

N.Y. Post: Lutz C. Ribeiro



MEMORY LIVES: Maureen St. Guillen, who keeps Imette's ashes in this locket, attends the sad graduation yesterday with daughter Alejandra.

Locket keeps Imette close to her mother's heart

IMETTE St. Guillen made it to her graduation ceremony yesterday, after all.

Around the neck of Imette's mother, close to her heart, lies a small, silver locket containing the ashes of the beautiful daughter whose life was savagely stolen.

"I have her with me all the time," Maureen St. Guillen told me later, as she caressed the necklace tenderly.

"I carry her with me. I talk to her."

"She is always with me." Maureen wore the locket in the morning, as she climbed the stage of Madison Square Garden.

With tears in her eyes, and Imette's golden honor-society tassel also draped around her neck, Maureen joined 2,400 of Imette's fellow graduates at the commencement exercises for John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

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A spontaneous cheer broke out among the graduates as Maureen and Imette's sister, Alejandra, came onstage. Alejandra wore Imette's golden graduation shawl, signifying the completion of her master's degree in juvenile justice.

Maureen hoisted a portrait of Imette and accepted her diploma.

The crowd welcomed Imette home.

Later, Maureen told me about the "difficult, emotional day" — which started with a conversation with her daughter.

"I bought her a graduation card," she said softly. "I'm going to keep it. At some point, it will be destroyed with me."

Maureen was joined at the ceremony by several of Imette's friends, including Claire Higgins, the last friendly face to see Imette alive.

On the night Imette was killed, Claire left her friend alone in a bar — never realizing that an ex-con bouncer, Darryl Littlejohn, allegedly lay in wait. And a night that started out with promise forever turned into a cautionary tale about women and bars in New York.

Now Maureen is a mother on a mission. Yesterday and today, she and her top-shelf lawyer, Joseph Tacopina, scheduled meetings with legislators. It is too late to help Imette.

But they hope to spur a

change to the law. To make sure that people like the man who murdered Imette can no longer prey on women.

"Then Imette will not have died in vain," Tacopina said.

Maureen wants her daughter to be remembered for helping others, rather than for her gruesome end. She is donating every cent she receives from civil suits, against the city and The Falls bar, to a scholarship fund in Imette's name.

"She was interested in helping young women. We've decided to focus on that," the mom said.

Then tears formed again.

"I felt very proud for the kids that were at the Garden," she said. "They have so much to look forward to."

And she cried for her loss. For everyone's.

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