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CHERYL SENTER/Staff photos

Thelma Gomez, left, and Jacqueline Rodriguez grieve for their lost sons during the memorial ceremony at the Guilmette School in Lawrence yesterday for four boys who drowned in the Merrimack River two years ago. Thelma's son, Victor Baez, was 9. Jacqueline's son, Christopher Casado, was 7.

Drowning victims remembered

Plaque dedicated to four friends at memorial ceremony in Lawrence

By GRACE RUBENSTEIN
STAFF WRITER

LAWRENCE — In the chilly morning yesterday, children, teachers and families gathered quietly around the Guilmette School Peace Garden to remember what happened on another cold day two years ago.

Eleven-year-old William Rodriguez ran onto the frozen Merrimack River Dec. 14, 2002, and the ice broke beneath him. His six friends plunged in and formed a human chain, struggling to save William and then each other. Christopher Casado, 7, Mackendy Constant, 8, Victor Baez, 9, and William succumbed to the 35-degree water. Christopher's brother Ivan, then 9, Francis Spraus, also 9, and Jaycob Morales, 10, survived.

"Out of these ashes of pain and tragedy we lift up today a monument to heroes," Superintendent Wilfredo T. Laboy said, addressing the 90 people who circled the small plot of earth in front of the building. "It is said that a true friend will lay down his life for another. ... They showed an example to all of us of what it is we should treasure."

Tara Laboy, who taught Mackendy, turned on a portable stereo and filled the air with a slow hip-hop



Fifth-grade students grieve as a plaque honoring the four boys is unveiled in the Peace Garden. They are, from left, Natasha Arias, Debora Goncalves, Luz Ramos, front, and Franshelly Tejada, all 10.



Third-grade teacher Jane Roth keeps her student, Jacqueline Rodriguez, 8, warm during the memorial ceremony.

melody, "I'll Be Missing You," by P Diddy and Faith Evans.

As the beat started pulsing, Natasha Arias, a fifth-grade student and close friend of Mackendy, bowed her face into her hand and cringed. All around the circle, tears began rolling down adults' and children's cheeks. Thelma Gomez, Victor's mother, released a sob and threw her

arms around Jacqueline Rodriguez, the mother of Christopher and Ivan Casado.

At the chorus, the children sang, "Every step I take, every move I make, every single day, every time I pray, I'll be missing you."

The families of Victor, Christopher and William stood near the center of the circle. Tara Laboy, the superin-

tendent's daughter-in-law, said Mackendy's family has participated in few memorials at the school because the experience is too emotional for them. They were not there yesterday.

Victor, Christopher and Mackendy all went to the Guilmette School.

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Two of the survivors, Ivan and Francis, still do.

When the ceremony started, Jacqueline had called to Ivan to stand in front with her. "Ven," she said in Spanish. "Come."

Ivan smiled anxiously and shook his head. He watched from the back of the crowd, with fellow survivor Francis by his side. During the song, a teacher gave Francis tissues, and he handed his ceremony program to Ivan while he blew his nose.

After the song, Natasha Arias stepped into the circle to read an essay she had written, "My Hero Mackendy," but she asked Tara Laboy to read it for her. After Mackendy died, the teacher read, Natasha decided not to go outside or to parties anymore. She stopped getting in fights and started behaving "like I'm 10 years old," which she is.

Then a friend read a poem

Natasha wrote, recalling how Mackendy was "like a funny clown" and a math expert who would help friends with schoolwork. "I miss my sweet chocolate-colored hero," the poem said.

Tara Laboy read a tribute from another of Mackendy's close friends, Ruddy Ortiz, as he stood beside her.

"He was afraid to go in the 10 feet in the pool at the Boys Club," Ruddy wrote. "I knew how to swim, so if he was drowning I told him, 'I'll save you, wherever you're drowning.' But then it happened."

During the service, the school unveiled a plaque set into a stone in the Peace Garden. It says the garden is dedicated to Christopher, Mackendy, Victor, William and Kerri O'Connor, a Guilmette School girl with physical handicaps who died in the same school year as the boys, at age 14.

The garden doesn't look like

much now; it's just the stone and a small, bare tree on a rectangular patch of earth. But teacher Jane Roth, who taught Victor, said in the spring it is filled with roses, irises and gladiolas.

The school also presented green wreaths to the boys' families, each inscribed with their child's name and the words "In our hearts forever," written in gold on white ribbon.

Principal Daniel Hanneken called Ivan forward to give the wreath to his mother, and then the boy hurried back to the periphery and Francis.

After the ceremony, six friends of the boys lingered in the school office. The four girls and two boys sat quietly with their teacher, Mrs. Laboy. Natasha Arias and Debora Goncalves held blankets around their shoulders. All except Ruddy's eyes were red and teary.

The principal told them, "Take your time."