

The Wayback Machine - https://web.archive.org/web/20160328150924/http://nyagv.org:80/faces-of-ny-gun-violence-jessica-santos-19/



legislative advocacy to reduce gun violence since 1993

New Yorkers Against Gun Violence

DONATE

JOIN



SEARCH

HOME	ABOUT	ISSUES	TAKE ACTION!	NEWS	EVENTS	RESOURCES	CONTACT US.
------	-------	--------	--------------	------	--------	-----------	-------------

Faces of NY Gun Violence: Jessica Santos, 19

Posted on Mar 23, 2016 • 3:57 PM

No Comments

If You Can Still Call It Life After Losing a Child: The Story of Jessica Santos and Gisela Marin

[jessica-santos](#)
Jessica Santos

On August 27, 2006 19-year-old Jessica Santos and her mother, Gisela, spent part of the day packing and running errands. The following morning they were to drive 60 miles from their home in Tarrytown, NY to New Haven, CT, where Jessica would begin her sophomore year as a criminal justice major at the University of New Haven. There wasn't too much to do to get ready for the trip — Jessica already had organized most of

the things she'd need ahead of time. She was excited to start the new school year and to see all of her friends again; she and her roommate, Celeste Hanley, had been planning to decorate their room in pink with zebra and cheetah accents.

At around 7 pm, Jessica remembered she had to pick up some things she'd left at her grandmother's house. After checking off that last errand, she decided to say goodbye to some friends who lived in the Yonkers area.

Gisela never liked the idea of her daughter going to Yonkers, where some neighborhoods have a high violent crime rate, but Jessica was fearless. Except for a couple of best friends from childhood, she never had a clique — she easily and willingly made friends with people from all walks of life.

It was on this same evening that 17-year-old Anthony Burton got into a rental car with three other men. As Jessica stood outside of the Beech Street Grocery, eating chips, drinking soda, and talking to friends, Burton came around the corner firing a .25 caliber semi-automatic handgun from the backseat. With six shots he pierced the deli awning, the wall, Jessica's car windshield, and her heart. As she fell to the ground, Burton and his friends drove away.

Jessica was the only person who got shot. She was pronounced dead at 10:57 p.m.

*"I still hear your voice when you sleep next to me/
I still feel your touch in my dreams/*

*Forgive me my weakness, but I don't know
why/ Without you it's hard to survive." —Cascada*

[Jessica, right, with a friend.](#)

[Jessica, right, with a friend.](#)

Become a Member

Take Action on Issues

DONATE

Celeste recalls arriving at the dorm room they were to share the following morning and seeing Jessica's name on the door. It was customary to decorate the doors to welcome students back. "I just remember my father and brother unpacking for me and I laid on my sheetless mattress just sobbing," Celeste wrote. "I ended up living in that dorm alone all semester until I moved."

While Celeste cried in an empty room, Burton was finally located by police. In a videotaped confession, he claimed he had been aiming at the grocery store sign under which Jessica and her friends were standing and that he "never meant to kill that girl."

Burton was convicted of one count of manslaughter in the second degree and one count of criminal possession of a weapon in the third degree. He was sentenced to the maximum five to 15 years for the manslaughter and the maximum seven years for gun possession. A month before he killed Jessica, he was arrested for selling drugs near an elementary school. His 4-year prison term for the drug charge was to precede his sentencing for Jessica's death.

Although the case was closed, there was never a satisfactory explanation for his crime. He may not have "meant" it, but his defense still rings hollow for Jessica's family and friends who believe Burton lacks all remorse.

"It took only one bullet to kill my beautiful granddaughter," wrote Nancy Marin in a victim statement to the court: "As she laid on a dirty street gasping for air, Anthony Burton went about his life."

[Jessica as a child.](#)

[Jessica as a child.](#)

Jessica's life had always been busy. Her grandmother described her as

WHY WE NEED NICHOLAS'S LAW:

M The Wayback Machine does not have this video archived.



SIGN THE PETITION

SUPPORT NICHOLAS'S LAW

STAND WITH US

email zip GO

TAKE ACTION!

LEARN ABOUT OUR EDUCATION WORK:

Jump to NYAGV Ed Fund

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:



"ambitious from a young age." She played softball, did cheerleading and dance, and was an excellent swimmer. Throughout high-school and up until her death, Jessica spent her weekends and vacations working as a lifeguard and swimming instructor. Her biggest desire, however, from around the age of 12, was to be a criminal investigator and work with forensics for the FBI.

Gisela recalls how Jessica's grandmother couldn't understand why her granddaughter would want to "work with dead people." But Jessica always went beyond the surface of things. "She said, 'Grandma, it's not just about the dead people. It's about finding out what happened and why it happened,'" Gisela says. "In nursery school, she was not the kid to take others' toys away. She was kind-hearted and inquisitive. She always wanted to know why and find the answer."

This trait carried over to her college friendships. If someone was in need, whether it was for advice on dealing with strict parents or curing a stomachache, Jessica tried to help. For Gisela, this meant answering many phone calls and instant messages throughout the day. Jessica valued her mother's opinion and always kept her in the loop of her social life. She came home every weekend, usually bringing friends with her.

Gisela is still close with these friends of her daughter's, some of whom call her "Mama G." She's attended their weddings and celebrated the births of their children, life milestones she'll never experience with her own child. She can't help but wonder what Jessica would be doing today. Would she be pursuing her dream? Would she be married or have babies? "I dream of her often, from when she was a toddler up until 8 years old," she says. "Sometimes I dream of her as she was at 19, and she's always in a hurry to go somewhere or to see someone."

[The "Jessica Room."](#)

The "Jessica Room."

Gisela calls her home office the "Jessica Room," because it contains photos of her daughter, mementos, and Jess's childhood dresser. Among all the pictures on the wall hangs a letter she wrote about being like a butterfly. She was so drawn to the insect she even got a

butterfly tattoo on her lower back. "I remember one day she was telling a friend from college: 'We have to be like the butterfly, we can't stay in a cocoon forever. We've got to transform and emerge.'"

Gisela didn't realize then that there would come a day when she would need to heed her daughter's advice.

"The day after we buried Jessica," she recalls, "I woke up and thought: 'Well, I can either get up and do something that's going to honor my daughter's memory or I can just lay in this bed and not get up and that's it.'" The fighter in her won, and by March 2007 she had [established a foundation in Jessica's name](#) that awards scholarships to students pursuing higher education.

In September 2015, less than 10 years after Jessica's murder, Burton was up for parole, sparking friends and family to write another round of victim statements. While they served a purpose – to convince the parole board to keep Burton behind bars – they also reawakened the fears of Jessica's loved ones.

In her victim's statement, Gisela wrote:

"[Burton's potential release] forces me to once again remember arriving at the hospital expecting to see my child injured but ALIVE, and instead hearing the words from the doctor saying, 'I'm sorry we did all we could but...' and all of the sudden the dread of the rest of the words and hearing nothing else but the anguished scream emanating from somewhere deep in my soul, feeling the room spinning and not having enough air to breathe. I felt as if had been punched so hard and stabbed in the heart – I felt as if I was also dying that very moment with my baby girl. I saw my daughter's lifeless body lying on the hospital bed and it became a harsh, cruel reality. It was final. That night I didn't "lose" my daughter, my daughter didn't die by choice – Anthony Burton took her life ... I will be sentenced to being apprehensive, always looking over my shoulder, knowing he is out there and fearful that he will shoot me or a family member."

The gun that Burton used was never found. Gisela isn't convinced that any particular gun law could have prevented her daughter's death, but she does think legislation such as [New York's restrictions on ammunition purchases](#) will help prevent a rise in future gun violence. Which is something those close to Jessica will always fear. In her victim impact statement, Jessica's best friend since birth, Jessica Fields, wrote:

"I can't imagine how she felt getting shot and laying on the ground taking her last breath. I have fears of that happening to me due to someone being so careless with disregard for human life. I have fear that when Anthony comes out he will do it again to someone else or try to hurt Jessica's family."

Fortunately, Burton's parole hearing was pushed back to September 2017 and Jessica's friends and family can breathe a bit easier. Today, ironically, Gisela works in Yonkers. Her office is far from the area where her daughter was killed, but it's still traumatic and uncomfortable. Life is forever changed. Though she has a close-knit family, including a husband and stepson, Gisela will always think about the what-ifs and the whys. There are no answers, of course, but there are signs. Sometimes while driving home on the Saw Mill Expressway, Jessica's favorite Cascada song, "Everytime We Touch" comes on. Gisela will turn up the volume and act as if her daughter is right there in the car with her. They still talk, it's just that the conversations have changed.

On the day of Jessica's funeral, her stepfather's niece caught a butterfly and brought it to Gisela, completely unaware of its significance. "She came up to me and said: 'There's this butterfly that won't leave me alone,'" recalls Gisela. "Maybe we should hold onto it and release it at the cemetery."

Gisela didn't think the butterfly would survive

[2016031595184751](#)

the hour-long church ceremony, but her niece was insistent and placed it in a bag from the funeral home. After the priest concluded the services, her niece handed her the bag.

"I opened it up and said: 'Bye, Jess. 'Till we meet again. Fly free, my butterfly.'

And I swear to God, this butterfly went straight up over her casket, circled three times and kept going straight up. It didn't fly away, it just lingered and went up. Now when people see a butterfly they tell me: 'Jessica came to visit me today.'"

To find out more about Jessica's foundation, visit RememberingJessica.com.

NYAGV thanks Dara Pettinelli for contributing this profile.

Tags: Dara Pettinelli, faces of ny gun violence, gisela marin, jessica santos, NYAGV, rememberingjessica.com

Previous post

In the Community: Gun Violence Forum in Troy, April 2

Next post

Join us March 30: Free Poughkeepsie Screening of "Making a Killing"

STAND WITH US

NYAGV₁ ON TWITTER

LIKE NYAGV ON FACEBOOK!

NYAGV EDUCATION FUND

Visit nyagvedfund.org for information about our 501(c)3 partner, NYAGV Education Fund.