

Flight 261: A time for remembrance

By Stuart Eskenazi
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PORT HUENEME, Calif. — Hueneme is a local Indian word meaning "resting place."

The peaceful surfside town that adopted the name, pronounced wy-NEE-mee, looks out upon the final resting place for the 88 victims of the crash of Alaska Airlines Flight 261. For many families left behind, this is a place to remember, to search for meaning and to grieve.

Some 350 relatives and friends will gather today on the beach, 60 miles northwest of Los Angeles and 8.5 miles from where the Seattle-bound jet plunged into the Pacific Ocean three years ago. There, under blue skies, they will dedicate a monument of remembrance, a bronze sundial that will cast its shadow across an inlaid bronze heart at exactly 4:22 p.m. every Jan. 31 to commemorate the time of the crash.

Pam Sparks of Enumclaw, mother of 20-year-old Ryan Sparks, who died on the plane with his fiancée, Meghann Hall, clutched the heart close to her own yesterday as families gathered at the memorial to practice for today's ceremony. At 4:22 p.m. this afternoon, Sparks will embed the heart into the base of the sundial, within the perfect line of its shadow.

The monument is a tribute to the lives of loved ones but also an expression of gratitude from the families to a community that has never stopped grieving with them. "The dedication marks a milestone," said Earlene Shaw of Enumclaw, whose husband, Donald, was on the flight. "I see it as the last real public farewell."

The \$350,000 monument has helped draw the families together, providing them a sense of purpose at a time when little has made sense. Planning for it began within this community two days after the 2000 crash, when Flight 261 families were still reeling from the loss.

Resident Kim Gunter, a dental hygienist, showed up at the Ventura County Community Foundation office in nearby Camarillo with a \$100 check to launch a campaign to build a memorial to the victims of Flight 261. The foundation, a local charitable institution, had fielded several calls from people in the community wanting to help.

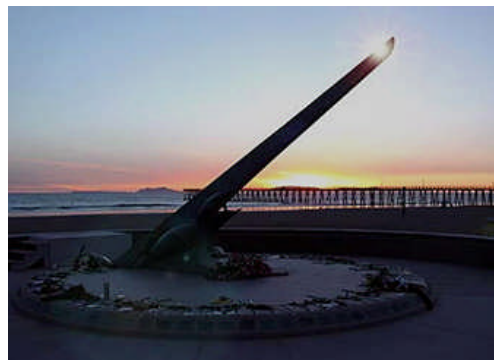
The donations were funneled through the foundation, including the largest: \$300,000 from Alaska Airlines. The Federal Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 obliges Alaska to contribute toward a memorial, but the law doesn't specify how much. Alaska is not legally obligated to pay anything.

Some Flight 261 families find the amount of Alaska's donation generous, but a few have opted not to participate in the monument dedication because they want nothing to do with the airline. Lawsuits against Alaska have been filed on behalf of the families of all 88 victims, and about half have settled out of court. The rest are scheduled for trial in June.

A National Transportation Safety Board report this month identified the airline's maintenance practices as contributing to the mechanical failure that caused the crash. The MD-83 jetliner, which had departed from Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, with stops scheduled for San Francisco and Seattle, failed to reach Los Angeles International Airport for an emergency landing.

While Alaska has contributed money toward the memorial, the company has otherwise demurred. Spokesman Jack Evans declined to comment on the airline's contribution out of respect for the families. Alaska and Horizon Air employees, who lost 12 co-workers in the crash, donated an additional \$45,000 toward the monument. Enumclaw's Shaw, 67, rented a place near the beach for the month surrounding the first anniversary, an attempt to pull herself together and stay close to her husband.

Jay Ryan of Covina, Calif., regularly walks to the end of the Port Hueneme fishing pier and, when no one is watching, talks aloud to his brother Terry, sister-in-law Barbara and nephews Pat and Jim, all of whom were from the Seattle area.



When it came to remembering their collective loss, "the families wanted to take charge of the memorial," said Jan Penna-Crane, of Kenmore, whose 27-year-old daughter, Deborah Penna, perished in the flight.

But they needed help, so Alaska hired a facilitator hand-picked by the families — then-Port Hueneme Police Chief Steve Campbell, who the families got to know after the crash. When the first families started arriving here the day after the crash, makeshift memorials already lined the beach. Campbell eventually gathered the mementos — teddy bears, banners, letters, rosaries, crosses and lots of flowers — and stored them in the evidence room at the police station and in his garage at home.

Campbell dried and shredded the flowers and Shaw made them into potpourri, which she distributed to some relatives. The rest of the mementos have been buried in a vault beneath the concrete base of the sundial.

When Campbell, who now lives in Bellevue, became manager of the monument project, families marked the occasion by giving him a construction hard hat.

The families designated Penna-Crane and her husband, Tom Crane, to chair the monument-planning committee. She received messages from relatives, describing what they wanted the monument to represent. A place to remember, honor and mourn. A sacred place to meditate and pray. A reminder that even in today's advanced world, things can still go wrong.

The families also wanted a monument that conveyed their appreciation to Port Hueneme's 23,500 residents. Immediately after the crash, commercial fishermen from the area combed the waters, vainly searching for survivors.

When all hope for rescue was lost, they helped in the grisly recovery and salvage operation.

"The community embraced us and helped us grieve," Penna-Crane said. "These people opened their hearts to us when we needed it most. How could we turn our backs on them?"

The city accepted their gift, donating the spot on the beach where the sundial was installed in November and giving the families tremendous freedom in designing the city's most prominent piece of public art.

"It's very impressive," said Lynne Navis, who with her husband, Larry, stopped by the sundial yesterday to admire the new addition to their beach. "This is a very neat thing but, you know, it's also very sad reading the names on all of those plaques."

The sundial's 20-foot diameter concrete base is surrounded by 88 small plaques bearing the names, age and hometowns of each of the victims of Flight 261. Leaping from the base is a family of three dolphins, cast in bronze. The dolphin has a spiritual connection for some of the families.

Jay Ryan was on a chartered boat that brought about 30 relatives to the crash site during the first anniversary. Dolphins surrounded the craft and put on a show.

"It was the darnedest thing I have ever seen," Ryan said. Local mariners familiar with these waters told Ryan they had never seen anything like it before.

As yesterday's run-through on the beach came to a close, the families saw the fins of a family of dolphins that had come close to the shore. They must have come, Penna-Crane said, to bless the artist's work.

From an initial pool of 48 submissions, the families voted overwhelmingly for the sundial design, a creation of Santa Barbara artist James "Bud" Bottoms. He and seven other finalists had traveled to SeaTac, on their own expense, to meet the families and make a pitch for the honor.

"It was a great feeling to win the competition, but it also meant that a great responsibility was put upon me," said Bottoms, 75, the father of Hollywood actors Timothy, Joseph, Sam and Ben. "I wanted the sculpture to say to the family members that although bodies are gone, the spirits of those they lost live stronger within them now. The great challenge for them is to move ahead with their own aspirations in life because they now also carry the aspirations of those they lost."

Penna-Crane can't help wonder if Bottoms' selection was meant to be. Bottoms had created a fountain, featuring dolphins, installed outside Puerto Vallarta's City Hall. Most of the passengers aboard Flight 261 were returning from vacations in that Mexican resort city.

"It is highly likely that all or most of our loved ones who were on that plane either walked by or actually admired his fountain while in Puerto Vallarta," said Penna-Crane, who is certain that is the case for her daughter Deborah, who was herself an artist.

"I find it mystical that possibly the last thing of artistic beauty that my daughter set her eyes upon was made by the same man who has created this memorial to our loved ones."