



# Johnny Craver

On the anniversary of his death in Iraq a wife remembers a soldier strong and loving, a devoted father ... gone forever

By Britney Porter

Up on a hill in Leonard, Texas, about 30 minutes northeast of McKinney, a battalion of flood lights illuminate an industrial-size American flag propped on a pole standing tall. Two large oak trees accompany the red, white and blue, not rendering a salute but swaying in the morning sun. The younger oak tree marks the grave of Johnny Craver, a 37-year-old Ranger who was killed in Baghdad one year ago this October.

Natalie Craver sits on a bench situated between two cedar trees. She gazes at a flower bed hugging a wrought-iron fence. Deep-sounding hollow wind chimes rumble in the wind.

“Shhh, Mama, do you hear that?” whispers Emma Jo Craver. “That sounds like Daddy.”

Natalie knows it is the wind chimes. They echo a low, resonating sound like Johnny’s voice.

Like a father’s voice ... a man who stood 6 feet tall and weighed 215 pounds. A father of three: 12-year-old Savannah, 10-year-old Caelen, and 4-year-old Emma Jo.

Johnny left for Iraq on July 14, 2006. He and Natalie closed on a house that they built in Fort Hood at 9 a.m. He left at 3 p.m. The 2nd lieutenant and U. S. Army Ranger instructor was to return home November 23 – one month after his death.

Johnny’s obituary in the paper read: “Johnny Keith Craver, 37, of Harker Heights, Texas, passed away Oct. 13, 2006 in Baghdad, Iraq. ... In lieu of flowers, contributions can be made ‘In Memory of Johnny Craver’ to the Boys and Girls Clubs of Collin County, 701 South Church St., McKinney, Texas 75069.”

When representatives at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Collin County (BGCCC) read his obituary and heard about Johnny’s involvement in the club, the BGCCC Alumni Association was formed. Today, Natalie is the chair of the association and said, “This is a way for me to honor him.”

Johnny was around 9 years old when he joined the BGCCC. “One day Johnny got beat up and he went to his dad and said, ‘Dad I need to learn how to fight.’ So his dad took him to the club and signed him up for karate,” said Natalie.

## Fallen soldier's memory will live on through the Boys & Girls Clubs of Collin County

Johnny walked a mile-and-a-half from where he lived on Leland Avenue, two blocks from Hwy. 380, to the BGCCC on Church Street, until he could drive.

"When I started dating him in '93, he still went," said Natalie. "He began kick boxing and competed all over Texas. But when he was around 22, he was in a bad car accident and shattered the bones in his face and broke his skull. After surgery, the doctor told him he had to stop, but he still went to train and help teach. Johnny was a leader to so many young people that looked up to him."

He was a leader at the BGCCC, and as a soldier in the military and a husband at home. Johnny and Natalie married on November 22, 1994. Both were living in McKinney and met through mutual friends. He was in the National Guard and went to Collin County Community College at night, paying for it all himself.

After Collin College, Johnny pursued a bachelor's degree in business at Troy State University in Alabama. In fact, he had one class left before finishing his degree. But he didn't make it home in time to start school in January.

Like most military families, the Cravers traveled across the country from Washington and North Carolina to Georgia and even Hawaii. "Our first duty station was Washington state," said Natalie. "We were there for only two weeks and then he left, so it was just me and Savannah, who was 9 months old. We were in Washington for a year and then Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for a year, and then Hawaii for three years."

When they were stationed in Hawaii, Natalie started school at Leeward, the satellite campus of the University of Hawaii, and she waited tables in the summer. After graduation, she became employed at the Red Cross as the Health and Safety Director. "In my mind, as much as I didn't want to believe it, I thought I may not have Johnny and I'd have to support myself," said Natalie. "The day that he was killed, I didn't know

it. You think there's gonna be a crack in the earth or something."

Natalie reflected on The Day. "We moved to Texas last July. We had come up to Celina for the weekend to watch my cousin play football; he's the quarterback for the Bobcats. We lived away for so long that being at the game with my family was so nice. I thought, 'Wow, we're going to get to do this all the time. We live in Texas now.'"

She continued, "As I was standing on that football field – we had won the game and the kids were rolling around on the field playing with their cousin – I looked up at the sky and thought, 'If he doesn't come home, this is where we belong.'"

"The previous night, Johnny called to hear about the weekend's plans. I said, 'We're going to the football game Friday night and the State Fair Saturday. Tomorrow is your granny's birthday and I'm gonna take her to lunch. Why don't you try to call?'"

On Friday, Natalie drove to Dallas and took Johnny's Granny to lunch, but he never called. She tried calling him, but no one answered.

The next morning, a white sedan pulled up to the Craver home. Soldiers in full-dress uniform rang the doorbell. No one was home, so they walked to the neighbors to ask about Natalie's whereabouts.

"My neighbor's husband was in Iraq, too, so when

they knocked on her door, she got the scare of a lifetime. She said that that was the worse day of her life, and I wanted to say that should be the *best* day of your life. Your husband came home."

Natalie was at her dad's house in Denton. She and the three children returned from the State Fair, bathed, and put on their pajamas. The doorbell rang at about 9:30 p.m. "Dad cracked opened the door and I'll never forget the look on his face," said Natalie. "He knew that he was about to open the door and it was going to be the worse thing ever."



*Johnny and Natalie's last photo together before he left for Iraq.*

"Dad cracked opened the door and I'll never forget the look on his face. He knew that he was about to open the door and it was going to be the worse thing ever."

Photos courtesy Natalie Craver



“Johnny would tell the kids, ‘I have to go over there so that other daddies can come home and be with their kids.’”

*Natalie holds on tight to Johnny before he leaves for Iraq. The couple married November 24, 1994 and were talking about renewing their wedding vows days before Johnny died in Iraq.*

After Natalie found out the news, family and friends rushed to Denton. “I’ll never forget it. I was sitting in my dad’s bathroom because the soldiers were still there and I just had to get away. I was on the floor in front of the bathtub and I remember my brother Neil running around the corner and *sliding* across the floor to me. I had Clay, my other brother, on the phone and I dropped the phone and we laid on the floor and cried together.”

Natalie wipes her face as she recalls the scene. She hugs Emma Jo sitting in her lap. “Johnny was there for all the births of our children,” she says. “We would be in these military hospitals and he’d be the only dad, because other women had spouses who were deployed. Johnny would tell the kids, ‘I have to go over there so that other daddies can come home and be with their kids.’”

Natalie takes a deep breath and rests her head on Emma Jo’s golden



*From left, Caelen, 10, Emma Jo, 4, and Savannah, 12, sit tight with their Mama, Natalie, 34, who lost her husband Johnny in Iraq one year ago this October.*

hair. “I really don’t think Johnny ever thought he *wasn’t* coming home. ... But when he left, he knew that he was loved. ... He knew that he was our world, and we knew that we were his.”

Natalie stared blankly at the soldier standing in the doorway.

“Oh my God, no,” she said.

“Yes,” he whispered softly.

Immediately, she thought about the kids. “Go to the kitchen. Go, go, go,” she yelled.

“What is it?” said Caelen.

“It’s Dad. It’s Dad,” said Savannah.

Natalie looked at Savannah. They were so much alike. They shared more than those deep green eyes. She was the oldest child; they had been through it all together. Natalie didn’t have to say a word.

“Dad’s dead,” said Savannah.

Caelen broke down in tears and began screaming, “He’s my best friend. ... He’s my best friend!”

Natalie picked him up and carried him to the bedroom. Johnny and Caelen were the boys in the house. They went hunting together and to all the ball games. They’d go to the corner store after a game and get a brownie and Big Red.

*Editor’s note: Natalie Craver is looking for former Boys and Girls Clubs members from across the country who live or work in Collin County to become a part of the BGCCC Alumni Association. Natalie has set a 100-member goal by year’s end. For more information, call the BGCCC administrative offices at 214-544-8924.*