

Remembering the victims of Flight 261: 'No one would believe how hard this is'

By Sally Macdonald

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PORT HUENEME, Calif. - Karla Gilbert spent part of yesterday walking a sparkling ocean beach, going over the words to "Amazing Grace," a grief offering to a much-loved aunt.

In a few hours she'd be singing it aloud, her soft soprano voice carrying the pain of 750 others who have gathered this week in the towns off the Southern California coast to mourn loved ones who were lost a year ago today when Alaska Airlines Flight 261 dived into the sea, killing all 88 aboard. Many of those aboard, such as Gilbert's aunt, Janice Stokes of Ketchikan, were returning to the Seattle area after vacationing in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico.

Yesterday family members and friends began two days of memorial services and programs to help them put the first year of grief behind them. The anniversary events are paid for by Alaska Airlines and planned by the family members, many of whom have been meeting regularly since the crash.

Many started the day by boarding private yachts to motor out to the crash site, about 10 miles offshore. Some, including Gilbert's family, toured a Navy hangar where salvaged shreds of metal and fabric - all that is left of the plane - are being stored and studied. In the afternoon they took charter buses to a cemetery where they buried the last unidentified remains taken from the ocean floor.

It was at that service where they would hear Gilbert, 16, a junior at South Whidbey High School, sing to ease her loss.

"Auntie Jannie was always there for me, hoping the best for me," Gilbert said wistfully as she walked the beach. Stokes' fiancé, Malcolm Branson of Ketchikan, also died in the crash.

"She'll be there with me, always, in my heart," said Gilbert.

"But this whole thing is so ugly. The wreckage. I didn't know the parts would be so little. And so many. No one would believe how hard this is. It's just really hard."

Paige Stockley had a similar reaction. "I thought there would be parts that would be recognizable as coming from a plane, but there weren't," she said.

She and her sister, Dina Moreno, lost their parents, Peggy and Tom Stockley of Seattle. Peggy Stockley was active in the houseboat community, and Tom Stockley was a *Seattle Times* columnist.

This was the first visit for many of the relatives to these beach communities, where fishermen, pilots of other planes and beachcombers watched with horror as the jetliner plummeted into the sea off Anacapa Island and sank into approximately 650 feet of water.

Stockley has visited several times since the crash and says the communities are "beginning to feel like home to me."

Some mourners were frustrated late yesterday morning when a stiff breeze caused a few crash-site trips to be canceled.

"We'd hoped to see it, to try to get some closure," said Pete Manning of Seattle, whose sister, Sarah Pearson, died, along with her husband, Rodney, and daughters, Rachel, 6, and Grace, 22 months. "This is just one steppingstone to putting this behind us. It'll take some time. It's been a year of a lot of good memories and a lot of tears."

Many of the mourners are becoming exasperated with authorities who have yet to determine what caused the crash.

"This is kind of a double-edged sword for me," said Mark Hall of Enumclaw, whose daughter Meghann was killed along with her fiancé, Ryan Sparks, also of Enumclaw. "It's getting some closure, and looking at the wreckage was very hard, very painful. But it's also reality."

"But for the family members, this has been like a homicide. ... We have heard nothing from the FBI, nothing from the grand jury. I'm not saying nothing is happening with the investigation, but the silence is just deafening right now."

While the families were mourning throughout the day yesterday - and there are more services planned for today - the beach towns were finding their own crash reminders.

Marie and Joseph Nagy of Oxnard, walking their dachshund, Samson, came upon a memorial in the sand. Someone had piled up beach sand into a U-shaped berm and planted it with purple irises and birds of paradise, with a dried sand dollar in the middle. "I find that tragedies like this affect many people," said Marie Nagy. Her son had taken his fishing boat out into the channel to help scoop wreckage from the sea right after the crash.

"Now he questions God, and that worries me a lot. I used to think you had a chance in the water, but now I know better. I think about it a lot."

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