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"Death parted us first. Our lives have been destroyed just as if we were married."

LUCY ALTA OF EAST BRUNSWICK

FIANCÉES ARE LEFT IN A VOID BY 9/11



PHOTO BY THE STAR-LEDGER

Attending the "Fiancées and Domestic Partners of 9/11" meeting on Friday in Metaxas are, facing camera from left, Lucy Alta, Debbie Barrett, Anthony Benghwa and Heidi Snow. The group has 18 members from New York and New Jersey.

With few rights, they gather to ease grief

BY MARY JO PATTERSON

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The scene looked like a typical Friday night party in the suburbs.

In one corner of the room, a pretty young woman held up her engagement ring — a huge diamond — for others to admire. At the other end, a man showed off a photo of himself and his fiancée on vacation, standing close to each other on a hill in Mexico. The muted, tentative conversation of people getting to know each other filled the room.

But suddenly, it became clear that this was no party.

"Every day, my life is a nightmare," one woman was saying, dark eyes filling as she averted her face. Everyone nodded.

This was a support group for fiancées and domestic partners of men and

women who died in the terror attacks of Sept. 11.

Of all the sadness and misery flowing from that day, they say, their situation may be unique. Like the spouses of victims, their lives are shattered. Unlike spouses, they are not family.

In the harsh post-Sept. 11 reality, fiancées and domestic partners have no clear legal ties to those who died, only memories of plans, unfulfilled promises and wrecked dreams.

They also have no claim for compensation. Even those whose lives were financially intertwined with a lost partner are not entitled to the fund the federal government has created for surviving relatives. Whether they could make a claim to an estate in a lawsuit is not at all clear, either.

"In my mind, I had a future, a finan-

cially secure one, and now it's gone," said Lucy Alta of East Brunswick, a member of the support group. Her fiancé, Paul Inzella, 33, was killed at the World Trade Center. Before Sept. 11, they had lived together for a year and were planning an April 11 wedding.

"So many of us were close to repeating the wedding vows. But we didn't get to say 'till death do us part,'" said Alta, a medical claims analyst. "Death parted us first. Our lives have been destroyed just as if we were married."

Her fiancé worked as a systems analyst for Carrier Pityaguid, the bond trading firm that lost 687 employees in the collapse of the Trade Center's North Tower. Within just that firm, the disaster robbed hundreds of children of a parent, created legions of widows and robbed

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SUPPORT

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Fiancées are left in a void by 9/11

sons of parents of their adult children. But it also, Alta said, left 44 people like her.

The "Fiancées and Domestic Partners of 9/11" group has 18 members from New York and New Jersey but is likely to grow, said the founder, Anthony Bengtsons, 56, of Green Brook, a partner in a metal parts company in Cranford.

His fiancée was Lydia Bravo, 38, a registered nurse for Marsh & McLennan who also worked in the North Tower. They're the couple in the photograph in Mexico; Lydia's first day back from vacation was Tuesday, Sept. 11.

Other support groups for family members who lost loved ones that day formed months ago, but it took the fiancées a much longer time to find each other. After all, their names did not appear on any official list.

In October, looking for support in his grief, Bengtsons joined a group at a local church. He still attends but found that the group was tended to focus on the young widows who had become single parents, or bereaved parents of young adults.

"It was wonderful, but I was looking to speak to other people who lost their fiancées and domestic partners, to share some of the grief that we go through," he said. "It's kind of different, because you're not yet married, you've treated a little differently by outsiders sometimes, and there's no family to help with the healing."

Bengtsons and Lydia Bravo met in 1985, got engaged two years ago and planned a wedding this winter. Both had previous marriages and grown children. Together, he said, they imagined a wonderful future. Maybe early retirement and a house at the Jersey Shore.

Then came Sept. 11.

By talking to his fiancée's surviving colleagues, Bengtsons learned the names of a few other fiancées. He contacted them,

began networking online, and by last month found enough people who wanted to meet each other that he launched the group.

Members plan to meet weekly in each other's homes.

Bengtsons, the lone male in the group so far, is not at all uncomfortable at being outnumbered.

"We have so much in common," he said. "We help each other. At this point, when you're out with friends, it's not easy to talk about the Trade Center any more. People want you to get better, talk about other things. In the group, we can speak freely about what happened."

The group's second meeting was held last Friday night, in Monmouth County. Among those present was Heidi Snow, a New Yorker who lost her fiancé in the 1996 crash of TWA 800. Snow went on to form an Internet support group for airline crash victims' survivors.

Debbie Barrett of Red Bank, who had been engaged to marry Brian Cummins, 38, a Cantor Fitzgerald employee, was also there.

"We had merged our lives," she said. "He sold his house and came to my house. We had made a big down payment on another house. Every day, he told me, he reassured me, 'Don't worry about anything.'"

Three weeks before he was killed, over dinner one night, Cummins told Barrett that he had made her the primary beneficiary on his company's \$100,000 life insurance plan.

Yet the proceeds have been paid out not to her, but to Cummins' estate; the firm told her all of its insurance records were destroyed in the collapse of the building Sept. 11, she said.

The only financial aid extended to fiancées or domestic partners (a term that includes both common-law spouses and same-sex partners) of Sept. 11 victims has come from charities, such as the Red Cross, and the New York State Crime Victim Compensation Fund.

Those with expenses they cannot meet are not eligible for money from the federal government's Sept. 11 Compensation Fund, said Brian Drizin, a lawyer in Red Bank. Depending on circumstances, they may be able to sue the estate.

Some victims' kin, however, may voluntarily share their award, Drizin said.

The support group, which hopes to create a Web site, is looking for new members.

Its e-mail address is fiancéesof11@aol.com.



Sharing stories at the meeting on Friday are, from left, Debbie Barrett, Anthony Bengtsons and Heidi Snow. "We have so much in common," Bengtsons said. "We help each other."