Aylin Llona says reminders that she will never see her husband again are everywhere. They appear, unexpected. On a mountain hike. When a Mariners game is on the radio. In line at Starbucks. Working in the yard or walking the neighborhood.

“That was our first car together,” she says, pointing to a green Saturn wagon that turns in front of us onto Seattle’s Eastlake Avenue. It is the same model and color as the car Dan was driving when he was killed. She smiles and sighs heavily. “God, it’s such an unimaginable loss. He was … no, he is, my soul mate.”

On October 4, 2005, uniformed officers came to the home Llona shared with Johnson to inform her that Dan and his colleague, state of Washington seismologist Tony Qamar, had been in a collision with a logging truck on northbound U.S. 101 near Hoquiam. The two men, on their way to collect seismic information from earthquake recording instruments along the Olympic Peninsula, were crushed when the truck spilled its load in the path of Johnson’s car. They died at the scene.

Investigators concluded that the truck was overloaded, causing a high center of gravity, and bolts that helped secure the logs were overstressed and failed. The truck’s driver, Garland Massingham, 40, tested positive for methamphetamine and was faulted for driving too fast into a curve. (After the Hoquiam crash, Massingham continued to drive and lost another load a month later.) He pleaded guilty to vehicular manslaughter in January 2007 and is serving up to 54 months in prison.

Washington State Representative Ruth Kagi (D-Lake Forest Park) called Johnson and Qamar’s deaths a “preventable tragedy” and, with support from Llona and Qamar’s widow, Kathleen Ellsbury, backed legislation to remove dangerous trucks and drivers from state highways. After nearly a two-year effort, the Tony Qamar and Daniel Johnson Act passed in February 2007. It implements strategies to better enforce regulations for in-state trucking (which aren’t as stringent as rules for interstate hauling) and more effectively monitor drivers, like Massingham, who have histories of violations.

Llona, who changed the spelling and pronunciation of her first name from Eileen to Aylin because she is “no longer the same person” since Johnson died, says she clings to the notion that her husband was doing what he loved the day his life was cut short.

“Dan’s greatest love, besides of course,” she
Autumn 2007 arches

Johnson, or DJ as he was known to friends and family, was the type of guy who could convince almost anyone that rocks, math, and science were not only fun, they were cool. His passion, say friends and colleagues, was not merely infectious, it was powerful and inspiring.

Born in Minnesota in 1959, Johnson graduated from high school in Tacoma and, like his brother, Dave, and sister, Laurie, attended UPS. He was a thoughtful, overachieving science student here who, according to UPS emeritus professor Al Eggers, “was one of the rare geology majors coveted by the math and computer science department.”

He was a studious guy who also made plenty of time for fun, such as playing cello in the university string quartet and competing on the slopes with the Puget Sound ski team. Craig Smith ’82, Johnson’s best friend from UPS, says memories from college and beyond flood back in a constant loop: their first ski race at Crystal Mountain; discovering Java Jive together; the tiny apartment they shared in San Francisco; the day Johnson was married, against the majestic backdrop of Mount Rainier.

“I remember moments and events, some from more than 25 years ago, as if they had happened this morning,” says Smith. “When I do, no doubt a smile will crack my lips, and I will feel a sense of comfort knowing that I am blessed to have had the company of my wonderful friend.”

Johnson chose to spend what little free time he had at UPS delving deeply into volcanology. On March 27, 1980, he was part of an undergraduate research team that began surface deformation measurements on the north side of Mount St. Helens. He also helped install the first “tiltmeters” in the volcano’s crater to aide in predicting dome-building eruptions. Two months later, on May 18, the volcano erupted.

Johnson spent most of the 1980s pursuing his Ph.D. in geology and geophysics at the University of Hawai’i, where he studied magma storage in the Kilauea volcano. He also became an expert in using global positioning systems to conduct studies of ground-surface displacements caused by tectonic processes, testing this technology in such exotic locales as Indonesia and the Galapagos Islands.

In 1992 Johnson found himself commuting back and forth to Seattle for an entirely new experiment. “A mutual friend set us up while Dan was still in Hawai’i,” says Llona. “I used to joke there was an ocean between us from the beginning.” Their love affair was quick; the couple married in September 1994.
Llona, a California native who had earned a master’s degree in library science, moved with her husband to Ellensburg, Wash., for Johnson’s research post at Central Washington University, where she ultimately worked as a librarian. After six years the couple returned to their beloved Seattle, and Johnson took on projects at the University of Washington and UPS.

By 2002 Llona and Johnson settled into a quaint home just four miles from the UW campus. Dan often dropped in to the seismology lab at UW, and Aylin worked at Suzzallo Library. They relished biking to work, hiking on the weekend, and spending time with friends.

When he was with those friends, Johnson could be quite a ham. “I remember a group of us watching Riverdance on TV,” says Llona, “and Dan was really into it. He got up and danced right along with Michael Flatley. He knew all the moves.”

It was this side of Johnson—fun, vivacious, lively—that many recounted with sad fondness at his October 10 memorial service in the rotunda of the Wheelock Student Center on the Puget Sound campus. Llona says the outpouring of emotion that day was “astounding.”

“It was amazing to finally meet all of the people I’d heard about all those years,” she says. “It was so honoring of him. I don’t think he had a clue how deeply he affected people. Being there really helped me deal with my grief.”

As a lasting memorial to her husband, Llona created the Daniel J. Johnson Geology Field Research Fund, which will grant one UPS geology student per year $2,500 to assist with research projects, starting this fall. It also assists with student field work more generally—already helping to fund student research locally and in Alaska this past summer.

Llona says the UPS endowment and the passage of the Tony Qamar and Daniel Johnson Act are both helping ease her grief. The act, which the state House passed in a vote of 88–9, significantly increases penalties for drivers who have multiple violations and requires commercial trucks that weigh more than 26,000 pounds to carry U.S. Department of Transportation tracking numbers so infractions can be monitored within the state of Washington.

Knowing that others could be spared her pain, says Llona, “lets me know Dan’s death was not for nothing.”

As the second anniversary of Johnson’s death approaches, Llona says for the first time in a while she is actually thinking ahead. “I spent the last year in shock,” she says. “And finally over the last few months, after a lot of meditation, I’m starting to look to the future and not the past.”

She pauses. “But I know, whenever I am in the mountains, Dan is beside me. That will never change.”

Stacey Wilson ’96 is a frequent contributor to People, Portland Monthly, and other magazines.