

Essay: A tragedy close to home

CNN's Jack Hamann shares thoughts on media sensitivity and the meaning of family after Flight 261 crash.....*February 4, 2000 Web posted at: 3:34 p.m. EST (2034 GMT)*

[SEATTLE](#) (CNN) -- The crash of Alaska Airlines Flight 261 hit one neighborhood harder than any other.

My neighborhood.

I live on Queen Anne Hill, just north of downtown Seattle. Ten of the 88 victims -- including six children -- lived on Queen Anne. Two others lived on a houseboat on Lake Union, just a few blocks away.

I did not know any of those who died, but several of my neighbors did. One set of friends lives three doors down from the now-empty home of the Pearson family -- Sarah, Rodney, Rachel and Grace -- all of whom perished when the MD- 83 dropped from the sky into the Pacific Ocean.

A close friend of mine shared memories of the Clemetsons -- David, Carolyn, Blake, Miles, Coriander and Spencer -- three of whom attended the elementary school down the street

Queen Anne is a small community in a big city. And we are hurting.

Media's coverage of victims examined

Our families pore over the morning and afternoon newspapers, absorbing the details of the lives of ordinary folks who took an otherwise ordinary flight that most of us can imagine ourselves taking.

As we read the obituaries, the conversation inevitably turns from the crash itself to the way the media covers the crash, particularly the way people like me write about the victims. I'm convinced that coverage says something intriguing about families, reporters, and the way reporters view families in the year 2000.

On Wednesday, in an impressive four-page spread, the Seattle Times profiled most of the 88 people aboard Flight 261. Many were traveling alone, and each one was the subject of a eulogy.

But of the 88 victims, 47 shared the same last name as someone else on the plane. Individuals traveling with family members were memorialized with their loved ones. In addition to the Clemetsons and Pearsons, there were 12 husband-and- wife couples, three of whom were traveling with their children. Three young men were cousins.

Partners given their due

The shared memorials didn't stop there.

Bradley Long was a 39-year-old real estate agent. William Knudson was a 53-year-old businessman. Long and Knudson were profiled together, because, says the Times, they were partners.

Nowhere were the men described as gay, but it was clear that the newspaper didn't mean business partners. These two men, the story explained, owned a home together and, according to Long's co-worker, "lived life to its fullest." Two apparently gay men -- given the same treatment as more than a dozen victims who were husband and wife or parent and child.

Craig and Paul Pulanco were on the plane together. Brothers? Father and son? Cousins? According to the Times, they were "a witty fun-loving couple who loved their two dogs almost as much as the garden that adorned their South Seattle home." Once again, no mention of anyone being gay, but the eulogy touches on their commitment ceremony two years earlier, when Craig Gruhl changed his name to Craig Pulanco.

Toni and Jacquelyn Choate were parent and daughter. Toni, we are told, was a "man who was living as a woman." A family friend remembers that back when Toni was named Larry, "He was an excellent father, as far as taking [Jacquelyn] places and showing her things. They were real close." They both died on Flight 261.

No more being left out

I can't figure why I was struck by the casualness with which the relationships between these three pairs of people were described. At one time, such relationships would have been treated euphemistically or ignored altogether. There was something oddly comforting about the seamless descriptions of their lives amid those of the more traditional families.

This kind of reporting comes as good news to the members of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), a New York-based group that acts as a watchdog for portrayals of sexual minorities in the media.

GLAAD spokesman Wonbo Woo says that "This type of reporting helps people understand just how normal the lives of gays, lesbians and transsexuals can be."

GLAAD's only complaint so far is that a San Francisco newspaper's use of "she" to describe Toni Choate was apparently changed to "he" when the story hit the wire service for distribution to the rest of the world.

Reality of blended families not addressed

But if we in the media have been more sensitive to some kinds of families, we have dropped the ball on others.

For two days, news of the death of the six members of the Clemetson family inevitably included the sad -- and dramatic -- observation that the entire family had been lost.

Many of those same stories included the fact that this was the second marriage for both David and Carolyn Clemetson. Two of their four young children were from David's first marriage, we were told, and another was from Carolyn's.

Mike Barber of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer was the first reporter to connect the dots and realize that there were clearly other members of the family still alive.

Three days after the crash, Barber wrote a heart-wrenching account of Claire Barnett, mother of two of the Clemetson children. Barnett shared custody of her two little girls, and on the fateful weekend, it was her ex-husband's turn.

Brian Turner, a close family friend, is part of a tight group of loved ones trying to console Claire Barnett in her grief. He says acquaintances have wondered aloud why the media defined family to exclude Barnett.

"I understand that the media had an immediate need," Turner says. "But that should be balanced. They should have taken the time to figure it out." Turner credits the Post-Intelligencer for providing a great sense of relief and healing for Claire's friends.

Source: <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/US/02/04/crash.essay/>