Sylvia Guerrero clutches her styrofoam coffee cup and stares out with blue grey eyes and a steely determination forged during the emotional wreckage that happened six years ago. Guerrero was in Lansing at the invitation of the Michigan State University Resident Hall Association and several LBGT student groups in advance of the Transgender Day of Remembrance on Nov. 21. She is a former law office employee who now spends her life devoted to telling her daughter's story. Her dead daughter's story. Her murdered transgender teenage daughter's story.

"Gwen was murdered for being who she was," Guerrero says bluntly. "That's wrong."

Gwen was Gwen Aruajo, Guerrero's 17-year-old daughter who was brutally beaten to death on Oct. 4, 2002. The beating was so severe that Aruajo had post-mortem bruises on her body. After the killers beat her, allegedly while in a meth-fueled rage over her lying about her gender, they drove four hours to the mountains and buried her body in a shallow three-foot deep grave. To prevent scavengers from digging up her remains, the killers covered her body with large rocks, one of which crushed Gwen's face.

"It's sickening what they did to my daughter," she said. "She had the right to live her life, they didn't have the right to take her life."

Four men were convicted of the crime. Two are serving 15-years to life, on second degree murder convictions. The other two plea-bargained for nine and 11-year sentences.

The strength to tell Gwen's story comes from a very deep sense of spirituality.

"Her spirit is always with mommy and I appreciate that," she said. "Her physical body is gone, but her spiritual presence is here."

"I know this is my purpose," she said. "I am honored to be her mother because in her death she has saved thousands and thousands of lives."

"I never ever want anyone to endure the pain and suffering I am still enduring from the loss of my daughter," said Guerrero.

The pain fuels her march for equality, taking her all over the country speaking to college, high school and middle school students. She tells students about Gwen, her murder and why it is important accept others.

"I am here to hopefully educate some people - to open some minds," she said.

"Nothing is going to bring my daughter back. I am an advocate now and I speak because I think it is important to share my daughter's story. And now is the time. Things are happening and I believe there is a lot of hope for the LBGT community, but I believe there is a lot of work to do."
Guerrero said Gwen came out to her as transgender when she was 14-years-old.

"As a mom who loves her children unconditionally, it doesn't matter to me. It wouldn't have mattered to me if she was gay or straight or transgender - this is my baby who I gave birth to, whom I love," she said. "So whether she was Eddie or Gwen, it didn't matter to me. So she knew that I loved her. I respected her for who she was and I allowed her to be who she was."

Guerrero said she thought Gwen was gay when she was younger, but says that was her own lack of information about transgender issues and identities.

For parents who are struggling with a child who has come out, Guerrero had a clear message.

"There is a lot of hate and evil and ignorance and homophobia and transphobia that goes on and it breaks my heart to see that. I know it first hand because I watched my daughter and I watched what it did to her."

"You know what? Pray about it. Be patient. You really have to be patient. And get educated. Always keep in mind that this is your child regardless. Acceptance is the key thing to making them feel and to continue with their life. There are going to be more things against them then for them. I still love my daughter, even in her death."

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