

LI activist's passion hailed

Pols: Brentwood woman a powerful ally against gangs

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Evelyn Rodriguez represented a rare kind of public activist — a powerful combination of strength and passion driven by a profound personal loss.

The Brentwood woman, whose daughter was murdered in 2016, allegedly by MS-13 gang members, helped bring millions of dollars to Long Island to combat the gang she vowed to battle.

On Monday, public officials across Long Island recognized the legacy of Rodriguez, 50, who died Friday after being struck by a vehicle during a dispute that police say was not gang-related. They said that in meetings where they sought state and federal funding, her presence could make all the difference.

"Nobody talked about it, but everybody knew how important and how powerful it was to have her in the room," Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said. "Evelyn was a force. You could see it in those meetings. She was a warrior."

Nassau District Attorney Madeleine Singas called Rodriguez a "valiant partner" in the fight against MS-13.

Funds she successfully advocated for included \$18.5 million in state funds to expand programs to combat MS-13 gang recruitment.

That broke down to \$2 million to expand after-school sports, music and other programs for at-risk kids of Long Island; \$5 million to expand a jobs program; and \$4 million for a State Police team to work with the community to identify and respond to gang hot spots.

When U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions visited Central Islip in April 2017, Rodriguez met with him and added her voice to



Evelyn Rodriguez in 2016

DANIELLE FINKELSTEIN

A wake for Brentwood anti-gang activist Evelyn Rodriguez will be held Thursday from 2 to 9 p.m. at Michael J. Grant Funeral Home, 571 Suffolk Ave., Brentwood.

A funeral Mass for Rodriguez is scheduled for Friday at 9:45 a.m. at St. Anne's Roman Catholic Church, 88 Second Ave., Brentwood. Interment will follow at Queen of All Saints Cemetery, 115 Wheeler Rd., Central Islip.

Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone, Suffolk District Attorney Timothy Sini, Nassau District Attorney Madeline Singas and Rep. Peter King are among the dignitaries expected to attend Rodriguez's funeral.

those calling for more federal money for programming in schools and the community.

In October, federal officials announced Suffolk County would receive \$500,000 to fight MS-13.

Suffolk District Attorney Timothy Sini said Rodriguez also helped expand a program aimed at gang prevention in Brentwood and other towns.

"She harvested her traumatic experience and tragic loss to affect positive change," Sini said.

Few people who face tragedy can transform their grief into effective advocacy, said Meena Bose, a Hofstra University political science professor. When they do, they can profoundly affect an issue, she said.

"When we see someone in the public eye who's lost a loved one, it is a tremendous

example of personal sacrifice and service that resonates with everyone," Bose said.

Such people engender "a respect, a trust" from the public, she added.

Rodriguez paid a terrible price when her daughter Kayla Cuevas, 16, and her friend Nisa Mickens, 15, were slain. Then she stepped into the media spotlight to challenge the gang known for its brutality against enemies.

"It's tough," Rep. Peter King (R-Seaford) said. She was "in the eye of the storm," he said.

She handled herself well in the halls of power, he said. "She was able to get her point across without seeming to be sorry for herself or confrontational," King said.

She was best known for her work on the national stage. In the wake of her daughter's murder, she met with President Donald Trump and was a White House guest at his State of the Union address in January.

"Evelyn would not be silenced," said Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-Shirley), who attended a roundtable discussion with Rodriguez and Trump a few months back to discuss efforts to defeat MS-13.

Suffolk police continue to investigate her death Friday and offered no new details Monday. No charges have been filed against the driver, who police said hit Rodriguez during a "dispute" over the placement of a memorial for her daughter. Police say the woman, who police have not identified, started to drive away and struck Rodriguez.

At a Monday roundtable that discussed law enforcement cooperation against the gang threat in Riverhead, Zeldin led a moment of silence in Rodriguez's memory.

Suffolk Police Commissioner Geraldine Hart said Monday's session was "a great testament to her memory and our commitment to continue the fight against gangs here on Long Island," and that "we are using all the resources at our disposal and working together, which is really what Evelyn was all about."

With Nicole Fuller
and Víctor Manuel Ramos



River overflowed and flooded I-95 in the aftermath of Florence.

AP / GERRY BROOME



A relative carries Ruth Brady at the Wilmington, N.C., airport.

AP / STEVE HELBER