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Family, friends mark birthday of slain Tarrytown woman with walk

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TARRYTOWN - Jessica Santos should have turned 20 yesterday.

The vivacious college student would have celebrated with glamorous clothes and makeup, friends said, a big party with dancing and all the laughter and delight that accompanied everything she did.

Instead, Santos' family, friends, neighbors and several hundred supporters of a recently re-invigorated local anti-gun violence group marked her birthday with a memorial walk in Tarrytown.

"We're here to celebrate her short life," said Gisela Marin, Santos' mother.

Jessica Santos was killed in a drive-by shooting in Yonkers last August, hours before she was scheduled to return for her sophomore year at the University of New Haven. Santos, of Tarrytown, was majoring in criminal investigations and wanted to become an FBI agent.

The 250 people who gathered in Patriots Park in Tarrytown yesterday morning exchanged hugs and memories of Santos before beginning a march to Pierson Park where a tree has been planted in her memory.

At the park on the banks of the Hudson River, Marin planned to release 19 butterflies, one for each year of her only child's life.

"The trial has started and will continue next week but we don't want it to overshadow this wonderful event today," said Marin, who wore a white t-shirt bearing a picture of her smiling, dark-haired daughter.

Anthony Burton, 18, is charged with second-degree murder. His trial in Westchester County Court resumes Tuesday.

Marin has established the Jessica N. Santos Foundation to fund scholarships in her daughter's name. Marin also revived the Westchester chapter of New Yorkers Against Gun Violence.

"It can't bring Jessica back but if it helps to save another life, that is very important to me," Marin said. "We lose a lot of youth to gun and street violence."

Marin's work and the impact of her daughter's death have made many converts to the anti-gun violence movement.

"If there was stricter gun control this would not have happened and Jessica would be with us today," said Sonialee Negron, 20, of Sleepy Hollow, a friend from early childhood.

Jesse Pereda, 21, of Tarrytown said he hadn't thought much about gun control until Santos, a high school friend, was killed while saying good bye to her friends on a street corner.

"People get illegal guns," Pereda said. "We've got to do something to stop it."

Jessica Fields, 19, and her mother Maryann Fields traveled from their home near Phoenix to attend the memorial walk.

"We were soul mates," Fields said. "This has changed my life completely. I plan to talk about how she died every day. I don't want anyone to forget her."

Former dormmate Viviana Martins, 20, of Bridgeport, Conn., said after Santos' death she joined the anti-gun violence organization in Connecticut and accompanied Marin's mother to Albany to lobby for gun control reform.

"People get guns so easily, we need much stricter laws," she said. "I want to educate people that this could happen to them too."

Celeste Hanley, 20, of Westport, Conn., would have been Santos' roommate last fall. Twenty minutes before her death, Hanley spoke with Santos about their plans to drive to campus together the next morning.

"I saved the recording of her voice on my phone mail," Hanley said. "I still have her comforter and her sheets. I never thought in a million years I would be in a position to get a phone call telling me she was dead."

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