



Photo credit: Gordon M. Grant | Heidi Snow, who lost her fiancé in the TWA 800 crash, in East Hampton. (July 15, 2011)

After her loss, she helps others to cope

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For Heidi Snow, it started 15 years ago today with a phone call: TWA Flight 800 had gone down. Michel Briestroff, the man she loved and intended to marry, was dead, along with 229 others -- everyone aboard the Paris-bound jet that night.

The days that followed, as she was holed up in an airport Ramada Inn in Queens with victims' families, were a kind of hell. Leaving that place, returning to the familiar patterns and places of her old life, was worse. It seemed there was nothing to go back to.

What saved Snow, who was 24 when the plane exploded, was saving other people.

After the crash, she founded a nonprofit -- Aircraft Casualty Emotional Support Services -- that offers the services of highly specialized grief counselors -- people who suffered their own plane crash-related loss.

She tells the story of the group and some of those it has helped in a book she co-wrote and edited, "Surviving Sudden Loss: Stories From Those Who Have Lived It." The book is scheduled to be published this fall.

"Everybody in here has lost someone before their time," Snow said. "Their lives changed in an instant."

The chapter headings of "Surviving" suggest a grim variety: While most are aircraft disasters, there are also contributions from people who lost loved ones to construction accidents, acts of terrorism and sudden infant death syndrome.

The goal is to give readers -- many of whom will be caregivers or struggling through loss themselves -- a sense of "what's ahead of you," from people who have already experienced it.

That was the idea behind the nonprofit as well. She at first sought help from a group of families of those killed when Pan Am Flight 103 was destroyed over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988.

"Right when I walked in, these people got it. These people knew where I was coming from," she said. "It had been eight years for them at that point, and I asked the Pan Am families if they would be willing to help mentor us from TWA. We began pairing mothers to mothers, siblings to siblings . . . It really worked."

John Seaman, of the support group Families of TWA Flight 800, said he had spoken with Snow about the book, though he had not yet read it.

It could be especially helpful for survivors uncomfortable with joining a support group, he said.

Snow is 39 now, married to the man who helped design her group's website, accesshelp.org. They live in San Francisco with their two young children. She has built a new life.

She works for her nonprofit full-time, fundraising and answering the 800 number that survivors call in the days, weeks -- sometimes years -- after a catastrophe. She has trained staff from JetBlue, Southwest Airlines, Air New Zealand and Qatar Airways on caring for family and friends of victims.

She flew to New York on Thursday and plans to attend tonight's memorial service for TWA Flight 800 at Smith Point County Park.

"It's no longer about me," she said. "It's based on my loss, but as time has gone on, it's become about the people we help."