



SUSAN SWARTZ

Lilies and bears for a brother

Elvia Bautista heard novelist Isabel Allende talk on the radio about losing her daughter Paula. It was one of the earliest essays on the popular National Public Radio series called "This I Believe."

Tomorrow, Elvia will be on that same show talking about losing her brother.

What the 22-year-old believes is that everyone should have someone put flowers on their grave.

Elvia visits her brother's grave on a Santa Rosa hilltop several days a week, sometimes twice in one day. "Whenever I feel sad or scared or angry and want to talk to him," she says. "Sometimes in the night, I'll just decide to stop by."

A round-faced beauty with long shiny hair, Elvia pulls her red van to the curb and walks to the granite stone which holds a picture of a smiling Rogelio Bautista. Elvia calls him "Gelio."

She rubs the marker until it glistens and props up a line of stuffed animals, damp from recent rains but cheerful anyhow. The new addition is a ceramic cigar-smoking dog.

"This would make him laugh," she says.

Elvia and Gelio grew up together in Mexico. He was the brother chosen to accompany her, the only girl in the family, to school and the store. "My mother would say, 'Go be with your sister.'"

When she was 12 and he was eight, they crossed the border together and were turned back. On their second try they made it. Elvia has been a legal resident since January of 2005. Her brother would have gotten his papers at the same time, had he not been shot dead in a gang fight. He died a year and a half ago on New Year's Eve.

"When my brother died, the newspapers said that a 16-year-old gang member was killed. That was all," said Elvia. He was also, she says, a big, tall guy with a goofy sense of humor and lots of friends, who could "make you laugh even if you were in a bad mood."

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It is compassion for this dead brother that Elvia hopes to elicit with her radio piece. That and maybe some more attention to gang violence.

Elvia, who supports herself and her child working at a group home for developmentally disabled people, was encouraged to submit her essay to the NPR series by Tatiana Harrison, producer of the Voice of Youth on KRCB public radio in Santa Rosa.

Having worked with Elvia on other radio stories, Harrison said, "Everyone sees the gang issue so much from the male perspective, but each one of these guys has a mom or a sister."

Elvia tells her story on the radio and in person and thinks she makes her biggest impact at community meetings, talking to kids who are in gangs or thinking about joining.

"Maybe if I share my story, then one person might think, 'Oh, yeah, I knew that guy. That was a real person, and he got killed.'"

She goes to her brother's grave because she doesn't want his memory to die. Some family members thought his body should be buried in Mexico, but Elvia protested, "No one will go visit him there."

The grave site, ringed with bottles of Mexican beer, rosary beads, a bottle of hot sauce, religious pictures and personal notes, is as crowded as a teenager's nightstand. Sometimes Elvia shares her flowers with nearby graves that are undecorated and seem to lack visitors. Sometimes she retrieves still-fresh flowers from the cemetery trash to put on one of "the lonely graves."

Often she's accompanied by another young woman who also lost a young man, an 18-year-old who died in a gang fight. In life the two young men wore different gang colors. One liked blue. One liked red. Now they share white lilies and pink silk roses, sometimes a stuffed bear.