

Deborah Penna

Allen Temple lost six friends to the Pacific Ocean on Monday.

Blue-eyed, brown-haired Deborah Penna, a Cornish College art student known for her abstract paintings and quiet, thoughtful way, was among them.

So were Michael Bernard, Ryan Busche, Abigail Busche, James Ryan and Russell Ing.

Temple met Penna, 27, nine years ago in Chicago, where she attended school. When Temple moved to Bellingham, she introduced him around.

Many of their shared friends perished in the Alaska Airlines Flight 261 crash.

"Half of my crew is basically in the ocean right now", said Temple, 28, a student at Bellingham Technical College who gathered with friends Tuesday night to sort out their grief.

Of his six friends aboard the flight, Temple knew Penna the longest. Her paintings, including a portrait of her boyfriend Charles, hang in Temple's Bellingham home.

"She expressed herself through her art", said Temple. "Debbie was a pretty soft-spoken person but when she did speak she had a lot to say in a few words. A lot of times she would sit by the wayside and absorb."

Temple said he had talked to Penna shortly before her trip to Mexico, a vacation planned in a celebration of a James Ryan's birthday.

"She was very excited to hang out in another country", said Temple.

Part of her trip included a visit with her boyfriend, Charles McHale, a University of Washington student working in Mexico on a building project for low-income families.

Penna attended art schools in Chicago and New York before enrolling at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle. A multi-media artist, Penna used a variety of materials in her work, from crayon to hair to plants.

"Painting was her first love", said Temple.

Penna expected to graduate in May, said Monica Moe, director of public relations for Cornish College.

Moe called Penna's death ... "devastating for a small community like Cornish which currently enrolls only 625 students."

Decisions on a memorial and scholarship for Penna are pending.

"She was delightful. Everybody loved Debbie", said Diane Brainard, the owner of Old Town Cafe in Bellingham, where Penna waitressed three years ago.

Brainard recalled how Penna took pains to create the "please have a seat sign" for restaurant customers.

Temple said he is still coming to terms with Penna's death.

"I have waves of not believing this happened," he said. "She was a beautiful person, inside and out."

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