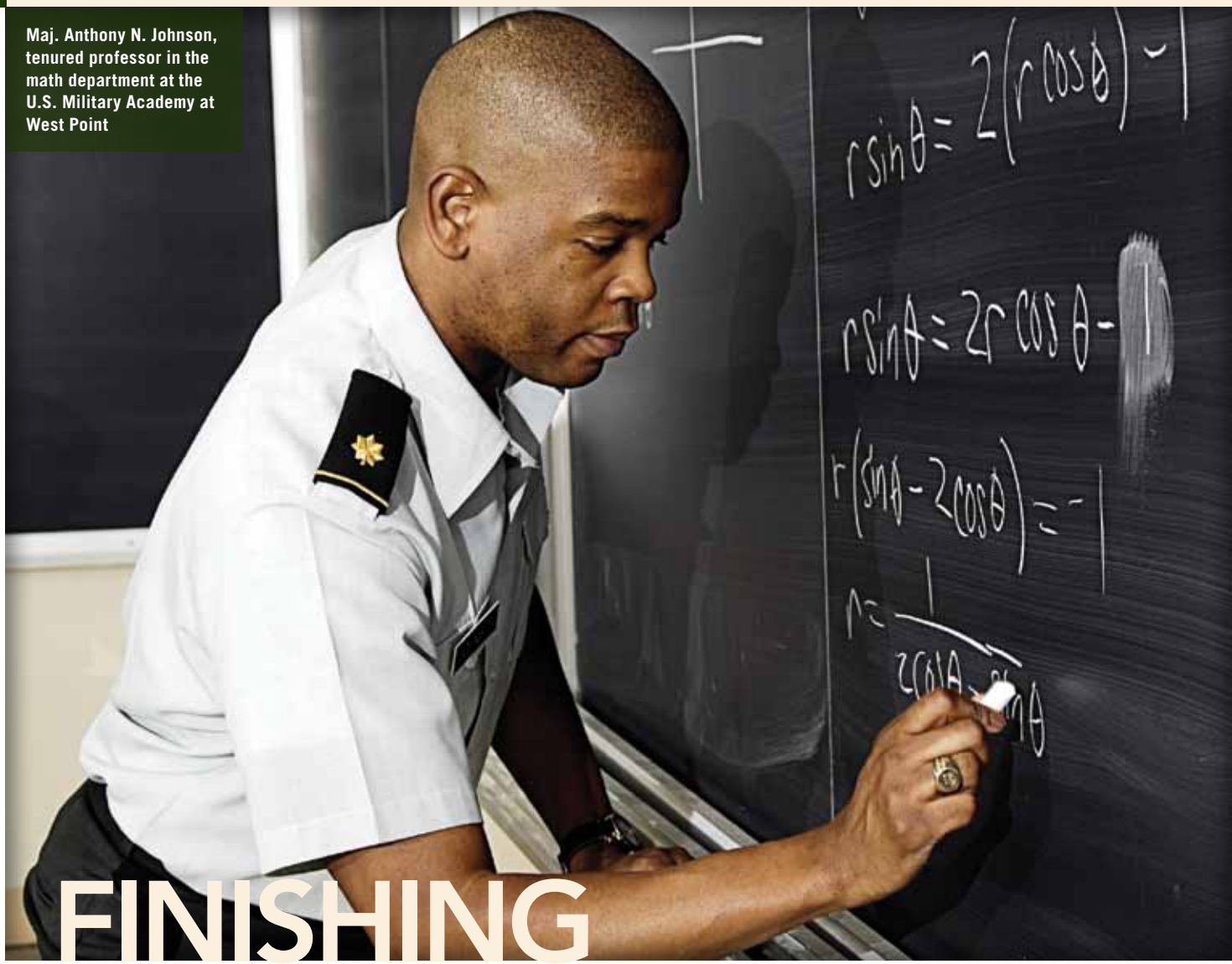

Maj. Anthony N. Johnson, tenured professor in the math department at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point

FINISHING 'ARMY STRONG'

Two Generations Rise and Thrive on Military Opportunities

By Donna M. Owens

As a mathematician, Maj. Anthony N. Johnson knows his early life did not suggest a high probability of success.

Growing up near a Richmond, Va., housing project, Johnson watched his parents split and saw his mother's struggles to raise him and his two siblings. School didn't seem to offer much promise, either: With his dismal grades, he barely graduated high school. And by the time he did, he and his childhood sweetheart, Darlene, were expecting their first child.

"I wanted to prove that I could take care of her, and after high school, I was working three jobs," he recalls. "One of them was selling $1,200 vacuum cleaners door-to-door. It was pretty tough."

Pressured by his employer to use unethical sales tactics, Johnson eventually quit in protest. He still remembers the parting words of his manager, which cut him "like a sword."

"He told me that I was black, poor, with little education and skills and would never amount to anything. …He said I would probably wind up in jail."

The incident shook him to the core.

"I knew that something had to change in my life," he says.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 52

Maj. Johnson often shares his life experiences with young people, stressing the value of hard work, tenacity and doing one's best.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 51

HIGH ACHIEVERS

Today, at age 39, the former teen parent who juggled those odd jobs is a decorated officer in the United States Army, holds four academic degrees paid for by Uncle Sam, and is a math professor at the U.S. Military Academy — one of just two African Americans with tenure in the math department at West Point.

Now married to Darlene for more than two decades and a proud father of three high achievers, Maj. Anthony N. Johnson, Ph.D. is watching his children march in his footsteps. His oldest son, Marc Anthony Johnson, 20, is a senior at California State University, where he's majoring in math. Middle child Benjamin Allan Johnson, 19, is a sophomore at West Point, where he's getting a $250,000 education paid for by the Army. Daughter Cinnamon Ann Johnson, 17, is a senior at O'Neill High School in New York State.

Maj. Johnson and his family have traveled the world and been in the company of U.S. presidents and other global leaders. Along the way, he's garnered numerous honors and accolades, yet he remains full of gratitude and humility.

> *"I knew that **something had to change** in my life."*

"I joined the service right from high school. I had very little understanding of what leadership meant, (not) having a man at home to model it," he says. "The Army demonstrated loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity and pride in one's country: all traits necessary in my success. These values formed the mental and emotional scaffolding I needed to build my life on a more sure foundation."

"What the military does, and what I have seen it do in many African-American lives, is that it gives you a chance to see the world and an opportunity to see what you really like (to do)."

MAKING THE MIRACLE

Johnson now believes God had a plan for his life. Not long after he'd stopped selling vacuum cleaners, a man in uniform knocked on his door. At first, Johnson was reluctant to answer.

"I thought it might be the police," he says with a chuckle.

The visitor turned out to be a U.S. Army recruiter, bearing good news: Johnson had scored well on a military

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entrance exam and was being urged to enlist.

"I'd gone with a friend to the recruiter's office, and while I was waiting, they had me take the test, too," he explains. "I'd forgotten all about it."

For a young person with few prospects, Uncle Sam's promise seemed nothing short of a miracle: training and job security, a regular salary, and health benefits for his growing family once he and his girlfriend got married.

"It was such an opportunity that I did not have before. I thought, 'I am gonna make this work or bust,' " Maj. Johnson says.

He made it work. He moved through the ranks quickly, becoming a staff sergeant in about four years.

Johnson worked for Armed Forces Network Europe, a television station in Frankfurt, Germany, as a broadcast engineer. Then, in 1993, he beat out more than 100 applicants to land a White House position, under then-President Bill Clinton. At the White House Communications Agency, he provided communications support for the president and worked as a systems engineer for the White House fiber optic cable infrastructure. Working so close to the commander-in-chief was "an incredible experience," he says.

COLLEGE GRADUATE

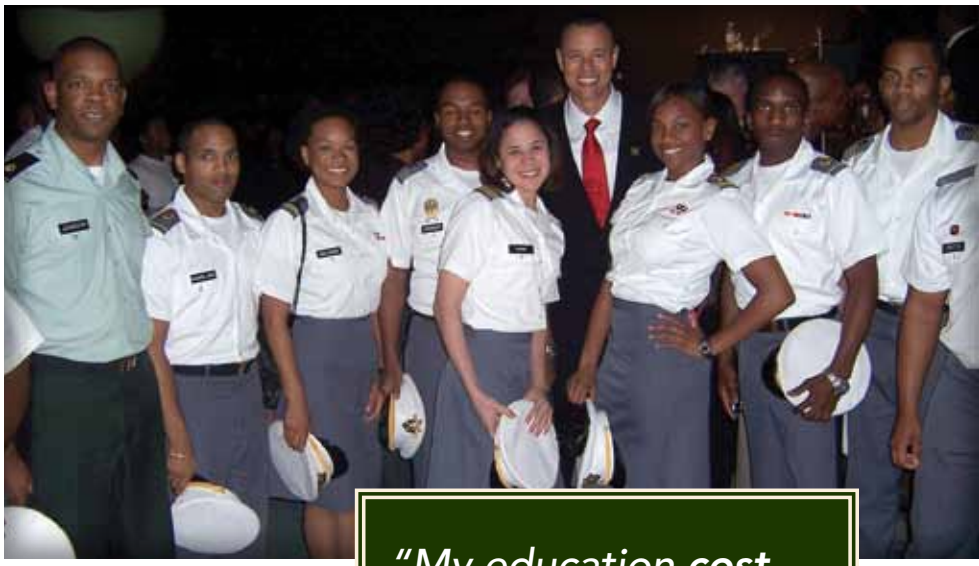
Johnson also found time to go to college, using the G.I. Bill to pay for it.

"My education cost the Army about $204,000. That is for a bachelor's, two master's and a Ph.D.," he notes.

Indeed, Johnson morphed from a high-school underachiever to an academic powerhouse, juggling part-time studies and building the credits to realize his dream of going to Officer Candidate School.

Near the end of his time in Washington, he was accepted into the Army officer corps, graduating with distinction. Next came a commission into the Army Signal Corps and Airborne School, plus numerous field missions that gave him opportunities to lead.

He returned to college, earning a B.S. in math in 1999 and an M.S. in math in 2000, both from Fayetteville State University in North Carolina.



"It took me nine long years to get that first degree," he says, "but I never gave up."

INSPIRING MINDS

Around the same time, Johnson nabbed first place in the annual National Science Foundation College Mathematics Competition, for his research into parametric equations. And there were other honors: induction into "Who's Who Among College Graduate Students" and the National Dean's List, among them.

After graduating from Fayetteville State, Johnson was assigned to Seoul, South Korea. He later earned another M.S. degree and a Ph.D. in applied mathematics from the Naval Postgraduate School. His research there — which won him more awards — involved a three-dimensional, continuum mechanics approach to detecting buried landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

This is expertise he will use while deployed in Iraq, where he has been since July. Before going to war, he spoke of his deep faith and sense of duty to his country: "I definitely know that freedom is not free."

At West Point, where Maj. Johnson taught from 2005 until his recent combat deployment, he serves as the senior advisor for the NSBE chapter and is dedicated to increasing the number of young African Americans in the math, science and engineering fields. The NSBE chapter at West Point has about 64 members.

> *"My education **cost the Army about $204,000.** That is for a bachelor's, two master's and a Ph.D."*

"It's helpful for the students to see what other engineers are doing in the field, because many of them will have careers after the military," Maj. Johnson says.

He hopes he is an inspiration to all of his young charges.

"The Army created a path before me from which I nor any in my family had come," he says. "For the first time, I was exposed to the full extent of my potential and given the opportunity to pursue it to the best of my God-given ability, without any institutional constraints. I only wish more people could experience what I have."

He often shares his life experiences with young people, stressing the value of hard work, tenacity and doing one's best.

"I let them know that it's not how you start in life but how you finish," he says. ■

***Donna M. Owens** is an award-winning journalist based in Baltimore, Md.*