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Inmates take responsibility for woman's shooting

November 22, 2009 By ZACHARY R. DOWDY zachary.dowdy@newsday.com



Inmates help raise money for victim

where



One by one, they apologized - for a crime they didn't commit.

Eight men in prison-issued uniforms sat around a table in the visiting room at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining on Friday and claimed a portion of responsibility for the July 1999, shooting that left then 19-year-old Amory Sepulveda paralyzed from the waist down.

It was an unusual kind of meeting between offender and victim, as none of them had pulled the trigger that launched the bullet into Sepulveda's spine, knocking her onto the pavement of Fulton Avenue in Hempstead that night.

None of these men were even there. In fact, the drive-by shooting that paralyzed Sepulveda remains unsolved.

But since the eight had been involved in other crimes - offenses including armed robbery and even murder - they felt they were responsible, in some way, for Sepulveda's personal pain and suffering.

"A lot of us helped create the environment where you got shot," said Thomas Edwards, 50, a Bronx native who waved his hand across the table to include his fellow inmates in a collective sweep of responsibility. "Somebody like you has the right to hold us accountable."

The eight men were among 80 Sing Sing inmates who helped raise \$3,000 on behalf of Sepulveda, who was a stranger to them two years ago.

The money they donated by using their prison commissary accounts, which contain funds they earn in prison jobs that pay just cents per hour, will go into a larger fund devoted to buying a van for Sepulveda to get around on her own.

She is now a junior at SUNY Old Westbury, studying to become a Spanish teacher for middle and high school students and to become a guidance counselor to help steer youth in positive directions.

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The men said Sepulveda's story was an inspiration.

"You helped give us a sense of purpose, a sense of meaning," said Rashan Smalls, 35, of Buffalo, another of the inmates. "You are, in fact, an angel."

Sepulveda has appeared on national television and has spoken to youngsters on Long Island and in New York City, admonishing them to make better choices, not to hang out in certain crowds, as she had done on the night she was shot.

"My goal is to at least reach one heart, one head, to just understand what the possibilities of gang life are," said Sepulveda, who has never been a gang member. "Usually they show you that you could end up in a cemetery or you could end up in jail. What about the ones that are disabled or left in the hospital? That was me."

Sergio Argueta, executive director of Struggling to Reunite Our New Generation, an anti-gang violence organization in Hempstead, said the men in Sing Sing learned of Sepulveda through links forged with Freeport Pride, a community-based organization, and STRONG, which launched a fundraising drive for her two years ago.

Through Freeport Pride, at-risk youth visited the inmates who were part of the prison's Youth Assistance Program, designed to alert teens to the dead-end they could look forward to if they pursued lives of crimes and violence.

Argueta said the eight inmates should also take responsibility for steering some of those teenagers away from lives of crime - and that others such as elected officials should step up to take more responsibility.

"You be our voices inside the walls and we'll be yours on the outside," he said, praising Sepulveda for being "one of the most effective tools for changing people's lives."

Donations may be sent to Freeport PRIDE, c/o Amory's Circle of Friends, 46 Pine St., Freeport, NY 11520.

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