

THE CRASH OF FLIGHT 4184

Dealing with a tragedy

Crash victims linked forever with Roselawn

By JOHN NORBERG
Journal and Courier

ROSELAWN — At the red brick American Legion Post, signs of everyday living — a Friday-night fish fry, a weekend craft show — mingle beneath a flag at half-staff, hanging limp, its wind knocked away.

The signs of everyday life and unimaginable tragedy are as intermingled here as oaks and maples on the tree-lined neighborhood streets.

It's just a few miles from American Legion Post 238 on Indiana 10 to the soybean field south of town where an American Eagle commuter plane — Flight 4184 — crashed last Monday afternoon.

A short time earlier in Indianapolis, 68 people had casually walked onto that plane, bound for Chicago and places all around the world. About 5 p.m., their plane pitched and rolled over Roselawn and fell.

Minutes later, the hearts of Lincoln Township volunteer firefighters sank as they walked through the muddy crash site, helpless to do anything but stare at the wreckage of plane and lives in a field of broken dreams.

Roselawn is a small community where people know one another by name or sight or reputation. The faces and names of the people who died in the crash — names such as Bramley and Ko and Shellberg and Sjoeborg — aren't known to people here.

But the lives that ended near Roselawn are now forever linked with this community, with the everyday routine of people who live here because they like the peace and quiet.

Intense media coverage of

Inside

A six-page special report on Monday's crash of American Eagle Flight 4184.

LEFT: SHATTERED DREAM



Flight 4184

Special Report

the plane crash gradually will ease. But the people who live here always will remember Oct. 31, 1994, and the week that followed.

"Remember and pray for the families of flight 4184," reads a sign outside the Roselawn First Southern Baptist Church.

Pastor Randy Gaskey put those words in place soon after the crash. He has thought of little else since Monday.

"We just can't forget the families and all the volunteers that have helped out this week," he says. "As a church we just want to reach out and do what we can. Next week, or whenever everybody moves out, we were afraid the human factor would be lost. We need to

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By Tom Campbell/Journal and Courier

Pastor Randy Gaskey knows the healing process for Roselawn will be lengthy.

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remember families of the victims for their loss and for the grief they are going through."

He has no plans to take the sign down soon.

'A quiet area'

No community could ever be prepared for something like this.

This farming area is dominated by three Newton County towns — Roselawn, Thayer and Lake Village. No one can say exactly where town boundaries begin and end. About 3,000 people live in the area.

Businesses in Roselawn, the biggest of the towns, are scattered along Indiana 10 west of Interstate 65. There's a small strip mall with an IGA, Fagan Pharmacy, Renfrow's Hamburgers, Prospect Auto Supply.

In residential areas decorated for Halloween, children ride bicycles, and burning damp leaves create curling clouds of smoke with deep, husky smells.

Near the railroad tracks on Indiana 10, across from the co-op elevator, is the Family Restaurant and lounge, owned by Larry Carroll.

Tending bar one afternoon, he stands behind the long counter and talks about his town. He's 69 years old and has owned this business almost 20 years.

"The original town of Roselawn is only about four blocks wide and seven blocks long," Carroll says. "But there are about 18 or 19 little subdivisions around here.

"This is a quiet area. It started building up some when I-65 came through and that's when all these little subdivisions started."

People in the subdivisions do a variety of work, he says. Many work in the steel mills and factories in Gary and Hammond.

"Some are truck drivers, some are carpenters and painters — run-of-the-mill people," he says.

There are three camp sites here where people bring recreational vehicles on weekends and in the summer.

"They come here to get away from it all in the bigger cities," Carroll says. "They come so they can get away from hearing what the neighbors next door are saying about them."

"The joke around Roselawn is, the event of the day is to go down to Larry's and drink coffee and watch Amtrak go through."

Media onslaught

People in town aren't all that happy with reporters, Carroll says. There was a news story here earlier this year about some students wearing hip-hop clothes to North Newton High School. The controversy made national news, but many here

thought it was all kid stuff.

This area is also home to Kenneth Lakeberg, the father of conjoined twins separated in a procedure performed in Pittsburgh. When that story went national, Lakeberg made news himself, admitting he used money donated for the family to buy alcohol and cocaine.

And now the plane crash.

"When we make news," Carroll says, "we really make it."

"The news media is too persistent. They stick their nose in everyone's business. I had 38 of them in here Monday night after the plane crash and they weren't buying anything. They were just running around sticking microphones in people's faces. People left."

A game show is playing on the television above the bar as Carroll thinks about the good things in his town.

"Everything here is good," he says. "I'm here. You can't get much better than that."

Close to home

Not far from Larry's, Anna Baker lives in a trailer that's been enlarged with wood frame construction. She's 87 years old. Her home is white, trimmed in blue, and inside she wears a vest jacket. She has the TV-set on. There are pictures on the wall of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

"They all come by," she says, smiling. "Everybody seems to want to take care of me."

She was born in Terre Haute, but moved here in the early 1960s.

"Back then, Roselawn was just about like it is now," she says. "It's a quiet town. There's quite a few new people who have moved in. I don't know them. It's getting bigger and I think it'll get even bigger before it's done. Everyone here is neighborly and nice."

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Tracy Lewis

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Roselawn

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At the Farm Bureau Insurance Office on Indiana 10, agent Sandy Stemper stands behind a counter. She's dressed in a business suit.

"The town grew a lot in the '70s, but it's not growing much now," she says. "The people here are very easy-going, very forgiving. Very gentle."

People here shop locally if they can. If they can't, they drive 20 minutes north to Merrillville.

"But the stores won't deliver furniture down here," says Brenda Vincent, who also works in the office. "Put that in. The stores in Merrillville will deliver to DeMotte but they won't deliver to Roselawn or Thayer."

What do people from other areas think about when they think of Roselawn?

"Let's not talk about that," Stemper says. "Don't do that to us."

A getaway

Down Indiana 10 a few miles is the Sun Spot Resort. It's hidden behind trees and a high wooden fence and as you go around a turn a sign proclaims, "clothing optional."

Roselawn has two nudist resorts, Sun Spot and Ponderosa. Sun Spot was formerly known as Naked City, under a different and controversial owner.

Sharron Wallace is the receptionist at Sun Spot.

Wallace wears a long-sleeved shirt with a green design and green slacks. There are also two men in the building, one in work clothes, the other in a suit.

"Some people stay here year-round and some people just come on weekends," Wallace says. "I've lived here for nine years now."

"Most of the people who come here are from out of town, Indianapolis and Chicago. It's a getaway from the city."

They get along fine with other people in town, she says.

"People who come here have been coming here for years," she says. "It's like one big happy family. Being nude is comfortable, it's very comfortable. You should try it."

She laughs.
The white Victory Baptist

Church is in a residential part of town, near the intersection of Constitution and Bunker Hill drives. Homes here have carved pumpkins on front porches, little ghosts hanging from trees, straw men lying in the grass.

Sharon Colee is the church secretary. She sits in a small office, just big enough for her busy desk and a few chairs.

"The nudist thing, it's something self-contained," Colee says. "Unfortunately, Roselawn has always been noted for those. But there's a lot more to Roselawn than nudist colonies."

Concern for families

The community has been busy since the airplane crash.

"We're not used to this, as far as having so many people here from outside," Colee says. "But we're a welcoming community. The restaurants are staying open later than normal. Anytime something like this happens in a community, you take it personally. We're reaching out to help."

But people who live here haven't gone out to the crash site to look, she says.

"We have a real respect for that place," she says. "We have a deep respect for what's going on there. We're very concerned for the families of those people."

Roselawn is a place where people coming in off the interstate can find help and food if they need it, Colee says.

"Reporters have been referring to us as a sleepy little town, and we are slow-paced here," she says. "You can walk around outside here at night. Life here centers around children and family functions, not big news stories."

One of the busiest places in the area lately is the Village Inn restaurant at the corner of state roads 10 and 55. It's the closest business to the crash site.

Pat Cox, 37, sits at a wooden table eating beans and cornbread while his wife, a waitress who's done more than 70 interviews in three days, sweeps the floor nearby. Cox is a salesman.

"We have probably the best community I've ever been in," he says. "People here work together. In a crisis, there are a thousand people offering to help you."

He's concerned about the

crash and the accuracy of reporting on it and his town.

"I wish the reporters would get the facts straight," he says. "But they're not so bad. The ones who have been in here turn out to be good tipsters."

And now, Thayer

North of the Village Inn on Indiana 55 is Thayer. The Lincoln Township Volunteer Fire Department, which services Roselawn, is located here.

It's a town of about 300 people, maybe 500 if you include the surrounding area.

There's a tavern, a small grocery, a resale store and two used car lots. The residential streets have names like Market and Garden. There's a pumpkin patch just outside of town.

Sandra Benson has been postmaster here for 26 years.

"I've lived here all my life," she says. "It's quiet here. At least it used to be quiet."

She laughs.
"It's terrible what's happened.

If something was going to happen here, we'd rather it be something nice. The crash is kind of far removed from most people in the community. If we had known the people it would have hit us harder."

They're staying away from the crash area.

"No one I know even wants to go down and look at the site," Benson says. "I haven't been south of Indiana 10 since this happened. I don't want to see it. It's none of my business. They're taking care of it very well."

The sun goes down early here. The community keeps time with Chicago.

By 4:30 p.m., it's getting dark in Roselawn. Near Larry's restaurant, the lights at the railroad crossing flash red while a silver, red, white and blue Amtrak train rolls through, sounding its forlorn horn as it passes. It doesn't stop.

Inside the train, people can see the sign that says "Roselawn," and no doubt they know what's happened here.

It's a town of everyday people leading everyday lives. But for now, its name is linked with tragedy.