Overcoming social distancing to fight violence
Murders of Haverhill men bring together groups for peace rally

HAVERHILL — After the murders of Haverhill’s Efrain Maisonet and Carlos M. Rivera, several civic groups knew they had to connect with the community, as they often do in times of strife, to send a message that violence is not the answer.

But a barrier was in the way: Coronavirus-related concerns and social distancing ordinances make organizing in the traditional sense difficult.

The anti-violence groups — including UTEC, Haverhill High School’s Violence Intervention Program and POSE — are giving thanks for technology — and for the community partners in UTEC leader Gregg Croteau’s cell phone.

“Within six hours of us coming up with the idea to organize, we were on a Zoom call with 35 folks from the community,” Croteau said. “We know that with the pandemic, this kind of organizing is a bit more challenging and you have to be creative.”

After the April 7 stabbing death of Maisonet, a 2019 Haverhill High graduate, Croteau called for a little help from his friends, including VIP’s Andy Polanco, POSE’s Dennis and Kat Everett, and Jesus Ruiz from Leaving the Streets Ministry.

The groups quickly mobilized and decided to hold a silent car procession through Haverhill to pay tribute to Maisonet and Rivera.

Rivera, who also attended Haverhill High, was shot March 31 in Lawrence. According to the Essex County District Attorney’s
Office, Rivera was dropped off at Holy Family Hospital in Methuen after the shooting. The district attorney’s office was notified that Rivera died April 6 at Tufts Medical Center in Boston. No arrests have been made.

Maisonet, 19, was stabbed to death April 7 after a fight in a parking lot behind Haverhill stadium. Police say 18-year-old Oscar Quinones admitted to bringing what he described as a fishing knife to the fight witnessed by several people. According to those witnesses, Maisonet and Quinones were there to fight over Azure Doucette, Maisonet’s current girlfriend whom Quinones also dated. In an interview with police after his arrest, Quinones said he used the knife to stab Maisonet only after Maisonet “began punching him in the face.”

Arraigned on a murder charge in Haverhill District Court April 9, Quinones remains held without bail until his next court hearing June 8.

The anti-violence procession that began Saturday morning at Consentino School and ended at the downtown parking deck was not advertised in advance in order to adhere to proper social distancing protocols, Croteau said. Cars involved in the procession were driven by representatives from Community Action, Young Sisters United, Center for Hope and Healing and SISU. State Rep. Andy Vargas, D-Haverhill, and City Council President Melinda Barrett also participated.

“There’s clearly a lot of emphasis around the pandemic as a public health issue, but we also believe that violence is a public health issue,” Croteau said. “There’s unfortunate similarities in the contagion factor. The biggest challenge for our young people is when they feel like nothing is going to change. We need to keep sending the message that we’re never going to be comfortable being desensitized to this.”

Dennis Everett hopes Saturday’s rally lets those struggling with feelings of isolation or those grieving the deaths of Maisonet and Rivera know help is out there.

“There’s a mixture of emotion after these acts of violence and we wanted to create something stable,” Everett said. “People are hurting and it’s a way to say ‘We still love you and we’re still here.’”