

A 7-Year-Old Dies in the Bronx, and Records Show a History of Abuse

Julissia Batties, who was found unconscious with a head injury, had been the subject of a child welfare case since birth. Her half brother admitted beating her, a police official said.

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Life in a 10th-floor apartment in the Bronx was supposed to be a new start for Julissia Batties and her mother, from whom she had been taken at birth over safety concerns.

But their reunion came to an abrupt and violent end on Tuesday, when Julissia, 7, was found unconscious with a head injury and died at the hospital, the police said.

On Wednesday, a high-ranking police official said the girl's 17-year-old half brother had admitted to beating Julissia because he believed she had taken some snacks. No charges had been filed, and investigators were waiting for a medical examiner to determine the official cause of Julissia's death.

Police officers and medics were summoned around 8 a.m. on Tuesday to the apartment in the Mitchel Houses, where the siblings lived with their 35-year-old mother, Navasia Jones, and Julissia's 1-year-old brother. A neighbor who had previously reported abuse in the apartment watched from the hall as medics tried to revive the girl, then as her mother followed them to an ambulance.

Shortly after 9 a.m., Julissia was pronounced dead at Lincoln Medical Center.

As Julissia's life slipped away, her mother told the police her daughter had fallen and hit her head on a desk around 5 a.m., then started vomiting three hours later. But there were other unexplained bruises on the girl's body, the police said.

Her older half brother later told investigators about their dispute, according to the police official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to disclose details without authorization. He was taken to a facility run by the Administration for Children's Services.



A day after Julissia Batties died, a makeshift memorial for the girl was placed in the lobby of the Bronx apartment building where she lived. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

The case recalled the death of 7-year-old Nixzmary Brown in 2006, which forced an overhaul of the child welfare agency, although a string of children's deaths have followed under the agency's watch. Nixzmary was beaten after a family member accused her of taking food without permission — the same reason Julissia's brother hit her, according to the police official.

Yolanda Davis, Julissia's paternal grandmother, said she had raised the girl for most of her life until April 2020, when she turned the girl over to her mother for an extended visit.

The child welfare agency decided to return Julissia to her mother permanently, Ms. Davis said, and the child was never returned to her care.

"I begged them not to let her go back to her mother, and now we're here," Ms. Davis said.

A lawyer for Ms. Davis said that the decision to return Julissia to her mother had been made by A.C.S. at the recommendation of a foster-care nonprofit, S.C.O. Family Services, which managed Julissia's case for the child welfare agency and had placed her with Ms. Davis.

A.C.S. declined to comment on Julissia's case, citing confidentiality laws, and the foster care agency did not immediately return a call on Wednesday evening.

Records show the family has a long history of involvement with child welfare authorities, and the police had been to the family's apartment several times before. Michael Roberts, a neighbor, said that as recently as Friday, his girlfriend had called the authorities after seeing Julissia with a black eye.

"There was always a lot of commotion, always yelling, always screaming," Mr. Roberts said.

The police official said they were not notified about the incident until Tuesday because it had been reported directly to the child welfare agency and not through 911.

Around 7:45 a.m. on Tuesday, Mr. Roberts said, Navasia Jones was banging on all her neighbors' doors on the 10th floor and yelling, "My baby can't breathe!" and "My daughter's not breathing!"

He said he did not open the door right away, but he stepped into the hallway after a few minutes and saw several emergency medical technicians pumping Julissia's chest in her bedroom.

He said he saw Ms. Jones and Julissia's 17-year-old brother at the apartment, then watched Ms. Jones follow the workers as they carried Julissia to an ambulance.

Officers have filed at least nine domestic abuse reports involving the family and responded to five calls for someone in need of medical attention, according to a second police official, who did not have information about the timing and outcomes of those incidents. Mr. Roberts said that he had spoken to police and social workers from A.C.S. about the family on several occasions.

Police officers stood outside an apartment in the Bronx on Wednesday, a day after a 7-year-old girl was found dead inside. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

In 2013, the year before Julissia was born, Ms. Jones lost custody of her four older children. She lost custody of Julissia shortly after she was born in 2014 in a case that was the subject of a state appellate court decision.

After a family court judge initially granted Ms. Jones custody of Julissia, A.C.S. appealed, arguing that Julissia's safety was endangered by the failure of Ms. Jones and Julissia's father, Julius Batties, to exercise a "minimum degree of care."

In 2015, the appellate judges ruled in favor of the child welfare agency, finding that Ms. Jones, despite completing mandated parenting skills and anger management programs, was still "prone to unpredictable emotional outbursts," even on supervised visits with her older children, and was "easily provoked and agitated."

"Until the mother is able to successfully address and acknowledge the circumstances that led to the removal of the other children," the judges wrote, "we cannot agree" that returning Julissia, "even with the safeguards imposed by the family court, would not present an imminent risk."

Julissia went to live with Ms. Jones — first provisionally last year, then permanently a few months ago — Brian Zimmerman, a lawyer for Mr. Batties, confirmed.

Yolanda Davis said she had been trying to regain custody of Julissia. Desiree Rios for The New York Times

A lawyer who represented Ms. Davis said that Ms. Jones had refused to allow Ms. Davis to see Julissia after getting her back. Ms. Davis's petition for visitation was scheduled to be heard this fall, he said.

Ms. Davis was distraught when she arrived at Julissia's building on Wednesday afternoon.

"I'm very numb. I'm very hurt," she said. "I need justice to be done."

A lawyer who has represented Ms. Jones in family court cases declined to comment.

In the lobby of the building on Wednesday, there was a small memorial for the girl: stuffed animals, candles and a bouquet of red and purple flowers.

Upstairs, Julissia's bedroom was visible from the hallway as police officers entered the apartment. There was a little book bag with Mickey Mouse on it, along with a can of Pringles and some Elmer's glue.

Mr. Roberts, 31, said he had seen Julissia on Sunday in the elevator with her mother. The girl wore sunglasses.

Kitty Bennett contributed research.