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THE LIFE AND DEATH OF DENIS MALTEZ: Group-home death in van stuns mom

Relates to:
Denis Manuel Maltez
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A grieving mom wants to know why her disabled 12-year-old son died in a group-home van.

ELINOR J. BRECHER
The Miami Herald

At 4:45 p.m. on May 23, Denis Manuel Maltez called his mother, Martha Quesada, from the group home where he lived.

"I love you, Mommy," was the last thing he said.

Then the autistic 12-year-old and seven other Rainbow Ranch residents boarded a van headed to a flea-market barbershop.

Four hours later, Martha Quesada tore into Hialeah Hospital's emergency room, hysterical. Something had happened in the Rainbow Ranch van. After an employee restrained him, Denis had stopped breathing.

Neither the staffer who tried CPR in the Flea Market USA parking lot nor paramedics could save him. Now the dark-haired, dark-eyed boy she called mi negrito lay under a white sheet.

"Mommy's here! Mommy's here!" Quesada screamed, convinced by the breathing tube helping preserve his organs that he was still alive.

Then she fainted.

On June 1, Rainbow Ranch's three group homes lost their licenses. Operators David and Therese Glatt had to shut them down. Denis' death wasn't the only reason.

State regulators presented a juvenile court judge with an emergency order portraying the home where he lived, 310 Northwest Dr., as a den of neglect where disabled children were over-medicated, sexually abused each other and sometimes went hungry.

DOING WELL

Quesada was surprised to hear it. Denis -- so violent by the age of 8 that he could no longer live with his family -- had done well there.

Except for infected bug bites and bruises he told her he got fighting other children, Denis seemed happy and healthy.

He'd been on medication since a doctor prescribed Ritalin when he was 3 , after it had become obvious for a year that something was wrong.

"He was not talking," said Quesada, 29, who emigrated from Venezuela at 12. She has two younger children with her longtime companion, Adalberto Ros. 'He just said a few words: 'Mama.' 'Leche.' "

At this point in a recent conversation, she broke down sobbing. It was less than a month since Denis' death and she still had no answers: What really happened in the van? Who was with him? Why did he stop breathing?

She said a caregiver "told me he was kicking the [van] window and that was the reason they had to sit him down and put his arms behind his back to restrain him so he'll calm down in the van."

The emergency order, which doesn't name staffers, says at the flea market, three staff and four kids went inside, "leaving one staff person alone with the remaining children in the van. The driver states that when he came back, [Denis] began yelling, screaming and kicking, so he asked the other staff person if she needed help. Reportedly, she declined it."

The report says the driver heard Denis talking and thought he was all right, "then suddenly noticed that D.M. was silent and nonresponsive. They took him out of the van and attempted to revive him and called 911."

The staffer left in the van "reported that she laid D.M. down on the seat and restrained his legs," the report says, then "turned him over on his back and noticed he was not breathing. . . . She denied using excessive force."

Autopsy results, pending toxicology tests, are months away. County police homicide detectives are investigating.

FIRST GROUP HOME

Quesada can't forget the day in 2003 when she took Denis to his first group home, in Cutler Ridge. She thought she wasn't a good mother because she couldn't control his outbursts.

He had a habit of pretending to vomit when he got upset. He hit and bit, pinched his mother's arms and face hard enough to leave bruises, threw and broke things, and pulled sister Dayana's hair.

When he tried to choke Dayana, now 10, Quesada agreed to place him. She forfeited no parental rights.

"It was hard" to leave him at the group home, she said. "Every time I go see him and have to leave him, I cry."

After another boy punched him in the face in April 2005, she moved him out. An administrator from the Agency for Persons with Disabilities strongly recommended the newly opened Rainbow Ranch.

She was delighted.

"It's a big house with a pool, and I think it's going to be better. It looked like your own home. It was clean. . . . " At the time, only one child lived there.

Quesada visited her son often. She'd sometimes see the kids lunching on rice and beans, chicken or vegetables, but Denis liked going out to Burger King.

"He never mentioned he was hungry," she said.

He also loved visiting Dayana and their younger brother at the Hialeah house that Quesada and Ros are remodeling.

One of Quesada's concerns was about how sleepy her son often seemed.

After his death, she learned from the emergency order that his drugs had been putting him to sleep at school, Ruth Owens Kruse Educational Center, and that school personnel had told Rainbow Ranch about it.

Kendall psychiatrist Dr. Steven L. Kaplan prescribed Denis' drugs. He saw him twice: May 27, 2006, and two days before Denis died.

Denis had been diagnosed with autism, schizophrenia, mild mental retardation, psychosis and depression, and was already taking the "major tranquilizers" Seroquel and Zyprexa and the anti-seizure drug Depakote when he met him, Kaplan said.

If Denis hadn't taken his medications at the right times, "it's possible" he'd be sleepy at school, "but I never saw him dopey or sleepy," Kaplan said. "He was all over the place, a tough little guy to handle but very likable."

The call came at 7:12 p.m. from Jessica Coronel, Denis' favorite Rainbow Ranch employee. She told Quesada that Denis "was taken to the hospital . . . because he was not breathing well."

When Quesada and Ros reached the hospital, they found Therese Glatt and her mother-in-law, Gloria Auston, in tears.

"David [Glatt] was not there," Quesada said. "They said he was so devastated."

She next saw Glatt was at the funeral. He'd sent flowers, then gave her a check for funeral expenses: about $10,000.

The next -- and last -- time she saw Glatt was after reading about Rainbow Ranch's license revocation in the June 2 Miami Herald.

'IT WAS A LIE'

'I went to the group home. . . . I said, 'David, I need to you explain me this article.' He said all of it was a lie."

When hospital officials initially asked Martha Quesada about organ donation, she refused. But as the night wore on, she reconsidered, then agreed.

"Maybe another mother can be happy," she thought.

A few weeks later, after Denis had been tucked into a niche at Dade Memorial Park, someone called from the University of Miami. Would Quesada consider donating some of her son's autopsied brain tissue for autism research?

This time, Quesada didn't hesitate: "I say yes."

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