

Mother who lost daughter launches rebirth of local anti-gun violence group

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TARRYTOWN - Armed with the endorsement of local and state officials and dozens of area residents, a grieving mother last night launched the rebirth of a local group against gun violence.

Gisela Marin, whose only child, 19-year-old Jessica Santos, was shot dead as an innocent bystander last summer, said the revived Westchester chapter of New Yorkers Against Gun Violence will focus on youth education while providing manpower and resources for the statewide group.

"Six shots were fired, but it only took one to destroy Jessica's life and mine forever," Marin, 45, told an audience of more than 60 during the group's kickoff meeting at the Warner Library.

"I am taking a stand against gun violence by working with New Yorkers Against Gun Violence so that Jessica's and other young lives don't become just another forgotten statistic," she said. "I want to be able to go to area schools and community centers to speak about these devastating effects and educate our children from the youngest to the high school level."

Jackie Kuhls, executive director of the statewide New Yorkers Against Gun Violence, said local chapters provide a valuable resource in terms of assistance on telephone campaigns, lobbying and grass-roots efforts that adhere to the chapter's particular agendas. Marin also got assurances that the new group's efforts will have an audience among lawmakers.

"I thank you for your courage," said state Sen. Andrea Stewart-Cousins, D-Yonkers. "And we won't let you down. We're going to stand with you and we're going to stand behind you, and we're going to make sure that your voice is heard and that your story's told." Santos' shooting also hit home in Yonkers, the city where she was gunned down.

"You lose somebody in our city, it affects everybody," said Yonkers Mayor Phil Amicone. "To lose a child, an innocent child, is just absolutely the worst thing that we can dream, however that child was lost. To lose them to gun violence from an illegal gun - and we know it was an illegal gun - just makes it worse.

"This is not about gun ownership," he said. "This is about the flow of illegal guns that end up in the hands of criminals and children." Santos was shot Aug. 27 while talking to friends outside Beech Street Grocery in Yonkers. Her family said she was bidding farewell to friends in the city, and was to leave for her sophomore year at the University of New Haven the following day.

Yonkers police later arrested Anthony Burton, 17, and charged him with second-degree murder and second- and third-degree criminal possession of a weapon in the shooting. Police said he allegedly fired six shots from a .25-caliber handgun out of the window of a passing car. Santos was struck once, police said, and was pronounced dead at St. Joseph's Medical Center.

In the aftermath of the shooting, Marin sought to get proactive, promising a Santos funeral to give meaning to her death. She befriended organizers of the Bronx chapter of New Yorkers Against Gun Violence. Then she decided to revive the local group. The Westchester County chapter was founded in 1996 by the family of Michael Frey, an Eastchester police officer who was killed in the line of duty.

Kuhls said that the family remains involved, but that the group has become relatively inactive in recent years. Marin decided to revive it in her daughter's memory. Westchester County Legislator Thomas Abinanti, D-Greenburgh, said at the meeting that a legislative agenda remained from the local chapter's first incarnation.

Marin was also a guest on Teen Talk TV, which will air today at 5 p.m. on WNYE, which is Channel 22 in most of the region. Titled "Tales from the Hood: Loved Ones Lost to Street Violence," the show features Marin and other parents who have lost children.

Anyone interested in more information is urged to contact the statewide group at 212-679-2345 or www.nyagv.org.