

'Thank You' Is Not Enough : 3-Year-Old Boy's Family Pays Last Respects to a Guardian Angel

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As the funeral Mass for Sara Quezada began at St. Lucy's Catholic Church on Wednesday morning, Clayborn Keith quietly rolled his son, covered in blankets in a child's red wagon, into the last row.

Keith, 31, and his wife, Juana Ramirez, 26, had brought 3-year-old Clayborn Jose Keith, or "C.J." as he now insists, to pay last respects to "Teacher Sara," the preschool teacher and supervisor who died shielding him from a bus that rolled over them after a June 24 field trip to the Los Angeles Zoo.

C.J., who wears his brown, wavy hair below his shoulders like his father, suffered a fractured hip and will spend most of the summer in a cast from his waist to his left ankle and halfway down his right leg. His parents call Quezada their son's guardian angel and tearfully thanked the Quezada family for their sacrifice.

"To me, 'Thank you' is not enough," Ramirez said after the Mass. "We want to do more but we don't know what we can do."

Quezada, who was buried a day before her 51st birthday, was killed when the bus, parked on a slight incline at the zoo parking lot, began to roll. C.J. had started to get on board, as had half the children on the field trip that day, but fell. Quezada, witnesses said, pulled the boy toward her to shield him with her body and was killed instantly.

"If you could turn the clock backward and my mom could see what would happen, I still think she would have done it," said Sara Quezada, 28, the oldest of Quezada's three children. "She wouldn't be able to live with herself knowing that she didn't do anything to help that child. He's alive because basically my mom gave her life. More than anything, it was more like an instinct. The child was in danger, so she saved a child."

Gathered at the family's El Sereno home after the service at Resurrection Cemetery in South San Gabriel, her family remembered Quezada as a hard-working woman who took pleasure in simple things, like flowers and even new grass that had recently been planted at the school.

Her 25-year-old son, Jose, who has taught sixth grade at Farmdale Elementary for two years, said he will keep the lesson of his mother's death with him the rest of his life:

"If my mom was able to sacrifice her life, for me, that's inspiration to go on and do anything in this world. I know that she wouldn't want to see any of us be defeated by (this). She would want us to go on and try even harder. I feel like I owe it to her, for her to be able to look down and say that I was worthy of her."

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Originally from Mexico City, Sara Quezada came to Los Angeles in 1969 with her husband, Armando Quezada, 54, and raised Sara, Jose and Cesar, 22, mostly in Bell. They moved to El Sereno in 1987.

With their parents' continuous emphasis on getting an education and encouragement to make something of themselves, all three graduated from college and are now elementary school teachers in Eastside schools.

After the children had entered school, Sara Quezada enrolled herself in English as a Second Language courses and then classes in child development. She worked as a teacher's assistant for a Headstart program, a teacher's aide at an elementary school and eventually as a preschool teacher at Jardin de Ninos, a private, nonprofit school that enrolls about 50 preschool children, toddlers and infants in Lincoln Heights.

Her most recent accomplishments were to become an American citizen in April and vote for the first time in the June primaries.

About a year ago, Quezada, who was described as friendly and sweet, was promoted to supervise the preschool. It was her job to greet each child and parent in the morning and say goodbye when they left in the afternoon.

"She really cared about the kids. That was her main concern," said Letty Robles, an administrative assistant at the Los Angeles Child Care Development Council, the preschool's umbrella organization. Robles' 3 1/2-year-old son, Isaiah, is enrolled at the school and had attended the field trip with C.J. "She called everybody *mijo* and *mija*. She was a very caring person."

The thought was not lost on other parents who attended the funeral that Quezada could very well have saved their children in the accident. Many said they hope to hold a fund-raiser soon for the Keiths and many have expressed a desire to rename the school after Quezada.

Jardin de Ninos was closed Wednesday to allow staff, parents and children to attend the services.

Father Ramon Marti, who officiated at the rosary and Mass, tried to console the family by explaining that the only way a person can meet their creator is through death. But he also touched on the sacrifice that Quezada made for the life of another.

"Sara, in her death, showed all of us a great example of life," he said.