

The weekly interview

Heidi Snow

Survivor of grief starts ACCESS, supports others affected by air tragedies

By Lucas Knowles
Staff Writer

Heidi Snow's life changed forever on July 17, 1996. It was the date her fiancé Michel Breistroff was one of the 230 passengers killed when TWA Flight 800 exploded shortly after takeoff from New York's Long Island.

"I think I aged twenty years that day," Snow said. After the tragedy, Snow's family in Scarborough, as well as her friends in New York City, where she lives, tried to help her through the grieving process. But something was missing from their comforting words. As big a help as her friends and family were being, they could not truly relate to having someone they love die suddenly in a plane crash.

After Flight 800 went down, Snow tried to get in touch with groups that helped support people in her situation. There were none in New York City.

It was then Snow heard about a group that was meeting in upstate New York. The group was comprised of people who had lost loved ones in a Pan Am Flight 103 eight years prior. She could not drive herself there, but a kind person drove down to New York City and took her up to Albany.

Snow found that the people attending that meeting were feeling the same grief and pain she was.

"Even though it had been eight years since the crash, fifty or sixty people were still at the meeting," Snow said. "It made me feel like, 'I don't have to be over this as fast as I think.'"

It was at that meeting that Snow passed around a sheet of paper. On that piece of paper, people wrote the name of who they lost, their phone number, and the relationship to the person they lost in the plane crash. This gave her an idea. She thought that maybe matching people who lost loved ones in plane crashes with each other would be a great service.

"It was then that I started thinking that this could be a real non-profit group," Snow said.

After the Red Cross volunteer who was assigned to her when Flight 800 crashed had to leave after two weeks, Snow's idea materialized even more. After two weeks helping people through a disaster, Red Cross volunteers have to move on. This was a shock to Snow, considering she

had shared everything with this volunteer.

"They said 'we're shutting down now, time to go on to the next disaster,'" Snow said.

Snow wanted to know if there was anybody she could call to fill the void left by the Red Cross volunteer, but she was given no numbers to call. Snow wanted to change that immediately. She didn't want people to experience that kind of cut-off again.

It was in October of 1996 that Snow started up ACCESS, or Air Craft Casualty Emotional Support Services. ACCESS pairs up people who have suffered the grief of losing loved ones in plane crashes with other people who have suffered a similar fate.

Among other things, materials from ACCESS are distributed by Red Cross grief site counselors. It gives affected people information on how to contact ACCESS, and what they can do if they need more help to get them through their grief.

"That is one of the reasons I founded ACCESS," Snow said. "To let people know that they don't have to go home by themselves and they never have to leave a situation like that empty handed."

ACCESS has grown tremendously in the six years since its inception. They now employ over 250 grief mentors on a volunteer basis, and have brought together several people. They try to provide every person that calls them with the most accurate match possible.

It is not only people affected by recent air crashes that ACCESS helps. One of Snow's favorite matches involves two people affected by a plane crash over 40 years ago.

"It was a perfect match," Snow said. "Both were grown-ups, both were in New York, and they both had been affected by the same plane crash. We connected them 40 years to the day the crash happened."

Even though Snow would like to keep the work of ACCESS primarily related to air disasters, she felt a need to help people affected by the tragedy of last Sept. 11. She was not in New York that day, but went back as soon as it was safe to help with the support effort.



ACCESS founder Heidi Snow

ACCESS has both a toll-free helpline and a web site. They have just had a video made called *For Survivors, By Survivors*. They also send out a newsletter, telling the stories of people they have helped. ACCESS is a non-profit group, and does lots of fund-raising.

"It's an amazing group of volunteers," Snow said. "Everybody involved wants to be there."

The Web site for ACCESS is located at www.accesshelp.org and the toll-free help line is 1-877-227-6435. They are always accepting donations.

Snow has recently gotten married, and is starting another chapter in her life. But she will always have the pain of losing a loved one in a plane crash, and hopes that she can help people in the same situation.

"Grief is not set in stone," she said. "You never know what will happen next."