

Garden of Peace Participates in Lowell Ceremony

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At Lowell ceremony, relatives of murder victims share the pain

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LOWELL -- It's an exclusive fellowship that nobody ever wanted to join.

It is made up of families whose loved ones were murdered. Their stories vary in their grisly detail but the aftermath is always the same.

"When my son died, it was agony and maybe it would have helped if I knew there was a group to help me," said Maria Ayala, whose son, five-time Golden Gloves boxing champ Luis Ayala Jr., was shot to death on Pawtucket Boulevard in 2001. "My family, my friends were there, but only another parent can really know."

Ayala was surrounded by her family as she stood in front of Lowell City Hall last night, observing the annual Day of Remembrance Vigil sponsored by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of the Parents Of Murdered Children.

"I've wanted to be here before, but this is my first time," Ayala said. "I'm going to start going to their meetings at Saints Medical Center. I think it will be helpful to hear from others and maybe I can help someone."

Several hours before the event began at 6 p.m, chapter Chairman Arnie Muscovitz, whose daughter Karen was strangled to death in Florida in 2004, learned that the man accused of Karen's death is expected to go to trial next week.

"There have been so many delays," Muscovitz said. "First he fired his lawyer. Then they had to determine if he was crazy and could stand trial. Finally, we have a date. Hopefully, we can get some closure."

Muscovitz got involved with the Parents Of Murdered Children shortly after his daughter's murder. He took over as chairman earlier this year.

Close to 100 people huddled close as the sun sank behind City Hall and the chill of the night set in. Mayor Edward "Bud" Caulfield spoke. City Councilor Rita Mercier joined Alice Muscovitz in reading the names of the 45 murder victims whose families have become part of the organization. Hundreds of red balloons were released into the air.

"It's a very calm and beautiful fall evening," Caulfield told the crowd. "The city is peaceful and quiet tonight and the reason we are here is to reflect. Prayers need to be offered for those victims throughout the country, as well as their families. I am honored to be here with you tonight."

Guest speaker Evelyn Tobin commended Caulfield for his appearance, saying that public officials usually pretend that murder does not exist in their communities.

"It's bad PR," said Tobin, adding that when a national tragedy such as the Columbine massacre occurs, there is an outpouring of community grief and support. "But our loved ones did not die in such a public way. They died one by one and we feel alone in our grief. We are sometimes shunned as if our grief is contagious."

Tobin's daughter, Kathleen Dempsey, was asleep in her Lexington home in August 1992 when she was stabbed by an intruder. She called 911 but a dispatcher thought the call was a prank. Nobody responded and she bled to death. Her attacker was never captured.

"To this day, my family has not received an apology from the town of Lexington," said Tobin, who went on to co-found the Peace Garden, a memorial to homicide victims near Suffolk University in Boston. "I decided that if I was to go on living, my life would have to make a difference, if only in some small way."

Kristen Loranger was 17 when her younger sister, Erika Foresteire, was stabbed more than 20 times while she babysat two small children in a Princeton Village apartment in Lowell in 1983.

"She was only 13," said Loranger, who attended with her father, Jim, and Erika's best friend, Tammi Lawrence. "I've never been to one of these observances, but I wanted her to count. I wanted her to be remembered, you know? She was just an awesome young girl. I, we, miss her every day."

Standing alone, holding a candle, Charlotte McCullough said she has been searching for a support group ever since her son, Chuckie McCullough, who was stabbed to death after a fight outside an apartment on Sutherland Street in Lowell after a Lowell High dance on Nov. 19, 2000.

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