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Rahway students grieve for boy, 12, killed in fire

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The survivors of Sunday's house fire in Rahway were in critical condition yesterday, as school officials tried to ease the blow of the tragedy that killed one of their students.

Nory Rodriguez, 37, and her daughters Zuleyka Cortes, 16, and Yazmin Cortes, 13, remained at Saint Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, along with 34-year-old Ismael Ferman, hospital spokeswoman Robin Lally said.

Officials and students said Zuleyka Cortes is pregnant, though they could not say how many months along she is.

Alexander Cortes, the youngest of Rodriguez's three children, was pronounced dead after the Sunday morning fire on Montgomery Street.

The 12-year-old, who had only been in the district a year, after moving from Elizabeth, was a sixth-grader at Rahway Middle School. His absence was palpable as classmates and staff grieved yesterday.

"He was making a nice adjustment," School Superintendent Frank Buglione said. "He seemed to get along very well with the other kids."

Others at the school recalled Yazmin, who is a seventh-grader there.

"Everybody was sad," said 12-year-old Taija Edwards, also a seventh-grader. "She's like a fun person. She's always happy."

The district's crisis team met before school to map out a strategy to help students, Buglione said.

Counseling was available at the middle school and the high school, where Zuleyka is a sophomore, as well as at Grover Cleveland Elementary School, where Alexander

was a fifth-grader last year. Zuleyka, whose birthday was Sunday, also attends Union County Vocational-Technical School half of the day.

More than a dozen students took advantage of the services. Two of the students were grief-stricken enough to leave school. The district also created a memory book in which students can pen recollections of the pre-teen everyone called Alex.

"At a later date, we will present that to the family," Buglione said.

The district is organized to deal with death and dying, and they've had to use the crisis team "more often than we've wanted to," Buglione said. In the spring, a high school student was stabbed to death and another student committed suicide within a short time span.

In the case of Sunday's fire, district officials will be working with parent-teacher organizations to organize a fundraiser for the survivors. A family of five lived on the first floor.

The cause of the fire is under investigation by the Union County Arson Squad, said Rahway Deputy Fire Chief David Eldracher. Although there were reports of an unattended candle, it was unclear what role it might have played.

Fire department reports, however, reiterated that smoke detectors in the home did not have batteries, Eldracher said.

The structure was uninhabitable yesterday, but is sound enough to be repaired, city spokesman Jeff Jotz said.

Students who emerged from a bus stop near the house at 1690 Montgomery St. paused in the park across the street from the dwelling, where the stench of smoke was still in the air. A blue tarp concealed the charred area on the second floor.

Residential fire safety tips

To help keep your family and home safe from fire, here are some tips to follow, provided by the New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board.

- Take time to check smoke detectors to ensure they are working properly and have full battery power. There should be at least one smoke alarm for each floor of the house. Residents should check their batteries when it's time to turn the clocks forward or backward.
- Keep an up-to-date list of emergency fire, police and medical phone numbers near your telephone and make sure every family member knows where the information is kept.
- Develop an escape plan with your family from multiple rooms within your home, both upstairs and downstairs.
- Ensure the address number on your residence is free from obstructions and debris, and can be read clearly from 20 or more feet away.
- Make sure windows of children's rooms are well marked to indicate them to firefighters.
- Keep flammable liquids free from heating sources, and store them in a cool location. Also, keep them separate from other stored items such as paper products and cloth materials.
- Keep a watchful eye on space heaters, and make sure there is at least 3 feet of clear space around them when in operation. Do not leave a space heater on unattended.
- Consider researching and investing in residential fire sprinklers to protect your family and property. If your residence has fire sprinklers, ensure that they are inspected periodically by trained professionals.

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SOURCE: The New Jersey Fire Sprinkler Advisory Board

"I still think he's in his room waiting to come outside," said 9-year-old Karleek Sutton, a fifth-grader at Grover Cleveland School.

"When you were in a bad mood, he'd cheer you up," he added.

Seventh-grader Maritza Colon, 12, said Alex wanted to join the military when he grew up. He liked to play tag and loved McDonald's.

The tragedy is still surreal to her. Saturday, "everything was fine."

Maritza said Zuleyka would let friends and family touch her belly to feel the baby move.

Physicians have to take extra precautions when treating preg-

nant fire victims, said Kamran Khazaei, chairman of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Trinitas Hospital in Elizabeth.

In burn units, doctors order high doses of vitamin A, which helps heal wounds, but administering the high dosage would affect the fetus. Dehydration or burns that become infected could throw a patient into pre-term labor, he said.

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