debra Beyer

# From Combat to Classroom

*Columbia College Hollywood student survives war and aims for a career making movies*

**Lajuan Johnson has his sights set on the big screen. The 26-year-old budding filmmaker and cinema major at Columbia College Hollywood lives for telling the story, directing the scene and getting the shot.**

But just a few years ago, Johnson had an entirely different aim: survival. He wasn't behind the camera, but in a war zone in Iraq, his life unraveling like a dropped reel of film.

At 19 years old, Johnson answered the call of duty. His mother, Robin Johnson, had suddenly lost her job and her then-husband had left their Long Beach home. Johnson's sister, Danielle Wilson, had been accepted at several universities and was eager to get started on her education. Johnson joined

the Navy to support his family.

"I thought if I went into the service and had money coming in I could support them for a while," said Johnson. "I had attended one year at Vanguard University [in Costa Mesa] and my mother really wanted me to stay in school. She was worried, but I said to her, 'It's going to be fine, it's not like there's a war going on.'"

The day after Johnson finished boot camp was Sept. 11, 2001.

He was sent immediately to

Camp Pendleton in Oceanside for training and then shipped out to Iraq, serving at first as a medical corpsman.

"It was an incredible set of circumstances — anything that could go wrong, did. They were sending everyone out," said Johnson, who spent nine months of his five years of service in war-torn Iraq.

Just a few months into the tour, he was on patrol with a group of Marines when gunfire erupted and a bullet struck his right arm.

"It happened really fast. The bullet grazed my arm and it wasn't any big deal," said Johnson. "We treated the wound and I was fine until I went home for Christmas."

But Johnson soon developed crippling pain in his right hip, caused by a staph infection that



Lajuan Johnson served in Iraq and the Persian Gulf before enrolling in film school.

had developed in his hip and lower spine. He was bedridden and in extreme pain.

After a few months of recuperation, Johnson was sent to an aircraft carrier that was stationed in Japan and which soon moved into the Persian Gulf. He served in an HS14 helicopter search-and-rescue squadron, flying missions

to find downed jets and crew.

"Unfortunately, we never rescued anyone on any of my missions — no one survived," Johnson said quietly. "I knew several of the pilots who died; I'm still dealing with that."

Thrust into life-threatening situations on the ground and

See COMBAT, Pg. 12

**Combat** Continued from Pg. 11

in the air, Johnson said his time at sea proved to be the most nerve-racking ride.

"There were a lot of sea mines that we always had to look out for and every time small boats came by we were called to battle stations.... Some guys couldn't take it," he recalled. "On the ground you can hide, take cover, on the ship, you feel trapped, you have no control. I used to just go to sleep hoping I'd wake up in the morning. I didn't like being this war person, having guns — it wasn't me, it didn't fit."

Johnson found release from the stresses of combat in a dream he'd put on hold. It was dream that extended all the way back to his childhood when his family held Friday movie nights, introducing him to such films as "Glory" and "The Shawshank Redemption."

"I was so moved by 'Glory,'

I rented it every week for four months," said Johnson. "Then 'Shawshank' and the theme of hope and never giving up... I knew I wanted to make great films like that."

Johnson's mother wrote to him in Iraq, reminding him of his childhood dream. He started to write his first screenplay on little pieces of paper. Then, instead of his usual care package filled with cookies and magazines, she sent him a used laptop with Final Draft screenwriting software. "I worked [on my script] every second I had from then on," said Johnson.

But Johnson's creative pursuits were held in contempt by some fellow crew members.

"A lot of the guys in my division knew I was working on something, but didn't know what," he explained. "I had this big wonderful stack of pages of my first screenplay and put them in my box of personal stuff. One day I left for a bit and

came back to find my screenplay torn up and in the trash. I said 'Who did this?' and they just laughed like it was a joke."

Johnson said his peers mocked him, but he held fast to his dream.

"I understood that we were in a world where people were hurting and they were afraid of unique things," he said. "They kept telling me I'd never be a filmmaker and to stop living this fantasy — it became a daily thing. But I just printed out the script again and locked it away and kept working."

"This is why my favorite films are about hope and the underdog... those are about me. Being in this school [Columbia College] and learning and making films is a huge victory for me. I am so thankful to be here," said Johnson, who started at Columbia College Hollywood the day after his exit from the Navy in July of 2006.

"The stuff that has happened

in this man's life since enlisting — 9/11, the years in the service, the staph infection — and then he enrolled at Columbia the day after leaving the service. [It] is not only noble, it's honorable," said Richard Kobritz, Columbia College president and CEO. "It's an amazing journey, a single-minded pursuit, and that we can share a part of his journey and help effect his success is wonderful."

Johnson is now a senior, studying directing and producing at CCH, an accredited school of film, television and visual arts located in Tarzana. The school, open now for more than 55 years, offers two-year associate of arts and four-year bachelor's of fine arts degrees in cinema or cinema/television, with a focus on producing, directing, screenwriting, cinematography or editing.

The curriculum fuses "art, academics and ambition" in a hands-on interactive learning environment that features state-

of-the-art shooting facilities, pre-production computer labs, TV studios, post-production and editing suites, two projection theaters and a library. Every student must complete at least two projects, which can serve as a demo reel, a calling card as they enter the professional arena.

"I'm very proud to be at Columbia," said Johnson, whose tuition is supplemented by the Montgomery G.I. Bill, which provides educational funding for service personnel and veterans. "I got accepted at several film schools, but Columbia was the only one at the time that offered a B.A. degree. It was more affordable, too — but mostly it's a small school with a very supportive environment. All the teachers want to help. And it's very hands-on."

The CCH motto is "Shoot first and ask questions later."

"So many schools teach years of theory, but you don't know

See COMBAT, Pg. 14

**Combat** Continued from Pg. 12

how to shoot a movie," said Johnson. "Columbia makes sure you know why you're doing it. In one class, Editing Practice and Theory, we'll spend two hours watching a movie then talk about the shots and editing, then we'll go in and actually edit it."

Johnson, who lives in Northridge, has written, directed and/or produced 11 short films, including one that was recently screened at the Brilliant Light International Film Festival at Raleigh Studios in Los Angeles. He has two full-length features on deck, is interning at production companies and studios and aspires to "work in film development and be able to control things and tell my own stories visually," he said.

But for now, Johnson isn't keen on turning his war experience into a movie.

"The flashbacks are enough - I wish I could erase those images," said Johnson, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. "A lot of people who had

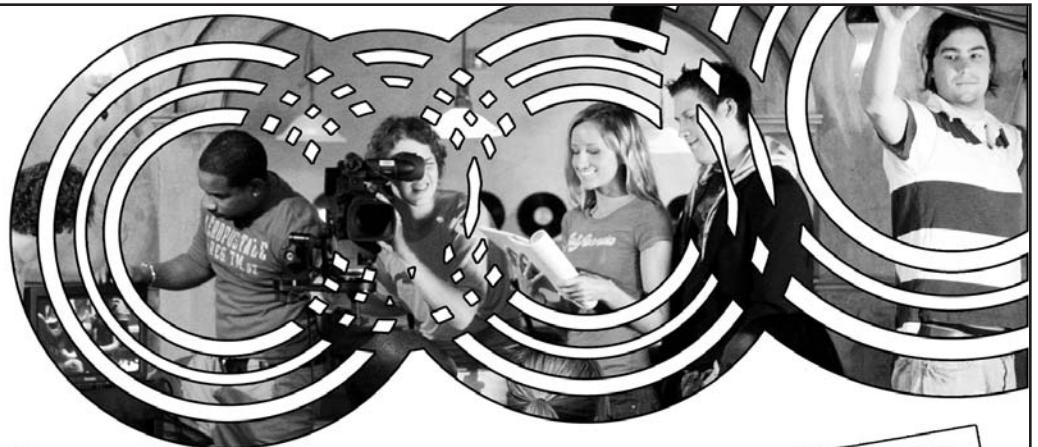
nothing to do with [the war] got hurt the most, and I'm dealing with the friends I lost, asking, 'Why did I make it home and they didn't?' It haunts me.

"But I believe all I can do is live my life to the best of my ability and keep going in the right direction to honor these guys. So I'd rather write about the value of life or tell the other side. My script 'The Dependents' is based on what mothers and siblings and spouses go through when their loved ones are at war. I want my films to have hope."

This summer, Johnson will begin his thesis film project from his script "Every Morning I Kiss the Sun."

"I'm a survivor. Every day I go to the school I'm grateful and give it all I have. To be able to make films now and actually be good at it, I know I can be victorious despite the odds. If my life and my example and storytelling can change someone else's life, then that's what I want to do." ■

*Debra Beyer is a freelance writer based in Glendale.*



## Come find your focus.

There's film school, and then there's CCH. Here you learn the whole art of film, and the whole business - from Emmy and Oscar winning professionals. You graduate ready to do the job, and ready to get the job. And you graduate with a serious, NASAD-accredited BFA.

Don't just go to film school - find your focus, at CCH.

 Columbia College Hollywood  
The film school with focus.

**CCH Open House**  
Sat. June 14, 11AM - 3PM  
Tour the school. Work a Panaflex.  
Get focused!  
RSVP: [admissions@columbiacollege.edu](mailto:admissions@columbiacollege.edu)

18618 Oxnard St.  
Tarzana, CA 91356

1-800-785-0585

[www.columbiacollege.edu](http://www.columbiacollege.edu)