

Community supports 'grand reopening' of store where owner was shot and killed

By Tyler Treadway

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FORT PIERCE — A carnival-like atmosphere held sway Friday afternoon where a month ago there had been tragedy.

A & M Discount Beverages at Okeechobee Road and Georgia Avenue, where store owner Parag Patel had been shot and killed in a Sept. 4 robbery, celebrated its “grand reopening” with tents set up by local beer distributors and Norteno music from a Spanish-language radio station befitting the business’ predominantly Hispanic customer base.

As Neha Patel, Parag Patel’s widow, and other family members manned the sales counter, some customers spent a few dollars on six-packs and snacks; others donated to the foundation set up in Parag Patel’s name. Southern Eagle Distributing Inc. of Fort Pierce, presented the Patels with a \$2,500 check from employees at the Budweiser beer distributor and a \$1,000 check from the foundation led by Peter W. Busch, the firm’s owner. J.J. Taylor Distributing handed over \$1,000 from the Miller/Coors /Yuengling distributor. A & M Food Store Inc., the parent company of the Patels’ business, has put \$1,000 into the fund; and more will be forthcoming, said Avani Patel, Parag Patel’s niece who’s overseeing the foundation.

“A lot of people wanted to give money to the family,” Avani Patel said, “but the family said, ‘We don’t want charity; we’d rather it go to the community.’”

Parag Patel’s 16-year-old daughter, Nidhi, came up with the idea of raising money to help at-risk young people.

“The family doesn’t want what happened to them to happen to anyone else,” Avani Patel said.

Authorities said three armed men walked into the store Sept. 4, and one of them shot Parag Patel as they approached the counter. Donald “DJ” Isaiah, 24, and Anthony “Rude Boy” Symonette, 21, both of Fort Pierce, have been arrested on murder charges; and police say they’re searching for the third alleged gunman. Two others have been arrested for alleged minor roles in the fatal robbery.

Some of the foundation money will go to the Youth Transition Center, a facility being built in Vero Beach by the Children’s Home Society to help 18- to 23-year-olds leaving foster care assimilate into society.

“About half the kids coming out of foster care never get high school diplomas or GEDs,” said Lawrence Brooks, executive director of Children’s Home Society, “and they’re one of the fastest growing segments of Florida’s homeless population.”

Brooks said about \$3.7 million has been raised; \$5 million is needed to build and endow the 20-bed facility, which is schedule to open in January.

As the celebration continued in the parking lot, Neha Patel, stayed dutifully behind the store counter, which has been equipped with bulletproof glass since the store’s “soft opening” just over a week ago.

“This is great,” she said as music wafted in through the store’s open door and customers and well-wishers filled the aisles. “The first week (back) I’ve been a little nervous and a little scared, but the customers have been so supportive. They’ve really helped me.”



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