

# JOURNAL

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## COPING WITH LOSS



JOSH STEPHENSON/JOURNAL

Heidi Snow, the founder and executive director of Aircraft Casualty Emotional Support Services, talks about the services her organization offers to help surviving families cope with the loss of a loved one from an air disaster. Snow began the support group after her fiancé was killed in the crash of TWA Flight 800 in New York.

## Support Group for Air Disasters

■ *Woman began work after her fiancé was killed in crash of TWA Flight 800*

BY MORGAN LEE  
Journal Staff Writer

The calls for help from friends and relatives of the dead can hit a peak five months after a major airplane disaster, according to Heidi Snow, the founder and executive director of Aircraft Casualty Emotional Support Services.

ACCESS volunteers comfort people whose lives have been interrupted or

forever changed by air disasters, stepping in to provide long-term support after the Red Cross departs and the media move on.

Snow, a New Yorker who also spends time at a house outside Santa Fe, is the sole staff member helping to connect hundreds of volunteer "grief mentors" with people who call looking for help.

She helps connect people to those with similar experiences, matching widows to widows, orphans to orphans. She brings together people who know what it's like to have a funeral without a body.

"It's there if they want it — like a security blanket," Snow said Tuesday

of the services provided by ACCESS' 250 volunteer grief mentors.

Calls related to the Sept. 11 attacks on New York and the Pentagon were still picking up Monday when news of another disaster arrived: the crash of American Airlines Flight 587 with 260 people on board in a residential neighborhood in New York.

Snow leaves on a red-eye flight today, bound for the Jacob Javitz Conference Center in Manhattan, a staging ground for emergency services.

There, she'll join two volunteers already handing out information about ACCESS to people who may call back in a week, a month or a year

— whenever they need it most. She already has been checking on ACCESS mentors who speak Spanish to field calls from families of passengers aboard Flight 587, which was bound for the Dominican Republic.

The ACCESS audience multiplied on Sept. 11., when thousands of people on the ground disappeared like victims of a plane crash.

Snow said she fielded a call on the day of the attack from a woman in Washington state who lost six family members in the World Trade Center.

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# Group Provides Support After Air Disasters

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Beyond direct counseling, ACCESS is helping families of the victims set up their own support groups by acting as a clearinghouse for information and contacts.

Snow knows first-hand what the families and friends of victims will face over the long haul.

It's been a little more than five years since Snow's fiancé, Michel Breistroff, boarded Paris-bound TWA Flight 800, which crashed over Long Island Sound.

Initially, Snow found support and sympathy in every direction.

"Everybody's in emergency mode saying, 'I'm here,'" Snow said.

And then they were gone — even a trusted friend from the Red Cross, Snow said.

The 24-year-old, who appeared on "Larry King Live" with New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, found herself alone.

"I was just completely alone," Snow said. "I was angry. What do you mean you just leave me now?"

She found enduring support through a group tied to victims of Pan Am Flight 103, which was

bombed in 1988 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

Unable to shake off her fiancé's death — even after his body was recovered — Snow found important companions among the Pan Am group, which still was meeting after eight years.

Today, Snow's story is material for ACCESS fliers and an Internet site, [www.accesshelp.org](http://www.accesshelp.org).

The group has helped air-disaster survivors and people who lost loved ones in air disasters dating to 1958, including people affected by helicopter and small plane crashes.

Snow, who worked at a hedge fund in New York before the 1996 TWA crash, said she plans to stick with her new career.

"I don't see it ending anytime," Snow said. "I don't know anybody that would want my job."

An application by ACCESS for funding through the September 11 Fund is pending, Snow said.

Donations to ACCESS currently are being matched through a \$60,000 grant from the Jacob and Valeria Langeloth Foundation to train volunteer grief mentors. ACCESS is located at 1594 York Ave., Suite 22 New York, N.Y. 10028.