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Hundreds Gather for Annual Candlelight Vigil to Memorialize Lives Lost

Community leaders, supporters, survivors call for an end to teen dating violence

TUSTIN, Calif., Feb. 11, 2015 – The statistics say it all – and they're not only staggering, but climbing. One out of every three adolescents in the U.S. is a victim of physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse at the hands of a dating partner. [Laura's House](#), a nonprofit devoted to ending the cycle of domestic violence for everyone, including teens, held its fifth annual Teen Vigil on Feb. 6 at the OC Sheriff Regional Training Academy in Tustin to help kick off [National Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month](#). The Vigil honors teens killed by their abusers and all those affected by teen dating abuse.

AP Guerrero was only 18 when he suffered verbal, emotional, physiological and financial abuse inflicted by his girlfriend. She monitored and criticized him incessantly. She played cruel mind games. She willfully and maliciously tricked him. Fortunately, after months of psychological abuse, he was able to flee his abusive relationship. But, as many others still find themselves trapped in a cycle of abuse, Guerrero shared his story alongside his mother, teen survivors and nearly 650 event supporters to celebrate survivors of teen dating violence – and remember those who lost their lives.

The Vigil opened with remarks from Margaret Bayston, executive director of Laura's House and Marissa C. Presley, the organization's prevention and education specialist who unveiled new service components to the nonprofit's [H.E.A.R.T. \(Healthy Emotions and Attitudes in Relationships for Teens\) program](#). The new elements, which advance the nonprofit's commitment to preventing teen dating violence across the nation, include:

- **Heart Chat:** provides support to those currently in abuse relationships by connecting them to experienced domestic violence advocates who can answer questions, provide safety planning tips, and connect teens with a professional therapist, if necessary.
- **Heart Health Line:** provides teens with convenient counseling and education services through a live video stream or by phone. Teens can email heartchat@laurashouse.org for information.

"It is remarkable to see how much our Candlelight Vigil has grown over the years," said Presley. "Our goal is to encourage continued conversations year-round between families and the community because prevention and education are keys to healthy teen relationships."

Event speakers included:

- Laura's House Board Member [Dr. Jill Murray](#), a nationally recognized expert, sought-after speaker, and best-selling author on teen dating abuse. Murray spoke about her dedication to ending the cycle of violence, and commended the nonprofit for its pioneering work to prevent, and end, teen dating abuse.

- Orange County Deputy Sheriff Rebecca Reger, who discussed the importance of educating teens on dating violence and shared a success story from the nonprofit's collaboration with the Sheriff Department's Gang Reduction Intervention Partnership (GRIP).

During the Candlelight Vigil, Laura's House presented [Wet Seal](#) with a Corporate Supporter Award for its efforts to raise awareness about teen dating abuse and elevate the nonprofit's brand nationwide by raising more than \$15,000 for Laura's House. Lisa Gaspar from San Clemente High School was honored with a "Teachers Together to End Dating Abuse" award for her vital role in educating youth, and helping connect them to the emergency hotline for resources and help.

The event concluded with teens declaring their survivorship and all attendees lighting candles to memorialize [Jacque Villagomez](#), a teen who lost her life to dating violence in 2008 and serves as the inspiration behind the event.

Event attendees were encouraged to "take a stand" against dating abuse by taking the pledge to be advocates for Laura's House. The nonprofit also launched a campaign to collect donations to support its H.E.A.R.T. program. To help the nonprofit exceed its \$5,000 fundraising goal, visit <http://laurashouse-1844.wedid.it/> throughout February. For information about Laura's House and its teen prevention program, visit <http://www.laurashouse.org/lhteen/>.

About Laura's House

The mission of Laura's House is to change the social beliefs, attitudes and the behaviors that perpetuate domestic violence while creating a safe space to empower individuals and families affected by abuse.

For more than 20 years, Laura's House has served those whose lives have been affected by domestic violence. Over the past two decades, Laura's House has provided shelter and support services to more than 4,000 battered women and children and counseling, life skills education and legal assistance to nearly 50,000 people. Connect with Laura's House on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) and [YouTube](#).

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