



More than 6,000 attend Chelsea King's ceremony

Published 03/13/2010 - 11:17 p.m.

(CNS) - Volunteers handed out sunflowers to an overflow crowd of more than 6,000 mourners arriving at Poway High School Saturday to honor slain teenager Chelsea King, described by her principal as a "shining light" that the community must make sure is never extinguished.

Family, friends, classmates and throngs of others sat beneath her giant image over the football stadium grandstand, as the sun beamed through cloudy skies.

Poway High School Principal Scott Fisher, speaking from a stage festooned with sunflower bouquets, told the crowd the events in the two weeks since Chelsea's disappearance and the discovery of her body have filled the hearts of everyone at the school, and "millions who never had the privilege of knowing Chelsea."

"While we mourn," Fisher said, "Chelsea's passing has strengthened the bonds of this community more than I could have ever imagined."

Saturday's event was arranged by family as a celebration of Chelsea's life, and the supply of 6,000 tickets for the stadium had been exhausted by 8 a.m., causing the family to request others to watch it online. Coverage was transmitted on the Internet by local TV stations.

The memorial got under way at 2 p.m. and featured music from the Poway High School band and the San Diego Youth Symphony, of which she had been a member.

King's parents, Brent and Kelly King, and her younger brother Tyler each spoke to those gathered and received a standing ovation.

"I wake up every morning now and I have to remember how to breathe," Kelly King said. "I have to remember how to put one foot in front of the other."

She said Chelsea tells her, "Come on, mom, we have important things to do, very important things to do." "I tell her, 'Angel, I don't know how to begin,' and she says, 'Take in all the beauty that surrounds us and help other people to see it, too.'"

Brent King said, "When this tragedy began to unfold, I needed to make a choice. I could choose despair, that would have been easiest; or I could choose rage. I have enough of that in me to walk the deepest part of hell a thousand times. Or I could choose hope. Because of you, I chose hope.

"I will channel my rage and commit my life to fight an incurable evil. Known sexual predators are not curable."

The couple flanked son Tyler as he walked to the microphone and said of his sister, "Her spirit is so large, it defeats death."

A montage of videos and photos was shown of King as a baby and as a teenager mugging for the camera and dressing in zany outfits.

King's cousin, Stephanie Dorian, called her a "sparkly gem of a girl" and said the teenager's story has touched the world.

"She has not died in vain," Dorian said. "Neither did Amber Dubois. Chelsea and Amber have become the catalyst to a new generation coming together before our very eyes to demand 'No, never again.'"

Dorian asked for a moment of silence in memory of Chelsea and Amber, a 14-year-old Escondido High student who may have fallen victim to the same alleged sexual predator.

A number of King's friends, some who participated with her in band, track and peer counseling, and teachers, described her as enthusiastic, energetic, with a quirky sense of humor and a contagious zeal for life.

At one point, everyone in the audience stood, raised high their sunflowers tied in light-blue ribbons, while the symphony played the swelling hymn, "All is well with my soul."

Dozens of white doves were released as the King family wept and hugged on stage.



Pastor Harry Kuehl of the Church of Rancho Bernardo gave a benediction and then led the audience in shouting, "Chelsea, we love you!" He offered the final words, "She heard us."

Volunteers who had handed out sunflowers before the ceremony gave mourners as they left the stadium packets of sunflower seeds inscribed, "With your help, Chelsea's light will never dim."

King, an avid cross country runner, disappeared Feb. 25 while going for an after-school run in Rancho Bernardo Community Park. A search by law enforcement teams from numerous agencies, aided by thousands of citizen volunteers, ended five days later with the discovery of the girl's body in a shallow grave along a drainage near Lake Hodges.

Three days after the girl went missing, registered sex offender John Albert Gardner III, 30, was arrested on suspicion of sexually assaulting and killing her. Police said DNA found on the victim's underwear incriminated Gardner.

Amber vanished while walking to school in February 2009. The Escondido High freshman's skeletal remains were found Saturday on a hillside in Pala, near the Riverside County line.

Gardner pleaded guilty 10 years ago to sexually assaulting a 13-year-old girl in his mother's townhouse, which is located about a mile from Rancho Bernardo Community Park.

Gardner is being investigated in Amber's disappearance. He is also a suspect in the attempted sexual assault of a woman at the park Dec. 27.