

# Tree of Angels celebrations

Over the past 27 years, hosting a Tree of Angels has become a memorable tradition observed in communities throughout Texas.

The Tree of Angels program helps communities recognize that the holiday season is a difficult time for families and friends who have suffered the crushing impact of a violent crime.

During the week of December 2–8, 2018, Tree of Angels events were held to honor surviving victims of violent crime and their families. Community ceremonies where loved ones brought an angel ornament to place on a special Christmas tree were held throughout Texas, and TDCAA would like to share photos from a few of these events.

If you are interested in hosting a 2019 Tree of Angels event in your community, a how-to guide is available from Licia Edwards at 512/837-PAVC or pavc@peopleagainstviolentcrime.org. Please note the Tree of Angels is a registered trademark of People Against Violent Crime (PAVC), a group committed to sustaining the original meaning and purpose of the Tree of Angels. For this reason, PAVC asks that you complete the information form on the website to receive the how-to guide. After the form is completed electronically and submitted to PAVC, you will receive instructions on how to download the guide. PAVC asks that you do not share the electronic document to avoid unauthorized use or distribution of the material.

## Laurie Gillispie VAC in the Erath County DA's Office

During our Tree of Angels ceremony, our guest speaker was Jamie Richards-Hogland, a young Tarleton State University student who was shot in her apartment on December 11, 2017, by Shawn Patrick Layton. Layton thought he was at his drug dealer's apartment, which was the next building over. As soon as Jamie opened the door, she was shot in the face and left lying in her doorway for

*At right are Jessica Hogland (standing) and Jamie Richards-Hogland (seated on the right). Jamie was the guest speaker at Erath County's Tree of Angels ceremony.*



**By Jalayne Robinson, LMSW**  
*TDCAA Victims Services Director*



*At right, the Tree of Angels in Erath County and above, a close-up of an ornament.*



several hours until neighbors heard her moaning. She is now paralyzed from the neck down. Layton was found guilty by a jury on October 11, 2018, and was sentenced to the maximum of 20 years in prison.

**Erica Craig, MA**  
VAC in the Dallas County CDA's Office



*Above are Erica Craig (left), Dallas County DA Juvenile Division VAC, and June Mitchell (right), Secretary. Below are the Dallas County Tree of Angels and the program for the event (inset).*



**Tracy Viladevall**  
VAC in the McLennan County CDA's Office



*Above, a child placing an ornament on the Tree of Angels in McLennan County, and at left, a close-up of that ornament.*

**Dana Bettger**  
VAC in the Bell County DA's Office

This was our 15th Annual Tree of Angels event in Bell County, and it was a great success. Many families attended and lots of community participation, from the Honor Guard to TAPS.

*Below, the Bell County Tree of Angels gathering.*



*I can honestly say The Amendment movie adequately reflects the many stages a crime victim faces during the aftermath of a violent crime and how after something like this happens, families face years of interaction with the criminal justice system.*

### **New judgment forms**

The Office of Court Administration (OCA) has recently updated its standardized felony judgment forms, instructions, affirmative orders, and special findings, all of which can be found at [www.txcourts.gov/rules-forms/forms](http://www.txcourts.gov/rules-forms/forms). The revised forms became effective on January 1, 2019.

I was delighted to see how the following question is pre-printed on the judgment: “Was the victim impact statement returned to the attorney representing the State? (circle yes or no)”

Historically statewide, it has been challenging for Victim Impact Statements (VISs) to be routed properly through the criminal justice process. A VIS returned to a prosecutor’s office by a crime victim may erroneously never be forwarded to community supervision (probation) or to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

I hope that having this question on the standardized judgment forms will create another VIS checkpoint in local criminal justice systems, that will cause paralegals or other staff typing judgments to collaborate with VACs to find out whether a VIS has been returned. If a VIS has been returned, it can then be routed to the person responsible for compiling the penitentiary packet, who would then attach the VIS to the offender’s commitment papers to be included in the pen packet that is sent to TDCJ (per the Texas Code of Criminal Procedure Arts. 56.03, 56.04, and 42.09). If a form hasn’t been returned, prosecutor staff can then make another effort to reach out to the victim(s) in the case to request the return of the form.

If you are a VAC, please collaborate with those in your county who type judgments and with those who compile penitentiary packets to ensure the VISs are being recognized, received, and routed appropriately.

### ***The Amendment* movie**

In April 2018, I was informed of the release of a movie called *The Amendment*, which is based on a very tragic true story, a 1979 home invasion in Oklahoma where two teenagers, Brooks and Leslie Douglass, lost both of their parents during a very violent crime. The movie reflects how Brooks Douglass went on to become Oklahoma’s youngest state senator and how he fought to change the state’s crime victims’ rights legislation.

Being very interested, I quickly secured my ticket because the movie would be in theaters for just one day, April 12. As I watched the movie, I reflected on my career as a victim assistance coordinator (VAC) for a criminal district attorney’s office and how I had worked with so many families much like the Douglasses—families who are trying to pick up the pieces of their lives after going through horrific circumstances, circumstances no one expects to face during their lifetime. I can honestly say this movie adequately reflects the many stages a crime victim faces during the aftermath of a violent crime and how after something like this happens, families face years of interaction with the criminal justice system. This movie speaks to your heart on the loss Brooks and Leslie Douglass experienced, their victimization, their struggle and fight for justice, and their desire to remain involved in their perpetrators’ case for years and years during the criminal justice process. I truly admire Brooks Douglass for sharing his story and for his persistence in seeking justice for his family and for future crime victims in Oklahoma.

*The Amendment* features actors Mike Vogel and Taryn Manning, and in his film debut, Brooks Douglass plays tribute to his late father by portraying him in the movie. It’s really a must-see for VACs and other staff who work with victims of violent crime.

A DVD of the movie is available online at [www.theamendmentmovie.com](http://www.theamendmentmovie.com).

### **In-office visits**

TDCAA’s Victim Services Project is available to offer in-office support to your victim services program. We at TDCAA realize the majority of VACs in prosecutor offices are the only people in their office responsible for developing victim services programs and compiling information to send to crime victims as required by Chapter 56 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. Therefore, VACs may not have anyone locally to turn to for advice and could use assistance or moral support. This project is especially helpful to new VACs.

Recently, my travels have taken me to Kerr, Gregg, Matagorda, and Victoria Counties—see the photos from my visits on the opposite page. Thank you to all of the offices that hosted me!

If your office would like to schedule a visit, please e-mail me at [Jalayne.Robinson@tdcaa.com](mailto:Jalayne.Robinson@tdcaa.com). I am available for inquiries, support, in-office consultations, group presentations, or training for brand-new VACs in your office. ✱



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: In Kerr County (left to right) are VACs Carole Machetta and Pam Peter; in the Gregg County CDA's Office (left to right): VAC Tammy Loggins, Family Violence Legal Assistant Laura Lara, and Director of Victim Services Karen Bertoni; in the Victoria County CDA's Office (left to right) are VAC Gwendolyn Sanford, TDCAA Director of Victim Services Jalayne Robinson, CDA Constance Filley Johnson, and VAC Amanda Roessler; and in the Matagorda County DA's Office (left to right) are DA Investigator Ashley Orta, TDCAA Director of Victim Services Jalayne Robinson; DA Steven Reis, and Investigator Jeannette Bell. Not pictured is VAC Shelby Baker.