

ABQJournal Online » Shooting Survivor Speaks Against Domestic Violence

In many ways, Johanna Orozco is just like any other hip young professional.

On Friday, she was wearing a flowing pink shirt over black leggings and boots and her short, dark hair was streaked with auburn.

She was assured and poised speaking to a group of nearly 50 people at Santa Fe City Hall, eliciting laughter as the lights dim and she starts her speech with a warning: "Just because the lights are off doesn't mean you have the right to fall asleep."

Only Orozco's scarred jawline offers a hint of the trials the 22-year old has endured in her short life.

The Ohio resident isn't in New Mexico just to sample the chile. She's here to raise awareness about domestic violence by sharing the details of an abusive relationship that culminated four years ago with her boyfriend shooting her in the face.

Orozco's courtship and early relationship with her boyfriend, Juan, was initially like something out of a fairy tale, she told attendees of an anti-domestic violence event sponsored this week by the New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence. She and Juan were childhood friends who connected romantically at the end of Orozco's freshmen year of high school.

"What can I say about Juan? Juan was just the most amazing guy," Orozco mused about her former boyfriend, citing his sense of humor, good looks and a litany of other appealing attributes.

Orozco's parents had died, and she was living with her grandparents in Ohio. The pair bonded, in part, because both had abusive fathers. Juan wasn't just Orozco's boyfriend, he was her best friend, and the two quickly became inseparable.

But cracks began to show four or five months into the relationship, when Juan started showing signs of jealousy. Orozco wrote it off as normal, cute even – a demonstration of Juan's love. But he became more controlling and possessive, trying to tell Orozco what to wear and forbidding her from talking with other boys.

She sat him down and they talked it out. Juan promised to change.

But the insecurity escalated. Juan began putting Orozco down, calling her worthless and ugly.

"I knew I was gorgeous. I knew I was smart. I was popular, volunteered, got involved in school. I was just that girl," Orozco said.

But Juan's put-downs, "hearing those words over and over from this guy I loved," ground down her sense of self "to where I didn't feel so confident anymore." She became depressed and isolated.

About a year after the pair started dating, Juan began to hit Orozco. She'd threaten to leave him, he would cry and apologize, she'd take him back, and the cycle would repeat. The violence grew worse, though Juan always made sure Orozco's bruises weren't in easily visible places. He threatened to kill her little brother.

"Why did I stay?" Orozco asked.

It's not a question easily answered. "I loved this guy, and when you truly, truly love someone, it's hard to just walk away, especially when they cry."

Finally, Orozco did find the courage to leave. To make sure she stuck to her vow, she told her family and friends. In response, Juan sneaked into Orozco's bedroom one night and raped her at knife point.

Terrified, she told a few friends about the rape, then a teacher. The police were called. Juan was put on house arrest, during which time he continued to stalk Orozco.

"I called the police every time, every single time" Juan harrassed, she said. "The police never helped me.

They never believed me.”

Her efforts to get a protection order came to nothing, because Juan was under 18 and the state wouldn't issue a restraining order against him. Then, halfway through her senior year of high school, Orozco's life changed forever.

It was evening, and she was in her car at home, about to leave for a late class. Glancing up, she saw Juan, dressed in black, creep down the driveway toward her.

“Then I started asking myself, ‘Why is he here? He's not supposed to be here.’ Then he took out a shotgun,” she said.

Orozco froze. Juan pointed the sawed-off gun at her face and pulled the trigger.

Orozco said one of the few memories she has of what happened afterward is telling a nurse, as she was being wheeled into surgery, that she wasn't ready to die.

Orozco survived, but a long and grueling recovery followed that included reconstructive surgery to rebuild the lower half of her face.

Orozco's sense of purpose never wavered, however. After leaving the hospital more than two months after the shooting, Orozco continued her senior-year studies from home. She attended the prom – she was voted Prom Queen – and later graduated with a B average.

Since then, she's turned personal catastrophe into a life purpose. Orozco is employed as a teen educator for a domestic violence advocacy center in Cleveland and has become a voice for tougher state domestic violence laws, including one that allows protection orders to be taken out on teenagers and another that mandates domestic violence education for teenagers.

She has also told her story around the country, appearing on television shows “20/20,” the “Oprah Winfrey Show” and “The View.” This year, she was also honored by the White House as a “Champion of Change.”

On Friday, Orozco encouraged New Mexico's domestic violence advocates to continue the good fight. “You swore to it, so stay with it. I know it gets frustrating,” she said.

According to the New Mexico Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a 2005 study of New Mexico adults indicated that one in three women and one in seven men have been a victim of domestic violence during their lifetime.

The coalition, which includes about 27 member organizations, also recognized five individuals and companies on Friday with its inaugural PeaceMaker awards. They were:

- Tony Trujillo, a Silver City resident who has been instrumental in getting his employer Freeport-McRohan to donate millions of dollars to local domestic violence efforts.
- Pauline Lucero-Equivel, a volunteer and fundraiser for Enlace Comunitario Development Committee, which provides domestic violence services to immigrants in Albuquerque.
- Arturo Castillas, a 22-year-old volunteer at Grammy's House in Artesia. Castillas volunteers as a way of giving back to a shelter system that once helped his family escape an abusive situation.
- Las Cruces Staples, which has “gone above and beyond” in aiding local anti-domestic violence efforts.
- Santa Fe Curves Inc., which has provided goods to Esperanza Shelter in Santa Fe for the past three years.

“That's really what it's about, a coordinated community response to end what is really a plague on our families, a plague on our children,” Santa Fe Mayor David Coss said. “If we eliminate domestic violence and all that violence, imagine our future.”

As for Juan, he accepted a plea deal and was sentenced to 27 years in prison without the possibility of parole.

“He cried. He cried like a baby. But he made the biggest mistake of his life,” Orozco said.

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