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Gone too soon

Joe Ferullo | Jul. 28, 2009 NCR Today

I didn?t know Lily Burk, never met her walking through our neighborhood. But when the 17-year old high school senior was murdered last Friday while running an errand for her mother, that death shook my home to its very walls.

This past Saturday, we were invited to the home of some friends, to view native Mexican arts and crafts on display and for sale -- proceeds were to go to a cooperative of women working in the remote and poverty-stricken Chiapas region of southern Mexico, the poorest part of a poor country.

The items had been brought back by a group of teenagers from a local private school. The students make an annual trip to Chiapas, to help the women?s group fix homes and build their small businesses.

In some ways, the gathering could have been the kind of Hollywood fundraiser that promotes snickers outside this town: a meeting of the comfortably middle class, doing what they do best -- shopping.

But when my wife and daughters and I arrived, none of the school kids were there, and the home was enveloped in an eerie quiet. The call, it turned out, had come just 20 minutes before. The body of their classmate Lily -- who went with them to Chiapas and had made plans to spend the rest of her summer helping the homeless in Los Angeles -- had just been found in her car in downtown Los Angeles. She?d been missing since the day before, when her mother -- an attorney and professor -- had asked her to pick up some test papers at her law school office on Wilshire Boulevard.

Lily?s death was picked up the next day [1] by the Los Angeles Times -- the kind of story that puts a young face and a promising life on the type of violent crime that has been creeping back into the urban landscape since the economy collapsed last fall.

Then, with Monday?s reports came the inevitable layer of irony [2] -- Lily Burk, who flew to Mexico to help the poor, who was to spend her summer with the homeless in this town, was apparently killed by a homeless man who got into her car and grabbed her money. An arrest was made late in the day.

Back at my friend?s home on Saturday, little of this was known yet -- just the shock of her death, the jolt to her young friends, the pain on the faces of parents that said simply: ?There but for the grace of God??

So we did the only thing we could do. We shopped. We looked over the items from Chiapas, paged through photos that students had taken there. We opened our wallets, unfolded our checkbooks, and gave our donations.

For the rest of the day, and each day since, my wife and I would catch each other?s eyes as we went about our life with our children -- we?d nod, we?d exhale, and we?d move on.

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Links:

[1] http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-burk27-2009jul27,0,3198482.story
[2] http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2009/07/arrest-made-in-slaying-of-lily-burk.html