

Symposium Talk – Atlanta

Kathy Tedeschi

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Hi, my name is Kathy Tedeschi. My first husband, Bill Daniels, was killed on board Pan Am 103. He was a business man returning from a meeting in Newcastle, England. He had left for this meeting on December 18 and planned to come home on December 22, 1988. Bill and I had met when I was 18, a freshman at Emory University in Atlanta, and we got married 11 days after I graduated. At the time of his death, we had been happily married 17½ years.

Twenty years ago, almost exactly to the day, I was a suburban wife and mother planning for her husband's surprise 40th birthday party. He had turned 40 on March 28, but he wasn't at home for that date, so I thought I would surprise him with a party a couple of weeks later. I have a photo attached that shows Bill opening some of his gag gifts from that night.

Also, this conference is taking place in the Regency Hyatt House in Atlanta, GA. Many years ago, Bill and I were here in Atlanta in college. One of my sorority formals took place at this same hotel. Bill and I had a room that night, and he kept the key! It wasn't like modern hotel room keys – it was a key on a ring with a heavy metal piece on the ring that said “Regency Hyatt House, Atlanta, GA” on it. It was always on his key ring and disappeared when he died. I asked for it back but it was never found.

On December 21, 1988, I got a call from Bill about noon NJ time. He was about to board his flight – Pan Am 103 – at London Heathrow. He was excited that they had finished up early and he had been able to get a seat on the flight that day. He asked me to let his office know so that they could hire a car to meet him at JFK airport, which I did. I then busied myself getting ready for Brice's 2nd grade party the next day – lining up all the goody bags for the kids, etc. (Brice was my 7 year old son, my middle child and I was his home room mother. I also had a daughter Erin who was 10. I was Erin's girl scout leader. In addition, I had a toddler girl Melanie who was 2. I was a stay-at-home mom.) We lived in Belle Mead, NJ, near Princeton. That evening, I took the older two children to their piano lesson and delivered Christmas presents. On my way home in the car with only Melanie sleeping in the back seat, I heard the radio announcer say something about a horrible plane accident. I didn't catch the flight number or even the airline, but I did hear the phone number he announced. I raced home to call the number. When I got someone on the phone, I asked him if there were any survivors and he just said, “Lady, you know as much as I do.”

My first concern was for my children. I felt that they were like someone with only one kidney – they had only one parent. I had to be strong for them, but I did feel on several occasions that the

wrong person had died. A big problem I had looming over me at the time, besides paying our bills, was health insurance. I got help from a close friend who was a CPA and learned how to budget, etc. I got COBRA health insurance for 3 years which helped immensely. Towards the end of that time, though, I found out that I could not get another private health insurance because we had sought counseling! We had to be 2 years treatment-free to get it. I solved that by crying to Bill's company and they extended my COBRA another 2 years. Later, when I got remarried, I told Russ I was marrying him for his insurance!

About a month after the disaster, Cardinal O'Connor at St. Patrick's Cathedral in NY invited all of us to a special mass. We were not Catholic, but we went. That is where I first met some of the other families. One lady is one of my best friends today – Jane Davis – I met her there. A month later, there was a meeting of all the victims' families in NJ. We went to that. There I met a lady who lived close to me, Lynn Garczynski, and she and I have been dear friends ever since. (She gave me this "Journeys" necklace when I moved out of NJ last year and I wear it every day.) That is when our group (Victims of Pan Am Flight 103) started and we found a way to channel our anger and grief into trying to keep this from happening again – in addition to finding answers...

After Bill's death, my sister-in-law invited me and my children to come out to Oklahoma where they lived and spend part of the summer with them. I told her I didn't know if I could do this because I had never pumped gas before (in NJ you don't do that) and I had never registered in a motel before. She said "Kathy, you are a college graduate, I think you can handle that!" And I did! I did try also to do the yard work that Bill had always done, but our yard sloped so much I decided I should hire someone else to mow it. Then after I did the fertilizing and we had a striped lawn, I decided maybe I would also hire that to be done. I went to a Little League game with a power drill asking any man who wasn't coaching how to use it so that I could use some of Bill's tools to fix ordinary things around the house. I learned along the way or I got good at hiring the things to be done.

I have changed so much since that period 20 years ago when I was "just" a mom and wife. I always voted, but suddenly, I was also an advocate for change. I found out that I could write very compelling letters. I wrote letters on a friend's computer – we didn't have one – to all the Representatives and Senators, I could think of – also to the NJ Governor and President of the US. I did write to Senator Bill Bradley, who was a NJ Senator at the time. He called a meeting for all the NJ families. I went to that. At the end of the meeting, he asked to meet me. Other families were also writing letters – not just me, but it was something that I would never in a million years have done if I hadn't been forced into this position. I have continued this letter-writing campaign. I have written anyone I found a need to write and sometimes I have had

amazing results. A couple of years ago, when Libya (who was behind the murders of our loved ones) was getting off the terrorism list without fulfilling all their obligations, I wrote to my Representative in NJ. He was a Republican. Other people also got in touch with a Democrat Representative from a different district in NJ and the two of them (egged on in part by MY letter) formed a bi-partisan effort to make sure that Libya didn't get away with this.

This work for airline security and seeing that justice is done has helped me work through my grief, but it also has given me something to live for – in addition to my beautiful wonderful children. I went 4 times to the Netherlands to view different stages of the trial for Megrahi and Fhimah, the two accused Libyans. When I wasn't able to actually be in Holland, I went to NY, to view it on closed circuit tv. I watched about 90% of the trial. I have kept up with what has happened since then – the appeals. The Scots still send me (and others) details about what is happening.

In the spring of 1990, I took off my wedding ring and decided that I was not married anymore and I needed something more in my life. I went to a singles mixer and met several people who told me that after the mixer was over they usually went to a local place to dance and socialize. I joined them and had a glass of wine and danced a little. When it got late, I went home – never thinking to pay for my glass of wine! I just wasn't used to worrying about such things! Later, I met Russ Tedeschi. He is a wonderful man and has been very understanding of this very big part of my life. We married in 1995, and have a great blended family. Our two sons live in NY City near each other and they do see each other often. Our 3 daughters live in NJ, Seattle, and with us in SC – but they all remain close through emails and phone calls. All of our “children” range in age from 30 to 21 and are all smart, happy, decent people that we are both very proud of.

When 9/11 happened though, I was devastated. I thought that all the work we had done in our group hadn't made a dime's worth of difference. I wrote a letter to the local bi-weekly newspaper pouring my heart out about how sorry I was. Immediately, I heard from family members who had lost someone in 9/11 and from a psychologist Ruth who was working with a lady who had just been widowed in the attacks. She invited me to come to a session with her patient. That woman desperately wanted to meet other family members, so Ruth arranged for the Princeton, NJ Jewish Center to give us the place to meet, and I called everyone I could find phone numbers for in the tri-county area around Princeton. I looked on the State police web-site and found the names of each victim and where they lived. I just started calling and telling my story and asking them if they wanted to join us. Our first meeting was October 10, 2001, and we met weekly after that. It was perhaps the most rewarding thing I have ever done in my life. We had over 50 people who came during the next few months. Some came every week and others came only once – but they were all on the email list and all got word of what we were doing if

they wanted to come. When it came close to the holiday season, I called the NJ Governor's mansion and asked if we could have a holiday party there – and they said “yes!” I got very brave about asking for things! Several of my group members started planning summer vacations together and two went into business together. Two others became two of the “famous 4 Jersey girls” – advocates for the 9/11 commission – they all met in our group. Another “famous” member was Lisa Beamer, Todd Beamer's widow, one of the Flight 93 heroes. She wrote a book and I am mentioned on page 259 of her book!

I have now moved back to SC, where I grew up. I have come full circle since I was a student from SC going to Emory University and meeting another student, Bill Daniels, from Florida. I am a different person from the girl that Bill Daniels married, but I think he would have been proud of the woman I have become.