

# Through pain, spurring change

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Luz Mari Pelaez first heard about the crash of TWA Flight 800 from a news report that flashed across her television screen. After failing to get through to the airline by phone, she drove straight to Kennedy Airport. That's where her daughter and son-in-law, Virginia and Eric Holst, had boarded the flight, and there, she figured, she'd get information.

All through that horrific night, she got no useful news.

As the evening evolved into a maelstrom of chaos and confusion, airline employees first told Pelaez to drive to the Coast Guard station in East Moriches. But when she found roads impassable because of barricades, police instructed her to go to a hotel in Bohemia for a family briefing that she said never happened. Finally, exhausted in the predawn darkness, she went to the only place where she thought she could get answers.

She went to her church.

"I don't know how I didn't go crazy that night. It was the most awful experience," said Pelaez, of Manorville.

## Unanswered questions

As if the loss of their children, parents and spouses were not enough, those left behind by the disaster felt they were victimized again, by a lack of information and courtesy.

Determined to change that, they evolved into a significant political force that prompted changes in federal law that improved how families were treated, and even boosted the monetary recovery from such a loss.

That legacy is one of the most tangible impacts of the disaster. The TWA family organization, which still exists today, sends out newsletters two or three times a year to keep families abreast of any aviation law changes. Like other relatives turned activists — from Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-Mineola), who lost her husband in a shooting rampage on the Long Island Rail Road, to mothers of victims of drunken drivers — the group adds a human voice to political and policy debate.

One of the cornerstones of the TWA legacy was passage of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act in 1996. The act set forth procedures for improving aviation security and

for informing and helping victims' families after crashes. Among the tenets:

- It prohibits aviation lawyers from contacting victims' families for 45 days to give them time to grieve.
- It requires airlines to set up a crash disaster plan to effectively inform relatives after a disaster.
- It requires private briefings from federal investigators; transportation, lodging and other assistance at airline expense; a memorial service; and the return of personal effects.

"The law recognized the human loss, not just the people who were killed but the thousands of other lives that were destroyed," said John Seaman, head of the Families of TWA Flight 800 Association. His niece, Michele Becker, 19, was

killed in the crash.

Throughout the crisis, the now-defunct airline maintained that it was doing its best, providing employee escorts to each family and trying to keep them updated.

"The families themselves really brought the issues to my attention," said Jim Hall, who was chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board when the crash occurred.

As a result of the TWA crash and other disasters, the training academy of the NTSB, which investigates airline crashes, now teaches a regular, weeklong course on family disaster assistance, designed to help officials from airlines and transportation agencies work with families.

This fall, the academy will host a daylong seminar on the 10-year history of the Family Disaster Assistance Act.

The family group has been active in pushing for a safety change that would prevent the buildup of flammable vapors thought to have caused the explosion of Flight 800. While the FAA hasn't passed an industry-wide rule on it, the group is convinced it helped persuade parts of the industry to include that feature in new planes.

"We've had a representative on an FAA committee and we've convinced the industry to support the position of inerting the fuel tanks so this wouldn't happen again. It was like turning a battleship around," said Seaman.

## Show of support

The families' reach has been felt in other ways. In 1997, Heidi Snow, then 27, who lost her fiancé, Michel Breistroff, on Flight 800, set up a support network that has helped dozens



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Heidi Snow's fiancé was killed in the Flight 800 disaster.

of people who have lost relatives in subsequent crashes. AirCraft Casualty Emotional Support Services, or ACCESS, has a Web site at [accesshelp.org](http://accesshelp.org) and has consulted airlines on how to treat families in the aftermath of a crash.

"It was really important that something positive come out of

this experience," Snow said from her home in San Francisco. She has since gotten married.

As for Pelaez, who still flies frequently to visit her son who lives in Paris, she said she's glad the families had some impact.

"Thank God the laws have improved," she said. "Still, there's more that can be done."

**John Seaman, who heads the Families of TWA Flight 800 Association, examines a sculpture placed last month at the TWA Flight 800 memorial at Smith Point County Park in Shirley.**