

anti-gun violence reviving an advocacy group Tarrytown mom revives anti-gun violence group



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TARRYTOWN

Gisela Marin isn't the first mourning mother to channel her grief into activism.

But if she has her way, she will be the last.

More than five months after her only child was fatally shot on a Yonkers sidewalk, the Tarrytown resident is reviving the Westchester County chapter of New Yorkers Against Gun Violence and plotting fundraisers, scholarships and community events in memory of her 19-year-old daughter, Jessica Santos.

"It's too late for Jessica," said Marin, 45. "But it's not only for Jessica. It's for other families, for other victims to, hopefully through this, do something together, do something about this epidemic. It is an epidemic."

The first endeavor will begin tomorrow, when Marin will convene a meeting at the Warner Library in Tarrytown to kick off the rebirth of New Yorkers Against Gun Violence in Westchester County.

State Sen. Andrea Stewart-Cousins, D-Yonkers, and Westchester County District Attorney Janet DiFiore or a representative from her office are expected to attend.

The Westchester chapter was begun in 1996 by the family of slain Eastchester Police Officer Michael Frey, but it has since lapsed into relative inactivity. Now, Marin wants to bring it back to life for her daughter.

"Gisela is kind of igniting a fresh spark," said Jackie Kuhls, the statewide organization's executive director. "This is the kind of thing that can give a lot of hope and purpose to other people, too."

Santos was fatally shot Aug. 27 while she chatted with friends outside Beech Street Grocery in Yonkers. She was to have left for her sophomore year at the University of New Haven the next day.

Anthony Burton, 17, was arrested. He was accused of firing six shots from a .25-caliber handgun out of a car window. One of the shots, it's alleged, struck Santos, a bystander. Burton is awaiting trial on charges of second-degree murder and second- and third-degree criminal possession of a weapon.

"I was so overcome with grief, but at the same time, I was so angry that something like this could happen," Marin said. "It made me question where did this kid get this gun? Where are guns coming from? How is it that every day you read the paper or watch the news and hear about some shooting?"

"And it's always a young kid," she said. "It's not like an older person who maybe had a registered gun and got into a scuffle."

Marin decided to get proactive, reaching out to advocacy groups. She found herself in contact with the Bronx chapter of New Yorkers Against Gun Violence, a statewide group that seeks to reduce gun-related deaths through education and lobbying efforts.

When she learned there wasn't an active chapter in Westchester, she made activating one the first goal.

But it doesn't end there. Marin said she also hopes to organize a fundraiser and community "family day" on July 22, which would have been Santos' 20th birthday.

Some of Santos' friends at the University of New Haven also have expressed support for a scholarship in her name.

"Gisela is just an inspiration," said Kuhls, the director of New Yorkers Against Gun Violence.

"She's somebody who has experienced one of the most painful things that can happen to a person in losing her only child to gun violence," Kuhls said. "But out of her emotional agony, she has decided to reach out and help others."