

OP/ED – Mercedes Vazquez Simmons, Monroe County Legislator, District 22 – March 23, 2022

As a community, a county, a city, we are all at a critical crossroads in violent crime and criminal activity that has spread like a cancer throughout our daily lives. Each day new and more violent crimes are reported, with young people – children as young as 12 years of age – committing serious and violent crimes with little to no accountability for their actions.

Often forgotten after the shock of the crimes committed are the families who must forever live with the permanent scars and loss inflicted on the innocent lives forever impacted as a result of these acts.

I know this firsthand. My family will never recover from the loss of my uncle, Pedro Santiago Sr., at age 78, who was affectionately known as Don Pedro for generations throughout the Latino community. My uncle was a patriarch in my family, as well as in the Latino community as a guitarist and part of the local Latino musical group Trio Los Arpegio. Forever his voice, his spirit, his humor, his presence, and his music were silenced by a random act of senseless violence.

Don Pedro was stabbed, and his life violently taken while at his home sitting on his front porch on March 11, 2020. His body was discovered by a US Postal worker while making delivery rounds later that day. The man who took my uncle's life was 30 years old and had been a recidivist criminal well known within the community who turned himself in, pleaded not guilty to the crime, and eventually pleaded guilty to manslaughter on September 17, 2021. He will serve 23 years in NYS Department of Corrections in addition to five years of post-release supervision for this crime.

For the families of victims and for victims themselves who survive, time passes very slowly while waiting for justice. The bail reform laws were changed in 2019 and, in my personal opinion, have increased the amount of crime, while adding additional fears and frustration to families and the community as a whole who have witnessed the revolving door of repeat offenders on a daily basis. Often times these decisions bear no logic and make no sense to anyone. The bail reform laws were initially designed to create an equal and level playing field for those who could not afford bail, versus those who could be released, solely based on their ability to afford bail.

Instead, it has created a nightmare scenario that has actually resulted in an increase in violent crimes, shootings, and homicides. This is not what the law was intended to do. We must make the necessary changes to the law that will instead both increase and strengthen public safety.

I support Governor Kathy Hochul in her decision to create changes to the Bail Reform Laws which she has clearly outlined reform for policies regarding repeat offenders, as well as the ability to make arrests based on hate crimes, violent crimes. Reform must include law changes that allows judges to set bail where and when the crime warrants such a need to protect the public – especially those involving felony crimes – those involving illegal guns, illegal guns which are sold to minors. Additionally, we must strengthen the loopholes that exist regarding domestic violence and violations of orders of protections, especially those involving the use of guns.

For the sake of our community in peril, for the sake of the future of young lives being impacted by the increase of violence, I implore all New Yorkers to support the critical reforms proposed by Governor Hochul. It is only by working together can we then work towards finding solutions to poverty and substance abuse that often escalates to negative impacts on our community as a whole – countywide.

Sincerely,

Mercedes Vazquez Simmons
Monroe County Legislator – District 22