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Laura's House Annual Candlelight Vigil Shows H.E.A.R.T.

Community leaders, supporters, survivors honor victims of teen dating violence

TUSTIN, Calif. Feb. 1, 2016 – Teen dating violence has long been a hidden epidemic, plaguing 1 in 3 Orange County adolescents. In a powerful tribute Friday, [Laura's House](#), a nonprofit devoted to ending the cycle of domestic violence for everyone, including teens, shed more light on this heartbreaking issue at its sixth annual Candlelight Vigil. The event was held at the Orange County Sheriff's Regional Training Academy in Tustin to commence [National Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month](#).

Launched in 2010 to memorialize [Jacque Villagomez](#), a vibrant 19-year-old who was beaten to death by her boyfriend in 2008, the Vigil honors teens killed by their abusers and educates the public on the dangers of unhealthy teen relationships.

Laura's House Executive Director Margaret Bayston opened the event with remarks about why Laura's House created the [H.E.A.R.T. \(Healthy Emotions and Attitudes in Relationships Today\) program](#), an interactive and educational campaign, which works to end teen dating abuse in Orange County. More than 600 teens, parents and educators attended.

"When we educate and empower our youth with knowledge, we are able to stop the cycle of domestic cycle before it even begins," said Bayston. "H.E.A.R.T. continues to grow as a model that works for teens, and many more students are learning how to date safely and be in healthy relationships."

Recognizable to many in attendance and to thousands of school-aged students participating in H.E.A.R.T. workshops, Laura's House Prevention Education Specialists Marissa C. Presley and Jennifer Ponce used the Vigil to reinforce the compelling messages typically delivered in schools around the county. Together, the two have reached nearly 10,000 Orange County students by visiting 180 classrooms.

"While many teens can easily identify a bully, it is much more difficult to recognize an abuser," said Presley. "Our H.E.A.R.T. curriculum teaches students how to identify potential abusers, and educates them about the cycle of violence, red flags and how to safely get out of an unhealthy relationship."

In recognition of local champions who have helped put a stop to teen dating abuse, Laura's House presented El Toro High School teachers Monett Engel, Gwen Harris and Athletic Director Robert Frith with the Teachers Together to End Dating Abuse Award, which is an especially meaningful tribute honoring Villagomez' alma mater.

Laura's House also bestowed Tilly Levine, co-founder of clothing retailer [Tilly's](#), with its Outstanding Community Leader award for her extraordinary commitment to local youth. Levine



created the Tilly's Life Center to empower teens with a positive mindset and enable them to effectively cope with crisis, face adversity and make tough decisions.

The evening concluded with a special performance and speech by 17-year-old singer-song writer-musician [Sidney Bowen](#), who shared her sister's story of teen dating violence. Attendees lit candles as Bowen sang a moving song she wrote about dating the wrong person. Attendees also were encouraged to pledge to end teen dating violence, to become advocates for Laura's House and to promote H.E.A.R.T. at their schools.

For teens in need of support, Laura's House offers HEART Health and HEART Chat – unique communication and counseling services aimed at helping adolescents in unhealthy relationships. 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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