



Group Solace to Air Crash Survivors

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By LOU MARANO

WASHINGTON, July 16 (UPI) -- Viennese psychotherapist Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), a Holocaust survivor, wrote that humans can find meaning through suffering. A woman who lost her fiancé in a plane crash has done just that.

Heidi Snow, 29, is the founder of Aircraft Casualty Emotional Support Services, and Tuesday marks the fifth anniversary of the crash of TWA Flight 800 over Long Island Sound.

Michel Breistroff, a member of the French national hockey team and a recent graduate of Harvard University, had been with Snow in New York City. They said goodbye on July 17, 1996, and he left for John F. Kennedy airport to fly to Paris. Snow was to meet him a few weeks later. But Breistroff perished with 229 others in the crash.

"You want to make sense out of what happened," Snow told United Press International in a phone interview.

In the days following the disaster, she said, many different theories were being advanced to explain its cause, yet none had solid evidence behind it.

"And that made it very hard -- and it still does, because some people suspect that it wasn't necessarily mechanical failure."

A year ago, the National Transportation Safety Board concluded that a short-circuit in the plane's wiring set off a spark that ignited volatile vapors in the center fuel tank, causing an explosion.

Snow said she started ACCESS because support at the crash site evaporated after about a week. The emotional pain was still high, however. The bodies hadn't even been found, she told UPI.

But the hardest part was when she had to go home.

"You've had all these support systems, and suddenly they're cut off," she said. "For a couple of months, I was really having a hard time."

Snow was 24 at the time. Her friends and family started telling her that she was not passing through the five stages of grief at the appropriate speed.

"It's time for you to get on with your life," they would say.

"It was very isolating, because there was no one who 'got it,'" Snow said.

She was looking around for a group of people who would understand her. Finally, the New York City Mayor's Office referred her to the survivors of Pan Am 103. Libyan agents sabotaged that flight over Lockerbie, Scotland, on Dec. 21, 1987, killing all 259 people on the plane and 11 on the ground.

Snow attended a meeting of Pan Am 103 survivors in Albany, N.Y.

"I called the woman who was the president at the time," she recalled, and cried when she found herself speaking to someone who "gets it." The organization offered to find someone to drive her to the meeting.

At the gathering, "I remember this woman came over and hugged me. We didn't have to say a word. It had been eight years, and about 65 people were at this meeting." To Snow, this meant that grieving from such a loss "is a

long, life process."

Snow asked if she could have the TWA 800 survivors call or meet with the Pan Am 103 survivors to learn, "We know we can survive this, because you have." About 50 of the 65 volunteered.

"Someone would say, 'How can I clean up my child's room? Her body hasn't been found yet.' But then another woman from Pan Am 103 had been there before. She understood that," Smith told UPI.

ACCESS evolved from that network.

"Because it was working so well, some people would say, 'You should make it a full nonprofit.' And now we have over 150 volunteers all over the world."

The group's Web site, accesshelp.org, lists postings for 14 crashes between 1987 and 2000.

"We had someone contact us who lost her father in 1960, when she was 9, in a collision between a TWA flight and United Airlines flight over Brooklyn," Snow said. She was matched up with a man who was 10 when he lost his father in the same crash.

Snow said that her group usually matches people according to relationships: mother-to-mother, orphan-to-orphan, etc.

Snow told UPI that understanding the specificity of another's loss is important because people start questioning their faith after air disasters, wondering how the crash could have been God's will.

ACCESS has a newsletter, Snow said, to which people send in articles and pictures.

"It's really a community of people sharing what they've been through, and people learn from one another," Snow said.

On Tuesday a memorial to the victims will be dedicated in a service at Smith Point, Long Island, N.Y.

Snow said the group came out of her need. No support existed for assuaging long-term suffering.

"After the first two weeks, you're supposed to be fine," she said. "Other people don't think you should be thinking about him anymore. They want to see progression.

"I think what's important about this memorial is to show that it's okay that (the survivors) are remembering (the victims) five years later. It's okay that they still think about them every day.

"It's a part of your life, and it doesn't just go away. There's not a day that I don't think about (her fiancé) and that this horrible thing happened. And I don't think the general public understands that."