

ARE THE PLANES WE FLY MORE AT RISK?

21 lives ended, dreams destroyed

Caitlin Albury

When Caitlin Albury, 12, told her father she wanted to go to Greenville, S.C., he said she would need her principal's permission. God must want me to go on this trip, Caitlin told friends, because everything worked out.

After the crash, her family set up The Caitlin Grace Albury Memorial Fund (www.cocotels.net/alburyfund) to raise money for medical care and education for the people of Abaco in the Bahamas.

**Sylvain Dubois**

Two months after the crash, at 11:30 p.m. on March 17, Emy Dubois was born in Lac Beauport, Quebec. She weighed 7 pounds 2 ounces.

Her father, Sylvain Dubois, 39, had interrupted a family vacation in Florida to fly to Greenville for business. He worked for Bonetti Canada, which manufactures equipment for paper and pulp mills.

His wife, Sonia, was seven months pregnant; their daughter, Eve, was 2.

**Richard "Eric" Fonte**

Eric Fonte, 29, loved firefighting and had arranged his flight so he could be back home in Jacksonville for a meeting of volunteer firefighters.

He was a business development manager for Computer Associates based out of Islandia, N.Y., but lived in Jacksonville with his wife, Andrea, and daughters Victoria Leigh, 3, and Kaitlyn Nicole, 1.

**Gary Gezzer**

When Gary Gezzer, 44, took a job as director of risk for Republic Services Inc., he expected less travel. Instead, he traveled more.

His wife, Jayne, looked forward to weekends when he was home. They had three sons, Gary, Ian and Boris. Before they moved to Coral Springs, Fla., they lived in Pittsburgh, where their boys played sports in the Bethel Park neighborhood and Gezzer coached football.

Keith Coyner, another passenger on Flight 5481, had lived in the same Pittsburgh neighborhood, then also moved to Coral Springs. Their wives wonder whether the men recognized each other.

**Jonathan Gibbs**

Jonathan Gibbs, 27, the first officer, lived in Charlotte. He worked a second job with his father's bridge-building company so he could afford to fly. He made about \$17,000 a year as a co-pilot. Gibbs had many interests: hiking, kayaking, scuba diving, carpentry, real estate. He majored in Spanish in college.

"Sometimes I think he went through so many interests, and was in such a hurry," said his father, Skip Gibbs, "because it was all the time he had."

**Steven Krassas**

In 1999, Steven Krassas and his wife, Robyn, moved to Charlotte, where he worked for GE Capital and she taught fifth grade at Charlotte Latin. A year later, they moved to Richmond, Va. When the plane crashed, Krassas, 39, was working for Fannie Mae financial services company. Friends remembered him as an engaging storyteller.

**Katie Leslie**

Capt. Katie Leslie, 25, was the middle child of five from Arlington, Texas. She was steady on the controls, one first officer said, and always "20 miles" ahead of the airplane.

After the crash, her younger brother Brad stayed in flight school at Louisiana Tech, where Leslie had graduated in 1999. But her housemate Kristie Wook, a pilot for Air Midwest, left Charlotte and quit flying. "My heart," Wook said, "still aches."

**Richard Lyons**

Richard Lyons' scuba diving buddies took some of his ashes and scattered them in the Bahamas where he loved to dive. When the right time comes, his wife, Deidre, will scatter more at his favorite beach in Rye, N.H.

Lyons, 56, of Lynnfield, Mass., was a manager of health and safety at W.R. Grace & Co., where Deidre works. Although he traveled a lot, he found time every day to telephone his grown son, Brian.

**Ima Rae Pearson**

Pearson, who was 72 and went by Rae, worked as a nurse anesthetist for 20 years at the Shriners Hospital in Greenville. If a child died, she went home in tears.

Born in Bluefield, W.Va., she had paid for nursing school in Shelby with money saved by waiting tables. She had a son, two daughters and six grandchildren, and had retired to North Myrtle Beach.

**Christiana Shepherd**

In the fall, before she left for Bob Jones University in Greenville, Christiana Shepherd put her journals in one box. Mom, she said, if I die I want you guys to read these journals so you know who I am.

Christiana, 18, was the second of Doug and Tereasa Shepherd's five children. The Shepherds are missionaries in the Azore islands off Portugal, and Christiana volunteered at her dad's church.

**Joseph Spiak**

After the crash, Joe Spiak's teenage son and daughter kept some of his ashes in two vials the size of salt shakers. When they go away overnight, they take the vials with them. Spiak, 46, grew up in Latham, N.Y., and married his high school sweetheart. He worked 21 years for W.R. Grace & Co. and lived in Acton, Mass.

**Ganeshram Sreenivasan**

Ganeshram Sreenivasan's parents immersed his ashes in the holy rivers of India, the Ganga and Godavari and Krishna. It is Hindu tradition.

Sreenivasan, 23, went to Clemson University to get a master's degree in computer science, then hoped to go to Harvard or Stanford for an MBA.

**Paul Stidham**

Dora Stidham cannot look at photographs of her husband, Paul. She cannot open his closet door in their new house in Dayton, Ohio. She cannot touch his wedding ring. "It marries today," she said, "as much as it did the day it happened."

They had been married 13 years and had two daughters, Alexandra, 12, and Kelsey, 7. Stidham, 46, was director of health, environment and safety with W.R. Grace & Co. "We had just built our dream house," Dora Stidham said. "He lived in it for three weeks."

**Michael Sullivan**

Michael Sullivan of Newtown Square, Pa., told a high school friend shortly after Christmas: I finally have it all. Sullivan, 44, was married, with two children and a successful business, Cape Software.

Some nights before bed, his daughter, Eleni, now asks her mother: Will you do that thing Daddy used to do? Michael and Donna Sullivan used to swing Eleni by her hands and feet and drop her onto the bed. I can't do it, honey, Donna Sullivan tells her. It takes two people.

**Ralph Sylvia**

Ralph Sylvia, 62, retired in 1998 from the nuclear power industry and moved from New York to Ashland, Va., where he started a consulting business. He and Joyce Sylvia had been married 36 years and had a grown son. "These were our golden years," she said.

After the crash, Joyce Sylvia got to know Robyn Krassas, of nearby Richmond, whose husband, Steven, was also on board Flight 5481. "I just felt like we could help each other."



This report on the 21 people who died in the crash of Flight 5481 was written by staff writer Elizabeth Leland.

Nicholas Albury

Nicholas Albury, 21, who was Caitlin's uncle, loved to fish and hunt and garden, and not long after he died, his wife, Michelle, harvested a large crop of sweet potatoes he had planted. They had been married 13 months. He played in the band at his church and hoped to be elected to Parliament in the Bahamas.

**Robin Albury**

Robin Albury, 38, and his wife, Janet, married in 1987 and had two children, Caitlin, who died in the crash, and Joanne, then 9.

"It was very difficult to ever get Robin upset," said friend and attorney David Price of Deerfield Beach, Fla., "or to ever find him in a bad mood, or to ever hear him criticize or speak ill of anyone."

**Sreenivasa Badam**

On his Web site, Sreenivasa Badam wrote: "The difference between history's boldest accomplishments and its most staggering failures is often, simply, the diligent will to persevere."

Badam, 24, scored a perfect 4.0 his first semester at Clemson and, because of that, got financial aid and a teaching assistantship. He sent money to his younger brother in India who was studying veterinary science.

**Mark Congdon**

Mark Congdon, who was 38, always seemed to be holding one of his children in his arms. At the time of the crash, Marcus was 12, Mara, 10, Sam, 8, and Rheanna, 4. He scheduled business trips around their hockey and soccer games. "I thank God I have these kids," Annie Congdon said, "because I have a reason to get up every morning."

Congdon, of Columbia, Md., worked as chief information officer for U.S. Foodservice. Now, if there's a problem in the Greenville office, colleagues ask: "What Would Mark Do?"

**Keith Coyner**

First thing every morning, and the last thing at night, Belinda Coyner presses "Play" on her tape recorder and listens to telephone messages her husband left their daughter before he died: "I'm just calling to say hi... Sorry I missed you... I love you..."

"There's Dad," Coyner tells her cocker spaniels. For six weeks, they raced to the front door to welcome him. By March, Coyner played the tape and the dogs didn't run.

Keith Coyner, 45, of Coral Springs, Fla., was a vice president with General Nutrition Companies and always seemed to be thinking of others. He had two grown sons and a daughter.

**Forrest Stephen DeMartino**

Steve DeMartino was one of the smartest men coworkers ever met. He invented words. DeMartino works, they called them.

He was a photographer, a baker, a biochemist. He loved plants, and carried a bucket and shovel in his truck in case he spotted an interesting wildflower. DeMartino, 48, and his wife, Rebecca Edgerton, lived outside Dayton, Ohio, and worked for Woolpert LLP, a consulting firm with offices in Charlotte.



Mother, daughter struggle with their loss

Flight 5481 from 1A

Twenty-three children lost their fathers in the crash of Flight 5481. Fourteen wives lost their husbands. A grandmother died. A little sister, a big brother, a favorite uncle.

Like the passengers on the plane, the families had no time to brace themselves.

We lost them

Janet Albury had just hung up the phone with US Airways when Joanne, who was 9, arrived home.

Joanne, she said, we lost them. Joanne didn't know what her mother meant. She had come from school. She didn't know why everyone in the house was crying. She had such a bewildered look, Janet Albury had to come right out and say it:

Daddy and Caitlin and Nicholas have been killed in a plane crash.

9-year-old comforts her mom

Janet cannot remember the rest of the day. She did not sleep at all that night.

In the morning, a call came from Charlotte. The medical ex-

aminer needed DNA samples to identify the bodies. Janet and Joanne searched the house, gathering hairbrushes and toothbrushes and combs that Robin and Caitlin might have used.

The next morning, Janet woke in tears, inconsolable. Joanne was sleeping beside her. Janet remembers Joanne turning to her and reciting a passage from Psalm 118 that Janet had often recited when the girls woke with a frown.

Mom, Joanne said, this is the day the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

Nothing was the same

Robin Albury would have turned 39 on Sunday, Jan. 19, 2003. Instead, they buried him and Caitlin and Nicholas that day.

No, Mom, Joanne had protested. You can't do that.

There are going to be many days that are hard, Janet says she told Joanne. One will be the day of the funeral. One will be the day of Dad's birthday. They will be the same day.

One hard day followed another.

The day Joanne went back to school, the principal brought her home about 10 a.m.

The day Janet went back to

How This Story Was Reported

The direct quotes in this four-day narrative came from the cockpit recorder recovered after the crash of Flight 5481. Details about the airplane and its fatal flight came from the flight data recorder and from testimony before the National Transportation Safety Board. Other sources of information included US Airways, Raytheon Aircraft Company, the National Weather Service, and interviews with pilots, eyewitnesses, mechanics, investigators, lawyers, and with families and friends of 19 of the 21 victims.

work, she walked into the hardware store, turned around and walked out.

Even their first day back at the beach didn't turn out how they had hoped.

It was in April, three months after the crash, and Janet thought Joanne needed to get out of the house. She needed to do something fun.

On holidays, Joanne had loved nothing better than to go to the beach with her family and ride on an inner tube pulled behind the motorboat. Caitlin bought a tube in July 2002 just for that.

Janet and Joanne went through the motions by themselves, Janet in the motor boat, Joanne on the inner tube, pretending to have fun. Afterward, Joanne said what

they both were thinking:

It's the first time we've been tubing without Caitlin.

Reliving the crash

On April 10, which would have been Caitlin's 13th birthday, a package arrived from US Airways. Inside were Robin's suitcase and the back brace Caitlin had worn for curvature of the spine.

To get their belongings back, and not Robin and Caitlin, seemed unthinkable.

To get them back on Caitlin's birthday was almost more than Janet could bear.

No one, Janet Albury says, should have to go through what she and Joanne and the other families have gone through. The air-

line industry, she believes, must be made to tighten controls over maintenance. She says she cannot accept what happened, knowing it could have been prevented.

At some moment every day, whether she is driving Joanne to Agape Christian School, or going to church at Bible Truth Hall, or shopping at the grocery store, or lying awake at night, she relives the crash.

At some moment every day, the plane begins to fall and it is as if she can hear Caitlin calling.

Her daughter is calling, and there is nothing she can do.

Rediscovering joy

Joanne misses her dad every day, and she misses her uncle, and there are so many, many times each day that she misses her big sister.

They created fantasy worlds with their Barbie dolls. They play-acted school. They managed a pretend hardware store. They fought as sisters will, but they always found each other again.

With Caitlin gone, some days Joanne doesn't know what to do.

So on Columbus Day in October, Janet took Joanne back to the beach to go tubing behind the motorboat.

Joanne brought along Caitlin's inner tube.

Before the crash, Janet would have driven the boat while Robin faced backward to watch the girls, or Robin would have driven, while Janet watched.

Now Janet had to do both jobs.

She cranked the motor and Joanne skimmed across the water behind her, wind and waves in her face.

When Janet turned around to look, Joanne flung her thumb up, a signal for:

Go faster, Mom.

This time, Joanne was smiling, and that made Janet smile.

For those few minutes, Janet steered and Joanne concentrated on nothing but holding on.

ANNIVERSARY OF CRASH

On Jan. 7 and 8, the anniversary of the crash, families and friends of the victims of Flight 5481 plan to meet in Charlotte to dedicate a monument to those who lost their lives and to bury their unidentified remains.

The ceremonies will be private.