

Hundreds mourn Fresno shooting victim Janessa

By Carmen George

A memorial service for Janessa Ramirez was held at Cornerstone Church Saturday. THEFRESNOBEE

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Report a tip: Anyone with information about the shooting that killed Janessa Ramirez is asked to contact Fresno police detective Adrian Alvarez at (559) 621-2445 or Crime Stoppers at (559) 498-STOP.

Support the family: The family has set up an online account through Go Fund Me (<http://www.gofundme.com/kiemdk>) seeking help with funeral expenses. By 7:15 p.m. Saturday, the account had passed its \$16,000 goal and stood at \$17,677.

Give to the reward fund: Anyone wishing to donate to the Crime Stoppers Reward Fund can contact Fresno police Lt. Joe Gomez at (559) 621-2751.

Hours before 9-year-old Janessa Ramirez was shot and killed in Fresno, she was sitting in a church pew, smiling.

Of that smile, Pastor Douglas Knox Jr. recalled, "You can't even fathom how beautiful it is."

It was one of the few times the pastor's voice softened and cracked while delivering an impassioned eulogy Saturday morning during Janessa's memorial service at Cornerstone Church in downtown Fresno. Knox's booming voice lowered again as he remembered rushing to Janessa's hospital bed the night she died.

He told a crowd of more than 500 people that Janessa's death "has unnerved this city" and that in this "perilous" time, we need to "share love with each other."

Janessa was killed Sunday, caught in the crossfire of a gang dispute in the area of Clinton and Marks avenues, west of Highway 99. Standing in front of a laundromat with her mother, Janessa was struck by a stray round fired from several hundred yards away, police said.

Fresno police are still searching for suspects in her killing and are asking for more tips from the public. Chief Jerry Dyer, who attended Janessa's memorial service, said afterward he remains optimistic that police will be able to arrest those responsible for her death. He said many of the tips have a "consistent theme," which has allowed detectives to focus their investigation more narrowly. A reward of \$22,500 is available for information leading to an arrest.

Janessa was recalled Saturday by her family as a happy child who loved God "very much." Although just a fourth-grader at Steinbeck Elementary School, she was a nursery youth leader at her church, First Galilee Missionary Baptist, and spent a lot of time playing with and reading to young children about God.

Janessa also loved to dance and sing, a love reflected in three songs performed by her church's choir. During one song — at the urging of a singer who knew Janessa loved to praise God — nearly everyone in the packed church was standing and clapping along to a joyful "Hallelujah."

A resolution passed by First Galilee Missionary Baptist called her a "church baby and a delight to every member" whose life was like a "beautiful sunset."

And Janessa was a "hugger." "You did not have a good hug until you experienced one of her full-body Teddy bear hugs," said aunt Roxanna Banuelos, who read her obituary.

Nancy Alejandrez, Janessa's day care provider for the past four years, said Janessa welcomed new children at the day care, and "every time she walked in, she would walk in with a smile."

A photo slide show showed that smiling face again and again: Janessa's head poking above the surface of a swimming pool while riding an inflatable noodle; her arms wrapped around her mother; poised happily before birthday cakes; and flashing a peace sign.

Ray Moran, who described himself as Janessa's "favorite uncle," said Fresno has a "crack in it" — drive-by shootings, gang violence, drugs and sex trafficking.

But fixing that crack is not just a police responsibility, he said. There are too many "fatherless homes," Moran said, and "it's up to the men in this city" to help raise their children well and by sharing positive teachings in the Bible — a comment met with loud applause.

Dyer walked directly ahead of Janessa's casket as it was carried out of the church early Saturday afternoon. As her body was placed into a vehicle to be escorted to Saint Peters Cemetery in an honorary motorcade, Dyer stood nearby, his eyes red from tears.

Before she was buried, Janessa's mother and grandparents stood together beside her grave holding a white dove that they released into the sky.

Of Saturday's services, Dyer said emotionally, "I have really mixed feelings. I'm happy for the family, that they have a faith in Christ and they know Janessa is in a better place. But at the same time I hurt, by the fact that this happened in our community when it didn't have to happen.

"We just need to do so much more in the police department, so much more in the community, the churches, the parents, the teachers, to make sure this doesn't happen again. And if we can do that, then Janessa's death was not in vain."

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