



Don't worry Alix,
What goes around comes
"Live life so completely
when death comes like
in the night there will
left for him to steal

♥

THE DOCTOR AND THE LONGBOARDER

BY KEITH GILLOGLY

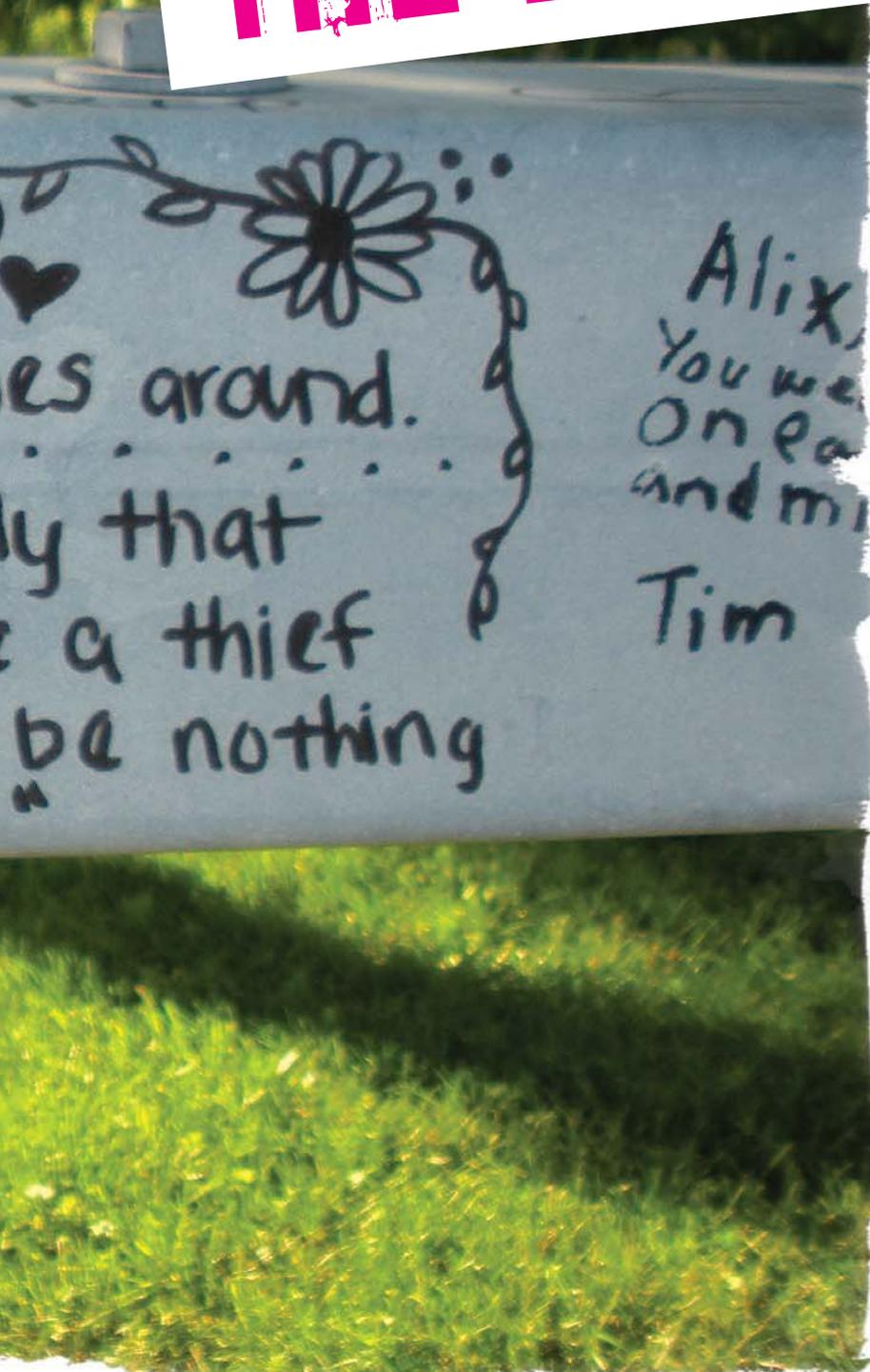


Photo: Joseph Garas



The road runs past a gas station, stretches underneath a traffic light and curves gently along its tree-lined backdrop. It is a mundane, winding road, connecting side streets and pockets of houses in a quiet, suburban corner of Buffalo, N.Y. But on a clear day, a portion of the road glistens in the sun-filled morning. Stuffed teddy bears, colorful ladybugs, a cross and flowers of all types line the sidewalk. The adjacent guardrail lies wrapped in pink ribbon and handwritten messages of love and remembrance. This is the site where 18-year-old longboarder Alexandria "Alix" Rice was struck and killed by a drunk driver while longboarding home from work the night of July 8, 2011. It is a meeting ground for those who've come to mourn and to recollect. It is a place to leave tokens of remembrance for the girl who was family, a friend or just someone who made them smile.



Dr. James Corasanti – Illustration by Talli Peled



The car that hit and killed Alix Rice. Photo: Mark Mulville

Alix's tragedy was mourned by her community and by longboarders across the country. Yet the circumstances of her death also sparked anger: The driver who hit her, James Corasanti, was a prominent area doctor; the accident was a hit-and-run. After a lengthy criminal trial – the outcome of which created more controversy and resentment – more details of that night emerged, but Alix's memory persisted. Her loved ones, her community and longboarders from all around grieved for her. She was the girl whose smile could turn around a bad day, whose personality flourished, who carried her longboard everywhere like a child toting her favorite teddy bear. Longboarding was her passion – in those final minutes, it was the last thing she did on earth. Alix was also a longboarder in the purest sense: She rode her board to get around and to simply have fun, and in this regard, her life was relatable to all longboarders. While her death came too soon, her life, and the way she lived it, was an inspiration.

When Alix saw people riding skateboards or longboards, she had a tendency to stop – to stop and watch. It didn't matter who they were; if they rode by, she'd ask, hey, can I ride? That's how Alix first met her friend Dez Little. Dez was skating a gap across from Alix's high school, a spot where getting kicked out was common, but that day he was undisturbed. Soon, the familiar rhythms of skateboarding set in: trying a trick, falling, getting back up and trying again. Frustration crept in just as a longboarder, Alix, came passing by. As was her instinct around skateboarding, she stopped to watch. Dez kept trying his trick, and Alix began cheering him on. "She was like, 'Snap out of it. You're going to get it,'" Dez recalls.

Their chance meeting led them to become friends, as both ended up working at the same local pizza shop, Bocce Club Pizza. Looking back on that day and remembering Alix's constant optimism, her always-positive attitude became a trait that Dez admired. It's

something he remembers even when skating, or just plain life, gets tough. When he's skating now, he can still picture Alix there cheering him on. All he has to do is glance down at the colorful bracelet bearing Alix's name that he wears in her memory. "If I'm stressed out – it could be from skateboarding or during life – I just look at this bracelet and think, what would Alix do?" he says. "What would she like me to do? ... She made me realize things aren't as tough as you make them seem."

Of all the destinations Alix's longboard took her to, the Bocce pizzeria was a frequent stop, even before she started working there. She'd stop in for a bite, and soon the girl with the wide smile, pretty eyes and big mop of dark hair caught the attention of one of the pizzeria's workers, Dan Loomis. When Dan describes Alix, the first thing he mentions is that smile. On a warm night in May, he's finishing up his shift as the pizzeria's ovens emit a steady curtain of hot air. His dark hair hides beads of sweat along his forehead, and his work clothes carry the day's flour and pizza sauce stains. From the counter he's now standing behind, he had often seen Alix come into the pizza shop, until one day he figured it was time to go ahead and ask her out on a date. As it turns out, that was the same day she'd asked for a job application there.

One of the first times Dan and Alix hung out together, Dan, who is also an artist, painted a portrait of her. Alix was always making little sketches of people or fashion designs or whatever came to her mind, and Dan and Alix's mutual interest in art proved a real way to connect.

Alix's first job at the pizzeria involved the backbone of all restaurant work: washing dishes. She didn't perform this task with drudgery, however. Instead, she sang about it. There she was, the new girl on the job, belting away with full volume and gusto and little care as to the opinion of her co-workers – her singing just made them laugh, anyway. A radio played in the background, but Alix sang right over it; singing was actually another of Alix's

talents and hobbies. Quirky songs about cleaning the cheese machine or whatever her current task involved became the new workday soundtrack.

On Friday nights, Alix focused more on dancing than singing. The crew would turn up the radio and blast cheesy pop music while everyone, especially Alix, danced. She'd spin around and shake to the beat in her bright, tie-dyed shirts, mismatched socks and ever-popular checkered Vans slip-ons or Converse sneakers. The goofy girl who rode regular-foot quickly became a friend and bundle of admired energy. Her triangle-shaped pizzas and other funny antics made her co-workers laugh, but they respected her for more than her vigor. "She was the kind of person who didn't care what you think," Dez says. If something was getting him down, Alix put her day on hold to listen. Be it a bad day or relationship troubles, she was the first one to tell him that hey, it wasn't as bad as it seemed. In Dan's eyes, Alix possessed an enviable sense of adventure and even bravery; she'd speed around everywhere on her longboard and take buses alone throughout the city. "She was tougher than me," he recalls.

The only thing that seemed to make her upset, Dan remembers, was when others referred to her chosen activity as skateboarding. Alix was a longboarder, and that's what she wanted to be called. Dan says, "She would get mad at the kids who would make fun of her because she rode a longboard and not a skateboard, and then months later she would see them on a longboard."

Break time at work meant time for an extra longboarding session for Alix. She and Dez would cruise around the pizza place's back parking lot. Often they'd switch off boards; she'd ride his short board, and he'd ride her longboard. Sure, Alix loved her longboard – a worn-looking Sector 9 she named Rupert – but all types of boards drew her curiosity. And when there was time, she'd ride over to a nearby store to pick up and bring back candy to share with everyone else.



Photo courtesy Tammy Rice

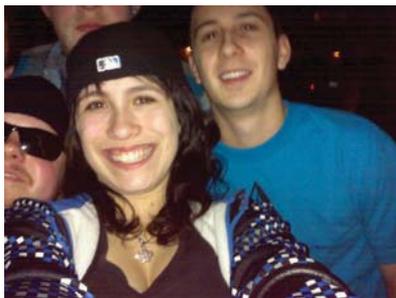


Photo: Joseph Garas

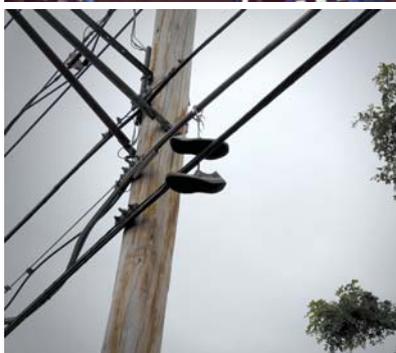


Photo: Joseph Garas

Alix and Dan normally worked the Friday night closing shift together, and Dan often gave Alix a ride home afterward. On the night of July 8, though, Dan was out of town, selling some of his paintings at an art festival in Rochester, N.Y. Alix stayed late at the pizzeria to help clean up, because that's just the kind of person she was, Dan says.

Sometimes Alix would longboard to a bus stop nearby to catch a ride home, but not that night. "I work every Friday, and that was the one Friday I wasn't here. I was out of town," Dan recalls. Alix finally finished up and stepped onto her longboard. She had wished Dan luck before he left for the art show. It was the last time they'd speak.

It's early evening when Dr. James Corasanti arrives at the Transit Valley Country Club in East Amherst, N.Y. He's come right from the Buffalo hospital where he works, after a long day spent seeing 18 patients, according to *The Buffalo News*. Tonight is couples' golf night at the country club. Corasanti, his wife and some other couples prepare for a friendly competition. Before heading to the course, Corasanti orders his first drink: a rum and diet cola. He golfs well tonight, making par multiple times, and has a second rum and cola mid-game. Afterward, Corasanti and the other couples grab a table. He orders a \$100 bottle of wine and some champagne for the table and a couple more drinks for himself. It's a relaxing night after the lengthy day, and at 11:12 p.m., Corasanti finally heads home. The incident, the awful tragedy, is still 10 minutes and four miles away.

Alix Rice has traveled only around a mile on her longboard on her way home from work. The blue BMW cuts through the dark night. Then, the collision, the damning split second, the 4,800 pounds of car against her 5-foot 5-inch frame. It hurls her body into the air before skidding her across the pavement. She dies instantly, her neck severely broken. The crash knocks her out of her shoes.

But the BMW does not stop, does not turn around, does not slow down. Corasanti later says he felt his car run over something, but that he didn't hear, see or feel anything enough to prompt him to stop or pull over.

When a passing motorist hears the horrendous sound of the impact, he stops to call 911 and begins searching for Alix; her broken longboard and shoes lie in a roadside heap. When her body is found, she has no pulse. Even if Corasanti had stopped to help her, there would have been nothing he could have done.

Corasanti's cellphone records also show that he was sending and receiving text messages while driving that night. At the trial, the prosecution said Corasanti was texting right up until the minutes before the accident occurred. He later deleted some of these text messages, resulting in a charge of tampering with evidence.

Corasanti's car motors on, a large gash in its right front side. Less than a mile away, he gets home and pulls the car into the garage. He examines the car's front and is taken aback by the extent of the damage. He notices red spots that look like blood, along with a small piece of tissue. He wipes away the piece of tissue, an action that would later prompt another charge of tampering with evidence. Here, he says, he begins to worry about what he struck; full comprehension, the dawning of what just happened, has not yet sunk in. His wife examines the car as well, and now she drives her automobile back to the scene to try to figure out what happened. When she arrives, she discovers that police have blocked off the road – and sees, up ahead, the tell-tale flashing of ambulance lights: Now it's clear that a person was struck – that it was Alix.

Corasanti's wife returns home, frantic. She tells Corasanti what she saw. In a panic, he dashes from his house, running at first and then slowing to a dazed walk. Some of his neighbors catch up to him; one would later testify that the doctor seemed frantic and spoke in a quick ramble, and when he became apprised of the situation,

he urged Corasanti, "You have to do the right thing."

One of the biggest questions Corasanti later faced was a simple one: Why didn't he call 911? To this, he says he just panicked and didn't know what to do.

As Corasanti continues his walk around the neighborhood, another neighbor phones a police officer and puts Corasanti on the line. The officer tells the doctor to go to a nearby gas station. When Corasanti arrives there, he's taken into police custody, 91 minutes after the crash. From the back of a police car, he asks about Alix's condition and is told she's dead.

Had Alix been a jogger or bicyclist, her death would have been no less tragic. But she was a longboarder, and longboarding is still growing, still evolving, especially in the mainstream's eye. Skateboarding and longboarding are still often viewed as dangerous or reckless activities, and the accident heightened this perception. When the news of what happened the night of July 8 spread, all were struck by the tragedy; some, however, were quick to speculate blame – not all of it on Corasanti. Before all the details of that horrible night surfaced, they questioned the role Alix's mode of transportation might have played.

Bob Knab, owner of the local skateboard and longboard shop, Phatman Boardshop, who lives only a few streets from where the tragedy occurred, says he remembers the initial public perception. It could have been the girl's fault, Knab says he recalls hearing; she was probably zigzagging in the street, others said. "People painted that picture the first day that that happened," he says. "I was getting all kinds of comments made to me [like] 'Oh, you see that skateboarding's not really too safe.'"

Still others suggested that Knab and the local longboarding community do something in remembrance of Alix, and he agreed. The general community had been hit hard by Alix's passing, but for the skate and longboarding community, they had lost one of their own. Like



Rockin' For Rice. Photo: Bob Knab



Photo courtesy Tammy Rice

Alix, Knab was also a longboarder; when he was a teenager, long before Alix had even been born, he'd built his own longboards out of slalom water skis and Road Rider wheels. His sons and his wife are all board-sport enthusiasts. And as the owner of a shop whose customers included safety-concerned parents, he didn't want the danger mentality of longboarding to win over.

Knab's connection to Alix ran even deeper. His own son would ride his longboard to Bocce's to pick up pizza, and Alix had been in Knab's skate shop only several days before she passed. After Alix died, Bob wanted to organize a longboarding-focused event in her memory. "I had thought about doing some kind of event but didn't really know how to go about it," he says.

The answer came when he was contacted by a local community- and youth-centered organization, the Amherst Youth Foundation. The result was an event in memory of Alix that raffled off longboards and raised money for the Donate Life Foundation, which raises awareness about organ donation. Alix was an organ donor who strongly supported this cause. For the local kids in attendance, they had a chance to ride longboards and receive lessons, too, because, after all, longboarding was what Alix loved.

On the sidewalk at Alix's memorial, chalk-written messages remind all who pass by how much Alix is still missed. In blue chalk, "I still think about you every day." In pink chalk, "Look in on your mom. She needs you." And so many of the marker-written messages dotting the guardrail describe missing that bright smile.

When the trial of James Corasanti ended, however, new messages soon appeared. As much as the site served to preserve happy memories, it now reflected searing anger: "This is an injustice!" "Burn in hell, Corasanti!" and other such vitriol now marked the memorial. Alix was gone, and those mourning received not closure but a reemergence of pain. The trial had concluded and the verdict had been delivered: Second-degree manslaughter: not guilty. Second-degree

vehicular manslaughter: not guilty. Leaving the scene of the incident: not guilty. Two counts of tampering with physical evidence: not guilty. All felony charges were acquitted; jurors found Corasanti guilty only of driving while intoxicated, a less severe misdemeanor offense that carries up to a year in prison. Corasanti could have faced more than 20 years in prison if convicted of the felony charges. To reach the outcome that seemed incomprehensible to most, what exactly happened on the night of July 8 came under intense observation and scrutiny.

On a hot day in June, Alix's mother, Tammy Schueler, sits thumbing through some old photos of Alix. Tammy's dark, shoulder-length hair rests against her white shirt, and next to her lies a small stack of napkins to wipe away the tears that she knows will soon well up. She pauses at a photo of little Alix at a museum. A stuffed, life-size bear peers out from a display case as a panic-stricken Alix pretends to run away. Tammy chuckles at the photo, at her daughter's goofy antics that were always part of her personality. She is still able to look back and smile, even laugh, but the pain, the hardship, persists. When you've lost your daughter, your only child, there's little alternative: You must be strong. Alix and Tammy were very close. When Alix first started longboarding around three years before she was killed, she'd ride around a local park as Tammy bicycled alongside her. Alix hardly had to work through a learning curve when she started longboarding. "She's a natural," Tammy recalls. "She just picked up to it like a duck to water." The pair traveled extensively together too. It was during a trip to California, to the skate haven of Venice Beach, that Alix purchased her cherished longboard. Tammy says it's the traveling they did together that fueled Alix's sense of adventure.

As fun as longboarding was to Alix, it was also quite literally a vehicle for exploration. If Alix could have had her way, she probably would have spent her days living the West Coast longboarding life. "She was the happiest when she was out boarding in California," Alix's cousin Corrina

Price says. "She was in her element." Yet as long as there's smooth ground to ride, no matter which coast, there's longboarding to be had. Most days Alix rode her longboard to class, wedging it (or him, rather, as she always referred to her longboard as "he," not "it") in her locker until the day's end and it was time to longboard home.

Longboarding is not always fun – falling, succumbing to speed wobbles, or just taking a turn too fast have results opposite of fun. Any seasoned longboarder has taken enough falls to appreciate that speed, freedom and fun sometimes come at a price. One night when Tammy was working, she received a call. Alix had come upon a patch of gravel while longboarding, a man called to tell Tammy that he'd found her collapsed outside of his house. Alix was taken by ambulance to the emergency room, and when Tammy met her there, paramedics said they thought Alix might've broken a hip. Luckily, it turned out she was only badly bruised.

Riding the same road where a hard bail or wipeout occurred takes resilience. For some, a trip to the hospital is reason enough to retire the longboard to a dusty garage corner. As soon as Alix was back in shape, though, she was back on her longboard. The hospital experience was but a minor hitch, more of an inconvenience than a scare.

When Alix wasn't longboarding with friends and just riding around, she'd longboard alone, going wherever it was she needed to go. Longboarding as a means of transportation brings independence: from cars, from traffic, from conformity. As a female longboarder in an activity that's – steadily less – predominantly male, longboarding fostered a different type of independence. Shortly before Alix was killed, she had her name, "Alexandria Mae," tattooed across her side. While she always called herself "Alix," marking her full name was a way of saying "This is me, and this is always who I'm going to be," her cousin Corrina says. Being independent and being unique – if not downright eccentric at times – was who Alix was. After she finished high school, Alix had begun taking fashion design classes. Along with



Alix memorial. Photo: Joseph Garas



Photo: Joseph Garas

her sketches of clothing, her fashion carried its own creative flair. She'd don a dress with a long leopard jacket and high-top Converse sneakers. "And she pulled it off," Corrina says. "I think she wanted to show people that you don't have to do what everybody else is doing to look good."

Not following everyone else made longboarding perfect for Alix. Longboarding and skateboarding will always focus on independence – no coaches and, best of all, no rules. Yet for Alix, being so willing to be her own person came at a cost, her mother says. Alix tended not to care what others thought of her quirkiness, but she also faced some taunting from peers while growing up. Still, Alix always expressed an awareness and concern for others. When she was eight years old, Corrina, as the older cousin, used to babysit Alix. One of Corrina's friends had recently passed away, and little Alix was left trying to cheer Corrina up and offered Corrina one of her own teddy bears. Corrina told Alix it was hers and that she should keep it. Later, when Corrina got home, she found the bear stuffed in her bag. She still has it today, as a reminder and reflection of the type of person Alix was, even from a young age.

"Alix would give you anything if she thought you needed it," Tammy says. "She would do anything to make you smile." She takes a sip of her coffee. Her speaking slows. The tears well up. "I'm a better person because every day I feel I owe it to Alix to make her proud of me," she continues. "And I have to be a better person in order to do that. I find myself being more Alix-like, being kinder to people; that's what I strive for – to be more like her."

On a gray morning in May, James Corasanti enters the courthouse in downtown Buffalo. He walks slowly past a couple of TV news cameras and the throng of observers who've come to watch his trial. With one of his defense lawyers at his side, Corasanti proceeds down a short hallway. His gaze shifts neither left nor right. His suit is gray. His hair is gray. The creases on his expressionless face run deep. In the courtroom

are 12 people – seven men and five women – who make up the jury, the ones who will decide his fate. They were the ones who heard from dozens of witnesses, the audience to an onslaught of legal rhetoric hoping to push or pull them toward one of two conclusions: what happened that night was criminal, or what happened that night was an accident. The jury attempted to filter out emotion and just look at the facts. But regardless of the facts, the ruling left a bitter taste amid Alix's stunned community. Corasanti was a wealthy doctor, a gastroenterologist to be exact. Alix was a teenage longboarder. Their opposite roles shaped immensely the perception of the trial. Corasanti could afford a top-notch legal defense team, and the results paid off.

The jury members came to their conclusion based on a simple yet particular aspect of law: reasonable doubt. James Corasanti was drinking that night. Legally, or otherwise, he should not have been driving. The jury recognized that, but they found doubt in believing that it was his drinking that directly caused the collision. The defense repeatedly noted that Alix was likely crouched down on her longboard at the time of impact, and, with the exception of her lime-green shirt, was wearing darker clothing. Alix was not swerving in the street or longboarding recklessly when the worst came upon her; both the prosecution and defense had witnesses attempt to explain Alix's exact placement on the road, and the jury believed she might have been near where the shoulder meets the road, as one witness testified. In the courtroom, the crumpled hood and front fender of Corasanti's car sat displayed before the jury. The deep gashes and bent metal provoked a simple question: How could such damage not prompt the driver to get out and check? Here, the defense used the car's mechanics to explain. As a top-of-the-line vehicle, the aluminum frame absorbs impact, minimizing what the driver feels. The car also has a soundproofed interior, the defense said. Prosecutors said Corasanti was speeding that night. The speed limit where the collision occurred on Heim Road is

35 miles per hour. Police estimated the BMW's speed at 46 to 52 miles per hour that night. However, an accident-reconstruction expert later testified that the car's speed was only about 40 miles per hour – a calculation the jury believed to be correct. As for Corasanti's drunkenness, he refused to submit to an alcohol breath test after being taken into police custody – an action that jurors can infer as an attempt to hide guilt. Later, Corasanti's blood was drawn on a judge's order. The blood-alcohol reading measured .10 percent – .02 over the legal driving limit – several hours after the accident.

The public outcry over the ruling has caused questioning – doubt, really – of the justice system. The legal community, of course, also followed the court case. To Buffalo-area criminal defense attorney Barry Covert, the case made an impression, but how it might impact future cases remains to be seen. "I think that these cases are all case-by-case analysis by the jury," he says, "and I don't think that a jury is necessarily in the future going to look back at this case and say, 'Well, because they held him not guilty in that case, we have to find this current defendant not guilty.' It's going to be a situation where every set of facts is going to be reviewed independently."

Whether or not the trial establishes a precedent, Alix leaves a legacy of her own. Hours were spent in the courtroom trying to piece together what happened that broken night, yet the minds of Alix's loved ones drift back farther; they remember the happy, humorous times. These are a different set of facts, ones that require no courtroom, no ruling. They say: We lost a beautiful person, a longboarder, someone who inspired others in life, and now, in death. "She was beautiful," Alix's mother says. "To take that personality with the looks and talent that she had, it's like the world got robbed. It really did." **CW**

This year's Broadway Bomb will be held in memory of Alix. Bob and others in Alix's community hope to have a concrete skatepark built in her memory. To raise money for the park, donations can be made at alixrice.com