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Students, friends hold memorial to honor teacher killed in crash

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SAN BERNARDINO - Handmade tissue-paper flowers and white balloons surrounded the portrait of a smiling young woman Thursday afternoon at **Norton Space and Aeronautics Academy**.

More than 150 students, friends and family members gathered on the school lawn and in the cafeteria for a memorial vigil to celebrate the life of Veronica Villalpando, second-grade teacher, colleague and friend.

"She has moved on but when you look into the eyes of every child here, you can see her there," said Gordon Soholt, chief academic officer for the Lewis Center for Educational Research, of which Norton is a part.

Villalpando died with her husband and their two young children Saturday in a fiery crash on the 15 Freeway in Ontario.

She was 29.

She was beloved by all, said principal Jan Corea.

"She advocated fun in learning. She was a planner, an organizer, a friend."

Soholt recalled one of Villalpando's favorite phrases. "She would always say, 'Come on guys' to get everybody going - she had such a vivacious attitude."

Veronica Villalpando lived in Moreno Valley with her husband, Ryan, and son, Mateo, 4, and daughter, Bella Rose, 6 months.

All four were killed in the multivehicle traffic collision Saturday that shut down part of the 15 Freeway.

They were on their way to meet family at a pizza restaurant when the crash occurred.

Veronica Villalpando's husband, Ryan, grew up in Redlands and was an assistant

football coach at Moreno Valley High School, and before that, coached at Redlands East Valley and Notre Dame high schools.

Both were active in the community, working with kids at every opportunity, according to Rick Piercy, president and CEO of both charter schools that comprise the Lewis Center.

"She was a really fine teacher and a wonderful mom," Piercy said. "We're a family and this outstanding staff is most concerned with every child here. It's important that the children have closure."

Parents, students and staff gathered in the cafeteria for a multimedia presentation honoring Villalpando.

Students spread out along a craft table, creating messages and pictures for a memory book that would be presented to the family.

Jacqueline Delgado and Leslie Reyes, both 9, said they loved Mrs. Villalpando.

"We miss her," they said in unison.

"My best moments with Mrs. Villalpando were when she was happy," said Shiann Brown, 7, one of her students.

The children wrote their sentiments on construction paper.

Jose Aguas, 8, said she was a good teacher.

"She made learning fun."

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