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Victim's family searches for justice



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ELKO — For Lidia Cortes, the phrase “hang in there” has lost all meaning.

The mother of the murdered Stephanie Gonzalez Estrada has been hanging in there since her daughter’s death on June 25, 2011.

“I don’t know how I function from one day to the other,” she said.

Even if Cortes doesn’t know how she’s doing it, she is, raising her own children and her three grandchildren with help from her whole family.

A family gathering is no less than 40 people, she said.

Gonzalez Estrada’s children were her life, Lidia Cortes said.

“It’s extremely hard because she was such an amazing mom,” she said. “We very rarely saw her without the kids.”

A wanted man

Gonzalez-Estrada’s alleged killer is Eduardo Estrada, her estranged husband. He has been on the run since the killing.

A reward fund for information leading to his arrest has been set up by Gonzalez Estrada’s family at the Elko Federal Credit Union, called “Stephanie’s Reward Fund.”

The money is exclusively for finding Estrada. Any money left over, or if the money is never used, will go to the next murder victim’s reward fund.

The murder was featured on America’s Most Wanted in January and has been airing since.

Estrada has family in Elko; Las Vegas; Tucson, Ariz.; Odessa, Texas; and Zapopan, Jalisco, Mexico.

“We’re waiting to find him,” Elko Police Capt. Will Lehmann said.

The court has issued a felony arrest warrant for first-degree murder for Estrada.

The Elko police have contacted the U.S. Marshals and the FBI. Both agencies are aware Elko police are searching for Estrada.

Estrada may be in the United States or may be in Mexico, Lehmann said.

"We don't know if he's in the U.S. or he's fled the country," he said. "We're looking at means of extradition."

An emotional toll

Estrada's capture will bring a sense of peace to the family, especially so they can no longer worry about him being out there somewhere, Cortes said.

Because of the gruesome nature of their mother's death and because the two youngest children were at the house when their mother was killed, their sense of loss and fear is especially profound.

"I relive how scared she must have been knowing the little ones were in the home," Cortes said.

Gonzalez Estrada's three children still miss their mother.

"The little one asked me to take him to heaven," Cortes said. "I said, 'we can't.' He says, 'Zip me up there as fast you can and I'll grab her.'"

"The children still ask and cry for her on a daily basis," Gonzalez Estrada's aunt Varmae Betancourt said.

A history of violence

"We all knew there was domestic violence," Cortes said.

Cortes tried not to meddle in her daughter's affairs, tried to leave her be for fear of harming her relationship with her daughter.

"Now I wish I had meddled more," she said.

"It's better to have them mad at you than not to have them at all," she said.

Cortes has seen the news of murders and domestic violence. She thought it couldn't happen to her family.

"You never think it's going to happen to you," she said.

Gonzalez Estrada stayed mum when it came to details about what was going on in her life.

"She kept so much secret from us," Cortes said.

Despite the alleged abuse and Estrada's alleged gang involvement, Gonzalez Estrada stayed with him.

"We all tried to help," Betancourt said. "She had three kids and didn't know what to do."

Gonzalez Estrada was lulled into a false sense of security, Betancourt said.

"I know Stephanie thought, 'he'd never do anything to me with the two kids there,'" she said.

For Faith Betancourt, another of Stephanie's aunts, Estrada was an incredibly controlling personality.

"He controlled her life," she said.

If anyone has information about Eduardo Estrada call the Elko Police Department at 777-7300 or America's Most Wanted tip line 1-800-CRIME-TV/800-274-6388.

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