

Rhia was a joyful child, full of hugs and mischief



Rhia Almeida was full of life. She loved her family, school, drawing, dancing, and Hannah Montana.

Rhia Danae Almeida, 7, died not far from her home in Ajo on Thursday evening, June 18.

She was born in Phoenix on September 30, 2001. She came to Ajo from Kaka Village with her family in 2008 and began attending school here. A first grader, she was attending summer school and getting ready to start second grade in the fall.

"She was such a special girl," said her mother, Elayne Gregg. "She was full of life and had a great spirit. She loved everybody and was loved by everyone. She did not have a single bad bone or thought."

As her mother remembered Rhia's delight in tickling her, her stepdad, Antonio Ortiz mused, "The mornings are the worst. That's when she used to come and jump into bed with us."

Rhia was a tomboy who loved Hannah Montana. "She was just beginning to like girly stuff," said her mother. She was constantly in motion, and was just learning how to break dance. Rhia was usually so happy she was bubbling over. "It was hugs and kisses all day," said her mother.

Rhia loved school and was enjoying summer school, both because she was a bright little girl and because she loved to be around people.

She adored her older brothers but that didn't keep her from pestering them and fighting with them, like any little sister would do.

Asked about her, Rhia's brother Julian, 9, said, "I love her, miss her.

and giving me kisses and hugs when I get home. I miss her fighting with her brothers. She was so active and did not have a care in the world. *I love you Rhia — Behave Baby.*"

Her two big brothers, Jesse and Julian, are taking her death hard, said their folks. The littlest, Roman, is too young to understand what is going on but knows something is wrong and looks for his sister.

The rest of the family is having a hard time dealing with the loss, too. When asked what people could do for them, Elayne said, "Pray for her, pray for the boys, pray for all of us."

The family attended Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Ajo.

They said they appreciate the love and support, prayers, food, and money offered them by so many, singling out Mary Sam of Hickiwan for "... doing many things we just can't do right now." Norma Gomez of Victim Witness for being a pillar of strength, and Lonnie Guthrie, Sara Coyle, and everyone at Ajo Ambulance.

They praised the Pima County Sheriff's Department for telling them what they needed to know with respect and professionalism and expressed gratitude to Ajo Ambulance and the Ajo/Gibson Volunteer Fire Department for their help and sharing in their grief.

Rhia is survived by her mother & stepfather, Elayne Gregg & Antonio Ortiz of Ajo; by her father, Jesse Almeida Sr. of Gilbert; by her brothers, Jesse Almeida, Julian Almeida, and Roman Ortiz, all of Ajo; by her aunts, Joycelyn Gregg & Erin Gregg, both of Sacaton; by her uncles, John Gregg of Sacaton, Trevor Rubio of Florence, and Isaac Fontes of Gilbert; by her grandparents, Olivia Antone of Florence, Patrick Rubio of Florence, Irene Almeida of Gilbert, and James Gregg Jr. of Casa Grande; and by the great-grandparents, Laura Sam, Agnes & James Gregg, and Robert Sam, all of Kaka Village.

A candlelight vigil will be held at the family home, 501 Solana, at 7 p.m. on Thursday, June 25. A wake with mass led by Father Tom will begin at 6 p.m. on Saturday, June 27, and end at 6 a.m. on Sunday morning in Kaka Village on the Tohono O'odham Nation. Burial will be in the Kaka Cemetery.

For those who would like to help the family through a difficult time, the Rhia Danae Almeida Donation account has been set up at National Bank of Arizona. The account number is 7638004852; the routing number is 122105320. People who do not have a branch of the bank near them may send checks with the information above to National Bank of Arizona, 101 La Mina, Ajo, AZ 85321.

She liked to play with the puppy and always loved to carry baby Roman. She made me laugh and we always played together."

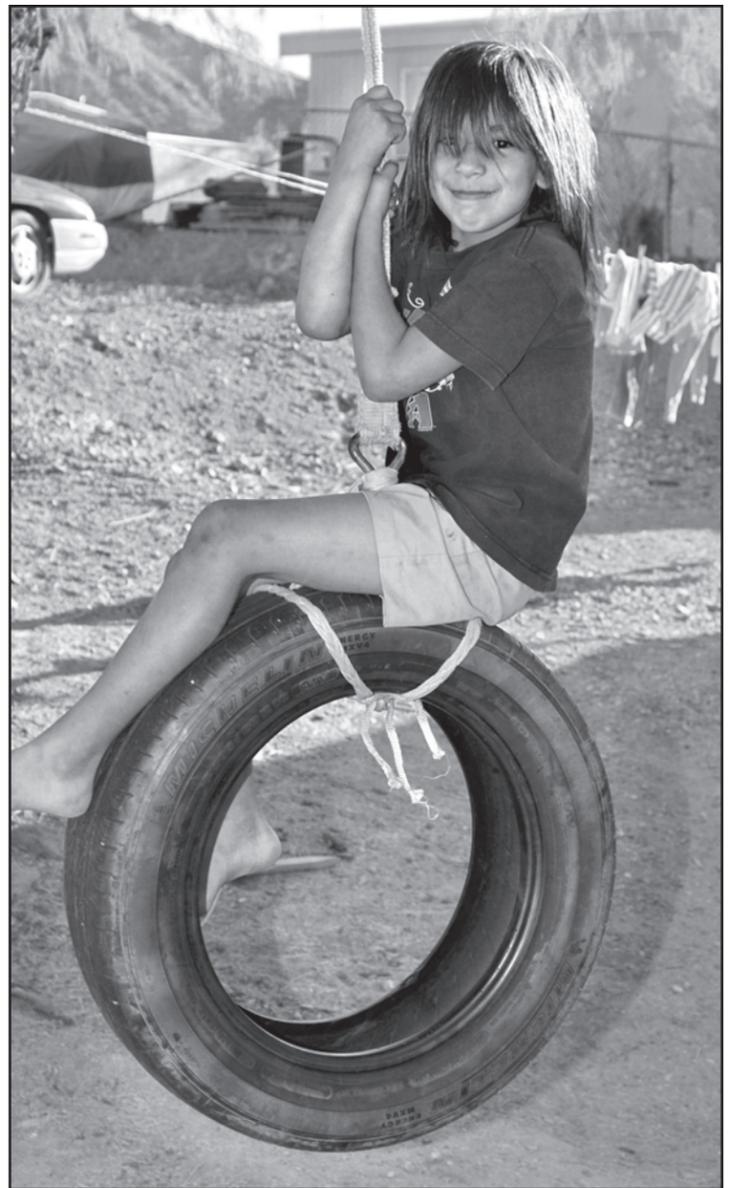
Her bother Jesse, 10, said, "I found her bike and I didn't see her. I didn't know where she was at. I miss her and I love her. She was the best sister. Me and her were supposed to have fun. I wish I was there for her. And everybody loves her."

Her baby brother Roman, who just turned one, always lit up when he saw her. She was always carrying him and bouncing him around, said their mother. "He also misses her. Rhia loved Roman so very much."

"We remember how much she loved to draw, dance, and give hugs and kisses," said her mother. "She was a true angel on earth who loved her brothers and loved to make everyone laugh. Everyone who knew her is truly blessed. Such a beautiful girl. We will truly love and miss her. She is happy now and in a good place."

"I will never forget all the fun and funny times she brought to our whole family," said her mother. "She truly had an enormous amount of love that she gave everyone who knew her. She was my best friend and I know I will see her and hold her again. And that is the thing that keeps me somewhat okay. We will continue to celebrate her life til we meet again. *Mama, I love and miss you so very much!*"

Her stepdad, Antonio Ortiz, said, "I miss my baby. Rhia was the life of our family. I will miss her running up



This photo of Rhia Almeida at play was taken about three weeks ago by Mark Boozer.

Arrest made quickly in child's death

It was a normal day in Ajo. People went to work. Some kids, like 7-year-old Rhia Almeida, went to summer school and came home to play. About 5:30 p.m. Rhia told her mother she was going to ride her bike to a friend's house on Palo Verde, two blocks away, unaware that only his older brother was home. No one knew that the world was about to shatter.

One of Rhia's brothers soon decided he was going to go to the house to play as well, something the siblings did almost every day. He came back with her bicycle and said no one was home. That's when Rhia's mother, Elayne Gregg, started to worry.

She sent her sons, Jesse and Julian, to look for their sister. Once the door at the Alegria residence was answered and the boy was told the younger Alegria boy wasn't home. Just before 7 p.m., becoming very concerned, she sent her son Julian to check. By that time there were flashing lights and Julian came home upset, saying "There's a dead body...a little girl with a blue shirt on..." Though she tried to calm her son, Elayne Gregg said, "I knew it was her."

Two girls on bikes had made the discovery. They found Rhia in a ditch near the 500 block of Ocotillo and ran to the nearest house to summon help.

When deputies from the Pima County Sheriff's Department and personnel from Ajo Ambulance arrived, they found the little girl, beaten and stabbed, was beyond help. Injuries were so severe that official identification had to be by autopsy, but everyone knew it was Rhia. Her stepfather, Antonio Ortiz, who is an EMT with Ajo Ambulance and recently became a volunteer with the fire department, was called to come home immediately from his station at Santa Rosa. Co-workers had to break the news.

Her injuries led local deputies to believe Rhia was the victim of foul play and a homicide team was dispatched from Tucson to the scene.

Clues at the ditch where Rhia was

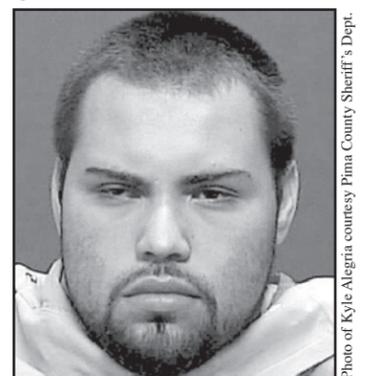


Photo of Kyle Alegria courtesy Pima County Sheriff's Dept.

left and other information led the homicide team to a home on Palo Verde and further evidence was located inside. Loretto Kyle Alegria, 19, was taken into custody on suspicion of first-degree homicide early Friday morning, according to Deputy Dawn Barkman. He is being held in Tucson. Bail has been set at \$1,000,000 cash.

Autopsy results have confirmed the cause of death was blunt force trauma and that she was stabbed as well.

Despite widespread speculation in the community, motive is unclear, although PCSD has said it is believed drugs and alcohol were not involved. Alegria has had previous encounters with the law and was recently sentenced to probation on local charges. Several people have said they found him "strange" and believe that he was responsible for unlawful entry into homes and possibly an assault, but none of the incidents have been confirmed by law enforcement. His MySpace pages, last updated over two years ago, showed a fixation with sex and pornography and bragged that he had been to jail three times.

Rhia's mother expressed relief at the arrest and hopes that a conviction will follow. "I don't want him on the streets anymore," Elayne Gregg said. "I don't want him to hurt anyone else." She also expressed sympathy for the Alegria family. "I feel for his family — they didn't do it, he did."



A shrine with flowers, candles, and toys has appeared at the place Rhia was found.