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Remembering Pan Am 103: Lessons Learned 20 Years Later

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I came to S.I. Newhouse School of Communications so I could learn how to tell people's stories.

I've always loved talking to people, learning about their lives and translating that into a larger world view. My career as a journalism student here at Syracuse has reaffirmed that passion and has proven that people's stories can illuminate world issues.

My 30-minute documentary on the 20th anniversary of the Pan Am 103 crash is really a compilation of stories. It tells the stories of the victims, as they are remembered, and the stories of those who lived through the tragedy, including the victims' friends, professors and families. By interweaving interviews with research, I have provided a larger view of the Pan Am 103 tragedy, including the lessons that have been learned 20 years later. Throughout that process I also identified those lessons which are still being worked on.

I approached this project through the eyes of a journalist. In their book *The Elements of Journalism*, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel define the role of a journalist in terms of nine elements. Three of those elements are that journalism's first loyalty is to citizens, it must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise, and it must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant. The documentary that has emerged over several months is driven by these essential elements of my chosen career.

The Elements of Journalism says a journalist's first loyalty is to citizens—or, as I see it, the human race. In my project, my loyalty was to

many. The project started out as a commitment to the victims of Pan Am 103 and the Syracuse University community. It soon grew to include the families, professors, former SU students, current and future SU students, the people of Lockerbie and the SU Abroad Center. I soon realized that my work should also extend past those touched by the tragedy. It should speak to the public in general. I decided that my work could provide insight for those who weren't directly affected by the crash.

The role of a journalist is to take the public where it can't go by itself. For those who didn't experience this tragedy, hearing the stories of victims' loved ones would be the closest they could get. I was fortunate enough to be granted interviews with the victims' friends. So I was able to provide a new layer to the public's information on Pan Am 103. The Pan Am 103 tragedy is still relevant, even to those who weren't born when it happened. If there was one overarching lesson from the Pan Am 103 crash, it's that no one is immune to the horror of terrorism.

My job, as documenter, was to help people open up and share their stories. I had to prompt them to reflect, to pull out the lessons learned. I had to gain the trust of those I interviewed, especially those who knew the victims. They had to trust me before they could tell their stories and the stories of their friends. At the same time, I had to keep a slight distance to look at the events and put them together. My job was to put each story into context and analyze how things have changed with time.

I was clear on my role. But fulfilling it was harder than I anticipated. This documentary was essentially a crash course in tragedy coverage. I was moved by the performances put on by the Remembrance Scholars and the words they spoke about the victims. But none of that prepared me for the Saturday and Sunday full of interviews.

I met with the students and professors on the top floor of Bird Library, in a quiet room with only two bright TV lights. There was a camera, but the lighting created the feeling that I was speaking with my interviewee alone. As I started to ask people about their memories and the victims, I became aware that their grieving process continued. Some voiced anger. Others cried. There were times where I had to stop the interview, let someone gather themselves, and then continue.

I was extremely moved as I listened to these people tell me about the day of the crash, how they found out, how they've been changed and how much they miss their friends. As a fellow human being, I choked up too, as they recalled their pain. As a journalist, I could empathize, but I had to keep a painful detachment. I wanted to cry. But I couldn't.

As each person left, I felt drained. I had listened to their story, emotion and all, with 200 percent of my focus. Once they left, I could break my focus. I never knew these victims. I didn't lose any friends. But I put myself in the interviewees' place and tried to see the tragedy through their eyes. I still remember watching grown men cry. I can still hear grown women talking

about their friends as if they were both still in college. To engage with these people, I climbed onto their rollercoaster of emotions.

The focus I exert in interviews is unlike any other aspect of my life. It's as if I am a different person for that brief discussion, switching "on" in my mind.

Often, the next interviewee walked in as the last walked out. There was no time to come to terms with what I had just heard. Within seconds I was replaying December 21, 1988, again. This continued for hours. Several students thanked me when we were done. Some hugged me. A couple told me that our conversation was the most healing exercise they've done to date. I feel blessed to have been able to provide that environment. At the end of each day, I was exhausted.

By allowing people to tell their stories, I was on my way to naturally creating a forum, where the students' and professors' reflections on the tragedy would be shared with the public. Those reflections and stories in part highlighted both strengths and weaknesses of several institutions in handling the disaster. Among those institutions were Syracuse University, the State Department, Pan Am and the press.

The Elements of Journalism says journalists' work must "provide a forum for public criticism and compromise." A forum in this sense is considered a finished product, open to the public, where ideas are shared. That includes criticism, so that a compromise can be made. A forum should almost be a free-flow of information and facts so that the public can become more

educated on a topic. In some cases that may mean a news article on policy issues like healthcare or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But in this case the topic of my forum is the Pan Am 103 crash and the issues – such as terrorism, flight safety and disaster management – that go along with it.

The Pan Am 103 crash and the events that followed happened because of a number of errors by many. The documentary was an examination of those mistakes and what, if anything, has been learned since. I was only 1 year old when the disaster occurred. So I had to seek out others to help me understand the issues and how they forever affected the lives of those involved. To do that, I had to allow my piece to become somewhat of a forum for criticism. Many of those I interviewed identified mistakes surrounding the tragedy and supported their views with concrete information. Some still had a lot of anger associated with those mistakes. Many of the victims' friends and professors told me they were finally able to share their thoughts publicly by talking with me.

This forum helped me to outline several issues. I looked at how things had changed. I compared the criticisms I heard to information I had gathered about how various institutions now deal with such disasters. I needed this information to help me with context. The public needed context to be brought closer to the disaster. Similar forums over the past 20 years spurred change. Parents have created groups and spoken out. Their efforts changed airport safety, international relations, disaster management and more.

As I was listening to the survivors' stories, I began to wonder if things would have been different for them if a forum had been created earlier. Some had shared their stories with the press. Others had never publically shared their stories. They felt as if people didn't want to hear them. Several students said that if a forum had been created on campus at the time of the bombing, it would have helped them find closure.

I didn't realize at the onset of this project that this work would also become a forum for compromise. There is a constant pull and push throughout the piece as different stories balance the mistakes with the lessons and balance the feelings of horror and anger with those of remembrance and closure. This documentary shows the compromises many have made to release some of the pain and allow some of the lessons to flourish. Students told me they were able to make some peace with their friends' deaths. Professors reflected on the memorials, philanthropic foundations and books created afterward. Through all these discussions, many participants expressed a sense that some things had come full circle.

This documentary adds to that sense of closure. I didn't go searching for this. It revealed itself. I set out to tell a factual story of what happened in 1988 and the procedures that have since changed. Instead, I found a collection of personal stories that illuminated the issues from and surrounding the bombing.

I continuously reminded myself I needed to strive to fulfill the journalistic element of making the significant interesting and relevant. The

interviews with the victims' friends, families and professors were invaluable in that process. Their stories helped to give the Pan Am 103 disaster a contemporary face. Those stories tied in issues that still remain for these survivors, and for the world.

Using the victims' stories to make this documentary personal was important to draw the public into a story that, on the surface, may not look like it affects them. The use of research and reflection-based interviews helped to make Pan Am 103 a relevant story today. Terrorism, hate and disaster happen every day. No one is immune. Lessons about how to deal with tragedy are part of the universal human experience.

The passage of time also helped me in the process of making this story relevant to an audience in 2009. I turned 1 year old the day after the crash. I remember nothing about it. I naturally have distance from the event. Before coming to Syracuse University, I had no reason to learn about this disaster. It had not touched my life. But as an SU student, I came to understand how the Pan Am 103 tragedy is part of my heritage, part of my connection with my university. As I worked on the documentary, I was affected by the stories of those who knew the victims. I was still able to take a step back and weave analysis in with these stories. So I could direct the project toward the lessons learned.

I had worked on other long form pieces before, but I definitely was less versed in this style. In middle school, for the National History Day competition, I had worked on two documentaries. But I had not worked on a

product that long since. As a broadcast journalism student, I am constantly reminded that, in general, shorter is better. You don't want to lose your audience and you want to be clear and concise with the information. In broadcast journalism, most stories run about one minute and forty seconds. Longer-form stories only run about two minutes and thirty seconds. This project is almost 30-minutes long.

I still aimed to be clear and concise with the writing of this documentary. But I allowed for more breathing room; I tried to let the documentary create its own pace. In emotional sections, where more personal stories were told, I tried to let the pace slow by leaving silence or music between speakers. In more purely informational sections, I tried to pick up the pace so viewers wouldn't get bored. I also used visuals such as video and photographs to keep the story moving.

When I set out on this endeavor, the thought of trying to fill 30 minutes of video seemed like a monster to me. But once the story started, everything came together. The personal tales and interviews led to more information. And more information led to more personal tales. Soon, the project didn't seem as overwhelming. In fact, twenty years of lessons could have filled more time, but my goal of being concise cut it down.

This documentary has a lot of information. But I really tried to let other people tell the story. I thought of myself as the detective, uncovering the facts and finding the people who knew the information. In the end, I wanted those who experienced the tragedy, or had researched it and reflected on it, to tell the

story. As a television journalist, I believe most stories are better told by visuals and the voices of those who lived them. I think I was successful in structuring the documentary with this goal in mind because there is little of my voice. Instead, the interviews are predominant.

My role as a journalist is to gather information, break it down and present it to those who either don't have time to collect it themselves or don't have the ability to find the information. I also take the approach that a story will often tell itself. My job is to help people inform themselves and present information in a way that is relevant to their lives. This project had several issues, not just one.

The formation of this project also came to me very naturally. Originally, I had thought I would be going abroad during the spring semester of my junior year. But I changed my plans when career opportunities and the option of early graduation became available. At the end of last semester I decided to get a jump-start on my career and graduate a year early instead of the semester early that I was originally planning on. I was still determined to complete my journey through the honors program and fulfill the capstone project requirements.

While I was making these decisions, Remembrance Week came along. And because this was the 20th anniversary year of the crash, a natural capstone topic fell into my lap. On top of that, the opportunity presented itself to interview several students and professors who were abroad in London in 1988.

These were the people who knew the Pan Am 103 victims, who had taught them and who still love them.

My original angle was just to look at the 20th anniversary to see how these students were still being remembered on campus. As I started interviewing, I soon realized a much more specific story line. Anger, frustration and sadness were still very present in the stories of those Syracuse University students who did make it back from London in 1988. They were angry the university never brought them together. And many were frustrated they had no way to find one another and lean on each other. Some said they never had closure on campus for a tragedy that forever changed them.

At the time, such terrorism hadn't happened in the United States. And no tragedy, by then, had robbed a university of over 30 students at once. No one knew how to handle the situation and, as a result, many of those who survived felt forgotten. Many had survivor's guilt, and many others spoke of nightmares from such a violent loss at such a young age. For the 20th anniversary, the university invited them back, realizing nothing had been done to help them make peace back in 1988. Many of those students credited the weekend with giving them some kind of healing.

Their anger went beyond the university. Many spoke about the insensitive way the media covered the bombing. At the time, national media outlets swarmed the campus, the town of Lockerbie and the SU Abroad center in London. The journalists' job was to get the story. But the government and Pan Am had little information and were slow in releasing what they had.

Several parents and students spoke to me about their frustrations toward the media. Those stories were great anecdotal data. From there, Professor Joan Deppa was able to provide more in-depth information because she had done research on the coverage. Some students I spoke with said they felt like they never had a chance to tell the press the real story of their friends. While they shared their stories, I asked them to also share stories about their friends. Many said this was extremely therapeutic.

I save the most telling statement for the ending of my documentary. A former student named Annie says very simply that she finally feels like her friends and their stories belong to her. For so long she felt that their stories were being told by others. Finally, she said, she feels as if she can make their stories her own.

That weekend also featured several panel discussions. I attended several of these, including the annual rose-laying ceremony and convocation. Through these informational events I learned that airport safety has improved, in part because some families had become advocates for reform.

I also learned more about Pan Am's mistakes. The airline company didn't match passengers with bags. That made it easy for a suitcase carrying a bomb to travel on the plane without an owner. Pan Am also hired untrained German shepherds to pass as bomb-sniffing dogs. Many students and parents spoke of their horror on September 11th as they saw the same tragedy happen again. Security lessons they thought had been learned with the death of their loved ones seemed to be forgotten in 2001.

Professor Joan Deppa researched the Pam Am 103 tragedy and why some mistakes happened. She's stayed at Syracuse University since the tragedy. So she was able to suggest other people I could speak with who could share information. Some of those sources told me about the university's reaction to September 11.th They told me that the emergency plans created after Pan Am 103 helped Syracuse deal with terrorism in 2001. This time the university was more informed, sensitive and wise. I learned of the role Syracuse has played in helping other schools deal with similar tragedies, like Virginia Tech.

I set out to find what mistakes had led to the Pan Am crash and what practical knowledge was learned afterward. After compiling my interviews and research I made a list of what went wrong and how things have changed since 1988.

Mistakes in dealing with the bombing of Pan Am 103:

- Weak airport security measures and Pan Am 103's violations of some security rules that were in place.
- Lack of information released by the government directly after the disaster, leaving families, the press and Syracuse University floundering for information.
- No real emergency management plan in place at Syracuse University, forcing faculty to create one on the go. As a result, information was hard to disseminate and other things fell

through the cracks, such as responding to the press and ensuring the psychological well-being of the survivors.

- A lack of understanding about the press' role in covering disasters. That, coupled with deadlines, led to much insensitive coverage of the tragedy.

Lessons Learned:

- Stronger security measures in airports, including luggage matched with passengers, better identification systems and more attention to detail in security measures.
- Better information dissemination by the government during disasters, as seen during 9/11.
- Emergency plans in place at Syracuse University and at other schools across the country to improve reaction to disasters, including more support for the psychological well-being of students and staff.
- Stronger journalistic ethics laid out by several news organizations, including disaster coverage rules.

After making this list I realized that many of those touched by the disaster have learned emotional lessons. Out of the tragedy, many people have worked to create some kind of good. The fruits of the tragedy include the Alexia Foundation, Professor Larry Mason's book on Lockerbie, and the Remembrance and Lockerbie Scholars.

As a journalist, my job is to uncover deeper truths. This includes insight others would miss if they weren't immersed in the story-telling process.

Human lessons underlay all the other stories, and one of the most significant lessons is how to keep on living when those you love are gone. The friends, families, and professors of the victims told their stories of loss. And whether they knew it or not, they also told me how they had been able to move on since 1988.

The Remembrance scholarships are a lesson in the importance of remembering. It's important to remember those whom we have lost. It's also important to remember why and to try to prevent it from happening again. Professor Mason's book is another example. He was able to create beauty and friendship out of disaster by continuing a relationship with Lockerbie and offering to tell the fuller story of that town, not just the tragedy. His book and the Lockerbie Scholars tell the lessons learned about peace. These efforts also are a way to fight the hate that created this disaster.

After interviewing those who knew the victims, I decided I needed to spend some time with the victims myself. I spent hours in the Syracuse University Pan Am 103 archives. I went through pictures, journals and letters. I got a better feel for the people everyone was telling me about. I looked at their smiles, the places they traveled, the letters and journal entries they wrote. I realized my loyalty was also to them. I hope my piece is more than just a

tribute to them and their lives. I hope it's a vehicle for reflection on the lessons so that their lives were not lost in vain.

After attending Syracuse University for three years, I was familiar with the Remembrance Scholars program. I knew why it was important and each Remembrance Week I reflected on those fellow SU students whom I had never met. But I still felt connected to them in some way. They walked the same sidewalks as I have and sat in the same classrooms I do. I always wanted to apply to be a Remembrance Scholar. I recognized the honor in representing one of the 35 students lost. When I made the choice to graduate a year early, I gave up the possibility to hold that honor. But this project is my own way of fulfilling that calling. I feel privileged to tell the story of the 35 students through their friends, families and professors.

Many of the students and professors from London told me they were pleasantly surprised by the living presence those 35 students still have on this campus. This project has made me feel that presence even more. My hope, as a journalist, is that I can become the voice for the voiceless. I hope this documentary has given the 35 students a voice. I think they would want some good to have come of their death. They would have wanted their tragedy to have spurred some progress in the world. They would have wanted to know that lessons were learned from the mistakes that created the horrible nightmare that was Pan Am 103.

I hope I have created a lasting memorial for the victims and those who loved them. I hope that I have helped in the process of reflection, healing and

closure for those I interviewed. I hope that this documentary will be viewed 10 years from now, on the 30th anniversary of Pan Am 103, and that even more lessons will have been learned, that more progress will have been made.

I hope that this project will become an important part of this university's history by capturing the voices, thoughts, insights and emotions of those students, professors and staff who survived Pan Am 103.

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Twenty years ago Syracuse University lost 35 students who were on their way home from a semester abroad in London. A bomb on board their plane killed them all. Today, the pain is still very real for those who knew them, including families, friends and professors.

For the week of October 19, 2009, hundreds of their family members, professors and former Syracuse University students reunited on campus for the 20th anniversary of the tragedy.. During this week, I shot most of my documentary. As part of my research, I attended several panel discussions and performances during the week. On Friday, I taped the annual rose-laying ceremony and scholars' convocation. Saturday and Sunday of that weekend, I conducted individual interviews with about 40 professors and former students.

At the end of that week, I had about 12 hours of tape. My next step was to review that tape. That process took a week – at least 40 hours immersed in my research. Before winter break I interviewed three more professors and spent about eight hours in the Pan Am archives. After winter break I spent about a month, or 60 hours, loading the video into a computer and editing the documentary.

My 30-minute documentary explores some of the lessons learned since the tragedy. It's told from the perspectives of the victims' loved ones, including students who did make it back from London in 1988. Many of those students had never before publicly, shared their stories.

The voices in my project talk about the mistakes leading up to the crash. They also talk about the practical and emotional lessons learned since. This documentary looks at a tragedy and makes it relevant for a contemporary audience. And it demonstrates some of the key principles of a journalist's obligations.

In *The Elements of Journalism*, authors Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel define the journalist's role in terms of nine elements. Three of those elements assert that journalism's first loyalty is to the people, that it must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise, and it must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant. These three elements were the driving force behind my honors capstone project.

The Pan Am 103 crash and events that followed unfortunately set many precedents for the country, the university and the press in dealing with large-scale tragedies. At that time, security at airports was far more casual than today. Then, a suitcase containing a bomb could easily travel alone on airliners. On Pan Am 103, the bomb exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland, killing 270 people on board and on the ground. Included among the dead were the 35 Syracuse University students.

The crash revealed many flaws in air-travel security; gaps in communication among airlines, the government, the press and the families of the dead; unseen connections between American foreign policy and modern terrorism. Communications among Pan Am, the press and the United States government were not strong nor clear enough, leaving many questions and much

disorganization. Foreign relation problems with Libya had been brewing for years. But the Reagan and first Bush administrations never expected an attack on civilians. That was made clear by the lack of information available directly after the plane crash.

From Kennedy International Airport, where Pan Am 103 was scheduled to land, to Syracuse University and Lockerbie, journalists were desperate for information. Deadlines and pressure from management drove some journalists to deal with victims' families insensitively.

Meanwhile, Syracuse University was also scrambling to deal with the disaster. It lacked a clear emergency response plan. The university had trouble finding information to release. That left families and friends frustrated and scared. At the time of the crash, universities had not had to deal with tragedy of this magnitude. From across the country, scores of journalists converged on this campus community, trying to get a snapshot of the disaster. But they also alienated many of those who were grieving. The university was forced to create an emergency plan on the go. Too often, students, faculty and staff members fell through the cracks. Now, 20 years later, many students who did make it back from London in 1988 express feelings of being forgotten back on campus.

In Lockerbie, the crash scene looked like a war zone. The townspeople tried to gather the belongings of the victims and kept a constant prayer vigil over the bodies until they could be moved. The Syracuse community is still trying to thank them for their kindness. A strengthening relationship between Lockerbie and Syracuse is one of the positives that grew from disaster. Now other positives

are also present because some lessons have been learned. Other lessons are still in progress.

This documentary aims to make sense of those lessons by looking at the events and reasons why they unfolded. Instead of reading accounts from 20 years ago, I went to the survivors to learn about this crash through personal stories. I spoke with about 25 former Syracuse University students who were abroad in London in 1988 and about 15 SU professors and faculty who were on campus and abroad at that time. I spoke with each person for about 15-20 minutes over the span of two days.

To gain perspective and understanding into why events happened, I also spoke with professors who had researched and reflected on the events.

I spoke with Remembrance Scholars who researched and represented the 35 students. That gave me insight into the living memory the victims still have on campus. And I spoke with some of the family members who shared the experience of losing a child and their perspective on how things have changed in 20 years.

I also gained a better understanding of those lost and how their memories are preserved on campus. Time in the archives allowed me to get to know the 35 students myself. Through pictures, letters and journal entries I got a sense of those whose stories I was researching. I learned that communications among airline companies, the government and the press have strengthened; airplane security has improved; and commemorative events on campus have grown.

But those who lived through Pan Am 103 are the first to point out that September 11th is a prime example that lessons are still being learned. The university's effort to remember the 35 students is proof that it is learning how to commemorate the dead. One example would be the university's recent effort to bring the class of 1988 London abroad and their professors back together during Remembrance Week. It was the first time those former students had been invited back as part of the commemoration. That inclusion shows the university wants to reconcile what wasn't done for those survivors at the time of the tragedy. Now, the university has a clear emergency procedure in place and is helping other universities, like Virginia Tech, to create and implement their own.

As far as lessons learned by the press, those I interviewed point out that September 11th was covered very differently from Pan Am 103. In part, that was because of more available information from the government and airlines. The *New York Times* series "Portraits of Grief" is proof that memorializing the dead has gained importance.

The biggest lesson learned is about dealing with tragedy. That lesson has been learned by those affected by the tragedy, including the students who survived, the professors, the Syracuse University and SU London abroad staffs, and the people of Lockerbie. The lessons they continue to learn are how to live with the horror they experienced. Some have learned how to make peace and even create love out of the hate that inspired such violence. This is seen in the relationships that grew between families, between Syracuse and Lockerbie, and in the relationships that are beginning to rekindle between students.

These lessons are seen in the faces of the Remembrance and Lockerbie Scholars. They are living proof that those affected have not forgotten and that future students will continue to learn about Pan Am 103. The lessons are seen in the philanthropic foundations set up in the names of the victims, in the artwork and in the books that have been created in the victims' memories.

This tragedy is still alive on campus. The documentary tells the stories of those students and professors who sometimes felt they had no voice. It gives them some control over the stories of their loved ones. The documentary gives them the opportunity to talk about their friends, instead of watching others do it for them. This is a research documentary that gathers facts and analyzes actions both past and present. It is also very much still the personal stories of the Pan Am 103 victims, both living and dead. Most of this story is told by those who lived it, those who studied it, and those who have learned from it. It's a reflection and analysis. It's also a piece of history, documenting the stories of those who can tell it best. Their voices must be heard now and in the future. That's the reason for journalism. That's the reason for this project.