

Daily Herald

dailyherald.com

Sunday, May 26, 2024

8 18458 00159 9 \$4.00

152ND YEAR • NO. 225

AMERICAN AIRLINES FLIGHT 191 — 45TH ANNIVERSARY



BRIAN HILL/bhill@dailyherald.com

John Jakubec, retired from the Chicago Fire Department, rings the bell during the memorial Saturday in Des Plaines for the 45th anniversary of the tragic crash of American Airlines Flight 191. Flight 191 is the deadliest non-terrorist aviation disaster in American history.

‘Worst event of my life’

Families, first responders remember the 273 who lost their lives in 1979 crash

BY ERIC PETERSON
epeterson@dailyherald.com

Family members, first responders and others with an emotional connection to the 1979 crash of American Airlines Flight 191 gathered at a memorial in Des Plaines Saturday to mark the 45th anniversary of the tragic loss of 273 lives.

Siblings Kim Jockl, Melody Smith and Jim Borchers were young adults when they lost their parents Corrinne and Bill Borchers, who were on the first leg of a journey to Hawaii.

Though grief is what they shared with the families of 271 others, it was Jockl's telling the story in 2010 to sixth-graders at Decatur Classical School in Chicago where she was assistant



BRIAN HILL/bhill@dailyherald.com

Cyrus Miller of Michigan makes a rubbing of the name of a loved one.

principal that led to there being a memorial at Lake Park.

Ryan Wangman, a member of that class who's already begun a career in journalism, said the fact there was no memorial after so much time galvanized him and his fellow students to action.

See **CRASH** on **PAGE 5**



BRIAN HILL/bhill@dailyherald.com

Kim Jockl, who lost her parents in the crash, reacts during the memorial for the 45th anniversary of American Airlines Flight 191 on Saturday in Des Plaines. The retired principal's students led the effort to get the Memorial Wall and Garden built in Lake Park.



DAILY HERALD FILE, DAVE TONGE

Flight 191 crashed because the left engine fell off right after takeoff on May 25, 1979. This is one of the two other engines.

Crash: 31 seconds of silence mark the length of doomed Flight 191

Continued from Page 1

They connected with government leaders and a landscape company to turn a vision into reality.

"We were moved," Wangman told Saturday's crowd. "We wanted to do something to right a wrong."

The students couldn't have foreseen the impact their actions would have, Wangman said. He now realizes it required kids young enough not to have the sense to take no for an answer to make it happen.

At precisely 3:04 p.m., the audience faced the direction of the runway at nearby O'Hare International Airport to observe 31 seconds of silence — the length of the doomed flight — punctuated by the ringing of a bell.

The names of the passengers, flight crew and the two victims on the ground were then read by those with ties to them or the emergency response.

Among the crowd was William Meskan, wearing the military-style American Red Cross uniform he owned in 1979 when he and his wife were among the representatives of the agency called to the scene from their home in Skokie.

Both regularly responded to disasters, but this one was



BRIAN HILL/bhill@dailyherald.com

Red Cross first responder William Meskan covers his heart during the ceremony Saturday. He is wearing the Red Cross uniform he owned in 1979 when he and his wife were called to the scene from their home in Skokie.

something different, he said.

"It was the worst event of my life, that's all I'll say," Meskan said. "Normally, the Red Cross deals with survivors, but there were none."

Instead, the agency's main task was helping get the victims identified as quickly as possible so their families would have closure, he said.

His wife, a dental hygienist by training, was strongly involved with the dental photographs that made that possible.

Daniel McGinley of Elgin attended the ceremony in memory of his cousin, 22-year-old Eileen Plesa

of Mount Prospect, who'd been a secretary for the Pitney-Bowen Leasing Co., at the time.

He recalls he learned of the plane crash on the day it happened, and that his cousin had been on the flight the next day.

"Just heartbreaking!" McGinley said. "It was just so sad. She was such a beautiful, talented young lady."

As Plesa's name was read among the other victims, McGinley said, "God bless you, Eileen!"

The Rev. Michael Zaniolo, who serves as chaplain for the Interfaith Airports Chapels of Chicago, said a prayer and blessed the memorial wall by sprinkling earth from the nearby crash site.

"We thank you for the blessing of patience," he said. "You have turned our sorrow into joy. You have built a community to be able to support each other. We ask you to continue to watch over us."

Jockl said it's the hope of every bereaved family member that those aboard Flight 191 have reached an ideal destination after all.

The ceremony ended with a guitar-accompanied vocalist singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."



DAILY HERALD FILE

O'Hare Runway 14-Left/32-Right, used since O'Hare opened, was where American Airlines Flight 191 took off before its 1979 crash near Elk Grove Village.

‘Worst event of my life’

Families, first responders remember the 273 who lost their lives in 1979 crash



John Jakubec, retired from the Chicago Fire Department, rings the bell during the memorial Saturday in Des Plaines for the 45th anniversary of the tragic crash of American Airlines Flight 191. Flight 191 is the deadliest non-terrorist aviation disaster in American history. (Brian Hill/bhill@dailyherald.com)



Kim Jockl, who lost her parents in the crash, reacts during the memorial for the 45th anniversary of American Airlines Flight 191 on Saturday in Des Plaines. The retired principal's students led the effort to get the Memorial Wall and Garden built in Lake Park. (Brian Hill/bhill@dailyherald.com)



Red Cross first responder William Meskan covers his heart during the ceremony Saturday. He is wearing the Red Cross uniform he owned in 1979 when he and his wife were called to the scene from their home in Skokie. (Brian Hill/bhill@dailyherald.com)



Flight 191 crashed because the left engine fell off right after takeoff on May 25, 1979. This is one of the two other engines. (Daily Herald file, Dave Tonge)



Family members pause to reflect on the loss of their loved ones during Saturday's memorial for the 45th anniversary of the crash of American Airlines Flight 191 in Des Plaines. American Airlines Flight 191 is the deadliest non-terrorist aviation disaster in American history. (Brian Hill/bhill@dailyherald.com)



People leave flowers at the memorial wall before they gather Saturday for the 45th anniversary of the crash of American Airlines Flight 191 in Des Plaines. (Brian Hill/bhill@dailyherald.com)



Cyrus Miller of Michigan makes a rubbing of the name of a loved one. (Brian Hill/bhill@dailyherald.com)



The Rev. Michael G. Zaniolo, chaplain for the Interfaith Airports Chapels of Chicago, distributes soil from the crash site to the memorial wall during a gathering Saturday for the 45th anniversary of the tragic crash of American Airlines Flight 191 in Des Plaines. (Brian Hill/bhill@dailyherald.com)



American Airlines Flight 191 crashed shortly after takeoff from O'Hare Airport on May 25, 1979, killing 273 people. (Daily Herald file)



In this May 25, 1979 photo, a firefighter hoses down twisted remains of an American Airlines DC-10 plane which crashed and exploded on takeoff from O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. Decades later, the crash of American Airlines Flight 191 moments after it took off remains the deadliest aviation accident in U.S. history. The DC-10 was destined for Los Angeles when it lost one of its engines, killing what investigators later determined were 273 people — all 271 people aboard the jetliner and two people on the ground. (Associated Press file)



O'Hare Runway 14-Left/32-Right, used since O'Hare opened, was where American Airlines Flight 191 took off before its 1979 crash near Elk Grove Village. (Daily Herald file)



In this May 25, 1979, photo, a portion of the landing gear of an American Airlines DC-10 lies in foreground as firefighters and emergency personnel survey the wreckage scene northwest of O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. (Associated Press file)



American Airlines flight 191 crashed just after takeoff from O'Hare International Airport on May 25, 1979. (Daily Herald file, Dave Tonge)



American Airlines flight 191 crashed just after take off from O'Hare Airport on May 25, 1979. (Daily Herald file, Dave Tonge)