

Thousands mourn slain teacher

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Thousands came out in El Monte, California, to mourn the slaying of Augustin Roberto Salcedo in Mexico.

El Monte, California (CNN) -- Thousands stuffed the bleachers on both sides of a California high school football field Monday night to remember a beloved teacher who was slain in Mexico a few days ago.

Grieving family members, friends and residents of El Monte, California, waved glowsticks in the air and listened to heartfelt stories about how Augustin Roberto "Bobby" Salcedo was a devoted family man and an inspirational educator. They heard, too, that

he was a practical joker who made people laugh.

Journey's "Don't Stop Believin' " blared on loudspeakers. And there was a quieter anthem: Salcedo's family sang "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" to honor the die-hard Dodgers fan.

In all, about 4,000 people cheered and wept at once at Monday's candlelight vigil held at Mountain View High School as they grappled with their community's loss.

Salcedo, 33, was one of six men whose bodies were found Thursday in in the north-central Mexican state of Durango, hours after they had been abducted from a nearby restaurant, according to Salcedo's family.

Salcedo's sister Griselda Salcedo Jefferson said that the holidays have made her brother's killing especially hard.

"It's been very difficult," she said at a news conference earlier Monday. "Even the arrangements -- just getting him over here. The holidays have made things even worse. Offices that we need paperwork from have closed.

"But everything's moving along thanks to all the love and support from people who have just volunteered to help without being asked," she said.

Bobby Salcedo had traveled with his wife, Betzy, to visit her family in the Mexican city of Gomez Palacio. They were eating late Wednesday night in a restaurant when armed men barged in, forced everyone onto the floor and abducted all six men who were in the party, Carlos Salcedo told CNN.

At 7 a.m. Thursday, police notified his sister-in-law that they had found her husband's body in a ravine with bullet wounds to the head and chest, he said.

Salcedo's family suspects that he was at the wrong place at the wrong time and that the killing might be drug related. Violence in Mexico has been heightened in recent years by drug-related disputes. The country ended 2009 with a record number of drug-related deaths, exceeding the record tally reached in 2008, unofficial counts indicate.

Salcedo's slaying shook blue-collar El Monte hard.

The mayor said the community had lost a brilliant and bright star. Both he and Salcedo's family called for justice.

Salcedo's father was a Mexican laborer in the 1950s who stressed the importance of education to his children. All graduated from college.

Bobby Salcedo, who was in the middle of his dissertation on educational leadership, took that a step further and was a doctoral candidate at UCLA, served on the El Monte elementary school board and worked as assistant principal at El Monte High School.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Augustin Roberto Salcedo known as devoted family man, inspirational educator

He was slain with five other men in Mexican state of Durango

About 4,000 people cheer and weep at Monday's candlelight vigil

Mayor of El Monte says the community has lost a brilliant and bright star

We know that Bobby meant a lot to the community.

--Betzy Salcedo, widow of Bobby Salcedo

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At the tribute Monday night, Carlos Salcedo called his brother Dr. Bobby Salcedo, in recognition of his brother's unfinished degree.

Among his younger brother's legacy are former students who have gone on to become teachers in the school district, he said. And a wife who is striving to become a doctor.

"We know that Bobby meant a lot to the community," said Betzy Salcedo at the earlier news conference. "He was a very special person with a very big heart.

"As a husband, he was always very loving, supportive and I knew that nothing bad would happen to me by his side and that's the reason i'm here today," she said. "Because of him I'm here, moving along in my career, in my dreams of becoming a doctor in this country."

Others on Monday recalled a lighter side of Salcedo.

Frank Zepeda, a former high school assistant principal, recalled Salcedo arranging an over-the-top dance with a toga party theme.

During cleanup, Salcedo had asked Zepeda that night whether it was a great dance.

"Yeah in your case Bobby it was a great dance," Zepeda said at the vigil. "It was not long enough, but it was a great dance."

CNN's Paul Vercammen contributed to this report.

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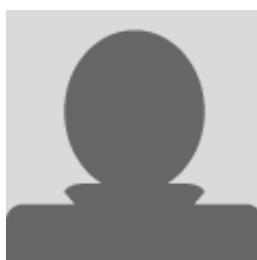
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