

FROM PAGE 1A

RESTAURANT

gal, told CharlotteFive on Thursday. It closed in 1992-1993 so Ricky could take a break. It reopened in Touchstone Village in 1993, in the former Pizza Village restaurant owned by Bruce Moffett.

Last year, Ricky sold the restaurant to Ivan Chonto, who lives overseas, Elizabeth said. The restaurant continued to be run by longtime employees, some of whom had worked for Ricky for close to 20 years.

Ricky retired and moved to Pawley's Island last year.

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AT RICCIO'S

Some of Elizabeth's favorite childhood memories included her time at Riccio's, she told us. At one point, there were arcade games at the restaurant. "I would always play them after I finished my homework," she said.

Elizabeth's first field trip at McAlpine Elementary School was to the

restaurant. "All the kids were mesmerized watching my dad throw the pizza dough in the air and spin it on his finger," she said.

But her all-time favorite memory: "For years, I begged my dad to name an entree for me because he would update the menu every so often, and I remember when he gave me a menu, I had to be about 12 or 13 and I saw Penne Elizabeth at the bottom."

Her dish was similar to a penne vodka. "Having the (first) bite of my dish was magical — I was so proud and to the very end it was always what I got."

BACK WHEN SMOKING SECTIONS AT RESTAURANTS WERE A THING

The restaurant "offers something fairly rare: a chance to feed pizza-lovers some cheap pizza in a very low-key atmosphere, while giving others with more entree-oriented



Peggy and Jerry Segal opened Riccio's Italian Restaurant in 1962. It moved to Touchstone Village in 1993.

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Elizabeth had her last Penne Elizabeth at the restaurant in June. But there is one silver lining: She knows how to make it herself now.

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RICCIO'S ITALIAN RESTAURANT

Location: 9213 Baybrook Ln Charlotte, NC 28277 (now closed)

Neighborhood: Touchstone Village

Instagram:

Uniquely Charlotte:
Uniquely Charlotte is an Observer subscriber collection of moments, landmarks and personalities that define the uniqueness (and pride) of why we live in the Charlotte region.

Melissa Oyler:
@melissaoyler

tastes a shot, too," Observer food writer Helen Schwab wrote in 1996.

Back then, to put it in perspective: Food reviews included things like whether a restaurant had a smoking section or not. At the time of Schwab's writing, Riccio's had planned to go full "no smoking" about a week later.

A THIRD-GENERATION OF THE RICCIO'S FAMILY GETS A JOB

In 2005, during her teenage years, Elizabeth started working at the restaurant. She needed gas money, of course.

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MEMORIES AT THE CHARLOTTE CLASSIC SPOT

Regulars also had fond memories of years of going to Riccio's. Many shared memories in the comments on the restaurant's Instagram post Thursday morning:

• "I worked there in my early 20s. I still dream about the flourless chocolate torte — I think a lady named Donna used to make

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HELENE

that nobody can give a full accounting of what that day was like for them because nobody survived to offer one: At roughly noon on that Friday, Knox, Alison, Felix and Lucas were swept away as they sought safety from floodwaters.

The only thing certain now is that the very day Knox and Alison had planned to marry is instead being reserved for four funerals.

He was 41. She was 35.

"It definitely feels like a bad movie," says Knox's sister, Briana, calling from her home in Palo Alto, Calif., sounding both deeply exhausted and deeply shattered. "I don't — she starts to say, then she stops. Then she sighs. Then she starts, softly, to cry. "It's like I'm not talking about real life right now."

'I JUST MADE THIS BEAUTIFUL HUMAN MY FIANCÉE'

They originally bonded over — of all things — bees.

In 2019, Knox and Alison both found themselves employed at Honey & the Hive, a Weaverville beekeeping supply store that Knox had only applied to work for because he was looking for a job and they were hiring.

They started dating in short order, attracted by shared passions that included animals, art, and camping, and creativity, and being members of the queer community in an area where it wasn't always easy to be a member of the queer community, among other things. (On top of that, Knox knew something of failed marriages, having been through one in his 20s.)

Before long, they were moving in together.

Their home was idyllic and idiosyncratic: a 1950s-era brick ranch with a fenced yard and a two-story barn, sprawling across a three-acre plot of land upon which also sat an older, larger, decommissioned outbuilding that long ago served as the little town's post office and general store. On the opposite side of their street were some railroad tracks, and on the other side of the tracks was the North Toe River.

As their relationship grew through the pandemic, their careers also seemed to snap into sharper focus.

Knox took to the whole bee thing with authority, becoming the store manager and eventually a teacher of beekeeping courses.

Meanwhile, although

Alison likewise had an affinity for the winged insects, she also had a degree from Western Carolina in forensic anthropology — and felt called to pursue a vocation related not just to death, but also (ironically) to grief. So she went after and landed a job as operations manager at Carolina Memorial Sanctuary, a conservation and green cemetery built into the lush, green, rolling hills of Mills River.

By last year, they'd built a well-rounded life that they loved, so much so that on June 11, 2023, Knox slipped onto Alison's ring finger a piece of jewelry he'd blacksmithed himself using a small forge he'd bought.

Briana, the sister he'd been making up for lost time with, was the first person he told.

"I just made this beautiful human my fiancée," Knox wrote in a text to his sister, beneath a selfie of the bespectacled couple showing off the ring.

He knew, of course, that in proposing to Alison he was also proposing to be a stepdad to Felix and Lucas — and he knew, of course, that these weren't just any ordinary boys.

BABY SWINGS, PODCASTS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Lucas, 7, liked cows. A lot. He had at least nine stuffed ones, if not 10 or 11, and he would attempt to carry all of them with him. Everywhere. Even to the water park, while his dad Lance Wisely strenuously objected.

Lucas wanted to be pushed in a baby swing that still hung from a tree at Lance's house in Marshall, N.C., not because he liked being considered a baby but because his dad could strap Lucas *in* to the baby swing. Securely.

Meaning his dad could then swing him as high as possible and then add in a good, hard, death-defying spin.

Lucas did gymnastics,

had started taking aerial silks classes, could climb 20-foot-tall trees in rain boots, and — oh yeah, was bilingual, thanks to the Spanish immersion program at North Buncombe Elementary School.

Felix, 9, was stupefying his parents by the time he was just 3, when he was already expressing an interest in learning about obscure types of dinosaurs and (ironically) the most severe types of weather events, from tornadoes to hurricanes.

Felix was incredibly curious, perceptive, and articulate, a future star on the debate team.

Felix could hang with adults in a lot of respects, and proved it by discussing wild creatures, folklore and supernatural topics with his mom Alison — as co-host of a podcast called "Beyond Legends" that they launched together just this past April.

This, his parents would probably admit, is classic Felix: The week of Sept. 16, Felix confronted his dad and asked him if he wanted to marry his partner, Sarah Sheahan of Minneapolis, Minn.; Lance said yes. Felix then called Sarah and asked if she wanted to marry his dad; Sarah said yes. Not long after that, when Lance was on the phone with Alison about figuring out the holidays with the kids, Alison said to Lance, "So, Felix tells me you guys are engaged..."

"That," Lance exclaimed, "is *not* what we told."

On the morning of Friday, Sept. 20, Lance dropped the boys off at school in Weaverville. It would be the last time he'd see his sons alive.

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A SURGE OF OPTIMISM, THEN WORST FEARS REALIZED

Briana called from the West Coast to check in on Knox late Wednesday evening, a day before Helene was expected to hit.

He'd done some basic stormproofing, he informed her, but he didn't seem worried about it.

And she wasn't either. Her brother lived in the mountains, after all. Not on the beach.

Thursday passed with no contact. Friday the line was quiet, too. She still wasn't overly concerned. They had been in fairly frequent touch since reconciling 2 1/2 years earlier, but it's not like they talked every day. It wasn't until some people she knew who had extended family in North Carolina reached out on Saturday to ask if she had heard from Knox.

"No," Briana said.

"Why?"

They told her about the storm. She looked at the news. It was the first she was seeing about Helene, and headlines were screaming with words like "brutal" and "devastation."

She immediately texted Knox. She would never get a reply.

From 2,500 miles away, as Briana's panic rapidly intensified, she started trying to exploit social media and the internet to glean whatever information she could that might provide clues to how things were looking back in Green Mountain.

Yet they've been heartened by an overwhelming outpouring of support from the community. The

same. There had even been talk of two of them trying to drive back to North Carolina in Sarah's four-wheel-drive vehicle, so they could try to navigate through the wasteland Helene had created to get to Knox and Alison's house themselves. They ultimately were discouraged from doing so, and stayed put.

Monday, Sept. 30, was the day that brought a surge of optimism after more than 48 hours of agony.

At the family's request,

someone in Yancey County with a good telephoto zoom lens had gotten as close to the house as they safely could before confronting a severely washed-out part of the road, and snapped a picture.

It showed the structure still standing, and the door open.

The house hadn't been swept away, Lance thought. *Maybe they're OK after all. Maybe that open door means they're airing out the house.*

But on Tuesday, Oct. 1, the worst of Lance's worst fears was realized, times four.

Sarah had been able to reach a fire department dispatcher, who had talked to a Green Mountain resident, who had reported this: Around noon the previous Friday — as the river turned into a sea that surged high above its banks, across the tracks and the road and into Knox and Alison's front yard — two adults with children were observed along their road getting into a white vehicle. *Ali*son owned a white Mazda CX-5.

The violently swirling flood kept rising. The vehicle began to float. The people scrambled back out of it.

According to the eye-

witness, the four were struggling to make their way through the water back to the house when a giant wave lifted all of them up — and rushing water carried them away.

"Everybody who goes in their house," Melissa adds, "gets stuck in the mud. There's always, for everybody, been a moment where you can't turn around. It's like quicksand. You're stuck, and then you're losing your balance, and it's like a moment of despair. But ..."

She pauses, then finishes the thought:

"... It feels wrong to be upset inside of their house. Because they were so kind and loving and joyful and positive."

HANGING ONTO THE HAPPIEST FEELINGS THEY CAN

In a weird way, in Lance's imagination, it almost seems as if the boys, Alison, and Knox are still there — in or around that house — together.

Lance still hasn't returned to North Carolina from Minnesota, and so in his imagination, "it feels, in some ways, like my

children are just with their mother. Which, in a grim

sense is true. But not in

the sense that like, *Oh,*

I'm gonna get them back next week. Which, sometimes, it still feels that way."

He's as shattered as any father can be. He'd give anything to push Lucas on the baby swing one more time, or to shake his head and smile in disbelief at something Felix did or said that made the boy seem twice his age.

But he also already is trying to imagine a future in which he's as happy as he was when they were alive.

"I mean, what can you do? Right?" Lance says. "I've known some parents who have lost their children, and ... a lot of them turn into shells of people — like, they're just hollowed out by it — and I don't want to do that ..."

"It's heartbreaking that they won't be here for me to share those things with anymore, to experience the joy of their silliness and their childlike perspective. They were such amazing, magical, ridiculous, joyful children. And I want to keep the vitality that I was showing my children — you know, showing them how to just drink from life.

"I still want to do that."

In Knox's sister Briana's imagination, meanwhile, she and her 14-year-old daughter, Dahlia, are transported back to the week this past summer when they visited Green Mountain and Knox, Alison, Felix and Lucas.