

Teens build altar in memory of slain 14-year-old

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Dad Jose Barrera, right, speaks of his son while stepmother Leticia Marques looks on during a gathering for Kevin Barrera at RYSE in Richmond, Calif. on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2009. Barrera, 14, was shot to death in North Richmond last weekend. (Dean Coppola/Staff)

Silence infiltrated, thick and shroud-like. No words left for the death of a 14-year-old.

The RYSE Center on 41st Street in Richmond looked like a carousel decorated for a wake, with bright murals and flickering votive candles, revolutionary sloganeering and Popsicle-stick crosses.

Teenagers sprawled on sofas, and a discussion about mortality.

"All you kids who are Kevin's age, please help us. Please help your brothers and sisters, because they are looking for kids your age. They are taking our kids," a teary Leticia Marquez told a standing crowd Thursday night. "This age is the right time for bad people to take our sons from us."

Marquez got a call Aug. 15 about her stepson, Kevin Barrera. Passers-by found him beside railroad tracks about 7 that morning, shot to death. They held the service Friday.

But not before his peers gathered for a more organic memorial, at a youth center where the incoming high school freshman showed interest in the past month, perhaps life-changing interest had he survived long enough to reap its benefits.

"I don't know the right words to say how I feel," rasped father Kevin's father, Jose Barrera, unaccustomed to speaking while crying. "My heart is really broke."



Dad Jose Barrera, right, wipes away tears while speaking of his son while stepmother Leticia Marques looks on during a gathering for Kevin Barrera at RYSE in Richmond, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2009. Berrera, 14, was shot to death in North Richmond last weekend. (Dean Coppola/Staff)

The youth center lacks a policy manual for handling such crises and won't write one any time soon, though Barrera is not the program's first homicide victim since RYSE formally opened this building last year.



RYSE staff member Carvonna Franklin, left, consoles Nalee Sampalan in front of an altar during a gathering for Kevin Barrera at RYSE in Richmond, Calif., on Thursday, Aug. 20, 2009. Berrera, 14, was shot to death in North Richmond last weekend. Sampalan had many family members and friends names and pictures represented on the altar. (Dean Coppola/Staff)

Such a concession would clash wildly with the program's purpose: To shelter, engage and empower teens in western Contra Costa County, a demographic squarely in the crosshairs of the region's street violence, and also the public's apprehensions about it and its causes. RYSE helps channel adolescent passion and energy to constructive ends: community building.

Kevin arrived only about a month ago, via Community Health for Asian Americans, a partner program in the building that provides mental health and substance abuse counseling among its diverse services for local youth. Kevin needed services; already he was no stranger to Richmond police.

But the point is, RYSE co-director Kimberly Aceves said, he made it to the program. "Nobody was making him come to RYSE," she said. "That's something he was doing because he wanted to do it."

Kevin died the night of Friday, Aug. 14, on a well-trodden footpath that crosses the railroad tracks that separate North Richmond from San Pablo. He spent the evening with family members at a house in

North Richmond, police said, but left on foot around midnight after receiving some phone calls.

A passer-by found his body about 7 a.m. Aug. 15. Detectives believe he died where he fell before dawn, in an open area away from houses.

Barrera became Richmond's 33rd homicide victim of 2009, and its eighth younger than 18.

The makeshift altar became a first for RYSE, full of candles and crosses and little notes. People taped photos over the murals, not just of Kevin but of many who died violently over the years in Richmond.

And in a building designed for teenagers, Leticia Marquez had her say.

"They are looking for kids who are Kevin's age, because at that age, kids think everyone else is right. They don't think their mothers and fathers are right," Marquez said. "They don't realize what they did. They don't realize how painful it is."

How to help

Kevin Barrera's family has established a memorial fund to help with funeral costs. Anyone wishing to donate to the Kevin Barrera Fund can bring or mail checks to Bank of America, 3100 Hilltop Drive, Richmond 94806.

Richmond police ask anyone with information about the Aug. 15 shooting death of Kevin Barrera to call Detective Eric Haupt at 510-620-6622 or the anonymous tip line at 510-232-TIPS (8477). The department offers a \$10,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of his killer.