

Helping hand in time of tragedy

Nonprofit supports loved ones of plane crash disaster victims

BY JAMIE CASINI
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For many people, it is impossible to imagine. A late night phone call or knock on the door letting you know that your loved one has suddenly been killed in a plane crash.

San Francisco resident Heidi Snow, 32, knows this scenario all too well. Snow's fiancé was aboard TWA Flight 800 on July 17, 1996. The Boeing 747 bound for Paris, exploded shortly after takeoff from New York's Long Island, killing all 230 people on board.

"My mom called me two hours after he left to get on the flight and said, 'A plane just blew up going to Paris.' ... That night I just waited. You hold onto any hope you can when something happens so suddenly," Snow said.

At the time of her fiancé's tragic death, Snow was living in

New York and inquired about a support group for loved ones of plane crash victims with the mayor's office.

When she found out there was no such support group, Snow — with the help of former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and Governor George E. Pataki — founded ACCESS, Air-Craft Casualty Emotional Support Services in the fall of 1996.

"I thought it was important to start matching families up — sibling to sibling or mother to mother — as a support network," Snow said.



Snow

Throughout the past eight years, ACCESS has provided peer bereavement counseling to hundreds of members who have lost loved ones in commercial, private and military air disasters, including 9/11, many of whom are in the Bay Area.

The nonprofit organization that began in New York has re-

cently established offices in San Francisco.

"It was a natural progression to have a presence out here because the Bay Area is the second largest area we serve," Snow said.

One of the many Bay Area residents who has been touched by ACCESS is San Francisco attorney Rachel Courtney. The 32-year-old lost her father in a private plane crash in 1999. Courtney found ACCESS while doing an Internet search for support groups shortly after her father's death.

"Heidi called me back and helped me connect with a woman in Pennsylvania who had lost her dad in a crash," Courtney said.

Talking to someone who has been through the same experience is extremely imperative to the healing process, according to Snow and Courtney.

Three years after Courtney's father died, she became one of now 250 ACCESS volunteers. As a mentor, Courtney has been connected with two other women who have lost their fathers in

plane crashes.

While she still talks to one person, the other only kept in touch for a few months.

"Sometimes you can make long-term connections and sometimes people also talk for a brief period to just get through the time," Courtney said. "The communication level is governed by the person who needs support."

Courtney and all ACCESS mentors participate in a training program to best prepare them on supporting others who have lost loved ones as a result of air disasters.

"While this is a really sad topic, a lot of positive things have come out of this tragedy for me, like the friendships and support. We do this because we want to help," Courtney said.

To learn more about ACCESS and its expansion into the Bay Area, an event is being held Thursday from 7 to 9 p.m. at 55 2nd St. in San Francisco. For tickets or more information, contact www.accesshelp.org or (415) 221-3774.