

Jackie Lacey
District Attorney
<http://da.lacounty.gov>



NEWS RELEASE

Media Contact:

Venusse D. Navid
Public Information Officer
213-257-2000
VNavid@da.lacounty.gov
Twitter: @LADAOffice

Oct. 4, 2019

District Attorney Jackie Lacey Honors Four Heroes for Courageous Acts

Los Angeles County District Attorney Jackie Lacey today honored four people for their courage in stepping up in the face of danger and helping to keep our community safe from violent crime.

The honorees include a 12-year-old boy who defended his mother and 1-year-old sister as his mother's fiancé assaulted them in their West Covina home; two sisters who rescued an elderly man being beaten by his niece outside his Los Angeles home; and a woman who chased down a drunken motorist after he hit a pedestrian in Rolling Hills.

“The courage displayed by these brave people reminds me that we all have the potential to step up and do what’s right,” District Attorney Lacey said. “I am proud of these heroes who helped my deputy district attorneys make our community safer by prosecuting violent crime against innocent victims.”

District Attorney Lacey recognized the honorees this afternoon at a Courageous Citizen Awards ceremony. It was hosted by the Rotary Club of Downtown Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles County District Attorney’s Office presents these awards several times a year to people who have performed extraordinary acts of valor and selflessness in assisting in criminal prosecutions, aiding victims, preventing crimes or even capturing suspects.

Awards were presented to:

Joel Ortuno, Jr., 12, of Anaheim (Case no. KA119643, presented by Deputy District Attorney Brendan Gibson)

Joel Ortuno Jr. was at his West Covina home with his 1-year-old sister, his mother and her fiancé on Feb. 6, 2018, when the couple began arguing. The fiancé attacked Joel’s mother as she tried to leave the house with the children. Joel, who was 11 at the time, stepped in and told him to stop. The man struck the boy, knocking him unconscious. Joel was awakened by his mother who picked him up and locked herself and the children in the bathroom as the defendant paced the hallway holding a machete. Joel

crawled out of a window and ran to a neighbor's house for help. Joel also testified in court against his attacker who eventually pleaded no contest.

The defendant pleaded no contest to one count of corporal injury to a child and one count of injuring a spouse, cohabitant, fiancée, boyfriend, girlfriend or child's parent. He was sentenced to four years in state prison and ordered to stay away from all three victims for 10 years. The case was investigated by the West Covina Police Department.

Viridiana Mendez, 34, of Los Angeles and Esperanza Mendez, 41, of Los Angeles (Case no. BA465533, presented by Deputy District Attorney Ashley Rosen)

Ms. Viridiana Mendez and Ms. Esperanza Mendez were cleaning a house northwest of downtown Los Angeles on Feb. 1, 2018, when they heard a commotion outside. The sisters looked out and saw an elderly man being physically assaulted by his niece. The man was trying to go into the house where he was living and retrieve his belongings. The sisters ran to help the man. They took him into the house they were cleaning and tended to his wounds. They called police and cooperated with the criminal investigation. They also testified in court and helped secure a guilty verdict.

The defendant was convicted of one count of elder abuse. She was sentenced to formal probation for three years and ordered to stay away from the victim for three years. The case was investigated by the Los Angeles Police Department.

Amy D'Ambra, 51, of Rolling Hills (Case no. YA098506, presented by Assistant Head Deputy District Attorney Alva Lin)

Ms. Amy D'Ambra was driving in Rolling Hills on June 11, 2018, when she saw a car approaching. She witnessed the other driver's vehicle strike a man who was getting mail from his mailbox and then drive away. Ms. D'Ambra checked on the victim who asked her to go after the man who hit him. Ms. D'Ambra made a U-turn and pursued the man, forcing him to pull over. Soon after, police arrived and arrested the man. Ms. D'Ambra was ready and willing to testify for the prosecution, prompting the defendant to plead no contest.

The defendant pleaded no contest to one felony count each of driving under the influence of an alcoholic beverage causing injury, driving with a .08% blood alcohol content causing injury and hit-and-run driving resulting in injury to another person. In addition, he admitted that his blood alcohol level was .20 percent or more. He was sentenced to 180 days in county jail, three years of formal probation and ordered to pay restitution to the victim and participate in a nine-month alcohol treatment program. The case was investigated by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

[About the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office](#)

Los Angeles County District Attorney Jackie Lacey leads the largest local prosecutorial office in the nation. Her staff of nearly 1,000 attorneys, 300 investigators and 800 support staff members is dedicated to protecting our community through the fair and ethical pursuit of justice and the safeguarding of crime victims' rights.