REFLECTIONS ON THAT DECEMBER DAY

ON A QUIET AFTERNOON IN EARLY OCTOBER, I was fully taken by the sight of the 35 empty chairs on the Shaw Quad. Created as part of Remembrance Week, the chairs were arranged to represent the seats of the 35 students aboard Pan Am Flight 103 when it entered our consciousness in an unimaginable way on that December day 25 years ago, the target of a terrorist bomb. There is no easy way to remember December 21, 1988, especially when you think about the joy for life, spirit of adventure, and unlimited potential the students possessed. They were headed home from London to gather with family and friends during the holidays and tell them about the travels and tremendous experiences they’d had abroad, and they never made it.

Just days before the terrorist attack, I’d returned home from traveling in Ireland, where I’d experienced a firsthand look at “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland. I remember seeing police stations fortified like military bunkers, passing through security checkpoints to enter the city center in Belfast, and reading about innocent people losing their lives on both sides of the border to bombings by the warring factions of paramilitary organizations. It was unsettling to see how brutal violence could often be so indiscriminate.

But when the Pan Am 103 bombing occurred, terrorism took on a whole new dimension for me. It was no longer a faded childhood recollection of the 1972 terrorist attack at the Munich Olympics, or the 1983 bombing of U.S. military barracks in Beirut. These were horrific events, but they seemed distant then in my 20-something mind, a world away from the confines of Central New York. Pan Am 103 changed that mindset. It personalized terrorism. These were students near my age. And they were from Syracuse, of all places in the world. It was so senseless and utterly random to have their lives stolen from us by such a savage act.

Through my years here at Syracuse University, I’ve been fortunate to have the parents, classmates, and friends of these students share with me their thoughts, memories, and stories of their lost children and friends. In the 25 years that have passed, friends and classmates have grown into middle age, pursued careers, raised families, and endured their own hardships—but they have never forgotten the 35 students who were taken from us that December day, always holding a special place in their hearts for them.

In this issue of the magazine, you’ll learn how their legacy lives on, on campus and in the hearts and minds of so many. While terrorism continues to plague our world today, we can only hope that the hatred, ignorance, and violence that fuel it will one day give way to a true understanding and acceptance of one another. Until then, we must carry with us the hopes and dreams of those lost.

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