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Taking others under their wing

Pilot, crew served communities as coaches, volunteers

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The captain of American Airlines Flight 587 was an accomplished pilot from a suburb of Princeton, N.J., who coached his son's Little League team.

Edward States, 42, was a veteran of the skies. He retired with the rank of captain from the Air Force, then returned to duty as a reservist during Operation Desert Storm.

The flight's nine crew members — States, his first officer and seven flight attendants — perished when the jet crashed Monday in Belle Harbor, Queens, less than three minutes after taking off from Kennedy Airport bound for Santo Domingo.

Just a month ago, States carried a U.S. flag on his leg of a cross-country run organized by pilots, firefighters and others to create on foot the scheduled Boston-to-Los Angeles journey of the two airliners that were hijacked Sept. 11 and steered into the World Trade Center.

States met his wife, Mary Alden, when they were in the Air Force, according to her parents, Nancy and John Alden of upstate Hyde Park.

The couple had two sons, Bradley, 10, and Daniel, 8. The family lives in a two-story house on a rural road in Plainsboro, just outside Princeton.

Yesterday, a memorial of candles and flowers lined the driveway. A placard read, "We Miss You Ed."

Outside the Plainsboro municipal building, Tom Murray, an American Airlines captain and family friend, said States was a devoted family man who volunteered at his church and the children's school.

"Ed will be remembered by his family and friends as a loving, caring and devoted husband, father and community leader," Murray said. "Those of us who knew Ed have suffered a deep and tragic loss."

American Airlines said States was a pilot with the company for more than a decade.

Sten Molin, 34, States' first officer, had wanted to be a pilot since he was 18, according to his father, Stan, a retired commercial pilot.

"Santo Domingo was his favorite route," his father said.

"He was extremely outgoing, friendly, compassionate, understanding," he added. "I'm flooded with phone calls from people who are so happy to have known him. They keep talking about his ability to listen — and to gently offer solutions for their personal problems."

Father trained him

Molin received his first flight training from his father, who certified him as a private pilot. Later, he got his commercial pilot and instructor certifications and worked for small airlines until he was hired by American 10 years ago.

On the ground, Molin ran a small computer programming business on the side. He was born in Jamaica Hospital, not far from where the plane went down.

The cabin crew consisted of four women and three men, most of them from the New York area.

■ William Valdespino, 37, who lived in the Chelsea section of Manhattan, always wanted to be a flight attendant, said longtime friend Luis Rodriguez.

"He was saying after Sept. 11 if he had to die, then he wanted a big party. He didn't want no one to cry," Rodriguez said. "He knew the danger of his job. We were talking to him all the time, saying to take a job on land. He said, 'No, this is who I am.' "

Rodriguez, who dropped off Valdespino's dental records yesterday to aid in the identification of remains, said the flight attendant "was extremely friendly — the most fun person to be around. If you were depressed, he'll make you laugh. Even in a funeral, he'll make you laugh."

■ Barbara Giannasca, 46, of Point Lookout, L.I., who leaves behind her husband of 11 years, also fulfilled a lifelong ambition to be a flight attendant.

"It was the only thing she ever wanted to do," said her niece Katelyn Koske. "She knew the risks of flying. She always said, 'I'm not afraid. This is what I want to do. This is my life.' "

Raised cancer funds

Koske recalled that her aunt dug out a project she had done in sixth or seventh grade on the topic "When I Grow Up." A preteen Giannasca wrote: "I want to be a stewardess."

"What's not wonderful to say about her?" Koske said. "About five years ago, I lost my mother to breast cancer. She really took me under her arm and began advocating to find a cure for breast cancer with me. A couple of weeks ago, she did the Avon breast cancer walk and raised over $16,000."

The other members of the cabin crew were Deborah Fontakis, 50, of Floral Park, L.I., Wilmer Gonzalez, Joseph Lopes, Michele Mills and Carol Palm.

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