
Recalling a boy 'full of energy, full of life'

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IRVING, Texas — For several agonizing days, young Camden Pierce Hughes had no name, and it seemed that no one missed him. Found dead along a remote dirt road in Maine, the tow-headed boy with Lightning McQueen sneakers was known only as a “blue-eyed angel,” even as his image was broadcast far and wide.

But, as it turned out, countless people here in this Dallas suburb were close to the spirited 6-year-old and are now reeling from his violent death, allegedly at his mother’s hands.

At First Baptist Church, where Camden was a Sunday school student, he was remembered as a bright, personable boy who was eager to learn and asked questions at every turn. At his elementary school yesterday, teachers recalled his angelic face, impish grin, and quick mind, how he would quickly finish his assignments, then help other students finish theirs.

“He was going to the first grade next year, but was already reading close to a third-grade level,” his kindergarten teacher, Whitney Bruno, said through tears yesterday at W.T. Hanes Elementary School. “He loved to grab a book off the shelf and read it to the rest of the class, and they would sit right there and listen to every word he read out of the book.”

Yesterday, the boy’s relatives claimed his body, which was found last Saturday in South Berwick, Maine. New Hampshire prosecutors have charged his mother, 42-year-old Julianne McCrery, with suffocating him.

McCrery’s former boyfriend, meanwhile, said that McCrery had bipolar disorder and took daily medication to control it. William Light, who lived with McCrery and her son from December until March, said she told him shortly after their relationship began that she had been abused by men her entire life.

But Light, 50, said he never witnessed any signs of mental instability or extreme mood swings and said he believed that her son’s death had to have been an accident.

“Ninety-nine percent of the time she was pure angel,” he said in an interview at a Walmart parking lot in Grand Prairie, Texas. “I think it was an accident. If it was not an accident, she should not be sent to jail. She should be sent to a doctor.”

Light said they had broken up in March but stayed in touch, and she sent him a text message Tuesday, one day before she was taken into custody. He was stunned by the charges against her and wished he could get word to her somehow.

“Tell her I still love her,” he said.

Another former boyfriend of McCrery’s, Robert Miller, said in an interview at his Irving home that she had told him she was bipolar, had mood swings, and had attempted suicide several times, including at least once over an unrequited love.

“When she moved in here,” he said, “I noticed she could get very hateful and not make sense.”

Miller said that he and McCrery fought constantly when they were together and that their last fight before they broke up got so bad that the police came to the house and asked him to leave.

McCrery's lawyer said this week that she wants to die so she can join her son in heaven and that she expressed disappointment that her crimes are not capital offenses. She came with her son to New England for the express purpose of killing him and herself, the lawyer said.

McCrery, who has battled depression and substance abuse, according to those who knew her, is being held without bail at the Rockingham County House of Corrections until a probable cause hearing next week.

Prosecutors would not elaborate yesterday on the manner or cause of the boy's death. McCrery's lawyer, a public defender assigned to the case, could not be reached for comment.

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services declined to comment on whether the agency had previous involvement with McCrery, because it is not involved in the death investigation.

Those in Texas who knew her said McCrery showed no obvious signs of distress before abruptly leaving town earlier this month. She went to church, attended parent-teacher conferences, and seemed genuinely interested in her child's education.

McCrery was not overly involved in school, but "showed up to the things that she needed to show up to," said J. Pat Lamb, director of security for the Irving Independent School District.

On Wednesday, the day she was taken into custody and the last day McCrery called in to report the boy's absence from school, she "sounded relieved," Lamb said.

"She said he was doing better and would be able to come out of the hospital and be able to return to school the next week," he said.

At Camden's school, the young boy's cubby, which he always kept neat and clean, is empty now, but his ID card bearing his photo still hangs there in his memory.

"Camden was a very sweet boy," said Bruno, 25. "He was a typical 6-year-old boy, full of energy and full of life. He had lots of friends in class, and he came in every morning with a smile on his face and a very cute green Ninja Turtle backpack."

Bruno recalled that near the start of school Camden raised his hand during a discussion of the American flag and said "Mrs. Bruno, there are only 13 stripes because there were 13 original colonies."

"And this was back in September," Bruno said.

The school's principal, Brenda Bingham, said Camden had a rich personality that featured a trademark grin that often took on a mischievous bent.

"He had an angelic face, the biggest, just gorgeous blue eyes, and a little grin that told me, here comes trouble," Bingham said. "He was a little personality that you saw and thought, 'That's our future,' because he was a bright young man and you saw so much potential in him."

Camden was also popular, friends with boys and girls in his class. Bingham said Camden's death brought back painful memories for her. Her only daughter, she said, died at just 3 days old. "I have a deep faith in the Lord," she said, "and I know he's in heaven playing with my little girl right now."

To help students make sense of what happened, teachers read a statement in class this week, saying, "This is very sad for all of us, and it is normal for you to feel sad."

"They are handling it as well as a 5- to 6-year-old can," Bruno said. "They all have grief and deal

with it in different ways.”

In her classroom, Bruno opened a folder of some of Camden’s work through the school year. Among the papers was a cut-out butterfly he had made.

When its wings opened, the message said, “Dear Mom, Happy Mother’s Day.”

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