

The *Hearts* of Heroes

Life Care and its directors of nursing, gathered in Cleveland, Tenn., for their annual meeting, honored the late Victoria Soto, a heroine of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, and her family in a ceremony Sunday morning.

The theme of the DON gathering is *It's All From the Heart*, and Soto was praised as a dramatic example of a teacher who loved her first-grade students and gave her life for them.

The tragic day of Dec. 14, 2012, will live in our memory throughout our lifetimes. That's when a 20-year-old gunman entered the Newtown, Conn., school and on a shooting rampage killed 20 children and six adult staff members. He had already killed 15 students and two teachers when he got to Soto's classroom.

Hearing shots and screams, Soto hid five of her students in a closet, and others got under desks. When the shooter entered her room, she threw herself in front of her students, placing herself between them and the killer, and was shot and killed. By her action, she saved the lives of a number of the children. She was hailed as a heroine, and later was awarded posthumously the Presidential Citizens Medal. Subsequently, the town of Stratford renamed the elementary school she had attended as the Victoria Soto Elementary School.

Israel Soto, Victoria's uncle, is a rehab tech at Life Care Center of Cleveland. He introduced other family members, including his wife and his parents, and then spoke about his niece – her courage, her devotion to her students, and her heart for them that propelled her to step in front of the gunman. He commended the audience of nurses for choosing a life of service out of a love for people that flows from their hearts. Jeremy Gravell, executive director, and Tina Flach, director of nursing at Life Care Center of Cleveland, spoke of Israel's sense of humor, his selflessness, and his exceptional commitment to those he serves. A video featured several of the center's residents praising Israel for his work on their behalf.

The ceremony closed with Kelly Wilcoxon, executive secretary in the president's office, presenting angel figurine awards to Israel and his parents, each bearing the inscription: *In Memory of Victoria Soto: A Heart for Students; Life Care 2013*. The award was appropriate, since Victoria often referred to her students as her "little angels." In reality, in the end she became their guardian angel.



Attendees at the ceremony included (L to R): Chairman Forrest Preston, Victoria Soto's grandparents, Israel Soto and President Beecher Hunter.

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The morning concluded with an inspirational concert by The Talleys, a gospel music family, and a personality test, *True Colors*, led by Meesh Kidd. The nurses had a free afternoon, and dinner and a reception were held at the Tennessee Aquarium and IMAX Theatre in Chattanooga.

Today's program began with a patriotic opening featuring the Cleveland Fire Department Honor Guard and the beginning of educational sessions. Keynote speakers for the week are Molly Cox, on the subject *Note to Self: Discover Joy*; Lisa Thomson, *The Heart of Health Care Reform – Today's Nursing Leader*; and Aaron Wilburn, *Laugh More – Live Longer*.

Highlight of the meeting will be tonight as performance awards are presented. Wednesday morning's closing sessions will include presentations by Bart Walker, senior vice president of operations; Dr. Ken Scott, chief medical officer; President Beecher Hunter; and Chairman Forrest Preston.

– Beecher Hunter