

Life of 'Little Jacob' comes into focus with arrest of mother, her girlfriend

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June 19, 2018 Updated: June 20, 2018 9:26pm

GALVESTON — For months, he was known only as Little Jacob, the young boy whose body washed ashore in Galveston.

Naked, bruised and malnourished, he had no name and no family trying to find him. Few clues emerged of his life or death.

But the mystery came to a close Wednesday with the announcement by law enforcement that Little Jacob was actually Jayden Alexander Lopez, an under-sized 4-year-old whose mother and her girlfriend have been charged in connection with his death.

It was a long eight months for investigators, who combed through clues and tips to find the answers.

"This was an appalling crime that made our hearts heavy," said Bryan Gaines, the supervisory senior resident agent at the FBI office in Texas City.

"No one reported Jayden as missing. No one was looking for Jayden. Jayden had no advocate other than us. Somebody took a beautiful, innocent child and discarded him in the ocean like he was a piece of trash."

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The boy's mother, Rebecca Rivera, 34, and Dania Amezcuita Gomez, 31, described in court documents as Rivera's girlfriend, have been arrested on charges tampering with evidence with the intent to impair a human corpse.

They remain in the Galveston County Jail, with Rivera being held on \$250,000 bond. Gomez, who has an immigration hold, is being held under \$100,000 bond.

The Houston women traveled to Galveston the night before Jayden was found to dump his body in Galveston Bay, according to the FBI.

He liked the beach, his mother later told investigators.

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A beach-goer spotted the boy's body on Oct. 20, 2017 along the water in the 700 block of Seawall Boulevard. But authorities couldn't match him to any missing children and there were no obvious signs of trauma on his body.

In the weeks that followed, authorities offered a reward of up to \$10,000 for information. Officials put up billboards from Texas to Kentucky and Louisiana and released a sketch of the boy's face.

"There was no family, no friends, no outcry," said Galveston Police Chief Vernon Hale. "Nobody to claim this little boy."

A small shrine that emerged atop the seawall near Seventh Street remained Wednesday, with an assortment of rain-soaked stuffed animals, toys, a deflated balloon, a jar of sand and a pumpkin with "Baby Doe" painted in green letters. A makeshift cross with stuffed animals draped on it was painted with a message, "You Mattered Little Guy."

Autopsy results released earlier this year provided some clues. The boy didn't drown, investigators said. He'd been at sea for 12 to 48 hours before he was found, and he'd likely been dumped in the water near East Beach or the Houston Ship Channel.

And he appeared to have been abused before his death. Though authorities did not provide details about the injuries, he had evidence of a broken thigh bone and other bruises. He was also extremely malnourished, weighing just 26 to 30 pounds — about half the weight a normal boy his age should have been.

Hundreds of tips poured in, but police struggled to solve the case.

Investigators tried "all the old-school tricks," Hale said. But it wasn't until after authorities released a crime scene photo of the boy in January that they got a break in the case.

In March, a caller to the FBI tipline said he believed Rivera was the boy's mother. He told authorities that the last time he'd seen Rivera in December, she had only one of her two children with her. That child looked "sickly" and "malnourished," and the couple said they'd been living in Chicago since October, returning to Houston only to attend a function.

Around the same time, Rivera started telling friends her older child was with family, according to court filings.

By April, investigators thought they'd identified an apartment where the couple might be staying in southwest Houston. They stopped by for a visit and knocked on the door but a woman inside refused to let them in, records show. Instead, someone fled out the back through a second-floor window.

Rivera has a previous criminal record, a driving while intoxicated arrest in Fort Bend County from 2003 and another arrest in 2011, though no charges appear to have been filed.

Admissions of abuse

A few days later, man who held the lease on the apartment allowed investigators to go inside. When they entered, they found Rivera and Gomez in the front room with a 3-year-old boy.

When asked about Jayden, Rivera said he had been kidnapped, according to court records. Gomez reiterated that claim under questioning, but later said she thought the boy was with Rivera's family.

It wasn't until later that Gomez learned the boy was dead, when Rivera told her that her brother had notified her of the child's death, according to court records.

In the weeks that followed, investigators used DNA testing to show Rivera was the boy's mother, and they used a toll booth photograph and video to show that Rivera's car — with Rivera and Gomez believed to be inside — had driven toward Galveston in the middle of the night within hours of the child's body being found on the beach.

By May, investigators went back to talk to Gomez,, who by then was in federal immigration detention, and she admitted being in Rivera's car that night. She said she was too drunk to remember any details of what happened.

Gomez was placed under arrest last week. On Tuesday, investigators returned to Rivera and she agreed to talk.

She told investigators that Jayden had hit his head on the wall about two weeks before his death. She said she tried to clean the injury with alcohol.

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After the injury, she said the boy began acting differently and became a nuisance. She said his face swelled up, his health deteriorated and he complained of stomach aches. Rivera admitted striking the boy with "whatever I could find," including clothes hangers. Eventually, Rivera said that "she could tell it was the end" and that Jayden had died, according to court filings.

Rivera and Gomez got up in the middle of the night and drove to Galveston, with the other boy in the car. They knew Jayden liked the beach, so they put his body in the water.

Rivera said she didn't seek medical care for Jayden because she feared authorities would take away both kids, according to court records.

Court records indicate abuse may have been a pattern in the boy's short life. A Department of Family and Protective Services investigator obtained records in July 2016 indicating that Jayden had been admitted to Texas Children's Hospital with a broken left thigh bone, which was later confirmed by the Galveston County Medical Examiner.

Rivera was arrested and charged Tuesday, and her younger 3-year old boy has been placed in foster care, according to a spokeswoman with that agency. Authorities still haven't located the child's father.

Justice at last

At Wednesday's press conference, authorities praised the public's assistance in solving the case.

"It was only with the public's assistance and prayers that we were able to make progress for Jayden," said Gaines, the FBI agent from Texas City. "We received hundreds of tips from citizens within Galveston County and across America. The surge in tips showed that the public wanted justice for this young boy as much as we did."

Police Chief Hale said he was proud to be able to deliver news about the break in the "Little Jacob" case. Hale took over the police department in January and made the case a top priority.

"When I arrived in January, my only goal quite honestly was not justice, but to give this baby a name," Hale said.

Jeff Banks, with the FBI, said that the investigation is continuing and didn't rule out additional charges being filed.

"We're still waiting on some evidence to come back," he said. "We're still waiting on some search warrants to come back, We'll take all that information, everything that we currently have, and try to determine the most appropriate charges and go from there."

Banks, who was visibly exasperated at the lack of progress at a previous press conference about the case in January, said he is relieved that the boy has been identified.

"This has been very tough on myself and every other person working on it," he said, "We've all worked very hard. A lot of time we've put into this and it's very rewarding to finally start getting some answers."

Samantha Ketterer and Brooke A. Lewis contributed to this report.