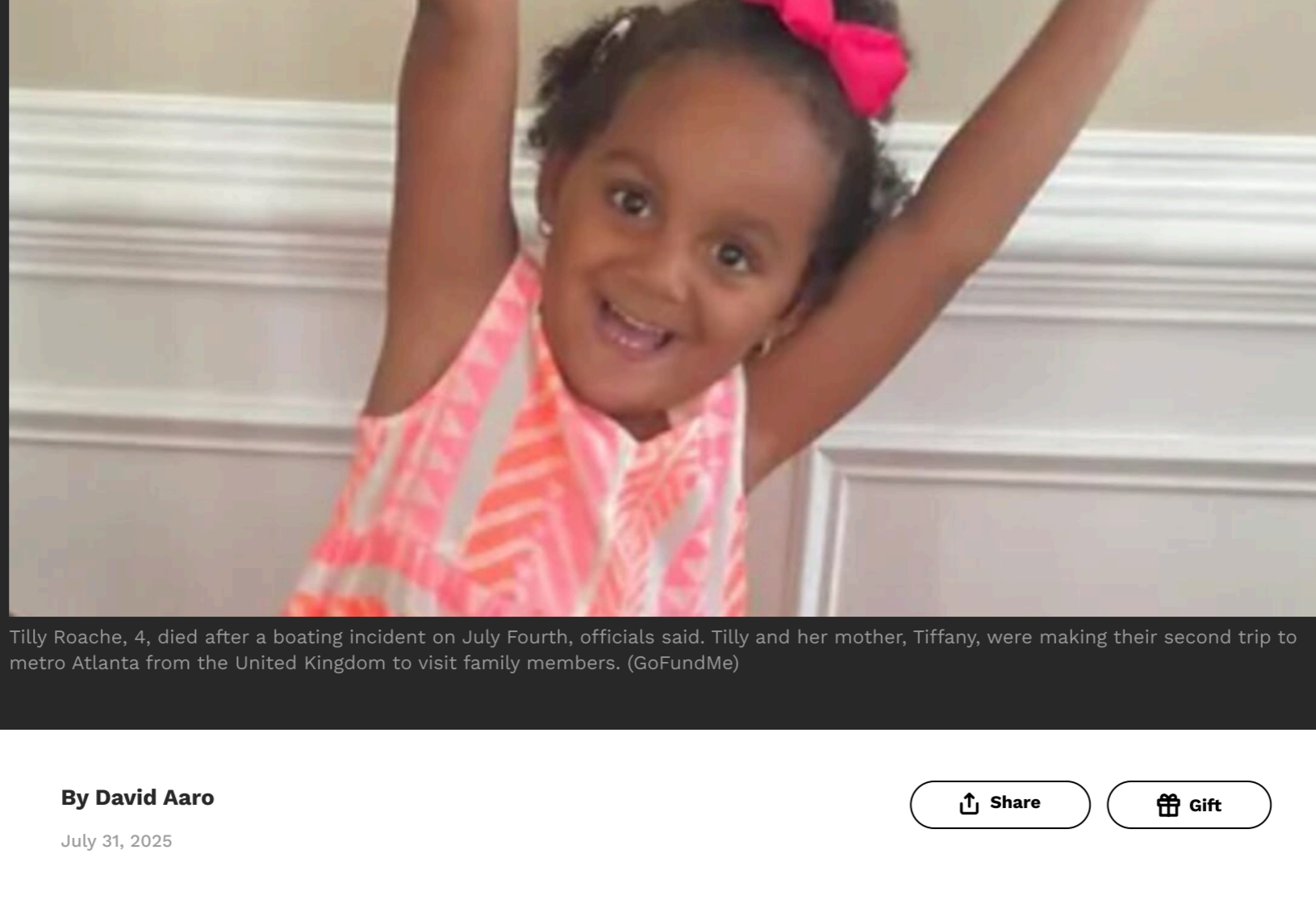


METRO ATLANTA

'My child is gone': Mother grieves girl, 4, killed in Lake Oconee boat incident

Family members and a witness say passing boats caused a wake that contributed to the pontoon capsizing July Fourth.



Tilly Roache, 4, died after a boating incident on July Fourth, officials said. Tilly and her mother, Tiffany, were making their second trip to metro Atlanta from the United Kingdom to visit family members. (GoFundMe)

By David Aaro
July 31, 2025

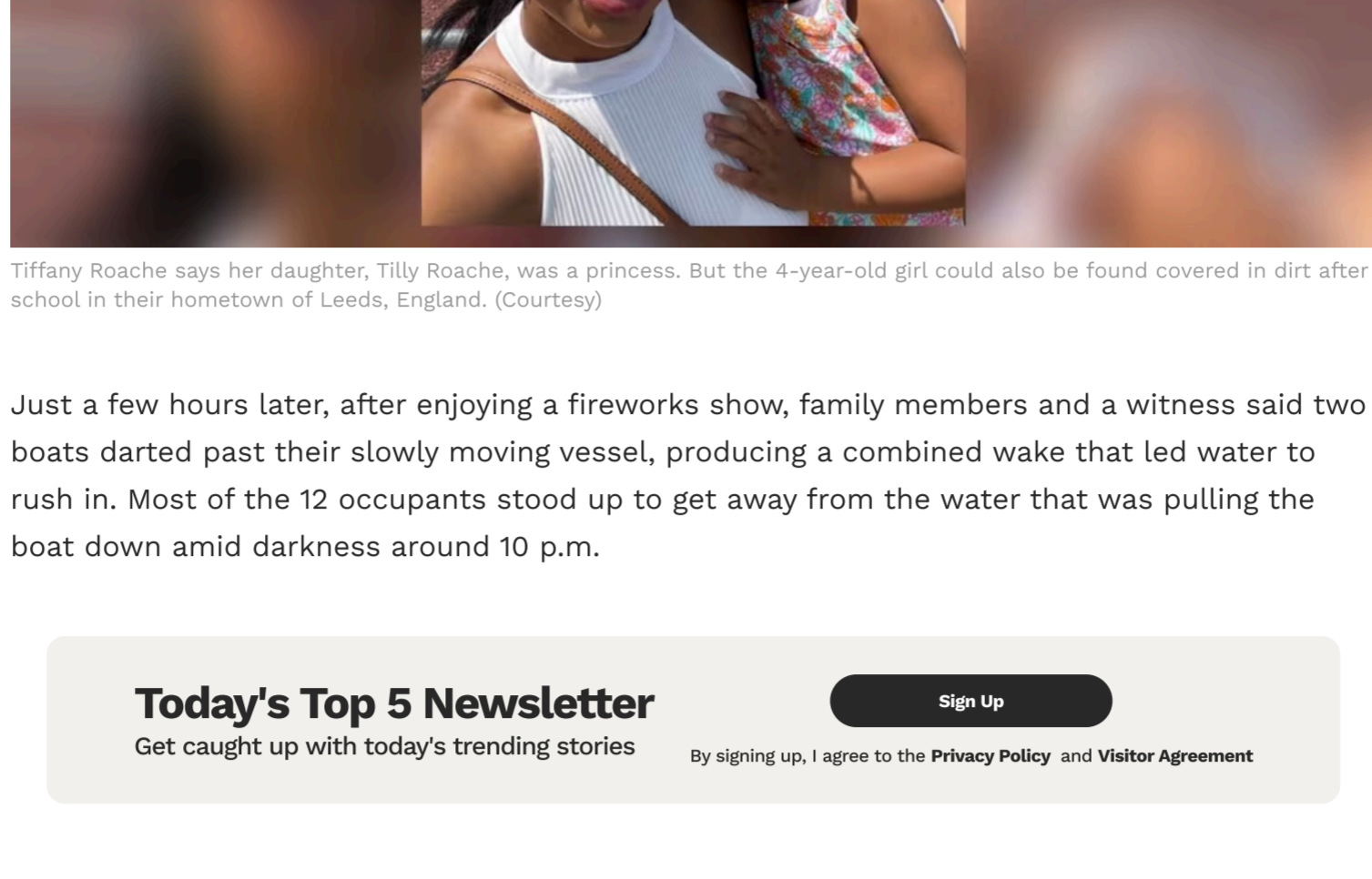
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As the sun set following a lively series of July Fourth activities on Lake Oconee, Tilly Roache cuddled close to her mother for a selfie video on a pontoon boat.

The 4-year-old smiled as she grasped a Hawaiian Punch juice box with both hands, her red hair bow caressing Tiffany Roache's temple as they snuggled amid fairly calm waters.

"Hi Grandma ... hi Granddad," Tilly Roache said, causing a wide grin to appear on the face of the single mother, whose outfit matched the little girl's bow. They were inseparable.

Tiffany has that 30-second video that was intended for Tilly's grandparents saved on her cellphone, but it's difficult to watch now.



Tiffany Roache says her daughter, Tilly Roache, was a princess. But the 4-year-old girl could also be found covered in dirt after school in their hometown of Leeds, England. (Courtesy)

Just a few hours later, after enjoying a fireworks show, family members and a witness said two boats darted past their slowly moving vessel, producing a combined wake that led water to rush in. Most of the 12 occupants stood up to get away from the water that was pulling the boat down amid darkness around 10 p.m.

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It then started to tilt before capsizing. Tilly, who was wearing her life vest, was trapped underneath and eventually pulled out of the water after about 40 minutes.

Next to the boat, the empty juice box was found floating amid trash and debris on the Middle Georgia lake.

Tilly died two days later.

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"My child is gone, and we're all left with a huge hole," Tiffany Roache told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "I wake up every morning just living the same nightmare over and over again. She's meant to be here with us."

An incident report from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources didn't mention other boats, just that waves began to come over the bow and that the movement of passengers caused it to capsize. When asked for more information, DNR Sgt. Mike Wilcox said the incident was not under investigation anymore and that "all I know about the incident is what is in the report."

Authorities have not charged anyone.

Putnam County Sheriff Howard Sills, whose office oversees investigations on Lake Oconee, said he did not receive any information about two other boats on the night of the incident, though a family member later told a lieutenant that a boat passed by and caused a wake.

This year through mid-July, there have been 10 boating incidents, three boating fatalities and three drownings on the lake, DNR spokesperson Mike McKinnon said.

Now, as the Roache family grieves, some are pushing for a new state law aimed at enhancing water safety and emergency response. A [Change.org petition](#) has drawn several hundred supporters. The proposed legislation is fittingly titled: "Tilly's Law."

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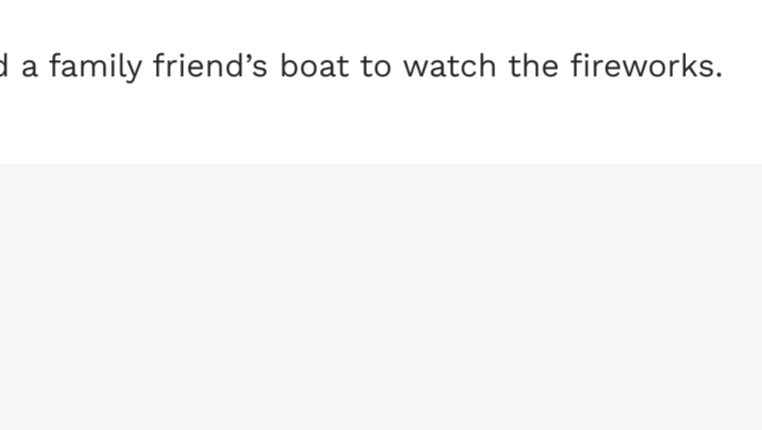
The princess and the tomboy

Tiffany and Tilly were making their second trip to metro Atlanta from the United Kingdom to visit family members, including Reginald Wesley, a cousin who has homes in Conyers and at the Harbor Club on Lake Oconee.

Tilly was a princess, her mother said, but could also be found covered in dirt after school in their hometown of Leeds, England. She loved getting her nails painted, but they would quickly get filthy from climbing trees and jumping onto the nearest swing set. If a spider or bug crossed her path? She would pick them up, of course.

Tilly's happiness was infectious. Her mother even joked she was almost too bubbly. But the 39-year-old never complained, even when Tilly would enter her bedroom earlier than expected and passionately exclaim "Wakey wakey!" in her cute British accent.

Their Fourth of July began the same way, with an agenda packed with classic American celebrations for the patriotic holiday. The day kicked off with the annual golf cart parade at the Harbor Club, where the family adorned their electric vehicle in flags and Wesley made sure a boom box was ready to play some tunes.

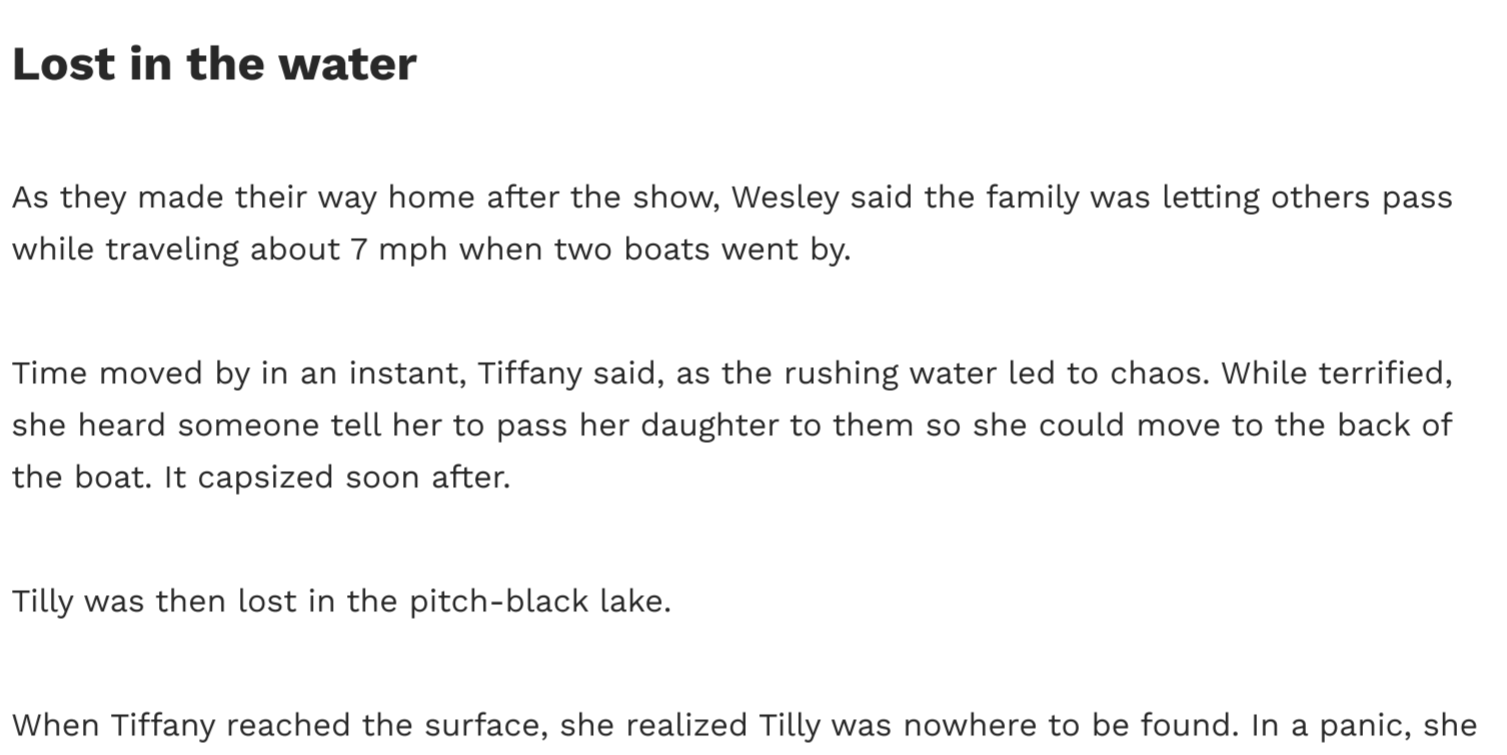


Reginald Wesley (from left), Tiffany Roache and Tilly Roache enjoyed a golf cart parade near Lake Oconee on July Fourth. The family adorned their electric vehicle in flags and Wesley...

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The festivities continued that afternoon in the family pool, where the giggling youngster grabbed her mother's arm for comfort. Tilly couldn't swim, but she loved the water, her mother said.

The group later boarded a family friend's boat to watch the fireworks.



Reginald Wesley watches the fireworks with Tilly Roache on July Fourth on Lake Oconee. Tilly couldn't swim, but she loved the water, her mother said. (Courtesy)

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Lost in the water

As they made their way home after the show, Wesley said the family was letting others pass while traveling about 7 mph when two boats went by.

Time moved by in an instant, Tiffany said, as the rushing water led to chaos. While terrified, she heard someone tell her to pass her daughter to them so she could move to the back of the boat. It capsized soon after.

Tilly was then lost in the pitch-black lake.

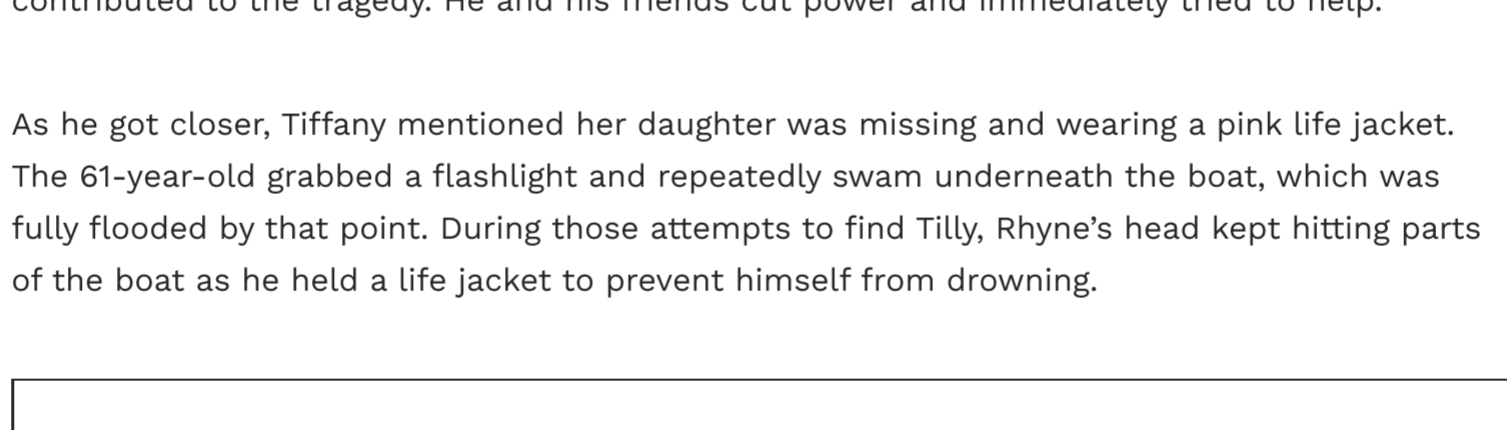
When Tiffany reached the surface, she realized Tilly was nowhere to be found. In a panic, she yelled for help. Tiffany then heard her daughter's piercing screams coming from under the boat, just a few feet away.

"She was screaming for Mommy. That high pitch. I've never heard her call for me like that. She was petrified," Tiffany said. "So I was calling and calling, and I said, 'Mommy's gonna come and get you.' I kept trying to go under to find her, but it was too dark."

Moments earlier, longtime lake resident Greg Rhyne, who also owns two Stevi B's Pizza Buffet restaurants in metro Atlanta, said he was traveling ahead of the family in a similar pontoon boat when the two other boats flew past. That drew the ire of his passengers, as the combined wake "tossed us around a little bit." One boat had blinding green lights that Rhyne remembered seeing earlier during the fireworks show.

Fatal boating incident on Lake Oconee

A 4-year-old girl was killed after her family boat capsized from a large wake July 4 on Lake Oconee.



Reginald Wesley consoles Tiffany Roache inside his Conyers home after her daughter's death. "I feel like I failed her. As a parent, you're supposed to keep your children safe," Tiffany said, breaking down in tears. (David Aaro/AJC)

A race against time

Feeling exhausted, Rhyne said first responders and DNR officers arrived but told him they didn't have a way to dive under the boat. To get away from deep water and waves, Rhyne asked them to move it toward the shoreline, about a football field away, but they stressed the need to wait for fire crews, he said.

"And I said, 'Guys, there's possibly a little girl under here. If we wait that long, this is going to be over with. She's not going to make it.' That was my concern as already 10 minutes had passed," Rhyne said.

McKinnon said officers had basic first aid and safety equipment with them, including tourniquets, flotation devices and "other equipment for enforcement operations."

Crews eventually pushed the boat to the shore. During that lengthy process, Rhyne said he started to see items coming out of the boat, which turned out to be just trash from the vessel.

Disheartened, he jumped in the water again. That's when he saw a small hand in the boat's seating area. He pulled Tilly out by her life jacket and yelled at the top of his lungs upon reaching the surface.

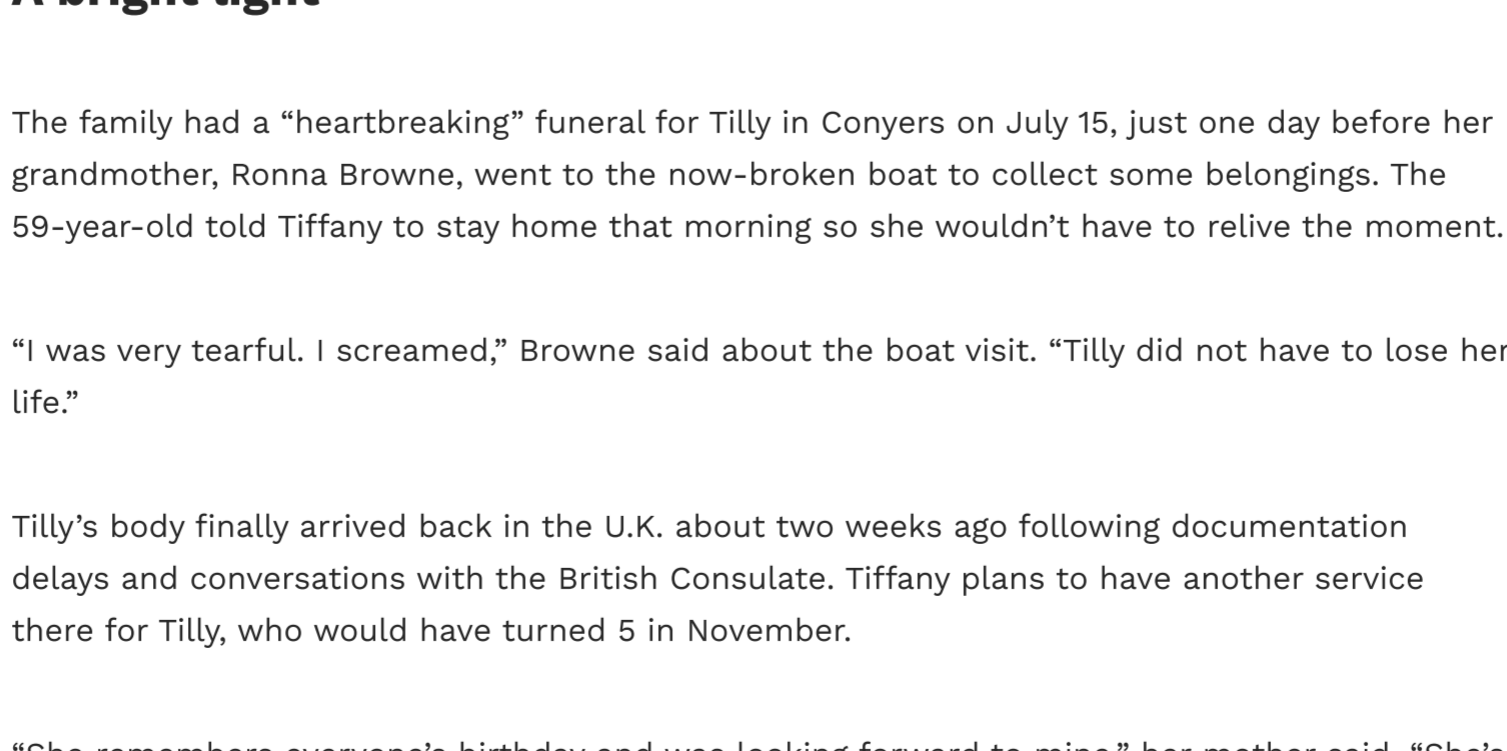
It had been about 40 minutes since the boat capsized, he said.

After responders performed CPR, Tilly was hooked to breathing tubes while lying on a stretcher and eventually flown by helicopter to a Children's Healthcare of Atlanta hospital. Family members, including Wesley, looked on, hoping she was still breathing.

"Uncle Reggie wants to play with you, baby," he said, while looking at Tilly's still body.

She never woke up.

"I feel like I failed her. As a parent, you're supposed to keep your children safe," Tiffany said, breaking down in tears. "She was calling for Mommy for help."



Reginald Wesley consoles Tiffany Roache inside his Conyers home after her daughter's death. "I feel like I failed her. As a parent, you're supposed to keep your children safe," Tiffany said, breaking down in tears. (David Aaro/AJC)

A bright light

The family had a "heartbreaking" funeral for Conyers on July 15, just one day before her grandmother, Ronna Browne, went to the now-broken boat to collect some belongings. The 59-year-old told Tiffany to stay home that morning so she wouldn't have to relive the moment.

"I was very tearful. I screamed," Browne said about the boat visit. "Tilly did not have to lose her life."

Tilly's body finally arrived back in the U.K. about two weeks ago following documentation delays and conversations with the British Consulate. Tiffany plans to have another service there for Tilly, who would have turned 5 in November.

"She remembers everyone's birthday and was looking forward to mine," her mother said. "She's a bright light that the world needed."

About the Author
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David Aaro is a breaking news reporter for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

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