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Memories of Jamaal Addison shine brightly  
Mourners gather on the fourth anniversary of the soldier's death

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More than 100 people gathered beneath an azure sky last week to honor Army Spc. Jamaal Addison, the first Georgia soldier to die in the 4-year-old Iraq war.

"We're so proud of you," said Shawn Smith, who emotionally recounted riding bicycles with Addison as a youngster.

Jamaal Addison, a graduate of DeKalb County's Lakeside High School, was 22 years old on March 23, 2003, when his company — the 507th Maintenance, stationed at Fort Bliss, Texas — was ambushed near Nasiriyah, 230 miles south of Baghdad.

Friday's memorial service, at Hillandale Memorial Park in Lithonia, was the fourth in what has become an annual rite. Two young women from the Hopeday Theater Dance Group performed a spirited "praise dance." Mourners read poems, offered reflections and sang songs. Blue and white balloons anchored a spot near Addison's grave. DeKalb Chief Executive Officer Vernon Jones was among those offering remarks.

Kevin Addison told the crowd that he was watching a National Basketball Association game on television when he switched to CNN and learned that his son's unit had come under attack. He called Jamaal's mother, Patricia Roberts, and said, "Something terrible has happened."

Jamaal Addison's death, his father said, was "the worst thing that could happen to this family. He always had a solution to every problem. He was the go-to guy.

"Jamaal was my MVP — my most valued person."

As an American flag fluttered in the breeze, Kevin Addison spoke about his anger at the war that took his son's life. Jamaal's mother has spent the past four years as an anti-war activist.

On Friday, she smiled when presented with an "American Hero" quilt. And she watched with pride as her 5-year-old grandson, "Little Jamaal," was given a child-size replica. Roberts has been helping to rear the boy since his father's death.

"When my son was killed, so much of me went with him," she said. "I asked God, 'What does this mean?' And he said, 'You must use his life to help others.' "

She established the Jamaal Addison Motivational Foundation. "We have to come together to help our youth," Roberts said.

Toward the end of the service, Marietta artist Lisa Gleim-Jonas made a presentation on behalf of Art From the Heart, a volunteer effort by the Atlanta Fine Arts League to paint portraits of those who have died in the war.

"May this portrait bring you much peace and happiness," she told the family.

As she and others unveiled the portrait of a smiling Jamaal Addison, the crowd applauded.

"That is gorgeous," said Addison's aunt, Catherine Walcott of Lithonia.

As the Wardlaw Brothers quartet sang the hymn "Amazing Grace," Walcott and her daughter Lauren hugged each other and wept.

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