

Wednesday, December 30, 2009

Napa girl wears her heart on her sleeve

Morales, 17, works to support family of murdered teen

By ALISHA WYMAN
Writer



Erica Morales knew Jesus Tornero for only a couple of months, but following his death she felt compelled to remember him. She had T-shirts printed, which she sold to raise money to help pay for his funeral.

Erica Morales barely knew Jesus Tornero.

They met in sixth period at Napa High School, and she knew little about him beyond his warm smile. But when 16-year-old Tornero was killed during a robbery on Louisa Street in September 2008, Morales, 17, couldn't help but think about his family.

Morales, a senior at Napa High, drove around with her mom and collected donations for Tornero's family. In total, the effort garnered about \$800, she said.

Separately, she orchestrated the production of T-shirts stamped with his photo for students to purchase in his memory. The Coliseum, a Napa shoe and sporting goods store, created the shirts and sold them for \$13 and many students wore them the day of Tornero's burial.

The shirt reads, "Jay Tee, We miss you," and lists the dates of his birth and death: Sept. 9, 1991, and Sept. 22, 2008.

Other students made their own shirts in tribute to Tornero.

"I felt like I had to help because I felt that if I was in that situation, I would want someone to do the same thing," Morales said.

Teresa Tornero, Jesus Tornero's mom, showed her gratitude with the expression on her face when Morales delivered the money, Morales said.

On the day he died, Jesus Tornero was walking home when Derrice Tray Lewis, 17, and Donovan Pierre, 24, attacked him, police said. They demanded he give them all the money he had. Ultimately, they made off with a cell phone and \$10.

The beating Tornero received cost him his life. Police were called to the scene and Tornero was taken to the Queen of the Valley Medical Center, where he died of his injuries.

In the months since, Lewis pleaded no contest to murder and will serve 25 years to life in prison. Pierre was sentenced to a 15-years-to-life in prison after pleading no contest to second-degree murder.

Morales was among many students at Napa High who were shocked at the time of Tornero's death, Morales said.

"I just couldn't believe that they would do that," she said.

Tornero was a senior and was about to **graduate**. He was known for his happy demeanor, she said.

More than a year has passed since Tornero died, but good work continues in his name.

Napa dentist Adrian Fenderson, a reliable supporter of charitable causes, sponsor of **fundraisers** and events in which he offers free dental treatment to the needy, held a contest this year looking for young people who had done good deeds.

"The whole purpose of this is to get kids looking at the volunteering part of their lives," said Fenderson. "That's my passion."

After a committee narrowed down the 35 essays submitted for the contest, he picked the winner.

It was Morales, who had submitted an essay at the urging of her mother.

Fenderson said Morales' effort stood out because of the way the cause spread among other students.

"It wasn't just an individual," he said. "What she was able to do was recruit others."

Morales stopped by his office this month to accept her prize, a new Dell laptop computer.

Tornero's death and the events that followed taught Morales many things, she said. The most important?

"I learned how to help people and to be thankful for your family, because you never know what can happen tomorrow," she said.