

# Daily Herald

Big Picture . Local Focus

## In wake of tragedy, advocates inspire change and hope

By Burt Constable | Daily Herald Staff

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### Local victims of Flight 4184

Pilot Orlando Aguiar, 29, of Round Lake Park

Flight attendant Sandi Modaff, 27, of Naperville

Passengers Mark Bailensen, 32, of Carpentersville

Joseph Begeny, 52, of Grayslake

Jose V. Calderon and Jose W. Calderon, of Chicago

Gino De Marco, 34, of Mount Prospect

Cheryl Dwyer, 41, of Arlington Heights

Kenneth Raymond Ernst of Lake Forest

Gail Kathleen Fulle, 47, of Des Plaines

Patricia Henry, 37, of Glenview

Patrick Henry, 4, of Glenview

Frank Sheridan Jr., of Berkeley

Dana Thompson, 27, of Chicago, formerly of Glenview

Elkin Sithole, 63, of Chicago

Ken Spencer, 53, of Barrington

Not wanting to miss a second of trick-or-treating with his older brother and cousins, 4-year-old Patrick Henry wore his Halloween costume as he boarded the airplane with his mom, Patty, that afternoon of Oct. 31, 1994.

Workers wading through the American Eagle Flight 4184 wreckage scattered across a soybean field near Roselawn, Ind., sobbed as they came across Patrick's small Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle shoes. Proof that he and his mom died together came in the heart-wrenching discovery of his tiny hand still clutching his mother's finger.

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As she approaches the 15th anniversary of that crash, Terri Severin can't erase the chilling details of how her younger sister and nephew were killed. Saturday's annual ceremony at the memorial of crosses lining the rural roadside next to the crash site won't bring her closure any more than the previous 14. But the Arlington Heights woman found a way to honor their memory. Her activism helped lead to new laws and changes in the way airlines handle crashes. Severin's says her new book, "In the Wake of the Storm: Living Beyond the Tragedy of Flight 4184" ([www.inthewakeofthestorm.com](http://www.inthewakeofthestorm.com)) was written "to convey the message of hope."

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"It was the worst weather I can recall on a Halloween," says Severin, who was busy after school that day in 1994 trying to organize a gaggle of trick-or-treaters that included her three kids and some neighbors.

Many suburbanites were glued to "Monday Night Football" on TV, where wicked winds and a freezing rain kept young Green Bay quarterback Brett Favre from completing a single pass in the first half, but the Packers still went on to crush the Bears 33-6 at Soldier Field.

Patty Henry was in Indy to meet with a client of the family's private investigation business. The 37-year-old divorced mom took Patrick, her other child, Jonathon, 7, and an adult friend. Because the flight was overbooked, Patty got Jonathon and her friend on a flight that left 15 minutes earlier. The plan was to meet up at O'Hare and drive to Severin's for trick-or-treating.

As news of a plane crash broke late that afternoon, Jim and Ruth Henry of Mount Prospect feared the worst for their daughter and grandson, and asked Severin to call the airport in Indianapolis to see if their loved ones were on that flight.

"I was actually annoyed because I was busy with Halloween and my kids," recalls Severin. She took comfort in knowing that Patty's tickets to Indy had been with another airline, and that something as awful as a plane crash "simply didn't happen to people in close, loving families like ours."

Every time the phone rang or someone came to the door, Severin was confident it would be her sister apologizing for being late. They always spent Halloween together. The Henry girls were born on Jan. 12, one year apart. They played together, swam together and "were as close as twins," Severin says. "She was my maid of honor. I was hers."

In those days before cell phones and the Internet, it was impossible to find out anything about the flight, Severin remembers. Patty's friend and son Jonathon arrived at O'Hare, waited, and eventually took a cab home without seeing or hearing anything about a crash.

Jim and Ruth Henry drove to O'Hare in a frantic attempt to get information. Severin called the airline's special toll-free phone number scrolling across the bottom of her television.

"I was actually on hold for three hours," says Severin, who by now let bad thoughts "seep into my head."

An American Eagle employee finally took her call.

"I was so relieved," Severin remembers. "Finally, I'll get the confirmation they weren't on that flight."

Instead, the employee took her name, told her they had no information and hung up.

In contrast to Severin nervously waiting for news, the kids massed in the living room, happily dividing their sugary booty. "I sent them to bed knowing their cousins hadn't hooked up with them, and that there had been a plane crash," Severin says.

After five hours in a waiting room at O'Hare, Jim and Ruth Henry met with an American Eagle representative who told them, "There has been a plane crash. It has been confirmed that Patricia Henry and Patrick Henry were on board the flight. There were no survivors."

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The turboprop plane developed an icing problem and plummeted into that Northern Indiana soybean field at about 415 miles per hour, killing all 64 passengers and four crew members.

The days, weeks and years of misinformation, frustration and lack of compassion that followed inspired Severin to strive to change the way our government and the airlines handle plane crashes.

"It was through the work of Terri and other family members that the full scope of the Roselawn tragedy became clear," writes Jim Hall, who served as chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board from 1994 to 2001. "Compounding the devastation from the disaster was the airline's callous behavior."

Severin and other families members weren't told of a mass burial of unidentified body parts. Many personal items recovered in the wreckage were thrown away or not returned when promised. Questions asked of Severin and other family members in the days immediately after the crash focused on any illnesses, bad habits or family genetic history that might have lowered the victims' life expectancies and the airline's settlement.

Severin testified before many agencies studying the crash. After one hearing four months following the crash and cleanup, Severin walked through the field and found wires, a luggage tag, an armrest, a pocketknife, a pearl and even chunks of flesh and bone.

"I didn't know if what I carried in my hand was my sister or my nephew," says Severin, who put the remains in a cooler and notified authorities.

While denying liability for the accident, American Airlines and the French manufacturer of the ATR-72 turboprop plane paid \$110 million in 1997 to settle the lawsuits filed by families of 27 of the 64 passengers and four crew members killed in the crash. The safety board said the flight crew was not responsible for the crash. Other settlements came in other courts. Jonathon, who received some money in that settlement, is now 22 and attends college in Georgia.

"We are terribly sorry that this happened," Anton Valukas, a former U.S. Attorney who was a lawyer for American Airlines, said as the settlement was announced. "We can never compensate you for the loss that you have suffered."

Because of the diligence and determination of Severin and others, Congress passed, and President Bill Clinton signed into law, the Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 and created the Office of Family Assistance. Severin has helped train airline and government officials in how to better handle a catastrophe.

"I honor them for stepping forward and wanting to learn how to do their jobs the best they can do," says Severin, who works in a local high school.

She and her daughter will attend Saturday's memorial service and potluck dinner, put on by members of the Roselawn United Methodist Church, which has befriended the families during the past 15 years.

Severin's Catholic faith assures her that Patty and Patrick are watching from heaven as she and others deal with the constant changes on Earth.

Halloween is different for Severin now, always triggering sorrow. But as she writes in her book, "My ability to accept Patty's lasting presence in my life eases the pain associated with that date, and endows me with the capacity to continue giving life to the memory of my sister and nephew."