

Fresno girl, 9, dies as innocent victim in gang drive-by gunfire

By Jim Guy

Janessa Ramirez SPECIAL TO THE BEE

A 9-year-old girl who died after being hit by gunfire appears to be the latest victim of Fresno gang violence, police Chief Jerry Dyer said Monday.

Janessa Ramirez, a fourth grade student at Steinbeck Elementary School, was an innocent victim of an exchange of gunfire between at least two people about 8:40 p.m. Sunday near Marks and Clinton avenues.

Dyer, visibly upset by the child's death, responded tersely when asked how he was doing as he walked up to a news conference held at the scene.

"Terrible," he said.

The chief said his department would "spare no resources" to find the people responsible for Janessa's death.

"We will put as many investigators as we need on this case to bring some kind of justice to this family," Dyer said, adding there were a number of people in the area when gunfire broke out. He urged those people to contact police and tell detectives what they know.

Dyer also said there are about 20 surveillance cameras owned by businesses in the area and that investigators are checking all of them.

Janessa died after going with her mother to a liquor store at the northeast corner of the intersection to cash lottery tickets, Dyer said. Outside the store, they recognized friends at a laundry located in the same strip mall and went to chat with them. That's when two volleys of gunfire erupted about 300 yards northeast. A round from the second volley struck Janessa on the abdomen.

The child told her mother her stomach was burning and she fell to the ground, Dyer said. She was rushed to Community Regional Medical Center, where she died at 9:27 p.m.

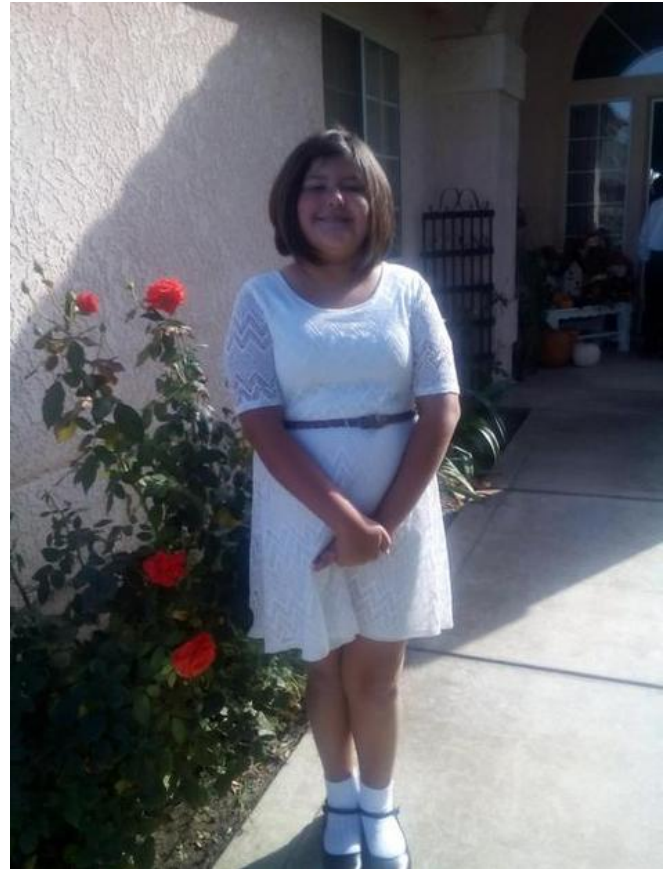
Two vehicles, one black and one white, sped south on Marks Avenue and then west on Clinton Avenue.

"We have a mother who lost her baby girl," the chief said. "I talked to her on the phone. She is hurting. We need courageous people to come forward and solve this senseless act of violence.

"I am so fed up with gang violence in our city. We have lost an innocent child that was struck by an errant bullet. I am asking those involved to come forward, but I don't expect them to do that because they are cowards."

Janessa's grandfather, Frank Posas, remained at the scene Monday morning.

"I just pray for officers to find out who did this," he said. "They took the life of a precious little girl. We want justice



done.

“She had a big heart,” he said of Janessa. “Everybody loved her, and she loved everybody.”

Monday night, family and friends remembered Janessa as they gathered outside the central Fresno laundromat where she was shot. Just outside the laundromat, mourners had placed a votive candle, a stuffed bear and a couple of paper signs pleading for justice for Janessa.

“She was lovely and kind and sweet ... always had everybody laughing,” cousin Cynthia Aguilar, said.

Joann Deleon, whose brother is married to Janessa’s aunt, was talking with Janessa and her mother outside Fresno Wash Station when the girl was hit by a ricocheted bullet. Deleon’s son ran inside the laundromat and called police while Janessa’s mother tried to keep her daughter calm as they waited for the ambulance to arrive.

Janessa’s mother “didn’t break down, not once,” Deleon said.

Deleon said she tried to pray with Janessa, whose lips turned blue as the color drained out of her face. Despite having trouble breathing, Janessa managed to tell her mother she loved her just before she was taken to Community Regional Medical Center, where she died about an hour later, Deleon said.

Janessa “was very well liked, very well known by students and staff,” said Steinbeck Elementary Principal Tami Boatright.

School was out Monday for Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday, but Boatright said she had been in touch with Janessa’s mother and with district staff and the chaplain to set up support for staff and students on the return to school Tuesday.

Janessa was a member of the school’s dance team and in the choir, Boatright said. “And on Friday, she was scheduled to receive for her classroom, the Most Improved Reader Award. She was just really excelling and thriving and doing well.”

Anyone with information is asked to call Crime Stoppers at (559) 498-STOP, where a reward leading to an arrest has been increased to \$5,000.

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