

Ghost Bike Honors Late Student

A white “ghost bike” will soon be set up outside Tony Hillerman Middle School, and hundreds of fluttering ribbons will bear messages of sorrow and remembrance for former student Hailey Ratliff.

Twelve-year-old Ratliff, who attended Hillerman as a sixth-grader last school year before moving to California, was killed in September in Novato, Calif., near San Francisco, when she was hit by an SUV while riding a bicycle.

It left two communities grieving, but folks at Hillerman are trying to help their students deal with it with the placement of the memorial bike and tying the ribbons on a nearby fence.

At a school assembly Friday, Ratliff’s mother, Angela Ratliff, talked a bit about her daughter.

“The outpouring has just been amazing and I want to thank you for that,” she told the crowd of about 900 students and faculty at the West Side school.

“People wonder what makes her so different, why she has gotten this much attention,” Ratliff said. “What made her so different and made her so special.” It was a number of things, she explained.

“She was very outgoing and very memorable,” Ratliff said.

“Even if you have a conversation with her for five minutes, you’re going to remember her. She was easy to be around. She was kind. She never forgot the importance of giving somebody a kind word or a friendly smile. Because it is important. A kind word or a smile can make a huge difference in somebody’s day. And it was important to her to make difference for people.”

The Duke City Wheelmen Foundation provided the bike, and each of the students created a ribbon message.

“This is a way to help them remember Hailey, to help them memorialize her,” said Jennifer Buntz,



Angela Ratliff, the mother of Hailey Ratliff, thanks the students and staff at Tony Hillerman Middle School for honoring her daughter with a ghost bike memorial in Hailey’s name that will be placed near the front of the school. (Jim Thompson/journal)

the foundation president. “And because they’re choosing to place a ghost bike, it’s also a call for safety. It’s a call for alertness, attentiveness on the road. Because nobody wants this kind of thing to happen to another child, another family. It’s such a horrific thing to have a child die so young. Nobody wants that.”

Michael Banuelos, whose children attended Hillerman last year with Hailey, helped get the drive going for the memorial.

“Hailey’s passing was such a tragedy,” he said. “Our son told us one night that one of his friends from school died on her bike. Details started coming out and it became even more of a tragedy. She was driving home from school with her backpack and her helmet. It was really a sad story.”

They wanted to create something positive out of the tragedy and thought a ghost bike would be a good way to do it.

“We really tried to do something to honor Hailey by putting something out there that would promote bicycle safety, motorists safety and also be a memorial to Hailey herself,” Banuelos said. “We hope that this does that and will do that.”

Hailey’s friends at school said they have had a hard time dealing with her loss.

“I didn’t think it was real,” said Emily Gutierrez, who met her in January after moving to Albuquerque from Las Cruces. “I was ready for somebody to come out and say, ‘Just kidding.’ But then I realized that it never came and that’s when it really hit me. Like in fifth period. And I just completely started breaking down and crying.”

A group of the girls went into the hallway



Students walk by the ghost bike memorial made in honor of Hailey Ratliff and the ribbons left by students at Tony Hillerman Middle School. The bike will be placed near the front of the West Side school.

A group of the girls went into the hallway that day after they found out about it, said Briana Flores.

“We brought a box of tissues with us and we cried,” she said. “And there was so many tissues on the floor, you could barely see the floor.”

But putting up the ghost bike and making the ribbon messages helps, said classmate Sierra Sewell.

“I think it’s a good idea,” she said. “People that walk or bike to school can remember her and remember to be safe on their way to school.”

For Hailey’s family, her absence leaves a hole that cannot be filled, said Ratliff, who, with two of her sons, drove upon the scene of the accident shortly after it occurred.

“So we are seeing a lot of grief with them,” she said. “They’re kids. They’re going to have their good moments and their bad moments.”

Still, Ratliff, whose family has since moved back to Albuquerque, encouraged Hailey’s friends to remember the way she was.

“When you talk about her, tell the stories with a smile on your face,” she said. “And live life to the fullest. Live every single day like it’s your last day, because we don’t know when that day is going to be. We didn’t know when Hailey’s last day was going to be. So don’t take it for granted.”

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Kai Ratliff, 7, watches as people look at the ghost bike created in honor of his sister, Hailey, a former Tony Hillerman Middle School student who was hit and killed while riding her bike in California two months ago.