

# Community of grief honors its dead

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PORT HUENEME, Calif. — A sundial monument unveiled yesterday to memorialize the victims of Alaska Airlines Flight 261 tracks the unending passage of time. For some victims' families, it also may represent the conquering of one stage of grief.

"Our loved ones would be proud of us for hanging in and seeing this through," said Patty Sanchez, of Seattle, whose daughter, Colleen Whorley, died three years ago yesterday when the Seattle-bound jetliner crashed into the Pacific Ocean, eight miles off the shore of Port Hueneme, a small middle-class community in Southern California.

Sanchez joined about 300 family members and friends from the Pacific Northwest, California and elsewhere as well as about 200 Ventura County residents at a dedication ceremony that was somber yet uplifting — much like the monument.

The 12-foot-tall bronze sculpture is the product of more than two years of labor by victims' families determined to give something to others even though so much had been taken from them.

Paige Stockley, of Seattle, who lost her parents, Tom and Peggy Stockley, on the flight, said she plans to work on establishing a second Flight 261 monument for Seattle, possibly on Port of Seattle waterfront property near Myrtle Edwards Park.

Sanchez supports that idea but will step back and let others make it happen.

"It's taken a lot of energy to stay plugged into this," Sanchez said. "It's time to kick back and spend time with my family."

Her husband, John, said he suspects yesterday's monument dedication will result in the diffusion of family members who grew close in planning the project.

The late-afternoon ceremony on the beach, timed to correspond with the moment of the crash, took place under California sunshine. Colorful bursts of refracted light peeked through a thin layer of clouds as three Coast Guard cutters, including one that helped in the rescue effort three years ago, floated close to shore. The sky was lined with trails of white vapor left by airplanes taking off from Los Angeles International Airport, about 60 miles down the coast.

Flight 261, with Seattle as its final destination, crashed at 4:22 p.m. on Jan. 31, 2000, before it could make an emergency landing at the Los Angeles airport, killing all 88 aboard. A mechanical failure caused the accident, although the National Transportation Safety Board cited Alaska's faulty maintenance practices as a contributing factor.

Locals came to the ceremony in beach hats and sandals and set up lawn chairs in the sand. Many family members wore polo shirts or summer dresses to stay cool.

The families offered a succession of thanks to local officials who assisted with the \$350,000 monument, which was helped by a \$300,000 donation from the airline and \$45,000 from Alaska employees. They recognized Port Hueneme Mayor John Sharkey and the City Council, which donated the spot on the city's 50-acre beach park where the sundial was installed.

In turn, Sharkey welcomed them "as family, literally, because you are part of our community."

The ceremony climaxed with the reading of each victim's name. A bell rang once for each name and then a family member or designee walked toward the monument to place a single white rose on the edge of the 20-foot-diameter concrete base of the sundial. After laying the rose, each family member joined a circle around the sundial, clutching the hand of the person alongside.

Steve Campbell, monument project manager and former Port Hueneme police chief whom Alaska hired to assist the families, said the circle mirrored those that family members have formed during their monthly get-togethers in Seattle.



As names were called, the same Coast Guard helicopter that participated in the search for survivors three years ago flew back and forth over the sea.

As a bagpiper played, the families walked in procession to the beach, many arm in arm, some barefoot in the sand. There, they threw flowers into the tide. Many wept.

Memorial designer artist James "Bud" Bottoms, who was joined at the ceremony by three of his actor sons, called his work a "culmination of many minds, many hands and especially many hearts."

At the morning Mass, arriving family members accepted white carnations. They surveyed placards containing pictures of the victims and icons that served as reminders of their personalities and passions: a guitar, pretzels and beer, hiking boots, a soccer ball, an easel.

Stockley, who is in the Pacific Northwest Ballet orchestra, played Bach suites on her cello as families entered the church.

"I played at my parents' funeral," she said. "It's easier to play than not. If I'm not playing, I have to confront my loss."

Not all of the observances occurred in Southern California.

In Seattle yesterday, one family member planned to light 88 candles at her home in memory of all the victims. A group of old college friends whose social circle was broken by the crash planned to have a toast at a University District pub where the gang used to hang out.

"It's been a long time, three years," O'Reilly said during the Mass, attended by about 250 family members. "But I'm sure for many of you, it seems like yesterday. That is the nature of love. That is the nature of pain."

Source: <http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=20030201&slug=memorial01m>