



Victoria "Vicki" Soto

November 4, 1985 - December 14, 2012

Among the eight adults murdered yesterday along with the twenty school children at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. was 27-year-young teacher Victoria Soto.

Victoria Soto will be forever remembered as a teacher who gave her life by shielding her first grade students from Adam Lanza's gunfire with her own body. She beams in photos. Her enthusiasm was evident. She was doing, those who knew her say, what she loved.

And now, Victoria Soto is being called a hero.

Though details of the 27-year-old teacher's death remain fuzzy, her name has been invoked again and again as a portrait of selflessness and humanity among unfathomable evil.

A cousin, Jim Wiltsie, told ABC News that investigators told his family she was killed while shielding her students from danger. She reportedly hid some students in a bathroom or closet, ensuring they were safe.

"She was trying to shield, get her children into a closet and protect them from harm," Wiltsie told ABC. "And by doing that, put herself between the gunman and the children."

Soto's goal was simply to be a teacher.

"She lost her life doing what she loved," Wiltsie said.

When her students were in danger, her instincts kicked in.

First-grade teacher Vicki Leigh Soto, 27 years old, died trying to protect the children she loved, her cousin Jim Wiltsie said. When the gunfire started on Friday morning, she gathered her students and tried to hide them in a classroom closet, officials told her family.

"In doing so, she put herself between the kids and the gunman's bullets," said Mr. Wiltsie, who is a police officer. "That is how she was found. Huddled with her children." He said he didn't know if her students were among the dead.

Ms. Soto, who had just turned 27 last month, grew up in Stratford, Conn. She was the oldest of four children in a big, extended family that included many public workers and first responders. Her cousin said that she loved going to the beach and was active in her church.

"Vicki was a great individual with a huge heart and put students first. Unfortunately, that is how she lost her life," Mr. Wiltsie said. "I wanted people to know that she was a hero for what she did, and that she gets the recognition that she deserves."

Her life was filled with family and children. From an early age, she knew she wanted to be a teacher. She had worked at Sandy Hook Elementary School for five years—three as a first-grade teacher and two as an intern—and was pursuing her master's degree in special education at Southern Connecticut State University, according to her biography on the school's website. She

wrote that she graduated from Eastern Connecticut State University with a degree in elementary education and history.

"She was a very nurturing individual—big sister was her role," Mr. Wiltsie said. "Instinctively as a teacher, all she wanted to do was protect those kids, and that is what she was trying to do."

On her teacher page, she said she enjoyed reading, owned a black lab named Roxie and loved spending time with her brother, two sisters and cousins. She also wrote that she loved flamingos and the New York Yankees.

"I look forward to an amazing year in first grade with my amazing students of room 10!" Ms. Soto wrote on her teacher page.

Photos of Soto show her always with a wide smile, in pictures of her at her college graduation and in mundane daily life. She looks so young, barely an adult herself. Her goal was simply to be a teacher.

"You have a teacher who cared more about her students than herself," said Mayor John Harkins of Stratford, the town Soto hailed from and where more than 300 people gathered for a memorial service Saturday night. "That speaks volumes to her character, and her commitment and dedication."