

“Everything started failing for us”

An interview with a relative of Chicago house fire victim

By George Gallanis
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Thursday evening, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with Olga Guzman, the great-aunt of 16-year-old Victor Mendoza, one of the ten children that were killed Sunday by a house fire in the city’s working-class neighborhood of Little Village.

Olga and her sister, Victor’s grandmother, sat next to a commemorative collage of Victor, celebrating his life. Along with other family members, friends and supporters, they were attending a continuing vigil for the ten children.

More than sixty workers and young people were once more in attendance for the vigil ahead of the funeral for the children on Saturday. Candles, photos, stuffed animals, balloons and cards of remembrance still adorned the street.

Absent again were any representatives from Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s office or Little Village’s Alderman George Cardenas. Instead the mayor, the media and the political establishment have rushed to blame the victims of this social tragedy.

The grief of Olga and her family was at times eclipsed by their contempt for these figures, who have done nothing to help the victim’s families. As reporters began to speak to her, she immediately condemned Chicago’s Democratic Party politicians and the mainstream press.

Her face was stern as she relayed the tragic events and the impact on the community. “They say that the fire started in the other building. The stove exploded inside and broke all the windows.”

“Look at all the windows,” she pointed. “They’re broken. The fire then spread.”

“When the fire caught in this building where my nephew was, and when he went upstairs at

eleven-thirty, twelve-thirty at night, I guess the babies were already by themselves. Maybe Victor walked in, he saw them sleeping and thought, ‘All right, that’s my baby cousin, I’m going to go to sleep.’ So he went to sleep. But then smoke from the fire killed them all. First the babies died, then everyone else.

“Then when the fire happened, a lady came there at three o’clock, four o’clock in the morning. She came from work, and she’s like ‘There’s a fire!’ and she started banging on the windows and woke the neighbors. Then she called the fire department and they came.

“But we didn’t know that Victor was there until afterwards. When they were at the hospital, my nephew identified him. He has a tattoo with the name ‘Sonia,’ his mom’s name.

“This is my first great nephew. My sister’s grandson. There’s six of them, now there’s five. My niece Sonia [Victor’s mother] is homeless. My sister is homeless. My niece Vanessa is homeless. My nephew Mingo is homeless. My nephew Ulysses is homeless.

“They were all staying there. They’re all homeless now. Instead of that damn Cardenas coming and helping, he’s accusing the mother of neglect. All of these people are homeless; they need a place to stay. They need clothes, they need food. Instead of being positive, he just knocks everybody down and starts questioning and attacking.

“They don’t care. I would expect Emanuel to be here at least. But see we don’t have the money and so they’re not here. Everybody here works; everybody does what they need to do.

“I understand there are gangs but some of those children don’t have parents. Or jobs. And it’s hard for

them to get jobs because of their tattoos and what they stand for. It's hard. You know what? I expected somebody big to come and help but instead local organizations and neighbors are helping. They come and bring food. A lady comes and makes lunch and dinner. They buy pizzas and they make eggs with rice and beans for breakfast with warm tortillas. People donate water.

“Why doesn't any politician come and help? Because you know why? We're low-income.

“They said the inspectors came and that the building failed the inspection. Well then how come the city didn't say this is hazardous, the wires can start a fire, how come they didn't then tell everyone to leave? But I bet you if it was in the neighborhood where Emanuel lives at or where Cardenas lives then you know they're going to do it. You know they're going to cover it.

The press has been quick to point to the investigations of the mothers of the deceased children by the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The problems these mothers faced were no doubt ones of deep poverty, but the mainstream press has been quick to cite these investigations to demonize and scapegoat the mothers in the aftermath of the fire.

Olga was livid at the way the mothers have been slandered. “The same goes for DCFS. If they say it's as bad as they're making it out to be, why didn't they remove the kids? The DCFS stuff has absolutely nothing to do with the fire.

“That's why I got a thing to say to Cardenas when I see him. I'm waiting. He wasn't here yesterday, he wasn't here the day before yesterday. I've been coming here everyday and I come in the morning around ten, eleven o'clock but I'm here and I'm still here.”

When a WSWS reporter asked what it was like growing up in Little Village, Olga said:

“Back then it wasn't dangerous. We use to play Kick the Can, Father May I?, Mother May I? We use to play Red Light, Green Light. The gangs wouldn't bother you like they do now.

“But things have gotten worse. Why? Jobs. My parents lost their jobs. My father worked for AMP Bakery. They shut down. They were on Kostner. My mother worked for Western-Electric on Cicero and Cermak. The company shut down. All these companies shut down. Nobody has money. The economy.

Everything started failing for us.

“I have nieces and nephews who don't know how to read because the schools have failed them. Slum landlords are taking advantage of low-income people because they know they are struggling and need a place to stay because they have a family and they don't make a lot of money, they make minimum wage. Then landlords raise rents if they want to because they can get away with it like that.”

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