

Dedication rites today for Alaska Flight 261 memorial

By Beth KaimanSeattle Times staff reporter.....January 31, 2002

Deborah Penna had a window seat on Alaska Airlines Flight 261, and in her last moments she probably saw the ocean.

Jan Penna-Crane was Deborah's mother, so she goes back, especially on the Jan. 31 anniversary, to stand on the shore of Port Hueneme, Calif., and take a boat 8-½ miles out into the water where the plane crashed.

"It's the place where her eyes last saw this world," Penna-Crane said. "We just feel we need to be there."

Today, Penna-Crane, who lives in Kenmore, her husband, Tom, and Deborah's brother, Matthew, will make the trip again. This time, they will help dedicate the site where a monument will be built to the 88 victims of Flight 261, which was en route from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, to Seattle when the plane's stabilizer malfunctioned and the pilots lost control.

On the second anniversary of "when the time stopped for them and changed our lives forever," as Penna-Crane puts it, plans are in place for California sculptor James "Bud" Bottoms to build a concrete and bronze sundial on the beach.

Every Jan. 31, the shadow from the sundial's 12-foot-high bronze arm will cross a plaque on the dial.

The names and birth dates of the crash victims will be carved on the side of the sundial, and, near the base of the arm, three bronze dolphins will spring forth — an infusion of joy into a monument commissioned out of suffering.

"I didn't want anything you'd see in a graveyard," Bottoms said. "The ocean, the dolphins are joyous. ... You look out into the ocean and say, 'It was such a joyous thing to have those people in my life.'"

The memorial is to be dedicated on the third anniversary of the crash.

The families decided almost immediately they wanted a memorial on the beach — to remember the dead and the outpouring from the community of Port Hueneme.

Port Hueneme donated the land — about 100 yards from the water — and Alaska Airlines is paying \$300,000 for the project. Alaska employees separately donated \$46,000.

Families of the victims are raising more money for maintenance.

Forty-five artists offered proposals and, after the field was narrowed to seven, the finalists visited Seattle to meet with the families.

All families got a vote in the final selection.

The process was democratic, said Penna-Crane, who with her husband headed the planning committee. A family that lost one person, for instance, got one vote. A family that lost three got three votes.

This memorial will be Bottoms' first. Fountains and sculptures in California, Japan and Puerto Vallarta, for example — all featuring his signature frolicking dolphins — were elicited from happier circumstances.

Bottoms, 74, started his career as an artist 20 years ago after losing his job at General Electric drawing visions of the future. What would transportation and housing be like? Bottoms imagined it, and company engineers built the products to match.

After leaving GE and getting a divorce, he decided to see a psychologist and take stock. Bottoms said he had been dreaming of a woman riding a dolphin, coming out of the water and shooting into the air.

The psychologist said the dream meant Bottoms should pursue his wildest aspirations. Bottoms took the dream as direct inspiration. He's been creating dolphins ever since.

Penna-Crane said the dolphin theme makes sense for the crash monument because last year, on the families' excursion to the crash site, dolphins swam around the boat.

Today's events will include a morning church service, a dedication ceremony at the beach and speeches by Bottoms, Port Hueneme's mayor and family members.

And Penna-Crane will look out into the water and feel closer to the 26-year-old daughter who played the flute with passion, hoped for a career as a printmaker, and would have traveled to Paris and Florence, Italy, with her parents to admire the art she loved.

Source: <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=20020131&slug=monument31m>