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# ANGUISH WRACKS FAMILY'S KIN - PUZZLED RELATIVES IN TEXAS SEEK ANSWERS TO TURNPIKE SLAYINGS

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By ALLYSON BIRD, Palm Beach Post Staff Writer   October 16, 2006   Publication: Palm Beach Post, The (FL)   Page: 1A   Word Count: 1080

In this transient border town of all-night tortilla stands and \$3 used tires, people who knew Yessica Guerrero Escobedo remembered her for her chocolate-covered strawberries. She made them for family, and she sold them at stores around town. She brought them to her co-workers in the jewelry department at JCPenney to say goodbye when she left for Florida.

For someone who died so horrifically, so mysteriously -- shot to death beside her husband, cradling her children, along Florida's Turnpike in Port St. Lucie early Friday morning -- she lived gently, simply.

She moved to Greenacres several months ago. Her husband, 28-year-old Jose Luis Escobedo, settled in months earlier and planned to restore cars and bring them back to Brownsville, at the Mexican border, to sell.

But Yessica, 25, and their children, Luis Julian, 4, and Luis Damian, 3, stayed in Brownsville with her father until her husband found a home for them.

A metal sign rests in the front window of her father's house, an angel sitting atop the words "Guerrero Family." Inside, an enameled Virgin Mary plaque looks over the faded green walls of the living room. A National Guard portrait of Yessica's father in 1973 hangs nearby.

Felipe Guerrero holds on to the memories of his daughter's childhood: drawers full of snapshots and trophies for soccer, swimming and volleyball. Sunday afternoon, he flipped through a tattered photo album chronicling her life: A 6-year-old with bangs blowing out birthday candles. A girl with caramel skin receiving her First Communion. A young woman and her cousin, both dressed in white flowing gowns their grandmother bought them for their quinceanera party.

"We lived like we did, but she had everything," said Guerrero, a bricklayer weakened by diabetes. "The only time I lost her is when she got married."

Family friend Carlos Waldo knocked on Guerrero's door Sunday afternoon, his Dallas Cowboys baseball cap in his hand and his wife, Eva, close behind. Their daughter played kickball with Yessica years ago.

"My sentiments from my family to yours," Carlos Waldo said, remembering with Guerrero the days when the girls would dance around his home.

The Waldos heard rumors that Jose Escobedo left for Florida to escape a drug problem. Guerrero could not explain his son-in-law's move and said many people from Brownsville move to Florida.

His daughter had never been outside of Texas. Thumbing through memorabilia, he said over and over, "I really didn't want her to leave."

Across town, Yessica's extended family said it was only a temporary move, that the couple wanted to bring Jose's cars back to the border and put their 4-year-old son in prekindergarten.

Yessica and the boys left on Mother's Day, presenting her mom with perfume at the airport. She told her she'd be back soon.

Gathered with a dozen family members in a suburban Brownsville living room Sunday afternoon, Yessica's aunt Monica Moreno wondered whether the killers worried Yessica would return to Brownsville.

"I think that the people that did this thought she was coming home the next day," Moreno said.

But she didn't know why anyone would target Yessica. She lived for her family.

As a child, Yessica instinctively yanked a younger cousin by the hair out of an aunt's pool when he began sinking to the bottom, unable to float. She handled her own children calmly, patiently when no one else could.

Her mother had the same easygoing attitude. Yessica's family calls her Jessica, the name her parents chose for her.

But everyone who mattered knew what to call her, so her mother let it go.

Yessica took classes in medical billing but then couldn't find a job in that field. JCPenney hired her as a seasonal employee last Christmas, but then kept her on until she put in her two weeks' notice. "We were sad to see her go, but she said she had to follow her husband," co-worker Rosa Torres said Sunday.

"Everything was about her children," she said. "That's why she got the part-time job," instead of one requiring her to work all day.

Yessica's family believes in bad luck. The murders happened on Friday the 13th. Her cousin died three years ago on a Friday the 13th. Her grandmother died two years ago on June 13th. Two other family members were in a car accident one Nov. 13.

They said Yessica's husband hunted for the family's Thanksgiving dinner each year and dressed up every Halloween. The Escobedos and Guerreros spent Easters together.

"They died as a family, what they were," Moreno said. Her voice cracked: "We're just asking why: Why the kids?"

A member of Jose Escobedo's family who lives in Brownsville said she had spoken with him Thursday night, just hours before his death. She said he had not mentioned that anyone was in the house with him and his family or that he had any plans to go anywhere that night. She said he was in a good mood when she spoke to him and there was no reason to believe he was in any trouble.

Yessica's family had tried to contact her, too.

Yessica had 15-year-old and 28-year-old brothers. Her youngest brother tried to call her Thursday night at about 11 p.m. to tell her about his football game.

Authorities said the family was murdered between 10 p.m. Thursday and 6 a.m. Friday.

Yessica, who always had time for her family, never answered her brother's call.

Her aunt said the family hopes for help catching the killer -- from people in Florida, from a state the Guerreros have never seen.

Staff writer John Lantigua and staff researchers Angelica Cortez and Sammy Alzofon

contributed to this report.

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1. (C) VADA MOSSAVAT/Staff Photographer Lisa Salazar and Felipe Guerrero gather with relatives in Brownsville, Texas Sunday to mourn Yessica Guerrero, who was killed with her husband and sons. 2. (C) PHOTO COURTESY OF ST. LUCIE COUNTY SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT The bodies of Jose and Yessica Escobedo and their sons, Luis Damian and Luis Julian, were found shot to death along Florida's Turnpike in Port St. Lucie. VADA MOSSAVAT/Staff Photographer 3. (B&W) Felipe Guerrero looks at photos of his daughter, Yessica Guerrero Escobedo, whose body was found with her family Friday. Her family said her move from Texas to Florida was supposed to be only temporary. 4. (B&W) Tears spill onto the cheeks of Lupita Garcia, one of Yessica Guerrero Escobedo's relatives mourning her death in Brownsville, Texas. 5. (B&W) Family photo Felipe Guerrero says he doesn't know why his daughter Yessica and her family moved from Texas to Greenacres this year. PHOTO (2 C & 3 B&W)

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