

LATHROP – Three years ago today the body of Jeremy Lum was discovered floating in the river not far from the San Joaquin County Jail.

The UC Berkeley graduate and Lathrop resident had been taken into custody by San Joaquin County Sheriff's deputies on July 8, 2009 on suspicion of public intoxication. Those who processed him out of the facility the following morning would be the last to ever see him alive.

Time will never take away the pain or the murky circumstances surrounding his arrest. However, Lum's family is working to make sure that no other San Joaquin County family ever has to go through what they have. They contend a mental health episode was initially chalked up to public drunkenness and that even after Jeremy informed officers he was bipolar he was believed to have been "faking it."

"Right after this happened there really wasn't anywhere to turn to for information or help," said Connie Lum Perez.

Perez is Jeremy's aunt and a big part of the non-profit Justice for Jeremy organization that the family started to promote awareness and acceptance of mental health awareness.

"That really made things difficult, and we want to be able to provide resources and training to our public service agencies so that something like this never happens again," she said.

On Friday, July 8, nearly 100 people gathered at "Jeremy's Corner" near the intersection of Woodfield Park and Lathrop Road for a candlelight vigil to mark the third anniversary of his arrest.

It brought friends, family and concerned residents who wanted to come pay tribute to a young man who passed away too soon. It also allowed for the expression of feelings that are still strong in the community where Lum grew up and spent most of his life.

"It was a very powerful night and it was very emotional for a lot of us," Lum Perez said. "I think that the message we were sending out to everyone, about being united against the stigma of mental illness, is really starting to hit hard after two years."

As far as things on the Justice for Jeremy front goes, the organization is moving ahead with a variety of events and partnerships to help bring an end to the stigma usually attached to those who suffer from mental issues.

A collaboration with the LETS Foundation – which stands for Lets End The Stigma – is bringing the topic of mental health and illness to children in the community so that they can be informed about an issue that for years was something that was only talked about in hushed tones behind closed doors.

Recent revelations from high-profile celebrities disclosing their struggles with mental health issues, Lum Perez says, helps show people that it truly can affect anybody. And in a small town such as Lathrop, she said, it's not unlikely that some of those who are dealing with these problems are people that you may know.

"It really hits home in a community like this because we all grew up here and everybody is so close," she said. "It could be your coworker, your family member, your best friend. People don't like talking about it because of the stigma, and that's why we're working with groups like LETS to do what we can about changing that perception.

"The generation that's going to break it is going to be the youth, and that's where we really need to start," Perez added. "Since Jeremy's incident our mission has been to provide resources and training to volunteers, first responders and whoever else might want or need it. We're already having conversations with families and networking and doing the things that we need to do in order to help people. That's what this organization is all about."