



## Grief group for crash families growing internationally

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**NEW YORK** - Heidi Snow lost her fiance on July 17, 1996, when TWA Flight 800 exploded off Long Island. The Red Cross helped loved ones of victims for a short time, but her grieving continued.

Snow found comfort in a meeting of families who lost their own loved ones in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988.

"This woman came over to me. She didn't say a word," Snow recalled. "She hugged me and she started crying. I remember her embracing me and I felt so comfortable. I thought 'OK, these people get it.'"

From that beginning, Snow created AirCraft Casualty Emotional Support Services (ACCESS), which matches grief-stricken relatives of crash victims with others who share their pain. Now nearly a decade old, the organization has a 24-hour hot line and 250 trained mentors.

Now the group also has a program to help companies and organizations prepare their employees to deal with grieving family members if disaster strikes.

Snow, of San Francisco, said the new program was developed after Air New Zealand asked her in 2004 to train its workers to respond to the needs of grieving relatives. Qatar Airways made a similar request, and a law firm that deals with grief-stricken families of plane crashes has inquired about training for its workers, Snow said.

The sensitivity training includes instructions on how to speak to someone who might have lost a relative in a disaster, and how to understand the anguish caused by the often lengthy search for bodies and the cause of a crash.

Snow hopes to share what her group has learned with U.S. airlines, corporations and organizations that respond to disasters.

Since ACCESS was started, families of victims of airline tragedies as far back as 1958 have called for help. "We can never bring their loved ones back, but we can make it easier to get through a day, a moment," Snow said.

Snow, 34, learned firsthand how quickly life can change when Flight 800 exploded in the sky off the south shore of Long Island on its way to Paris, killing her fiance, Michel Breistroff.

"For the first year, it was really unbearable and difficult," said Snow, who has since married. "I still think of him a lot. There isn't a day goes by that I don't think of him."

Snow credits former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, now a member of the ACCESS board, for suggesting she contact Pan Am survivors after the Red Cross shut down its operation within weeks of the 1996 crash, leaving her to find help elsewhere.

Almost immediately, she began her nonprofit organization, which relies on donations to fund a \$120,000 budget.

She matched Pan Am families with Flight 800 families, who later consoled families of 229 people killed when Swissair Flight 111 plunged into the Atlantic on Sept. 2, 1998. The next year, those families consoled relatives suffering after an EgyptAir plane crashed on a flight from New York to Cairo, killing all 217 people on board. Volunteers also were ready to help after four planes were hijacked in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Snow said her reward comes when she sees proof that ACCESS has helped people rebuild lives.

Snow remembered a call from a woman who lost a child on Flight 800. The woman had lost her job, her husband was divorcing her, and she was overwhelmed by the thought of cleaning up the room where her child once slept.

After the group helped her, Snow received an e-mail from the woman.

It read: "I've got my job back, I'm remarried and I've finally cleaned up my child's room."

#### **ON THE NET**

ACCESS: <http://www.accesshelp.org/>