

'Sustained Compassion'

Remembering 5191 a year later

When the Minneapolis bridge collapsed last week, their mayor made a plea for “sustained compassion” on national television. He knew that the community would step up in the immediate aftermath of a tragedy, but he also knew that healing and grieving is a long-term process—something Lexingtonians are all too familiar with a year after the crash of Flight 5191.

The moment I heard of the tragedy of Flight 5191, I immediately thought, “Where are my loved ones? Could any of them be on that plane?”

I grew up near the Northern Kentucky/Cincinnati airport and my father was always traveling, so every time we heard of any kind of air tragedy, we immediately worried, wondering if Dad had—as he always did—hopped on a different flight at the last minute to get home an hour sooner. Those moments of fear always come back to me and I am once again a child, hoping that my daddy’s coming home to tell his jokes, play his piano, and laugh about my mom’s stories of what the kids did while he was away.

I know that on that day, August 27, 2007, there were others who frantically thought the same things. Was my daughter on that flight? Was that my husband’s flight for tomorrow morning’s business meeting? Did my son sleep in and miss his plane? Questions that run through our minds, like those of wild animals in search of basic, instinctive needs. We are all creatures of a greater power, a God, a Universe, and we all have that same need to know...could my loved ones be in danger?

Then the awful news came that 49 people were on board, and yes, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, cousins, aunts, grandsons—every person on that flight had someone watching the news, anxious to hear details but fearful of what the news might bring. All lives were precious; and all lives are treasured; and all their souls’ presence lives in the hearts of those who miss them daily.

WLEX News Anchor Nancy Cox remembers the day of the tragedy as “easily the most demanding day of my career. I had never gone on the air with so little information and stayed on the

air non-stop for that length of time.”

She and husband Tom Kenny (WTVQ) were on the air all day that Sunday. She recalls, “Tom got the call from WTVQ first... he got up and left... I started getting ready right away because I knew I’d be called. It was early on a Sunday morning, so we had no babysitter lined up. I started calling on my way into work.”



WLEX's Nancy Cox anchored the 5191 story for 12 hours, Sunday, August 27, 2006

Logistics had to be navigated, as they would in any house where both parents work; in the Cox-Kenny house, both parents had to spend the day reacting to the tragedy in front of a viewing audience, while still dealing with the nuts and bolts of just finding someone who could watch their kids. She remembers “My regular sitter was out of town...I started calling my backups, most of whom were in church. I finally reached a backup sitter who was visiting her family in

Omaha. She got on the phone with her roommate who I didn't know, but who babysits often. She came to the station to pick up my kids who were snacking and watching tv in the breakroom while I was on the air.” She says, “I ended up turning my children and my van over to someone I'd never met. I gave



WTVQ's Tom Kenny

her the keys to my house and told her I'd be home when I could. That ended up being some 12 hours later.”

The day ended even more sadly than she expected it to. “After anchoring our 5191 coverage all day, I was handed a slip of paper with Pat Smith's name as one of the victims. This was the first name I recognized. We were still live on TV, but our faces were not on camera...I looked to Kathy Stone, our executive producer who handed me the paper, and just said, ‘No.’”

She didn't know Smith well, but had met him through a prospective Habitat for Humanity project, and had “had several phone and email conversations with him. WLEX had planned to send me with Pat and a Habitat delegation from Central Kentucky to India to rebuild one of the villages destroyed by the tsunami. We were going to cover their efforts, showcasing the good they were doing, but also how it was changing local people's lives. Unfortunately, shortly after our decision to go, Hurricane Katrina struck, and station management decided to cancel the trip, believing it would be insensitive to show suffering on the other side of the world when we had so much suffering much closer to home.”

“I could not imagine that someone so giving and selfless could be gone so quickly. It made the whole tragedy all the more real to me.”

“I was instantly sad for all the families I had never met. I had to leave the set for a while, and I shed several tears for Pat and for all those families. Our community lost so much that day.”

She says, “the truly difficult part was the

Guest Essay

by Kim Thomas

sadness I felt for the passengers and their families. After meeting some of the families and learning more about the dead, I realized our community lost so many bright, dedicated, ambitious souls that day who would have had a huge impact on society. We should all grieve for that.”

Everyone had a story.

Some were love stories. Valerie Towles' husband was on the plane. The two met when he delivered pizza to her house. **Randy Towles**, 47, also worked with youth and was a trainer for young soccer and lacrosse players.

Michael Noel Ryan, 55, a stockbroker, was on his way to teach an investment seminar. He came to Kentucky from Ireland in 1981 and met the love of his life, Kathy. Husband and wife danced the night away at Picnic with the Pops the night before the flight.

Kaye Craig Morris, 57, and **Leslie W. Morris**, 72, were active at Central Christian Church, and charities including Chrysalis House, Toys for Tots, and Meals on Wheels. Kaye's remembered for her talent for poetry, and the two were on their way to an Alaska trip. Leslie practiced law for 49 years and was a senior partner at Stoll, Keenon, Ogden He was the 2005 recipient of the Fayette County Bar Association's Henry T. Duncan Memorial Award. Lexington attorney Bill Garmer says, “He was the most worthy adversary I ever faced.” Former Mayor Jim Amato says, “I think about them and miss them every single day.”

For another couple, their story was just beginning

Jonathan Hooker, 27, and his bride **Scarlett Parsley**, 23, were on their way to their honeymoon, having been married just the night before. Having pitched for UK baseball and later minor league ball, the Hookers' storybook wedding occupied the bulk of the national news coverage seeking “human interest” in the tragedy.