

TEAK DYER'S LEGACY INSPIRES, 25 YEARS AFTER MURDER

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It should have been a day of celebration for the Palisades High Class of '88, but the tone of the day shifted drastically when the body of a well-loved classmate, **Teak Dyer**, was found on the floor of a Palisades office at what is now Chase Bank. On the eve of her graduation, the 18-year-old girl was attacked and killed by a stranger.

The crime garnered national attention for a town unaccustomed to such violence, leaving the community grieving the loss of one of its own.

After a graduation party at the Santa Monica Pier, friends of the girl said she had been dropped off at a parking lot at 15200 Sunset Blvd. where she had left her car, but an investigation was inconclusive as to what transpired in the time leading to her death. Dyer's body was found with three bullet holes in the upper torso. Rodney Garmanian, a guard for a local security company, was arrested by the end of the day. He is now serving life without parole for the teenager's murder.

For Dyer's friends and family, the conviction was hardly enough to mend such a deep wound. While time would ease some of the pain, Dyer's childhood friend **Justine Stamen Arrillaga** found a way to raise a phoenix from the ashes of a young girl's life. The pair had become fast friends on the first day of elementary school and the news of her old friend's death was devastating.

"You can't even imagine being 18 years old and hearing this horrible thing has happened to your friend," Stamen Arrillaga said. "I went away to college three months after hearing it and I was sort of in shock for the whole time. It was awful."

It would have been easy to give up. She had every reason to feel alienated and alone after enduring the horrific loss, but 25 years later Stamen Arrillaga is hardly alone. She is surrounded by her family—a family that has grown to include more than 300 people.

Determined to honor the girl who had been by her side through childhood, Stamen Arrillaga founded the TEAK Fellowship in New York, a mentoring program that helps outstanding middle school students from low-income families gain admission to and succeed at top high schools and colleges.

She pressed on, taking it one day at a time, and graduated from Brown University. It had been 10 years since Dyer was killed when Stamen Arrillaga found herself running an academic program in the Bronx. Heartbreak came again when a student of hers, DeWitt White, was murdered. The 17-year-old prodigious musician overcame unimaginable socioeconomic odds to excel in the arts, mastering the piano before he was shot and killed in a drug-related incident.

"That was the second terrible tragedy in my life and it was then that I decided to start the TEAK Fellowship to honor them both," Stamen Arrillaga said of the two young lives lost. "This is a classic example of making lemonade out of lemons. I have so many amazing people in my life because of this fellowship. None of us knew this was possible but it has given us all the feeling that you can make it through a tragedy and come out on the other side."

With the support of Dyer's mother **Jackie Dyer** and her father **Rod Dyer**, Stamen Arrillaga saw her idea take root and blossom into a life-giving opportunity that has brought healing to the many who felt the loss of such a spirited young girl.

"I've been involved from day one and have been there every step of the way," said Jackie Dyer, who serves on the Board of Directors from her home in the Palisades. "This held me together. I felt supported by a huge community that shared in my loss. What better tribute to Teak than something living and breathing."

A longtime friend and supporter of the TEAK Fellowship, Henry McVey remembers when it was



Teak Dyer and her mother Jackie Dyer before the Pali High senior was murdered on the eve of her graduation. Inset: Clipping from Palisadian-Post published on June 30, 1988.

Photo: Courtesy of Justine Stamen Arrillaga



Justine Stamen Arrillaga and Teak Dyer met in the first grade at John Thomas Dye School in Bel Air.

Photo: Courtesy of Justine Stamen Arrillaga

all just an idea; an ambition of a young woman who wanted to give others a future her fallen friends would never have.

"They are tragic stories but you can let it fester, or you can take that sadness and turn it into positive energy," McVey said. "I think time does have a way of healing but you can't replace people or the experiences you had with them. What you can do is honor them and I know Justine still gets jazzed up about finding such a wonderful vehicle for honoring those two special individuals."

The foundation, which also provides leader-

ship training, exposure to the arts and outdoors, mentoring and career experience, has secured \$61 million in financial aid since its foundation in 1998. Each year, 30 students who might otherwise suffocate under the weight of their current situations are given the resources and support to make great strides in their education and their communities.

"These are very fabulous, high-achieving students who just happen to be from low- or no-income backgrounds," Stamen Arrillaga said. "But they are the most able, brilliant, lovely students



in New York. They are chosen very carefully, only 30 each year, for their talent. I believe they have a lot to give, starting on day one, and they always do."

From day one, TEAK fellows are given one-on-one tutoring and test prep for the grueling admissions exams required by competitive high schools and later colleges. Fellows learn the skills necessary to navigate both the admissions process and the daunting task of securing financial aid.

Yet for as much as the TEAK students are given, Stamen Arrillaga has made sure they learn to give back too. An extensive amount of the fellows' time is dedicated to service work. Through Public Interest Internships, TEAK fellows have performed 38,000 hours of service. The volunteer program is a key component in the fellowship's success and teaching young people to be positive influences in their communities.

To date, more than 300 TEAK fellows have been placed in academically exclusive high schools nationwide at a 100 percent success rate. They go on to attend—and graduate from—the top universities in the country, including many in the Ivy League.

Lisette Duran is one of TEAK's first success stories. During her seventh-grade year she applied to be part of the second class of fellows and began a journey that would teach her to take advantage of all of life's opportunities—because there were people like Teak Dyer and DeWitt White who never could. Duran will graduate from Columbia Law School this year.

"I know that it's not only because of my hard work, but because of the hard work of all of these people, the board and the staff, that I am where I am today," Duran said. "Justine always emphasized being about more than academics. She encouraged us to develop a love of music and culture and art. She taught us about making the best out of everything."

Amid music lessons and math tutors, summer internships and art classes, the TEAK Fellows and their leaders form a bond that more closely resembles a kinship than a fellowship.

"The most significant thing about TEAK, for me, is the bond I've created with the students, the staff and the board members," Duran said. "The board members had these prestigious careers outside of TEAK but we knew them as our aunts and uncles. It really never occurred to me that they had actual jobs. To us, they were part of our TEAK family and that was it."

It's been years since Duran completed her fellowship with TEAK, but in no way has she separated herself from the family. Her journey with them has come full circle and she serves as a mentor to a high school senior and is a chairman on the Junior Board of Directors.

For Justine, for Jackie, for Henry and Lisette, this is the family that changed their lives and built a home of triumph on a foundation of tragedy.

"It never gets better, it gets different," Stamen Arrillaga said. "I'm still so sad about her loss, but it's been 25 years and while it hasn't gotten better it is certainly different. To be involved with something as tremendously bright and positive as Teak was is really the pride and joy of my life."

Fifteen years in, it would seem that the TEAK Fellowship is just getting started. The 15th Anniversary Celebration held last month raised more than \$1 million in support.

"I am so proud of the current leadership and I'm happy to be an ambassador for this beautiful program," Stamen Arrillaga said. "So many of our students are starting to become major supporters and mentors. I have no question that the students and the staff will carry the program on forever."



MEASURING SUCCESS

TEAK has served over **300** students.

100% of TEAK 8th graders earned admission to academically selective high schools.
100% of TEAK 8th graders earned admission to 4-year colleges and universities.

87% of whom entered top-tier schools, including **23%** to the Ivy League.

TEAK students have cumulatively earned over **\$61 MILLION**

in need-based financial aid for high school and college.

Through Public Interest Internships, TEAK students have performed over **38,000 HOURS**

of service since 2001.

TEAK stats from 15th anniversary celebration