

National Crime Victims' Rights Week — how would you help?

The young woman pleaded with dispatch that horrific day to help save her life as she lay bleeding from gunshot wounds to her leg, neck and shoulder. Juan Lopez-Leyva, a man she barely knew, fired at her as she ran from him inside her own apartment. Following the shots, she fell to the floor and knew instantly she was paralyzed. Her roommate found her shortly after and called 911, placing the phone next to her head as she lay dying. She did not know that her terrified pleas to dispatch would later be played in court at the trial of her attackers. She also could not know that she *would* survive, only to face a very different future, now paralyzed from the neck down.

Astonishingly, Lopez-Leyva and his accomplice, Juan Sanchez-Ramirez, shot her over a lost wallet and phone that they had left behind the night before. They had gone to the victim's apartment because they believed she had these items, a mistaken belief that fueled a level of violence most of us will hopefully never experience. The fact was, she didn't have the phone or the wallet, but she knew the attackers and that helped lead to their arrest and ultimate prosecution on attempted murder, mayhem and deadly weapon charges. Yet, despite overwhelming evidence of guilt, the two attackers were released on bail, pleaded not guilty, and forced the case to a jury trial. This required the victim, who was already facing unthinkable physical and emotional obstacles, to endure more suffering.

The complex criminal justice process is a challenging journey for any crime victim. They experience a system weighted heavily in favor of the accused, but the members of my office's prosecution team were determined to do all they could to help her through this unfortunate reality.

This week is National Crime Victims' Rights Week, a program that for 40 years has challenged the nation to confront and remove barriers to full justice for victims of crimes. This year's theme, "How Would You Help? Options, Services, and Hope for Crime Victim Survivors," asks all of us — friends, family members, neighbors, colleagues, community leaders, victim service providers, criminal justice practitioners and health professionals — how we can help crime victims. The theme is particularly appropriate when considering the catastrophic circumstances of this case.

Throughout it, our prosecutor, victim advocate and investigator remained committed to securing justice for this victim, whose bravery and determination left them in awe.

While preparing for trial, the prosecution team spent many hours at the victim's bedside, explaining the court process, reviewing statements and doing all they could to prepare her for the trauma of reliving the crime through testimony. Tears ran down her face as she recalled the night these men tried to end her life. Unable to move her arms, she had to ask for help to wipe the tears from her eyes. The defendants' gang affiliations also meant that many witnesses were reluctant to testify, and extra efforts were made to ensure that they appeared in court. Additional steps were even taken to allow the victim to testify from a location closer to her hospital, since her badly injured body could not tolerate time out of bed and upright in a wheelchair. A Zoom hearing was opened from the courtroom so she could watch other parts of the trial from her care facility.

After weeks of preparation, the jury trial commenced and lasted six days. At its conclusion, the jury found the defendants guilty of all counts — six felonies each. They face decades in prison and will be sentenced, fittingly, this week.

The night the trial concluded, the prosecution team drove to the woman's care facility to share the results in person with the victim and her family. She was overjoyed, stating that she had appreciated how the prosecutor turned the camera broadcasting the Zoom feed just in time for her to watch the bailiffs place handcuffs on the defendants after the verdicts were read. She also shared that after being in her powerchair for the time it took to testify, she realized that her body could tolerate longer periods of time being mobile in her powerchair and out of her bed. Her gratitude for these small gestures were a humbling gift to the team.

This young woman is an inspiration and a survivor. With grace, humility and grit, she continues to overcome challenges, including the harrowing journey through the criminal justice system that all victims of crime must navigate. This week, ask yourself: "How can I help victims of crime?" Then act on it! As a community, it is incumbent upon us to commit to doing our best in advancing the victims' rights movement. We should support changes to our criminal justice system that prioritize crime victims and public safety over those that protect criminals.

The reality of today is that more and more resources are being directed toward offenders than to victims. I can think of no better motivation to spur support for victims of crime than the courage and dedication displayed in this case.