

Coalition helps those left behind

By Anna Starnes
Staff Writer

The Villatoros' living room presents a typical family gathering with kids and adults laughing with one another while lounging on plush, comfy couches. The animated discussions are undercut, however, by solemn reminiscing about a missing family member. Brother to some in the room and a father to others, Johnny Danilo Villatoro was killed in December.

Pictures of Villatoro cover a nearby table, and his 10-year-old daughter Nicoll clutches one of them. To find solace, the Villatoro family works with a nonprofit, the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham. Marcia Owen, the coalition director, has been accepted into this resilient family as she sits on the floor, cooing over Villatoro's 5-month-old son.

"I am very thankful for Marcia because she is really attentive and here for us, helping us with everything," said José Villatoro, Johnny Villatoro's brother. "There are a lot of bad people in the world that have bad hearts. Even though we aren't family, Marcia is present in our moments here."

The religious coalition, founded in 1992, helps families of all faiths who are affected by homicide. Owen met the family at a vigil the coalition held for Johnny Villatoro and other victims.

Full of enthusiasm and passion for her work, Owen jokes loudly with the Villatoro family. She also offers many kind words and hugs as she counsels. Another volunteer, Gina Perryman, often translates Owen's words from English to Spanish for some of the family members.

"In 1997, we began having vigils for families of homicide victims so that we could love them and to honor those that we have lost," Owen said. "One of the most terrible things in the world is to be indifferent to suffering. And the people who are being killed in Durham are our brothers and sisters."

Johnny Villatoro, 35, was shot and killed in December when he gave three young adults a ride in his car in Durham. Police have charged a 12-year-old, a 14-year-old and a 16-year-old



Nicoll Villatoro clutches a photo of her father, Johnny Danilo Villatoro, who was a victim of a homicide last December. (Staff photo by Anna Starnes)

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To learn more about the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham, its events and who it helps, visit:
www.nonviolentedurham.org

with his death. Villatoro did not know the accused.

"It really hurts what teens, little kids and adults can do to men that have not done anything bad to the country or to people that are honest, that are good to the family and that make wise choices," Nicoll said.

Owen said that in January the coalition introduced a new group called Circles of Hope and Healing for loved ones of homicide victims. In the circle, people come together to understand their suffering and share their experiences as they feel comfortable. A trained circle keeper or counselor monitors the healing process.

The program, made possible by a grant from Doing Good in the Neighborhood Community Care Fund, meets on the first and third Thursday of every month at Shepherd's House

United Methodist Church at 6 p.m. It is open to all.

A dinner is provided before each circle session by CORE Catering. Calling CORE the best catering company in Durham, Owen said they also make extra food during the week for coalition volunteers to bring to the homes of families that have lost relatives.

"I'm Methodist, and you can't go to someone without food, whether you have babies, or you die, or you graduate," Owen said, laughing. "Food means I love you."

Francisco Villatoro, 23, said that he has appreciated the support from Marcia and the coalition. The death of his brother is still so recent that it hasn't entirely sunk in.

"My brain is not letting me realize that it's real, but it is a fact," Villatoro said. "I don't know why it happened, and I can't understand how this could happen in the world."

Villatoro said his brother was the first in their family to travel to the United States as a legal immigrant from Honduras. He worked to purchase the Durham house the family currently lives in.

"When my brother first came here, he suffered living in 15 different places,"

Villatoro said. “He didn’t have any support here. We had him as support when we came here.”

Villatoro described his brother as a strong person and a good example to live by, explaining that no one in the family smokes or drinks because he did not do those things.

“If those three kids knew him,” Nicoll said, “they would have never done what they did.”

Owen said the Villatoros should remember they are not alone.

“There is no escaping our love,” she said. “We believe that the only response to this immeasurable suffering is God’s love. It makes me sad to think about Johnny.”

Owen added that the coalition also helps families like the Villatoros navigate the court system, which she said is difficult while people are grieving. A volunteer is present at all court hearings to take notes and offer guidance.

“Families are immediately thrust into the court system and that is very hard,” Owen said. “With the Villatoro family, it was especially wonderful and such a gift that they let us in and let us join them at the bond hearings and the court mess.”

The coalition volunteers do not end their support at the families of homicide victims. Through a year-long partnership, the coalition’s Reconciliation and Reentry Ministry helps people



Nicoll Villatoro, 10, proudly shows off her father’s hats. Johnny Villatoro, 35, enjoyed collecting the accessory. (Staff photo by Anna Starnes)

returning from prison acclimate to a normal life. The ministry leaders realized that people returning from prison need help getting over their past so that they won’t repeat it.

“We build relationships between community, offenders and victims, recognizing that all the divisions we create

are illusions,” Owen said. “That has been my experience in the coalition, watching my assumptions explode into nothingness so that I can love.”

Quotes from Francisco and José Villatoro appear as translated by Gina Perryman, a volunteer for the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham.

