

They hoped she was hiding in the Uvalde school. Instead, she was gone.

How Tess Mata's family came to learn she'd been slain in Uvalde

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Faith Mata, 21, was getting dressed and ready for work at her apartment in San Marcos, Tex., where she is a rising senior at Texas State University, when she received a text from a cousin in her hometown of Uvalde. Her cousin works at the Uvalde Police Department. The cousin wanted to know: What school did her sister Tess go to?

“Hurry,” the message read, imploring Faith to respond.

Faith replied that Tess Mata — a 10-year-old fourth-grader who loved TikTok dance videos, Ariana Grande, the Houston Astros, and getting her hair curled — attended Robb Elementary. Her cousin told her to call her mother, Veronica Mata, a kindergarten teacher at another elementary school in Uvalde.

Faith realized something was amiss, but she was not too concerned. Local schools in and around Uvalde frequently have to lock down, she said, because people arrested for crossing the border often try to outrun police or flee after being detained. Bailouts, Faith said, are common in the area but rarely has she seen them result in anything serious or fatal to bystanders.

Still, Faith called her mother, who was in a lockdown at her school. But Veronica also thought this was yet another bailout and was not too worried.

But then Faith's cousin texted her back and said there was a shooter near Robb Elementary. So Faith made another call to her mother, who by now had heard the same thing. A gunman was at Robb Elementary.

“But we thought it was under control,” Faith said. Soon, her father, Jerry Mata, an aviation mechanic, drove to Robb Elementary. He and Faith spoke, and that’s when the elder daughter realized the gravity of the situation. “My dad showed up and when he got to Robb, he said it looked like a scene from a movie with all the cops there,” she said. “So I waited for the all-clear.”

But the all-clear didn’t come.

“I started getting gossip. Another cousin wrote me and said she thought the shooter locked himself in a classroom,” Faith said. “Now I was kind of freaking out.”

Faith, who was supposed to report to work at an after-school day care, called her bosses and took the day off. A roommate, also from Uvalde, drove Faith the two-plus hours west to get home. On the interstate, Faith said she was constantly calling her mother, who had gone to the civic center and was waiting for school buses carrying evacuated students. She told her mother the same thing over and over.

“You need to let me know when they find Tess. Call me as soon as you get her, ’ ” Faith recalled. “But they never called me back. That’s when I knew something was off.”

Meanwhile, Faith was calling area hospitals. One in Uvalde. Another in San Antonio. But none of them had Tess.

“Where was she?” Faith remembered thinking. “My hope was that she was lost or hiding somewhere in the school.”

On Facebook, she tapped out a frantic post: “Facebook friends please help my family! We are looking for my sister Tess Marie Mata. She was at Robb Elementary. If y’all have any information you can give me please let me know!”

When Faith arrived in Uvalde in the late afternoon, her friend dropped her off at the civic center. Her dad met her out front and escorted her to a room. Inside, they waited with other families for any news, but nothing came for hours. They sat at large tables, where pizza and bottled water were offered.

“A lot of the families were not eating,” Faith said. “It was all families of students who were not accounted for.”

Many of the families huddled together, she said. Hardly any of the families mingled with others.

“Everyone was on their own,” Faith recalled. “I felt guilty if I were to eat. I didn’t know where my sister was. If she wasn’t eating, why would I get to eat? A lot of the people were on the phone or with their heads down. The room was silent most of the time.”

Late in the evening, she said, officials came by and started taking DNA swabs of parents. They were swabbing their cheeks, she said. The Matas, like other families, also had supplied authorities with a photo of Tess.

“When they asked for the DNA swabs, it was the way they phrased it — they needed them to help identify or find a child,” Faith recalled. “I just had a bad feeling.”

At some point deeper into the night, Texas law enforcement officials took Tess's mother and father into a private room at the civic center. A Texas Ranger broke the news, Veronica said.

"He just told us that Tess was one of the deceased," Veronica recalled. "My husband and I, we embraced. Then I asked for them to bring in Faith." Tess — known by many as Tessy — was one of the 19 children and two teachers killed that day at Robb Elementary.

When the door opened, Faith saw her mother's face.

"Her eyes were glossy. She just looked at me like our lives were about to change," Faith recalled.

Inside the room, Faith sat down and broke down. But then she held it all back and addressed the two Texas Rangers.

"They said the suspect was dead and that they killed him. And that if we needed any counseling, they'd be here for the rest of the week," Faith recalled. "At that point, we were just sad about my sister, but at the same time, we did want to know what happened to the gunman."

They left the building through a back door to avoid the news crews. But instead of going home, they drove to Jerry's parents' home. Tess and Faith's grandparents. Tess was close to them because they drove her to school every day and her grandmother always picked her up. When the Matas arrived, all Faith remembers hearing at first were the screams. She entered her grandparents' home, where her grandfather, so distraught, fetched a photo of Tess that had been sitting on the mantel.

"He was just holding it. Crying," Faith said. "She was wearing a purple shirt and jeans in that photo."

The three of them went home. The first thing they did was enter Tess's bedroom. Inside, they saw the narrative of her life: The purple walls. The corkboard with photos of her standing next to the Easter Bunny or being held in Faith's arms. "I Love You Faith!!!!" she scrawled on the bottom border of the corkboard. On another wall was a poster of Houston Astros second baseman José Altuve, her favorite player, so beloved that she, too, played second base on her softball team. A soccer medal hung from the ceiling, dangling next to a soccer trophy and a container full of dollar bills.

"My sister was saving that money for a family trip," Faith recalled. "She wanted us all to go to Disney World. She went a couple years ago. But she loved it so much she wanted to go back. We were planning to go once I graduated from college next year."

Over by her desk sat a framed photo of the sisters having lunch in San Antonio, next to a glass full of pencils and markers and a miniature toy giraffe. A calendar from February hangs on the wall. "B-Day" is scrawled on Feb. 6.

It was time to go sleep. Faith had an idea. She wanted to sleep in the same bed as her parents. She was 21. But she felt the need. Then, another idea. They grabbed Tess's white pillows, each of them printed with butterflies and flowers, and they took her pink blanket with pandas all over it. They took everything and put it all on Veronica and Jerry's bed. Now it was time to try to fall asleep. All three of them together.

“My mom slept with Tess’s blanket. We all each got one of her pillows,” Faith said. “It smelled like Tess.”