The youngest victims of a national calamity, and the people they left behind

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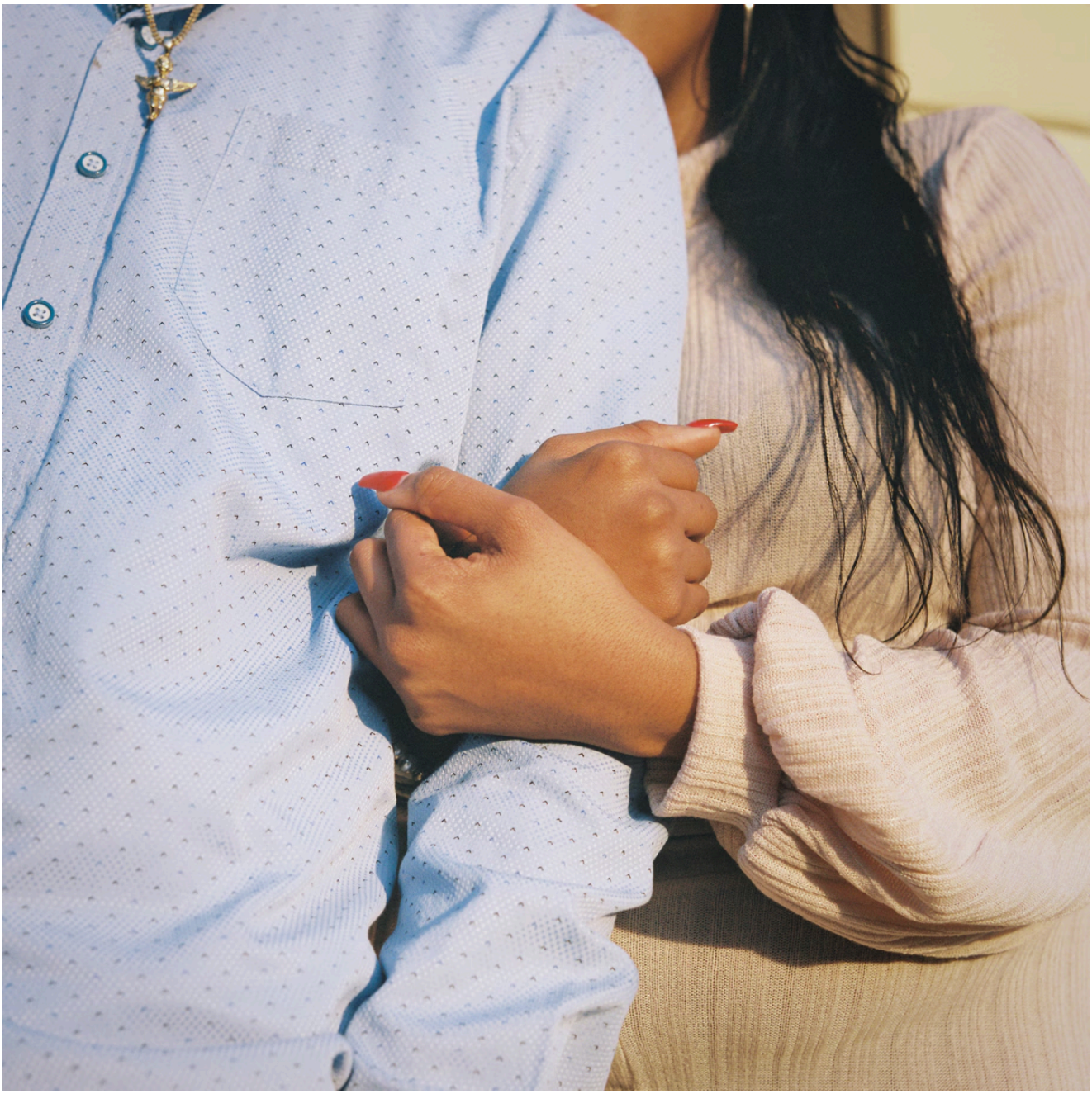

The coronavirus pandemic death toll in the U.S. nears 500,000, about a year after the first fatality

Lastassija White and Quincy Drone lost their 5-year-old daughter to covid-19 in October. “I could tell she was really scared,” her father said of seeing Tagan in the emergency room after her death, her eyes still wide-open. (Cate Dingley for The Washington Post)

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Priscilla Morse blames herself. “I had it last,” she said. “I was Gigi’s primary caregiver.”

Priscilla’s husband, David, blames himself. He brought the virus that causes covid-19 into the house after picking it up at the pool supply shop he manages.

Their 11-year-old son thinks it’s his fault: He’s the one who noticed his 6-year-old sister lying still, eyes open, blank stare. He called 911, but wonders if he couldn’t have noticed earlier.

[Here are three ways to visualize the monstrous death toll of the coronavirus in this country]

The older kids believe they should have checked in on their sister sooner.

“They were happy, well-adjusted kids,” their mother says now. “Then, snap your fingers. They’re broken, in therapy, on meds. Struggling, a lot.”

Covid-19 killed Gigi Morse in August in Jackson, Tenn. She was a dynamo of a kid who loved Froot Loops and was obsessed with all things “Frozen” — the songs, the characters.

The virus didn’t kill anyone else in the Morse family, but Gigi’s mother says it might as well have. The pain does not ebb. The guilt gnaws at them constantly.

“You see on the news, ‘X amount of people died,’ but it’s so much more than that,” Priscilla said. “Do people see just how destroyed your family and your life is, six months later? Half-a-million families who’ve had their world torn apart?”

As the nation reaches the milestone of a half-million deaths about a year after the first American succumbed to the coronavirus, the number of children killed by the disease remains relatively small. The necropolis of covid has grown into a city of sorrow the size of Atlanta or Sacramento — a death toll larger than the combined American losses in combat from the Civil War, World War I and World War II, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

In this new national graveyard of virus victims, the section set aside for the young held 271 children as of early February, according to data from the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Each death represents a shattered family and a trauma deepened, parents say, by the rampant belief that kids can’t get covid, or that it doesn’t much harm them when they do.

The day before Gigi died, President Donald Trump said that children “are almost immune from this disease. … They don’t have a problem.”

Although relatively few children die of covid-19, “it’s not fair to say it’s a benign disease among children,” said Sean O’Leary, an immunization researcher at Children’s Hospital Colorado and vice chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics committee on infectious diseases. “For every one of these deaths, quite a few kids spend a long time in ICUs and suffer lingering effects.”

The children who have died of covid-19 are, even more than among adults, disproportionately children of color — about three-quarters of those who’ve succumbed to covid so far, according to CDC data.

[Tracking the covid vaccine: Doses, people vaccinated by state]

They were kids who were obsessed with vampires and unicorns, thrilled by skateboarding and Mario Kart. They left behind stuffed animals worn raw with love, siblings who still wander into their rooms looking for them, and, next to one child’s tombstone, a little white concrete bench, bedazzled with pink rhinestones that spell out “Kim.”

They had futures in mind. In Gainesville, Fla., Kimmie Lynum was busy planning her 10th birthday party. J.J. Boatman, a 9-year-old in Texas, was thinking about his future; he wanted to be a policeman or maybe work at Taco Casa so he could bring tacos home every day. Tagan Drone, a 5-year-old in Amarillo, Tex., planned to be a mermaid for Halloween. Elizabeth English, a 12-year-old cheerleader in Arizona, was all about finding what would make people more beautiful; the equipment bag she carried was the plumpest on her squad because she stocked hair spray, gel and bobby pins for her teammates.

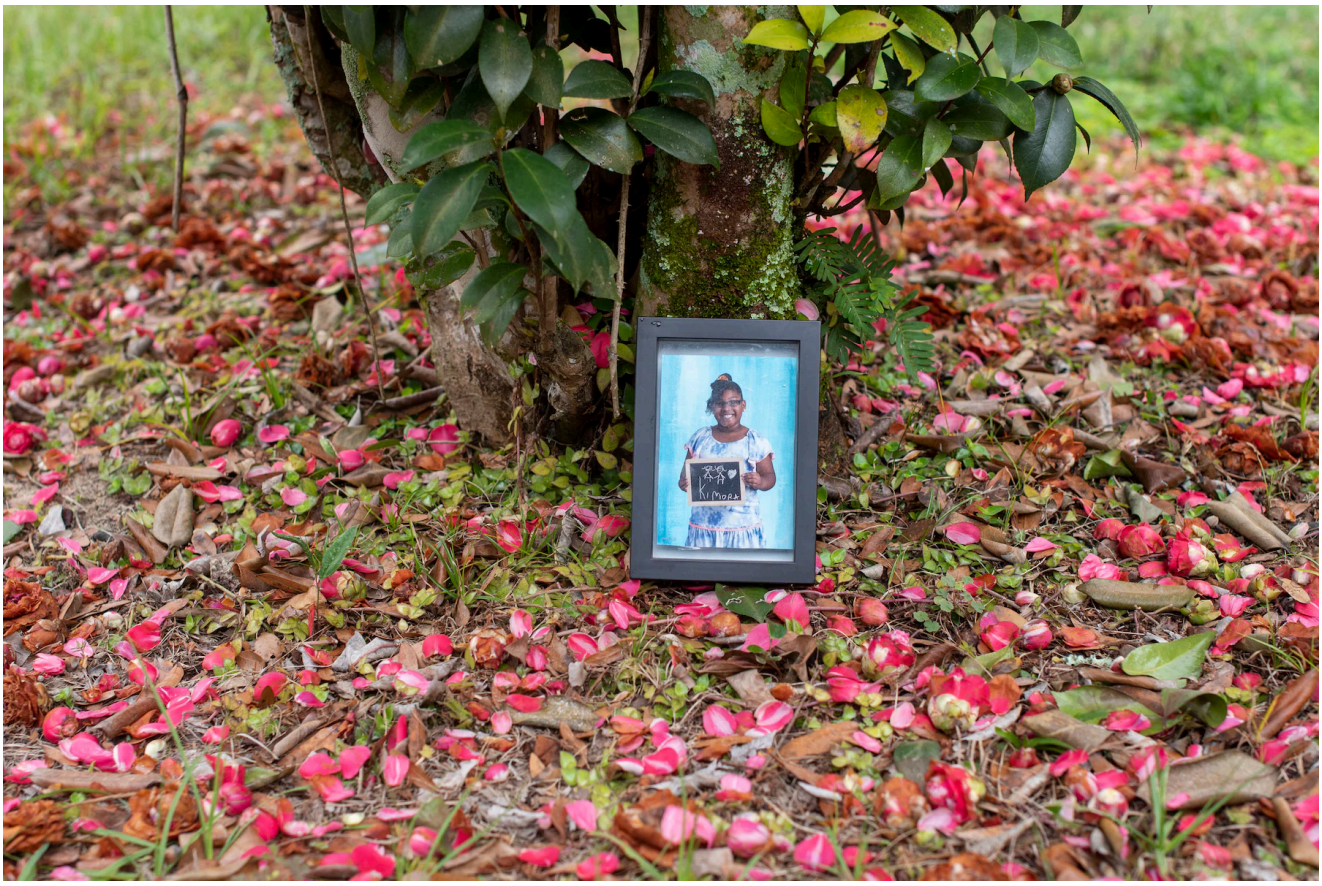
Like most kids, they probably had some extra protection against the coronavirus, possibly because their noses and throats contain fewer of the receptors that the virus binds to, or because of their more robust immune systems.

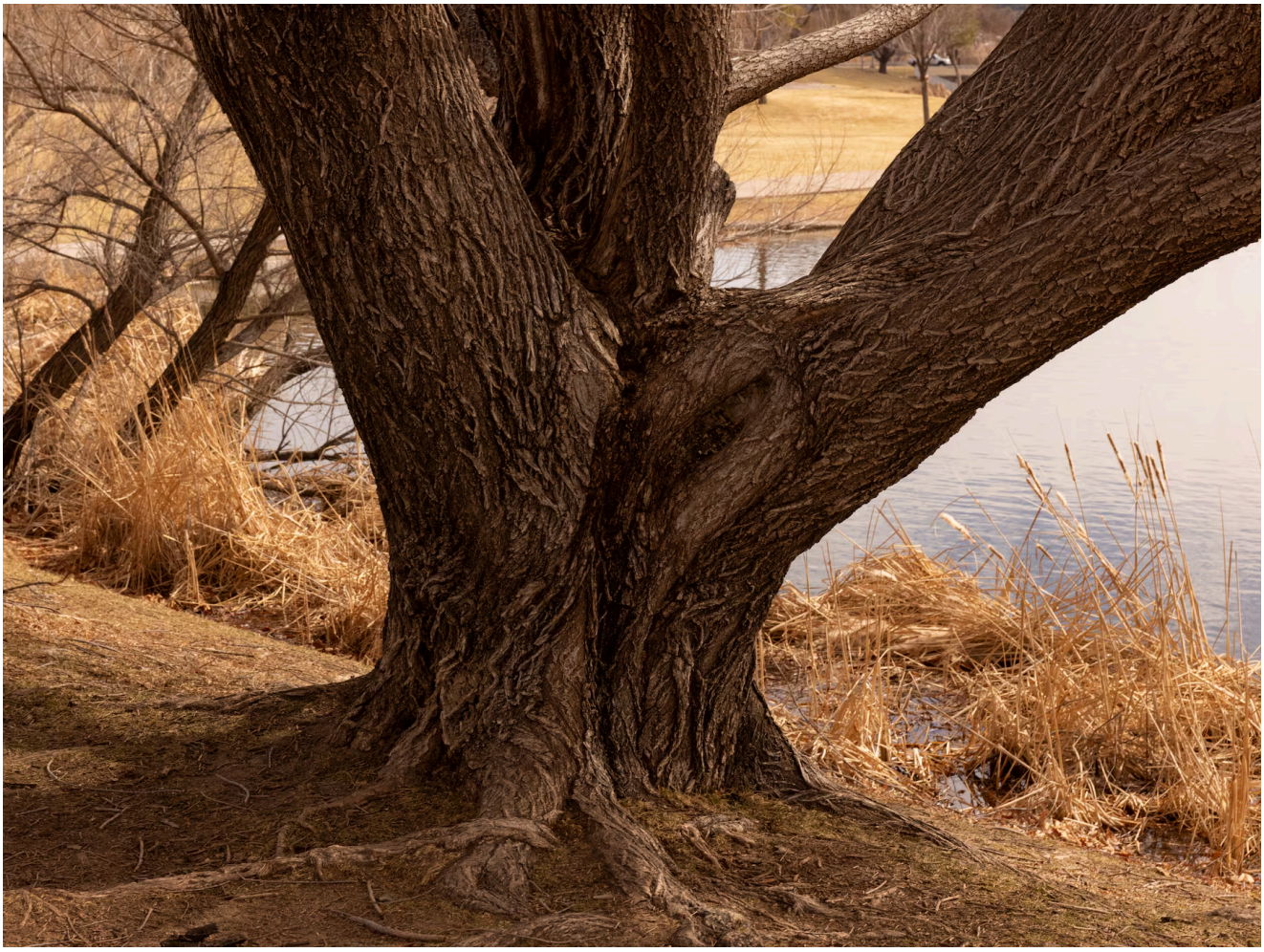
“Younger kids, 10 and under, are both less likely to get infected when exposed and less likely to spread the disease when infected,” O’Leary said.

Still, nearly 3 million children in the United States have tested positive for the coronavirus, about 12 percent of all cases, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

For some children, the extra protection wasn’t enough. Nor were extraordinary efforts by EMTs, doctors and nurses, who pumped and pressed and prayed long beyond each child’s last breath.

Child deaths amount to 0.2 percent of the U.S. total, and as of early this month, 10 states had suffered no child fatalities. One state that has had more than its share of pediatric cases is Tennessee, where 130,000 kids have gotten infected and seven have died, including Gigi Morse, whose mother called her “Gigi Pickles.”





White lifts Drone's shirt to show the tattoo on his back of their daughter, Tagan. (Cate Dingley for The Washington Post)

Kimmie Lynum’s school picture rests beneath a tree outside her home in Hawthorne, Fla. No one knew the 9-year-old had covid until after she had died. (Nydia Blas for The Washington Post)

Elizabeth English loved climbing this tree at a park in her hometown of Payson, Ariz. The 12-year-old died of multisystem inflammatory syndrome, a rare condition that affects children exposed to the coronavirus. (Cassidy Araiza for The Washington Post)

Lungs ‘on fire’

When Priscilla Morse was 7, she watched a documentary on horrific conditions in Romanian orphanages. “It was the first time I ever saw my dad cry,” she recalled.

Priscilla, who was adopted herself, told her parents: “I want to get them out.”

She and David have devoted their lives to adopting special-needs children from Eastern Europe and Russia. They had already adopted two children when, in 2015, David texted Priscilla a photo of a beautiful girl in a Ukrainian orphanage and this message: “How about one more?”

The Morses knew that Gigi — Gillian, actually, named for Priscilla’s favorite actress, Gillian Anderson — had hydrocephalus, a buildup of fluids in the brain. But they didn’t discover until she arrived and suffered a seizure that she also had epilepsy and autism.

Once in Tennessee, Gigi swiftly picked up English, leaping from “Eat, eat” to knowing her letters and numbers. At school, she was quickly moved from special-needs instruction to a regular classroom.

[Covid vaccine update: Tracking progress against coronavirus]

From the start of the pandemic, the Morses reined in their lives. No more Walmart, no more Target. David, considered an essential worker, had to go to the store, but otherwise, they stayed close to home.

On July 2, David was diagnosed with covid. His fever spiked to 104 degrees, and he had trouble breathing, but he recovered in a couple of weeks. Priscilla was next, on July 17. Her case was mild, though even now she can’t smell or taste. She sent her youngest kids to stay with her parents and isolated herself in her bedroom until she was cleared on July 31.

Then, on Aug. 3, Gigi seemed lethargic. She threw up. Priscilla took her to the doctor’s office, where Gigi drank a blue slushie, ate Oreos and ran around the waiting room. Her heart rate was fine, her temperature 97.4, her breathing clear.

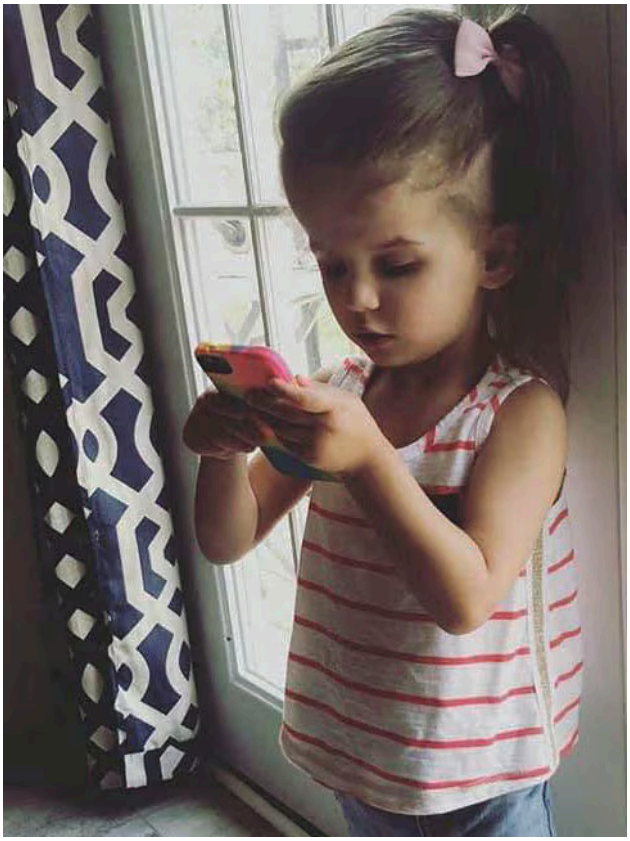
The doctor figured she had a stomach bug and sent her home.

The next day, Priscilla went to the store and left Gigi with her older kids and her son’s nurse. Priscilla was two blocks from home when her 17-year-old son called, screaming: “Gigi’s dead, come home!”

Priscilla arrived to find two ambulances, three police cars and a firetruck in front of her house. At the hospital, doctors worked on Gigi for 40 minutes, but there was no bringing her back.

A coronavirus test came up positive. There had been no seizure, no sign of any of her other problems flaring. Gigi had drowned in her sleep, a doctor explained. “Her lungs were on fire,” Priscilla said, “totally full. Her body couldn’t handle the covid.”

“All I could think about was, I’d had it last,” Priscilla said. “I felt like a murderer.”



Six-year-old Gigi Morse was a dynamo of a kid who loved Froot Loops and was obsessed with all things “Frozen” — the songs, the characters. (Priscilla Morse)

Gigi’s clothes, which someone offered to make a quilt from. “I can see her laughing and running and dancing and swimming in every one of these items,” her mother posted on Facebook. (Priscilla Morse)

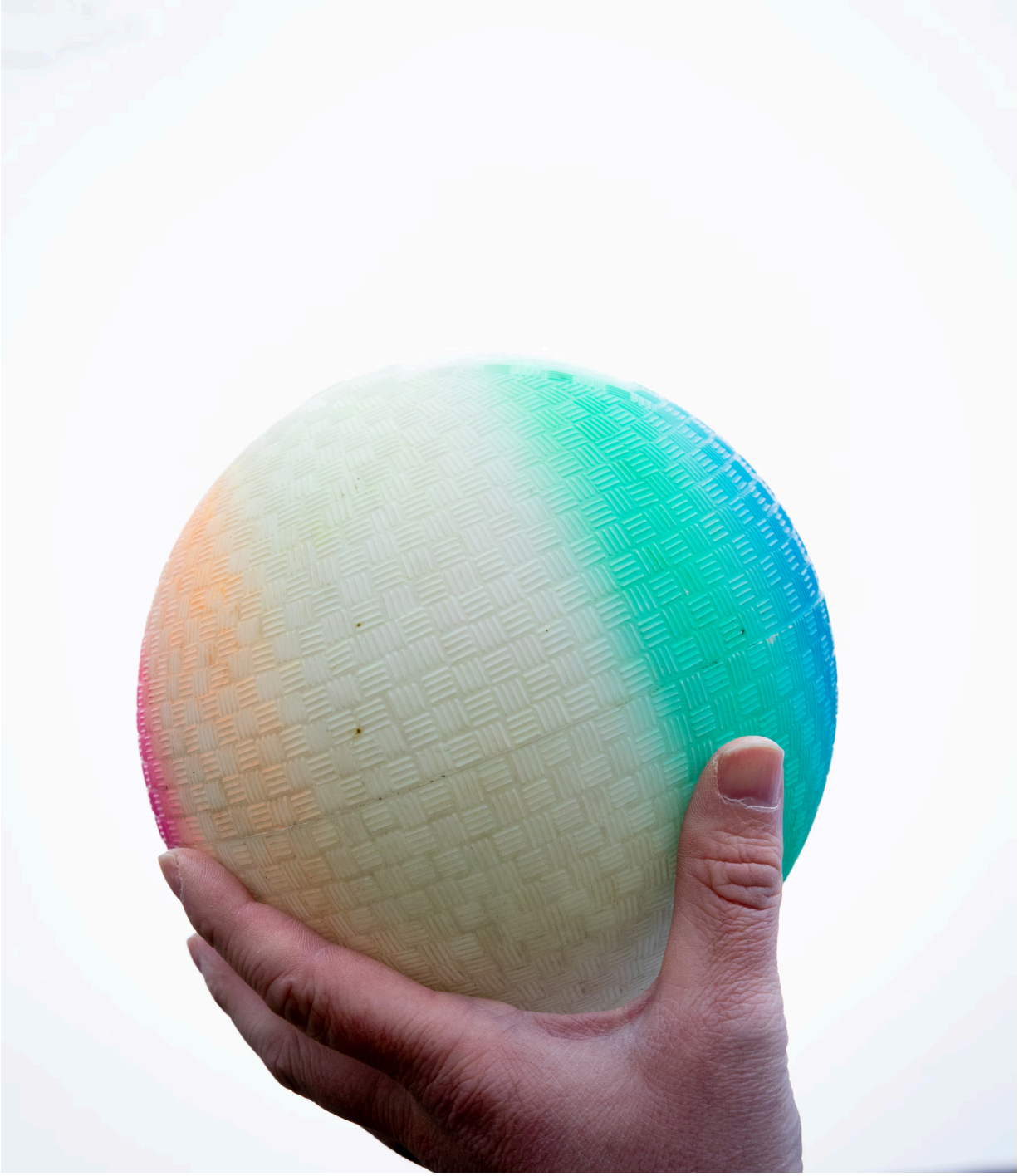
For years, the Morses have had a large social media following of people who admire their devotion to adoption and their care for medically troubled kids. That community rallied around the family, raised money, showered them with love.

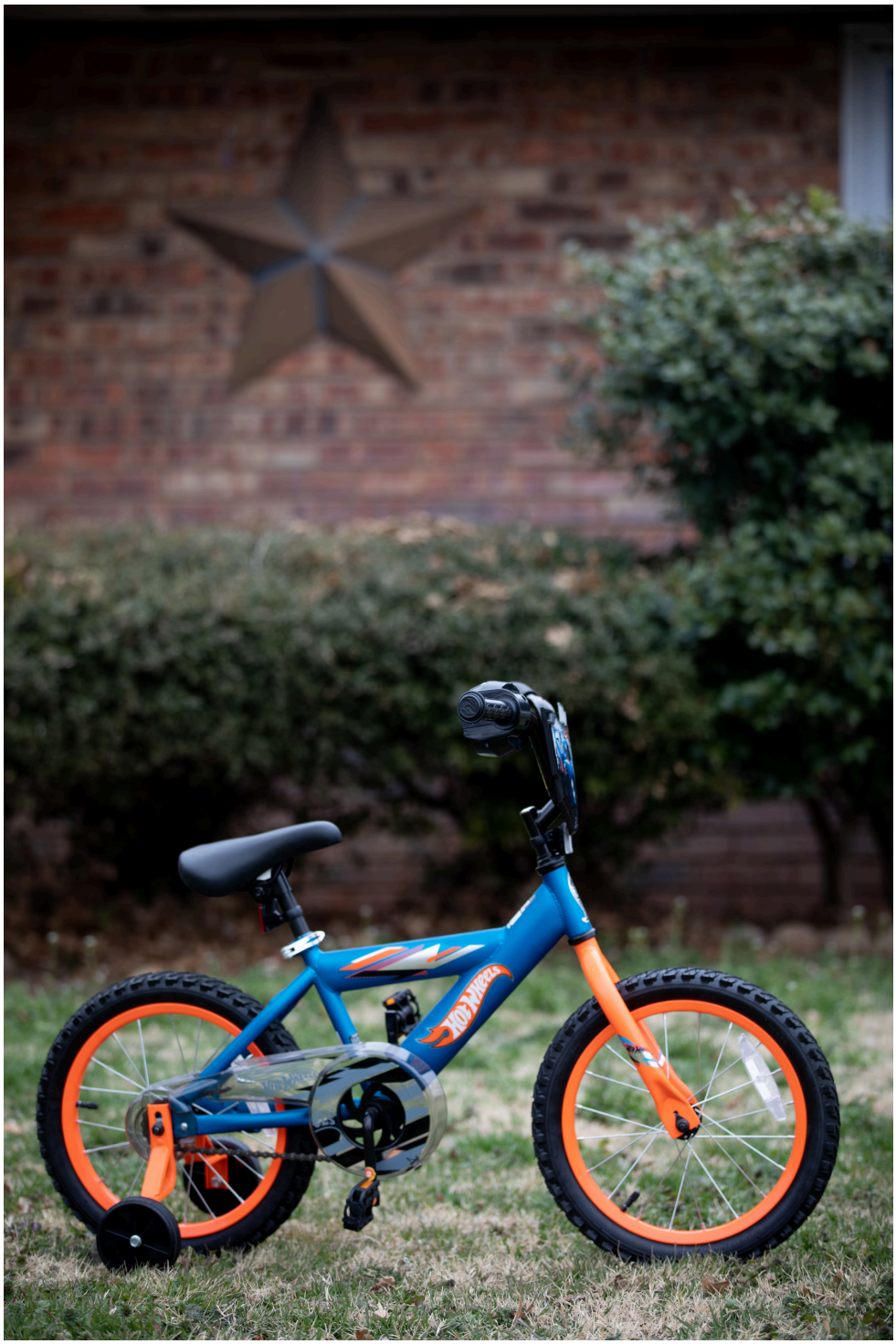
Others have attacked them: “Keyboard cowboys who scream that the virus is a hoax,” Priscilla said.

“You have to have a really thick skin,” she said. “I can’t have them telling me they’re sorry for my loss and then five minutes later screaming that someone’s taking their rights because we need them to wear a piece of cloth on their face.”

Six months after Gigi died, there are some good moments, such as when people tell the Morses that they weren’t going to get a vaccination but will now because of Gigi.

But mostly, there is the everyday of life with those left behind, moments like when Priscilla's 2-year-old picks up his mother's cellphone and looks for pictures of his sister, or when he toddles into her old room and calls out, "Gigi, where are you?"




HOT WHEELS

J.J. Boatman's father holds one of the 9-year-old's favorite toys, a colorful ball. (Allison V. Smith for The Washington Post)

This Hot Wheels bicycle was one of J.J.'s gifts for his ninth birthday. (Allison V. Smith for The Washington Post)

Another of J.J.'s favorite possessions was “Baby,” his toy kitty cat. (Allison V. Smith for The Washington Post)

‘Help me’

The night before Jason Boatman lost his only son to covid-19 in January, the two of them huddled on the couch doing their Sunday night thing, watching cartoons. They clicked on a show about vampires, and J.J., a third-grader, was intrigued.

“I want to be a vampire,” he announced. “But not a mean one.”

Jason laughed. Being a vampire isn’t always so great, he said, because they don’t age.

“You want to stay 9 years old forever?” the father asked. “Everyone around you will grow old, everyone will die.”

J.J. took a beat to think about it, then replied, “Yes!” But he’d do it under his own rules: “I’ll just bite you all!”

Earlier that evening, J.J. — Jason Jayden, officially — had been his normal, high-energy self, running around the house, hiding under blankets, to the exasperation of his older sisters, Sabrina, 13, and Electra, 14. For dinner, J.J.’s mother, Priscilla, had made his favorite meal — hot dogs with melted cheddar cheese, served with chocolate milk. He had devoured it as usual.

But that night, J.J., who typically fought to stay up late, got drowsy while watching the cartoons. When his parents tucked him in, J.J. complained of a tickle in his throat. Later, Jason noticed J.J. wheezing slightly, but that happened often given his asthma. He had no fever and otherwise seemed fine.

J.J. was still sleeping at 6 a.m., when Jason left for the Tyson meat factory where he’s worked for 14 years. He had barely started his shift when his boss ran over saying Jason’s wife had called, screaming. Something was wrong with J.J.; he was in the emergency room.

Back at their place in Vernon, Tex., a small town near the Oklahoma border, Priscilla had heard her son call out not more than 10 minutes after Jason left for work.

“Help me, help me,” the boy cried. He couldn’t breathe. Priscilla ran for the nebulizer they kept to treat J.J.'s asthma. She sat him on the couch, but he turned purple. Suddenly, he fell to the floor and began bleeding from his mouth and nose. Priscilla called 911.

By the time Jason got to the hospital, J.J. was on oxygen, conscious but “freaking out,” his father said. The next 12 hours were a blur.

A social worker asked Jason and Priscilla to wait outside while doctors and nurses took turns hand-pumping oxygen into J.J. The hospital had no ventilator, the social worker explained. A medevac helicopter to Fort Worth, 2½ hours away by car, was summoned, but fog prevented

takeoff.

Seven hours after Priscilla first called for help, J.J. arrived at the Fort Worth children's hospital by ambulance.

There, a nurse approached Jason and Priscilla. It was clear she had been crying. J.J.'s lungs and heart were in bad shape, she said. She showed them an X-ray: His lungs were full of fluid.

J.J. had tested positive for the coronavirus, the nurse explained, and he was experiencing severe inflammation. ER staffers had spent 32 minutes doing CPR on J.J. Now, his oxygen-starved brain had swollen.

That night, Jason and Priscilla took turns sleeping, and sobbing, next to J.J. In the morning, doctors told them it wouldn't be long. Later that day, J.J. died.

Priscilla Boatman holds a photo of J.J., who died of covid-19. (Allison V. Smith for The Washington Post)

J.J. loved jumping on his trampoline in his backyard in Vernon, Tex. (Allison V. Smith for The Washington Post)

Jason, 38, has replayed that night over and over. How did they get there? The virus had torn through Jason's plant months earlier, and he and his older daughter had caught it. Jason's moderate case kept him in bed for several weeks. His daughter lost her senses of taste and smell but was otherwise asymptomatic. In the months that followed, everyone in the family had been well. And after J.J. died, they all tested negative.

Maybe J.J. caught the bug at school. Central Elementary had opened for in-person instruction a few weeks before he fell ill. Jason and his family wore masks, but they knew not everyone in their community did. The source of J.J.'s infection remains unknown.

Was there something President Donald Trump, whom Jason had supported through the turmoil of the past four years, might have done differently?

"I believe he did the best he could," Jason said. "Once it started, there was no way of stopping it."

Jason still searches for a different path for J.J., a happy kid who swam and played tennis, who loved video games and Sonic the Hedgehog. What if the weather had been nicer that day and the helicopter had made it?

Priscilla, 39, a stay-at-home mom who had been preparing to get her teaching certificate, has pulled back from that effort; it's too painful to be around little kids. The Boatmans have withdrawn their daughters from school to keep them close and safe.

At the funeral home this month, Jason's mother, Rhonda, stayed by her grandson's casket for as long as she was allowed, talking to him about heaven.

"You don't have to go to bed on time there," she told him. "You can eat all the pizza and hot dogs you want. And you can look at the stars."

Elizabeth English's bedroom in Payson, Ariz. (Cassidy Araiza for The Washington Post)

Elizabeth, a seventh-grader, loved making people feel beautiful. (Cassidy Araiza for The Washington Post)

"Everything she was about was to make others happy," said Alesha Olsen, Elizabeth's eldest sister. (Cassidy Araiza for The Washington Post)

Quincy Drone stands alongside a unicorn toy that belonged to his daughter, Tagan. (Cate Dingley for The Washington Post)

Lastassija White holds a collection of Tagan's hair bows. The 5-year-old had always been "perfectly healthy" before contracting covid-19, her mother said. (Cate Dingley for The Washington Post)

White and Drone kept only a few of Tagan's things when they moved to a new home after her death, among them her stuffed owl and bottles of nail polish. (Cate Dingley for The Washington Post)

Kimmie's table and a collection of her things, including the LOL doll she loved. Last July she became Florida's youngest victim of covid-19. (Nydia Blas for The Washington Post)

Kimmie's clothes remain neatly organized in her closet. (Nydia Blas for The Washington Post)

Kimmie's bedroom is as it was when the fourth-grader died. (Nydia Blas for The Washington Post)

Alice Crites, Magda Jean-Louis and Julie Tate contributed to this report.

About this story

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