

## **Channeling Grief Into Advocacy / Kin of TWA victims fight to help others** **Lauren Terrazzano, STAFF WRITER, NEWSDAY - 07/16/1999**

When she found out in late May that Florida Gov. Jeb Bush had signed a bill freeing aircraft manufacturers from liability in state crashes of planes more than 20 years old, Aurelie Becker flew to Tallahassee, ready for a fight.

"I was infuriated," said Becker of St. Petersburg, who lost her daughter, Michele, in the crash of TWA Flight 800 three years ago when the 25-year-old plane exploded off the South Shore of Long Island. "If they were able to slide it in under the rug here, they'll be able to slide it under the rug in other states."

Bush would not meet with the families of victims, but after a news conference they organized, he took the unusual step of personally asking the Florida Legislature, which was intensely lobbied by Boeing, to repeal the aircraft portion of the bill next year.

Becker, a nurse turned accidental activist, was not alone. For many of the relatives of the 230 people who died on TWA Flight 800 on July 17, 1996, the third anniversary of the crash marks a potent evolution from grief to political advocacy.

The glare of television camera lights has faded. And gone are many of the reporters and news organizations who followed their moves almost incessantly in the days and months after the disaster. There have been divorces and remarriages and new babies, all intermingled with the loss.

But perhaps the most measurable result of the disaster, which still has no official cause, has been the steady political momentum of the TWA family organizations, which still exist today. Like other relatives turned activists, from the likes of Rep. Carolyn McCarthy to mothers of victims of drunk drivers, the groups add an often loud, human voice to political and policy debate.

"It's amazing the direction your life turns. I never envisioned myself in front of TV cameras, pleading a cause," Becker said. The families have lobbied for the grounding of older 747s and have pushed for family members to be part of the investigative process. They've been to Washington to lobby to amend the Death on the High Seas Act, a law that limits liability of carriers if the crash is considered to have happened in international waters. Their persistence helped the amendment pass the House, and the measure will be taken up in coming weeks by the Senate. They were also instrumental in the 1996 passage of the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act, which forced airlines to treat families better. An aide to Rep. John Duncan (R-Tenn.), chairman of the House Aviation Subcommittee, sees the family lobby as a crucial one. "It's a huge priority to respond to these people. They personalize things, and their voices are heard," David Balloff said.

**The families' reach has been felt in other ways. In 1997, Heidi Snow , 27, who lost her fiance on Flight 800 , set up ACCESS, at <http://www.accesshelp.org>, an Internet support network that has helped dozens of people who have lost relatives in subsequent crashes. "They gave me support," said Lynn Ross, 48, of Manhattan, whose longtime companion, Joseph LaMotta, died in the Swissair crash in September over Nova Scotia. Ross used Snow's Internet service to connect with other victims' relatives.**

A group called The Families of TWA Flight 800 Association also established a support fund administered through the Salvation Army that it hopes will help future families of crash victims. And with hawk-like vigilance, the families have become unofficial monitors of the airplane industry, wearing the sometimes conflicting hats of both lawsuit plaintiff and air safety advocate. For their part, some aircraft officials admit to experiencing a similar dilemma. "It's a terrible conflict, and one we find ourselves in at times, as defendants in lawsuits and advocates for aviation safety," said Boeing spokesman Russ Young. "But it doesn't interfere with either of our abilities to promote safer flying."

How much more effective the TWA families have been than other groups remains to be seen.

The TWA families' legacy has been a powerful one, says George Williams, president of a group representing families of victims of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland.

"We've been fighting for 10 years for getting airlines to treat the families of the victims with respect, so when TWA came along, it pushed the issue along because everyone was so highly attuned to these people's suffering," said Williams of Joppatowne, Md., whose son died in the bombing. And despite some of their victories, some members of the TWA group still struggle to define the families' role. "We're not wild-eyed radicals," said John Seaman, a director of the group, who, with a few letters to Long Island legislators and a call to Gov. George Pataki's office in the spring, got a commitment of \$100,000 for a memorial to TWA victims on Smith Point Park. "We just felt that some of the things happening to the families were so unbearable we should do something to make sure it didn't happen to anyone else."

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