

Naya Rivera is missing no more. But the 'Glee' star's queer legacy will last forever. (July 14, 2020, NBC News)

It's been almost a week [since the actress Naya Rivera disappeared](#) while boating with her young son on Lake Piru in Southern California, and in devastating news, [it appears that her remains have been discovered](#). Her friends and family have been going through an unimaginable ordeal as they wait for news they know can only be bad. The star's fans have also lived in a perpetual state of stasis these past few days, unable to grieve for not just the life of Naya Rivera the person but also for what she has meant to them over the years.

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Fans took to social media to beg rescuers and fellow fans not to give up hope. It was a futile if fitting gesture, because hope is exactly what lifts Naya Rivera's legacy, as well. Hope for a world where love and acceptance are the norm.

I don't use the word "legacy" lightly. But Rivera and her beloved "Glee" character, Santana Lopez, helped change queer television history. She paved the way for the [Waverly Earps](#) and [Elena Alverezes](#) of the world. Santana danced and sang through her pain, her confusion and, ultimately, her joy, and as she did, so did we.

In 2009, a quirky little show about a high school glee club debuted and immediately became a sensation. Ryan Murphy's "Glee," with its biting humor and earnest storylines, was unlike anything many of us had ever seen before. In the show's first season, Naya Rivera was cast as the casually cruel Santana Lopez, a sidekick of sorts to head cheerleader Quinn Fabray. But Rivera's sparkle quickly became hard to contain, and her role was expanded.

"Glee" grew in popularity at the same time as Twitter, which became integral to the show's success. Fans weren't shy about sharing what they loved and loathed about the show. And what they adored was the chemistry between Naya's Santana and Heather Morris' Brittany S. Pierce. In the 13th episode of the first season, a throwaway line stating that Santana and Brittany had slept together [sent fans into a frenzy](#). Brittany and Santana, or "Brittana," as fans call them, were meant to be. "Glee" rolled with it, and the relationship would soon be written into the series and become a favorite coupling.

In the second season, "Glee" really allowed Rivera to spread her wings. She dazzled with a cover of "Valerie" by Amy Winehouse (another talent gone too soon) and began exploring her character's sexuality with a mix of steely defensiveness and delicate vulnerability. Without nuance, Santana could easily have been written off as a one-dimensional high school bully, but Rivera knew the right chords to hit every single time. As she pleaded for requited love while singing Fleetwood Mac's "Songbird" to Brittany, fans were right there beside her.

To her credit, [Rivera embraced the fan love](#) and recognized early on how important her role was to LGBTQ fans and to television, period. In 2011, Naya even hosted the [GLAAD Awards](#) alongside co-star Cory Monteith, [who tragically died almost exactly seven years ago](#).

Rivera's role remained an integral part of the "Glee" story, and Santana's on-again, off-again relationship with Brittany was the heart of the series for many fans. Many queer people felt seen in a way they never had before. As documented on social media, [people inspired by the Brittana love story came out](#). They talked to their parents. They fell in love. They found families. They found courage. There was [even a convention dedicated to Santana and Brittany](#).

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Personally, my entire career was jump-started by the couple: My first professional journalism assignment was to vlog about "Glee" and the Brittana relationship. It changed the course of my life in many ways, and I will always be grateful for Rivera's candor and care when it came to playing Santana.

Naya Rivera, of course, was much more than one singular role. She had an incredible sense of comedic timing. Her monologues, delivered with a feverish sense of wit and sting, were some of the show's finest moments of both comedy and drama. Her soaring belt and gentle high notes evoked some of the best R&B, pop-rock and even folk singers. Her singing evoked universal emotions: the desire to love and be loved, to speak and to be heard.

As a chronicler and a part of this "Glee" fandom, I ache for everyone whose lives were touched by Naya Rivera. Her legacy lives on in all of us and every happy ending between two queer characters. Tonight we sing for you, Naya.

"And the songbirds keep singing like they

"Know the score

"And I love you I love you I love you

"Like never before."