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Ex-Gov. Johnson, Wife Are Divorcing

By Leslie Linthicum*Copyright © 2005 Albuquerque Journal; Journal Staff Writer*

Former Gov. Gary Johnson and his wife, Dee, were New Mexico's first couple for eight years.

Now, they're calling it quits.

Johnson said this week the couple had been separated since May and were taking legal steps toward divorce.

"I love her. I always will," Johnson said in a phone interview from Hawaii, where he was giving a speech. "We have just grown apart for what I consider a long time. I've been going from one adventure to another and I've been doing it by myself."

Johnson, 52, said Tuesday that he initiated the separation and that he has been dating Deborah Werenko of Santa Fe, a family practice physician and divorced mother of three who is also a competitive athlete. Werenko on Wednesday confirmed the two are dating.

Dee Johnson, 52, said Gary's actions are responsible for the split.

"My heart is broken with what Gary's done to me but I'm a survivor and I'll make it through this."

Dee Johnson is living at the couple's Albuquerque house; Gary Johnson is living at their Taos Ski Valley house.

The Johnsons, who met while skiing at Red River when they were teenagers, have been married for 28 years and have two grown children. They built a construction firm together, Big J, and were self-made millionaires by the time Johnson decided to run for governor in 1994.

Johnson, a maverick Republican, took office in 1995 and served for eight years. His tenure was marked by furious fights with state lawmakers. He attracted the nickname "Governor No" for his record number of vetoes and "Puff Daddy" for his quest to decriminalize marijuana use.

Since leaving office in 2002, Johnson has pursued athletics, training for triathlons, climbing Mount Everest and skiing nearly every day in the winter from his home in Taos Ski Valley.

Dee Johnson has been involved in charity events and has pursued art, learning welding and sculpting from renowned artist OK Harris.

Johnson and Werenko attended the gala grand opening of the Anderson-Abruzzo International Balloon Museum together in

Albuquerque on Saturday— the former governor's hair done up in a French braid— and were in Johnson's pickup truck the following afternoon when it was involved in an accident on Interstate 25 north of Albuquerque.

They competed together in the "Quest for Fire" adventure race in Angel Fire in May and both represented New Mexico in the World Ironman Triathlon in Hawaii in 2002.

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