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*Acknowledge the right of the people
to get from the newspaper both sides
of every important question.*

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Juan Figueroa/Staff Photographer

The parents of Camp Mystic campers from Dallas include (from left) John and Lacy Lawrence, parents of Hanna and Rebecca Lawrence; Cole and Alli Naylor, parents of Wynne Naylor; Tim and Missy Peck, parents of Eloise "Lulu" Peck; Blake and Caitlin Bonner, parents of Lila Bonner; Davin Hunt and Anne Lindsey Hunt, parents of Janie Hunt; and Doug and Carrie Hanna, parents of Hadley Hanna.

After the tragedy at Camp Mystic, parents of 'Heaven's 27' demanded change

Mothers and fathers of campers, counselors are our 2025 Texans of the Year

The parents of the 25 young campers and two teenage counselors at Camp Mystic, swept away in a catastrophic flood on the Fourth of July, were paralyzed with sorrow.

That holiday weekend, they had raced to the Christian girls summer camp in the Hill Country, desperate to reunite with the daughters they had dropped off just a few days earlier. Some searched for their girls in the matted banks of the Guadalupe River; others waited for news in a reunification center. They showed photos of their daughters, asking if anyone had seen them.

The reunions didn't come. Instead, the parents were swabbed for DNA and tasked with identifying the girls, some of them not recovered for days. One father recalled the sound of fireworks in the distance as he waited outside the morgue to learn if one of the bodies there was his daughter's.

One family lost twins. Another girl, Cile Steward, still hasn't been found. In the days and weeks following the disaster, the parents rarely left their homes. They struggled to even get out of bed. Stuck in a surreal world of shock and grief, they all experienced a kind of isolating sadness that left them feeling marooned.

Until they befriended each other. Slowly, mutual connections began to emerge. Families traded cellphone numbers and email addresses. By the end of July, dozens of mothers and fathers, only some of whom had been previously acquainted, were linked together in busy text and email threads.

Then came a video conference arranged by two of the fathers. For the first time, they all "met" on computer

screens and saw themselves in familiar faces of agony. They formed a kind of "fraternity of grief," as another father put it, finally able to share their despair with the only other people who understood.

The moms and dads learned they shared something else, too. Indignation and disbelief. How could they have sent their daughters off to camp one day, and just a few days later be told they were dead?

And it wasn't just any camp. It was the iconic Camp Mystic, which has welcomed generations of girls to its property along the Guadalupe River for nearly 100 years, including the daughters of some of Texas' most distinguished families. Hundreds of girls — many of them having been on waitlists for years — have learned how to fish, canoe and ride horses at Camp Mystic, like their mothers and grandmothers before them.

For several of the mothers mourning their daughters, Camp Mystic had been a haven. Why wasn't it safe for their girls?

Finding the answer to that agonizing question gave the parents a collective strength that rivaled their torment. They dubbed themselves the parents of "Heaven's 27," and they channeled their newfound energy, fueled by their girls, directly at the state Capitol.

With the help of a small army of pro bono lobbyists and advocates, they implored legislators, the speaker of the House, the lieutenant governor and the governor to pass comprehensive youth camp safety reforms.

In little less than a month — a stunningly speedy timeline in Texas politics — the parents fulfilled their mission.

On Sept. 5, Gov. Greg Abbott signed into law new camp safety regulations that the parents say would have saved their daughters' lives had

they been in place earlier that summer.

These parents had no duty to anyone other than their families. They set aside their space to grieve in private to work on behalf of other Texas children and their families. For their grit and determination in the face of such profound loss, the parents of Heaven's 27 are our Texans of the Year.

A journey and a mission

How the parents came together to effect such sweeping legislation at lightning speed is something of a miracle. In interviews across the state with 43 of them, many described feelings of helplessness and guilt about being unable to protect their daughters. Complacency around safety had taken root at Camp Mystic, they said, and the state allowed it. Advocating for commonsense reform, to them, was less of a choice and more an obligation to future campers as well the memory of their girls.

"It was so important because our girls' deaths were completely preventable," said Stacy Stevens of Austin, mother of 8-year-old Mary Barrett Stevens. "And we knew if we didn't get it done now, we would have to wait until the next legislative session" in 2027.

Still, that advocacy meant pushing their personal lives into the spotlight even as they were living through their grief. It would put them in front of lawmakers and news cameras when many of them would have preferred to remain under the covers in the privacy of their homes.

"We felt a ton of energy coming from our daughters," said Matthew Pohl of Austin, father of 8-year-old Abby.

One of the first confirmed deaths was 9-year-old Lila Bonner of Dallas. Her mother, Caitlin Bonner, was a sorority sister of Elizabeth Carlock Phillips, a Dallas philanthropist who had succeeded in pressuring the Legislature to pass Trey's Law, named for her brother. The law bans the use of non-disclosure agreements to silence survivors of sex abuse. Her brother, Trey, had been sexually abused at a Missouri youth camp for years and died by

suicide under the weight of an NDA.

Phillips said she was vacationing when her sorority text thread began lighting up. She learned Lila had been killed in the massive Hill Country flood. Soon, Phillips found out two other friends had also lost their daughters, Janie Hunt and Eloise "Lulu" Peck.

Phillips headed back to Dallas and reached out to the Bonners. Meanwhile, news reports were raising questions about the camp's emergency plans, which had just been approved by the state on July 2.

"I'm not the friend that will drop off lasagna," Phillips said she told them. "But let me know when you are ready to tackle these issues with the camps because this is not your fault."

A couple of weeks later, the Bonners called to say they were ready.

"We really didn't know anything about what exactly it was we wanted, other than transparency and accountability," Blake Bonner said.

Phillips got to work assembling a team. She was introduced to lobbyist Karen Rove, wife of Karl Rove, former senior adviser and deputy chief of staff for President George W. Bush.

At the same time, in Houston, Matthew and Wendie Childress, parents of 18-year-old camp counselor Chloe Childress, had begun to seek their own answers. A friend put Matthew in touch with a well-known lobbyist, Jim Grace, who also agreed to work pro bono. Soon the high-profile firm Hill-Co Partners in Austin was on board, too.

"All of a sudden we had this wonderful team of lobbyists that were willing to go to the mat for us," Matthew Childress said.

Childress said a mutual acquaintance introduced him to Bonner, and the two immediately became like-minded friends. They organized a conference call with all of the lobbyists, then knew it was time to gain strength in numbers. They invited all the parents to a meeting, a WebEx call, at the end of July.

By then, several of them had been back to Camp Mystic to retrieve their daughters' blankets, stuffed animals and other belongings. They had stood

"I was asking myself, 'How? Why? How could these little girls vanish in the night with nobody having eyes on them?' ... We did not send Linnie to a war zone. We sent her to camp."

MICHAEL McCOWN, father of 8-year-old Linnie McCown



Photos: Juan Figueroa/Staff Photographer

Parents of Camp Mystic campers pose for a photo in Houston. From left, John and Andrea Ferruzzo, parents of Katherine Ferruzzo; Samantha and Christopher Jacobe, parents of Mary Kate Jacobe; Katie and Clarke Baker, parents of Mary Grace Baker; Ellen and Andrew Sheedy, parents of Margaret Sheedy; Matthew and Wendie Childress, parents of Chloe Childress; Lisa and Brandt Dillon, parents of Lucy Dillon; Lindsey McCrory, mother of Sarah Blakely McCrory; Jorge and Ellen Toranzo, parents of Greta Toranzo; Warren and Patricia Bellows, parents of Anna Margaret Bellows; Elizabeth and Ryan DeWitt, parents of Molly DeWitt; and Natalie and Ben Landry, parents of Lainey Landry.

amid the debris in disbelief.

Almost every parent attended the meeting.

"That was the first time we were seeing each other," said Ryan DeWitt of Houston, who lost his 9-year-old daughter, Molly. "And we're mobilizing to be unified and go get something done."

They all agreed that they had to try their best to set aside their grief and get to work if any meaningful change could happen before next summer, when thousands of Texas children would again head to camp.

Rubber-stamped plans

Political dysfunction worked in the parents' favor. Lawmakers were in their first special session, which had begun on July 21. But with Democrats on a walkout over redistricting, nothing was getting done in Austin. That created a window of time before a second session was convened.

The parents and lobbyists dug into the details, learning all they could about Texas youth camp regulations and how they applied to what happened at Camp Mystic in the early hours of July 4.

At 1:18 p.m. on July 3, the National Weather Service had issued a flood watch effective through the next morning for much of the area. It wasn't an unusual alert in a region of the state known as Flash Flood Alley.

But at 1:14 a.m. on July 4, the weather service issued a heightened warning of "life-threatening flash flooding." Thunder shook cabins and awakened campers. Over the next two hours, the river rose rapidly, inundating the cabins closest to the water, located in an area known as The Flats. Girls in some cabins were evacuated to the camp's recreation center, but others were not. In fact, the camp's training manual for staff instructed that in case of a flood, the campers in The Flats were to remain in their cabins unless told otherwise by the office.

All 13 of the campers and two counselors in the Bubble Inn died. Eleven more campers from the Twins cabins and one from Jumble Inn were also swept away. All were in The Flats.

Richard "Dick" Eastland, the camp's director, died in the flood while trying to rescue campers. The disaster ultimately claimed more than 135 lives in Central Texas.

The parents and lobbyists discovered that the state's licensing requirements were scant and lacked teeth. State inspectors had signed off on Camp Mystic's emergency plan just two days before the flood, but without evaluating it. The camp simply had to have a plan on file to be in compliance.

"I just remember thinking to myself, 'What the hell did you inspect?'" recalled Clarke Baker of Beaumont, father of 8-year-old Mary Grace.

There were other troubling revelations. The Federal Emergency Management Agency had granted appeals by Camp Mystic to remove numerous structures from the flood map. Also glaring was a lack of requirement for the camps to have a means of reliable communication between cabins and the office during emergencies. And there was a lack of sirens or other warning devices in this flood-prone area of the state.

"We trusted them like we trust the school that we send our children to,"



The parents of Camp Mystic campers from Austin: (from left) CiCi and Will Steward, parents of Cile Steward; Kristin and Matthew Pohl, parents of Abby Pohl; and Stacy Stevens, mother of Mary Barrett Stevens.

said Wendie Childress. "And what we now know is there were no protections in place anywhere comparable to the way a school protects children. And so it was an awakening that we have all had and we've all had to live with."

Rep. Drew Darby, R-San Angelo, and Sen. Charles Perry, R-Lubbock, began drafting companion legislation. They worked around the clock and met often with parents to help draft thorough, enforceable regulations.

"From the very beginning, their presence shaped every conversation," Darby said in an email. "We approached this legislation with a simple guiding principle: If we were truly listening to these families, truly honoring what they had endured, then our work had to rise to meet the gravity of their loss."

A key development came when a HillCo lobbyist arranged private meetings on Aug. 14 with the parents and House Speaker Dustin Burrows, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Abbott — the so-called Big Three.

Time to testify

Phillips worked to get the parents ready. A mutual friend helped secure a private jet to fly the Dallas parents to Austin, and another nabbed a Vonlane bus to transport the Houston parents. Yet another person in Phillips' circle made the parents blankets with their children's names on them. They all met at the HillCo offices first for a briefing and encouragement.

In three private meetings, the parents one by one told their gut-wrenching stories to each of the state leaders. They told of their shock and their anger, and they talked about their daughters. It hadn't gotten any easier by the time they reached the Governor's Mansion at 4:15 p.m. that Thursday to meet with Abbott and his wife, Cecilia.

Everyone in the room was in tears by the end of the parents' accounts, they recalled.

"They were human beings feeling our suffering and understanding that we're in a state of shock," said Davin Hunt of Dallas, father of 8-year-old Janie. "But we're going to tell you, no matter how hard it is, we're going to tell you our story because something has to change."

The next day, Abbott announced

that he was calling a second special session with camp safety his top priority. The parents couldn't believe it had happened so fast.

The next couple of weeks were a whirlwind of legislative hearings and behind-the-scenes meetings. Many of the parents made several trips to the Capitol. Sixteen of them testified before the Senate Select Committee on Disaster Preparedness on Aug. 20. Lawmakers wept as they listened.

Michael McCown of Austin described how on July 5 he stood on the grounds of Camp Mystic in shock.

"I was asking myself, 'How? Why? How could these little girls vanish in the night with nobody having eyes on them?' ... We did not send Linnie to a war zone. We sent her to camp," McCown, father of 8-year-old Linnie, told the committee.

Throughout, the parents struggled to keep their composure. They were called forward in panels of four. One mom fidgeted with a tissue as she waited her turn to speak. Dads squeezed the shoulders of other dads when their voices wavered and cracked.

"I'm a horrible public speaker," Anne Lindsey Hunt said in an interview. Caitlin Bonner had felt the same but suggested a way through: "Lila and Janie would do it for us."

Carrie Hanna of Dallas, mother of 8-year-old Hadley, said she was also motivated by her surviving daughters.

"We have other children that we need to protect and show that you can also do hard things when it seems impossible, and that we will fight for you no matter what," she said.

CiCi Steward of Austin, the mother of 8-year-old Cile, delivered some of the most riveting testimony of the day.

"My daughter was stolen from us," Steward told lawmakers. "Cile's life ended not because of an unavoidable act of nature, but because of preventable failures. On just her fifth day of camp, the beginning of what should have been a magical summer, our Cile was swept away along with other beautiful girls."

In the final days of the month, the parents took turns keeping the pressure on. If one family was having a bad day and couldn't make a meeting, another would jump in to take over. Several granted media interviews to highlight their efforts.

The parents' determination paid off. Three significant new camp safety laws — House Bill 1 and Senate Bill 1, authored by Darby and Perry, respectively, and Senate Bill 3, authored by Sen. Paul Bettencourt, R-Houston — were passed by both chambers in the final days of the session. On Sept. 5, on the steps of the Governor's Mansion and surrounded by the parents of Heaven's 27, Abbott signed the bills into law.

The new regulations prohibit youth camps from locating sleeping cabins in flood plains and require operators to develop and annually update detailed emergency plans not only for floods but also tornadoes, fires, active shooters and other urgent situations. They require camps to robustly train staff and counselors on emergencies and orient campers within 48 hours of their arrival. Camps also must have radios with National Weather Service alerts, camp-wide alert systems and backup internet connections. The legislation establishes a public registry of licensed camps, requires governments in certain flood-prone areas to install warning sirens and creates a grant program to help pay for them.

Reality sinks in

In many ways, the parents' grief became more raw without the distraction of trips to the state Capitol. The changing of the seasons brought into sharp focus their futures without their daughters. There were too many empty seats at Thanksgiving. Fewer girls opening gifts under the tree at Christmas.

For many of the parents, working on foundations created in their daughters' memories has brought some comfort.

Most also have other children, some of whom survived the flood, and caring for their particular kind of sibling grief has been their priority. They draw strength from their faith. All of them urged the state to keep up the search for Cile Steward.

At least 20 families have filed lawsuits against Camp Mystic. An attorney for the camp has said that only a state investment in "modern river flood surge warning devices" could have prevented the disaster. The families are bracing themselves for long court battles.

They are also tracking two state legislative investigations into what happened at the camp. Jill and Patrick Marsh, parents of 8-year-old Sarah, said they're planning to lobby the Alabama legislature next year for similar camp safety reforms as those passed in Texas.

Bonded for life, the mothers and fathers gain solace in sharing their feelings with each other.

"No matter where you are in the grief process, there are other people who are in the same place, too," said Patrick Marsh.

And they plan to remain united in making sure Texas camps follow the new laws so no other parents have to endure what they have.

Rule breakers won't be tolerated. "Phones are going to be ringing, and we'll be up at the Capitol again," said Douglas Getten of Houston, father of 9-year-old Ellen. "We'll be wherever that we need to be to make sure this happens."

"It was so important because our girls' deaths were completely preventable."

STACY STEVENS, mother of 8-year-old Mary Barrett Stevens

"They were human beings feeling our suffering and understanding that we're in a state of shock. But we're going to tell you, no matter how hard it is, we're going to tell you our story because something has to change."

DAVIN HUNT, father of 8-year-old Janie Hunt, recalling a parents' meeting with Gov. Greg Abbott and his wife, Cecilia

Remembering the 'Heaven's 27'

The Camp Mystic campers and counselors came from all over Texas, and included one from Alabama

The 25 young girls and two teenage counselors who died at Camp Mystic were similar in many ways. Strong-willed and self-assured. Active and growing in their faith. Several parents said they took comfort in picturing the girls in heaven. The families remember their daughters below.

Mary Grace Baker

Less than two months before her death, 8-year-old Mary Grace Baker stood in a Beaumont church before her friends, family and teachers receiving her second-grade class's top honor, the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Award.

"It was a celebration of her character and the kindness and joy she brought to everyone around her," said her father, Clarke Baker.

A strong student, Mary Grace also had a long list of extracurriculars for her young age. She had been taking dance classes for five years and dreamed of being a Rockette in New York. But she also loved sports and "wore a tutu just as well as she wore baseball pants," her family wrote in a memorial. "And sometimes even at the same time."

She loved to travel with her family, including a large extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins, and especially loved time together with her grandparents. But most of all she adored her little brother, Jeb, insisting that he follow the rules.

"She wanted to protect him as if he were her own son," the family wrote.

Anna Margaret Bellows

Though not yet 9, everything little Margaret Bellows did was big.

She had a big laugh. She had a big zest for life. Her family even called her "Mega," a nickname that stuck after she had trouble pronouncing her name as a toddler.

"She was lively and fun and boisterous and loved everyone," said her mother, Patricia Bellows, of Houston.

Bellows imagines her daughter in heaven, together with the rest of Heaven's 27, doing the things she loved best.

"She's playing poker with her card shark friends," her mother said. "They're laughing really loud and dancing and having a lot of fun."

Margaret liked to play sports and was particularly empathetic. She had a strong faith, often reminding her family that, "God has a plan, we just don't know what it is yet."

Lila Bonner

Known as "Lila Bug" by her family, 9-year-old Lila Bonner was a "gentle caretaker who loved all creatures," her family wrote in a memorial.

She especially loved ladybugs, her mother said.

"They've been all over our house," said Caitlin Bonner of Dallas. Lila hoped one day to be a veterinarian and open an animal rescue.

Lila cherished being a big sister to Scarlett and Wynn and her bedtime routine with her father, who read books to her. Blake Bonner said he'll always treasure the memory of Lila, normally a goalie on her soccer team, scoring a goal of her own on her last game of the season shortly before her death.

"Those are the moments we were just starting to really get to share," he said.

Chloe Childress

Chloe Childress was known as "the machine" by her father, Matthew Childress, because of her high energy and love of adventure. The 18-year-old, a counselor in Bubble Inn and a former camper, died while staying close to the girls as-



The Associated Press

In July, a girl ran past crosses at a makeshift memorial in Kerrville honoring the victims of the July 4 floods.

signed to her cabin.

A graduate of the Kinkaid School in Houston, Chloe planned to enter the University of Texas in the fall as a pre-med student. In high school, she excelled in both academics and sports, serving as a member of the Honor Council and running on the varsity cross-country team. She loved all kinds of music and enjoyed writing her own lyrics and poems.

Chloe also had a long history of service, having founded the Love Our Senior Citizens Club, and participating in several other philanthropies.

Her mother, Wendie, said she imagines her daughter in heaven "taking care of everyone she can and sending love and being kind." And Chloe is being adventurous there, too.

"Chloe is riding a horse with Robert Redford," Wendie said, allowing herself a rare giggle.

Molly DeWitt

Molly DeWitt, 9, of Houston was imaginative and artistic, loving to spend time drawing, dancing and dreaming up stories. When she wasn't creating doll houses out of Amazon boxes, she enjoyed reading and learning about the world around her.

Molly loved all kinds of sports, including skiing, softball, basketball and swimming. But her favorite was soccer, where she was a force on the field and looked forward to games and practices alike. She especially enjoyed performing her trademark full-speed scissor move.

Molly also was sensitive to the needs of others. She cared about refugees, the homeless and children in the margins.

"Her instinct was always to notice, to care and to extend kindness," her family wrote in a memorial.

Her father, Ryan DeWitt, believes everyone in heaven is pain-free.

"But just in case there's somebody that's not, she's trying to make sure that they're OK," he said.

Lucy Dillon

A straight-A student, Lucy Dillon, 8, was set to begin a gifted-and-talented program in Houston's Spring Branch ISD in the fall. She loved math and science and was determined to face any challenge, academic or otherwise.

"This setting today would have been child's play for her," Lucy's father, Brandt Dillon, told a Texas Senate committee in August.

Lucy was also athletic. She played softball and basketball and recently helped lead her teams to win league championships. But it was basketball that captured her heart.

"Some of her happiest moments were spent shooting hoops in the driveway," her family wrote in a memorial.

Lucy loved the Houston Rockets

and dreamed of being a professional basketball player one day. She also loved to collect crystals, gems and "anything featuring corgis," her family wrote.

Katherine Ferruzzo

When Katherine Ferruzzo's waterlogged Bible was returned to her family, her mother was stunned to see that a single highlighted verse hadn't been washed out like the others.



"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes," Andrea Ferruzzo said, recalling Revelation 21:4.

"There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain; for the old order of things has passed away."

It's a fitting memorial for the 19-year-old counselor in Bubble Inn, who had a deep faith and compassion for children with disabilities. She volunteered hundreds of hours to organizations that served Houston's special needs community. She planned to attend the University of Texas, where she had hoped to major in special education.

Katherine had a "firecracker" personality and was active in her high school both academically and socially. She loved adventure and loved to make people laugh. Camp Mystic was her "happy place."

Like Chloe Childress, Katherine died staying with the campers in her care.

Ellen Getten

Doug and Jennifer Getten aren't huggers, but their 9-year-old daughter Ellen sure was.

"Ellen would make a 20-yard-dash to somebody and just wrap them up," Jennifer said.

Ellen had a bubbly personality and never met a stranger. She loved attending St. John's School in Houston and was especially fond of wearing her red uniform. She enjoyed playing tennis, learning golf and excelling in swimming.

But her favorite pastime was playing the virtual reality video game Roblox with her older sister, Gwynne, who was her "greatest cheerleader and her very best friend," the family wrote in a memorial.

Ellen loved to make bracelets for her friends. She "woke up happy, went to sleep happy and made everyone around her happy," the memorial said.

Jennifer said when she imagines Ellen in heaven, the freckly-faced hugger is doing cartwheels. "And if anyone is down or anything, she is taking care of them," she said.

Hadley Hanna

Hadley Hanna couldn't wait for her turn to go to Camp Mystic, where both her mother and older sister had been campers.

The 8-year-old with the sunny disposition was doing cartwheels across the lawn at camp the day Carrie Hanna dropped her off in late June.

"I love this place," Hadley told her mother, throwing her hands up in the air.



Hadley loved to dance and cheer and looked forward to starting third grade at University Park Elementary School in August. She also loved going on "date nights" with her father.

"Just her and me," Doug Hanna said, calling up a picture of a recent outing to Reunion Tower.

Carrie said she envisions Hadley in heaven with the girl's beloved great-grandparents. She's also having a good time "flipping and doing gymnastics" with the rest of her friends, Carrie said.

Virginia Hollis

Virginia Hollis had a faith in God that one day surprised even her father.

Lars Hollis said the two were sitting on a Florida beach when he told her that he felt like they were in paradise.

"No, daddy, there's only one paradise," the 8-year-old daughter said. "Heaven with God."

He and his wife, Lacey Hollis, picture their daughter in that paradise now. "She's watching over us and steering us towards love above all else, bringing families closer together," Lars said.



Virginia lived on a ranch in Bellville, northwest of Houston, with her parents and younger sister, Siena. She loved the outdoors and all it contained, especially butterflies, flowers, rocks and animals. A cowgirl, she particularly loved riding her horse, Salt Valley. She spent hours creating all kinds of art projects.

Virginia had also become an accomplished piano player. A song she wrote brought lawmakers to tears when her parents played a recording of it during a Senate committee hearing in August.

Janie Hunt

Anne Lindsey Hunt said she experienced firsthand her 9-year-old daughter Janie's penchant for compassion shortly after her death. The grieving mother was checking the digital images captured on a birdhouse camera outside her home when she saw one frame had been triggered by something other than the usual squirrel.

"It was a rainbow," she said. "And then above it was a huge splash of shocking pink, which was Janie's favorite color."

Hunt felt her daughter's presence. "It keeps me from going back to

that place where I worry Janie's alone out there," she said.

Janie hoped to be an artist one day and already had an impressive portfolio. This year, she was the only student from her class to have an exhibit at the Highland Park ISD Art Show. Last year she received the First Golden Art Star at Hyer Elementary. And in 2022, she won the Gold Youth Design Award at the Dallas Garden Club Flower Show.

Janie loved church and school. Her favorite sports were basketball, tennis and volleyball. Her family treasures the memory of her starring as the quirky seagull Scuttle in a production of *The Little Mermaid*.

Mary Kate Jacobe

Mary Kate Jacobe is in heaven "being exactly who she always was," said her father, Christopher Jacobe, of Houston.

"I was always in awe of her," he said. "She was always so sweet, but also witty and feisty."

The 8-year-old was born premature and spent time in the neonatal intensive care unit at Texas Children's Hospital. But she was as fierce as she was sweet and never lost a battle of wits, her family said.

Mary Kate adored her friends and family, particularly her big brother, Russel, who was her best friend. She was never far away from her puppy, Pickles. She founded Mary Kate's and Harry's Cookies and Derpy Rainbow Slime Shop. She called herself the Cheese Queen, the Pickles Queen and the #1Swiftie.

Her revolving list of career goals included growing up to be a singer, actress, artist and doctor. Mary Kate had a personality that "broke all molds," her family wrote in a memorial.

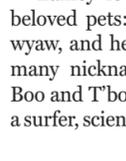
Lainey Landry

There's no doubt in Natalie Landry's mind that her daughter, Lainey Landry, is in heaven having fun with all of her friends from the Bubble Inn.

"She is with all these girls, and they are perfect," Natalie said. In her short time at Camp Mystic, the 9-year-old was having a blast at the scavenger hunts, dance parties, singing songs and making friends.

The little sister to big brothers Daniel and Luke, Lainey loved playing cards, especially old maid and gin rummy with her grandparents. She loved attending St. Michael's Catholic School in Houston and singing loudly in church. She played on her soccer and basketball teams, and looked forward to her Brownie Girl Scout meetings and activities.

Lainey loved taking care of her beloved pets: her cats, Lila and Yawyaw, and her dog, Doc. A girl with many nicknames, including Lainey Boo and T'bot, she dreamed of being a surfer, scientist, singer and mom.



Lainey loved taking care of her beloved pets: her cats, Lila and Yawyaw, and her dog, Doc. A girl with many nicknames, including Lainey Boo and T'bot, she dreamed of being a surfer, scientist, singer and mom.

Hanna and Rebecca Lawrence

Twins Hanna and Rebecca Lawrence, 8, loved transforming the family dining room into a playroom "filled with Barbies and other toys, and would spend hours in there just playing make-believe," said their father, John Lawrence, of Dallas.

They each had their own bed in their shared room. But when morning came often they were found together in Rebecca's bed, "with a pile of books crammed in there with them," he said. Hanna read stories to Rebecca to help her fall asleep.

Hanna, whose favorite food group was sugar, was the "instigator of the sort of joyful chaos that made your heart skip a beat," her family wrote in a memorial.

Hanna loved to leave her mark,

For family that suffered 4 losses, survivors lean on their faith

Loud cracks of thunder and driving rain woke up RJ Harber and his wife, Annie, early on July 4 as they vacationed in a cabin along the Guadalupe River.

But it should have been a warning siren that alerted them to the catastrophic Hill Country flood. A public siren should have roused the Dallas couple long before water began pouring into their cabin. Long before the flood claimed the lives of their two daughters and Harber's parents, who were in a nearby cabin.

A new state law passed in the wake of the disaster requires flood warning sirens to be installed in counties prone to flooding and with histories of related deaths or with dense residential or recreational use. Senate Bill 3, authored by Sen. Paul Bettencourt, R-Houston, also creates a grant program to help cities and counties defray the costs of installation and

maintenance. The sirens must be installed by next summer.

For Harber, that is too late.

By the time the loud storm awakened him and his wife at about 3:30 a.m., water already covered the floor of their cabin and was rising fast. They barely escaped through a window and swam to a safe spot.

After quickly alerting people in two other nearby cabins, Harber grabbed a kayak and paddled against what was now a raging, whitewater current toward his daughters' cabin. Debris came at him in the dark; he couldn't make it there.

Of the 20 cabins in that Casa Bonita community, only six remained. One of those swept away was the one containing Blair, 13, and Brooke, 11, and their grandparents, Mike Harber, 76, and Charlene Harber, 74.

Harber said that neither he nor his wife received any weather alerts on their phones



RJ Harber

Blair and Brooke Harber, pictured celebrating Christmas last year.

that terrible morning, adding that cellphone coverage in that area was spotty. He said sirens, like the ones that are tested once a month near his northwest Dallas home, would have saved his daughters.

"I should have had some kind of warning so I could get

to my girls, or my girls would have come to me if they heard a siren," Harber said.

Reminders of the girls are everywhere throughout the couple's home, including in a dish of pink and yellow candies in the living room. Those were Blair and Brooke's favorite colors.

Blair was the "model 13-year-old," Harber said. An altar server at St. Rita Catholic Church, Blair loved animals and helping her father cook. A rising eighth grader, she was an exceptional student and excelled in lacrosse, basketball, volleyball and cheerleading. Blair was kind, respectful, loving and full of faith, Harber said.

Set to begin sixth grade, Brooke was "pure energy and joy," her father said. Bringing people together and making them laugh was her greatest gift. She could run for hours without tiring and displayed

that energy while playing lacrosse, soccer, basketball, softball and volleyball. It seemed there wasn't a sport Brooke didn't like.

After the flood, the girls were found holding hands.

Harber said he and Annie have leaned heavily on their faith as they struggle every day to go on without their only children. Yet he doesn't think of them as gone, but in heaven where they are safe and encouraging him.

"I've come to understand that my relationship with the girls didn't stop on the Fourth of July," Harber said. "It's expanding and evolving."

The death toll is difficult to square with this age of warp-speed technological advancement and hyperconnectivity. The Fourth of July floods claimed the lives of more than 135 people, including locals and visitors from other parts of Texas and from out of state.

The water swept away RVs and knocked houses off their foundations.

Among the victims: An Austin toddler ripped from his mother's arms. College students from Beaumont sharing a cabin. A soccer coach and a teacher from Kerrville and their two children. A Kingwood family of three on their way to the rodeo. A Lewisville couple in their camper along the Guadalupe River, and another couple who had made the RV park their long-term home. A young father from Ingram who punched through a window to save his wife and kids. The list goes on and on.

The disaster finally moved Texas officials to do what they should have done a long time ago: mandate the installation of outdoor warning sirens along flood-prone areas. If only it hadn't taken heartbreak of this magnitude to make it happen.

Heaven's 27

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drawing a simple "H" on cream-colored chairs, her parents recalled. But she was also kind and had "lots of questions about people in need and how she could help," her family wrote.

Rebecca loved "calm, quiet and snuggles," her family wrote. She adored animals, especially big cats, and up until recently said she wanted to be a cheetah when she grew up. That changed to a teacher.

From early on, Rebecca had a strong sense of fashion. As a toddler, she loved an orange striped dress so much that her parents bought extras. She looked forward to the day she'd be old enough to add "a shock of color" to her hair, her family wrote.

In September, a friend of a friend texted the girls' mother, Lacy Lawrence, a picture of stone a stranger had laid 5,000 miles away along the Camino de Santiago in Spain. It read, "Hanna and Rebecca Lawrence. Gone to [sic] soon. May Your Joy Never be forgotten."

A short time later, the priest who performed the funeral service for the twins was leading a pilgrimage on the same trail and spotted the memorial stone.

"We still do not know who placed it there," John said. "But we are grateful to them, and grateful that this act of love made its way to us."

Kellyanne Lytal

Rarely seen without her platform heels and lipstick, Kellyanne Lytal had a flair for fashion. She loved Taylor Swift, the color blue and "anything that sparkled," her family wrote in a memorial.

"We will never forget the sound of her sashaying down the stairs in her heels and dazzling dress," they wrote.

The 8-year-old from San Antonio loved rollerblading, snow skiing, soccer, softball and gymnastics. And she never met a microphone she didn't like.

"Give her some music, a microphone and a chance to perform ... and the dance party was on!" her family wrote.

Perhaps her favorite moments, however, were the simpler ones, reading Bible stories, saying her daily prayers and snuggling up with her parents and little sister.

"She was the perfect combination of beauty and athleticism; cautious yet carefree; serious but wildly fun-loving with an unshakeable spirit," they wrote.

Sarah Marsh

Lots of 8-year-old girls try to be perfect rule followers, Sarah Marsh's mother notes, but not her daughter.

"Sarah was up for good trouble," Jill Marsh said. "She was a little mischievous. She wasn't going to do something just because you told her."

Jill recalled seeing photos of Sarah

at Camp Mystic taken at a dance party with her new friends in Bubble Inn.

"There were pictures of Sarah in someone else's bathing suit," she said.

Jill said Sarah, who lived in Mountain Brook, Ala., couldn't wait to go to camp. She had an adventurous spirit and looked forward to making new friends.

"She had this amazing ability to connect with people and make them feel like they were her favorite person," said her father, Patrick Marsh. "She is with the other girls now."

Linnie McCown

A fifth-generation Austinite, Linnie McCown, 8, was the middle of three children.

To her older brother, Bates, she was the "pesky but beloved little sister," her father, Michael McCown, told a Texas Senate committee in August. She was a "mother figure" to her younger brother, George, and "on the weekend would even pour him Cheerios and milk so my wife and I could get a few more minutes of rest," Michael said.

Linnie never let her dyslexia get her down, her family wrote in a memorial. She persevered in her many reading milestones and encouraged her other classmates in their own efforts.

She was greeted in heaven, her family said in a memorial, by her beloved bloodhound, Mabel.

Perhaps most of all, Linnie loved to dance. She was excited to start her second year as a member of her competitive dance team, Tarrytown Dance Force.

And she hoped one day to attend Stephen F. Austin High School, where her goal was to make the competitive Red Jackets Dance Team.

Blakely McCrory

Blakely McCrory could be mischievous at times, like when she put her pet box turtle in her mother's purse. In heaven, she's likely playing jokes on all her friends from Camp Mystic, said her mother, Lindsey McCrory of Houston.

A natural on stage, the 8-year-old loved learning and performing with a theater program called The Spotlight Project.

She wasn't afraid to perform her musical solos or to tackle difficult characters.

She looked forward to the theater activities at camp, as well as swimming, horseback riding, fishing, archery and playing basketball.

Blakely's father, Blake McCrory, died in March. An uncle died in June.

"It is the family's strong belief that Blakely's father and uncle sensed her distress in the floodwaters and were present to receive her safe and sound into their caring arms to guide her into the presence of her loving Savior in heaven," her family wrote in a memorial.

Blakely wanted to attend Texas A&M University to become a veterinarian and take care of cattle at her grandfather's farm.

Virginia "Wynne" Naylor

Wynne Naylor, 8, loved the outdoors and had a penchant for collecting lizards. She loved searching for them in her yard and in an alley and would bring them home.

"We were ordering cages on Amazon daily," said her mother, Alli Naylor of Dallas. "We would make her release them at night, but she would wake up at 6 a.m. the next day and go catch them again."

Wynne loved fishing, dance, gymnastics and, most of all, her two younger sisters.

She was looking forward to beginning third grade at Lake Highlands Elementary School and with the cooler weather would have been "organizing her gear and practicing her aim for the upcoming fall hunting season," her parents said in written testimony to the Senate.

Her father, Cole Naylor, pictures her in heaven with the rest of the girls. He could picture them together while attending the funerals of his daughter and some of the other campers.

"There they were, up in the front of each church dancing, walking across the railing, you know, like they were all still here," Cole said.

Eloise "Lulu" Peck

Among the most vivid memories Tim Peck has of his daughter is seeing her riding around the neighborhood on her pink bike as he arrived home after work.

"She was just 8-year-old innocence, riding around," he said of Lulu. In heaven he imagines her "in a little bike gang" with her camp friends, "giggling all along the way."

Missy Peck sees her with animals. "Lulu loved nothing more than a dog," she said of her daughter. "When you'd ask her what she wanted to be when she grew up, she said a dog walker or a dog groomer."

Lulu rejected the idea of being a veterinarian because she wanted to be with "happy dogs," Missy said.

When Lulu wasn't doting on animals, she was having fun with her little brother, Holden, her favorite playmate.

She loved attending Bradfield Elementary School in Highland Park, especially recess, when she would organize her friends as employees in her make-believe "Lulu's Spa," for nail and skin treatments.

Abby Pohl

Abby Pohl was fearless. When the family went on a vacation to Colorado, she saw Mount Crested Butte as something to conquer.

"She's scaling that thing far quicker than any of us could, or that we were comfortable with," said her father, Matthew Pohl of Austin.

The 8-year-old also loved to tell jokes and play pranks on friends and family. After a little practice, she became a Rummikub expert.

"She was a tiny comedian, whether painting a mustache on her face, giggling about 'chubby grandmas' or accessorizing with Minion goggles long after Halloween had passed," said a memorial written by her family.

The youngest of three daughters, Abby loved hitting tennis balls and practicing golf swings with her father on the weekends. She loved playing games with both her parents, reading and anything having to do with Taylor Swift.

Margaret Sheedy

Margaret Sheedy, 8, will be remembered by her family for her bright and confident personality.

She was so self-assured that she had no hesitation talking to strangers.

"Her self-assuredness, thoughtfulness and independence at such a young age were truly inspiring," her family wrote in a memorial.

Margaret loved attending the Kincaid School in Houston and looked forward to starting the third grade.

It meant another school year full of fun with her friends and teachers alike.

Always punctual and organized, Margaret had a habit of laying out her school clothes the night before so she would have extra time to help her little brother pack his backpack.

Her parents, Ellen and Andrew Sheedy, picture Margaret in heaven with the other campers.

They said Margaret, a fan of family movie nights, is probably eating popcorn and watching *The Parent Trap*.

Renee Smajstrla

Renee Smajstrla, 8, loved acting on stage. She once played a Lullaby League munchkin in a production of *The Wizard of Oz* and was hoping for a lead role in an upcoming play at Camp Mystic.

A resident of Ingram, west of Kerrville, Renee attended Hunt School, where she was a straight-A student. She had recently received the Soaring Eagle award from her teachers for her kindness and joy, according to a memorial written by her family.

Renee loved the outdoors and loved going to camp. She was a regular at Crider's, a family-friendly rodeo and dance hall in Ingram. And she enjoyed family trips to northern Michigan, where she played water and snow sports.

Most of all, she cherished being a big sister to Cameron, the family's younger daughter.

Mary Barrett Stevens

At about 4 a.m. on July 4, John Stevens had a vivid dream of his daughter, Mary Barrett Stevens. The 8-year-old tapped him on the shoulder and told him she loved him and that everything

was all right. He assumed he had dreamt his daughter was reassuring

him she wasn't homesick at camp. But hours later when he learned her cabin had been overcome by a flood, he took a different view.

"I'm convinced it was her on the way out, just trying to let someone in the family know she was OK," Stevens said.

That was typical of Mary Barrett, John said. She often could be found consoling a classmate or fellow basketball team member.

A student at Highland Park Elementary in Austin, Mary Barrett was fearless and liked to do things that made most people nervous.

She'd jump off rocks into a water hole, ski fast down a slope, and hop on the back of a horse without hesitation, said her mother, Stacy Stevens.

She looked forward to family vacations to Telluride, Colo., and was looking forward to her first summer at Camp Mystic, Stacy said. Mary Barrett loved her little brother, Graham, and sister, Lilly, as well as her scruffy mutt, Pete.

Cile Steward

Cile Steward, 8, of Austin, was an adventurer, as comfortable in sparkly heels as she was in fishing waders, according to a memorial written by friends of the Steward family.

Cile is the only one of Heaven's 27 who has not yet been found. Her family has been pleading with

authorities to continue looking for her. They wrote the following tribute:

"During her brief and beautiful time with us, Cile sparkled with life. She met every moment with exuberance, curiosity and a sense of humor that was as impossible to resist as her precious freckles and bright smile. Cile's creativity, determination and social ease made her a natural leader, but it was her deep sensitivity and utter sweetness that made her an adored friend and big sister. Her world was rich with community and blessed by the warmth of a family who treasured her."

Greta Toranzo

Greta Toranzo loved many different kinds of sports, but her favorite was tennis. The 10-year-old Houston

girl was on the youth team at Briar Club. The team won a city championship and went on to place third at the state championship. Her mother, Ellen Toranzo, said the two loved watching professional tennis matches together.

Greta was a straight-A student and cheerleader at Sinclair Elementary and swam with the Barracudas Swim Team.

She played softball with the Timbergrove Sports Association. She also played field hockey, lacrosse and loved taking horseback riding lessons.

The oldest of the Heaven's 27 campers, Greta was in her third year at the camp.

Ellen said she believes Greta is in heaven "big sistering" all of the younger campers and "picking out which Taylor Swift song they're going to listen to next."

