

Sept. 11 still defines the lives of the family Peter left behind

By LINDA LEAVITT

Two years ago this week Elizabeth and Dr. Stephen Alderman lost their son Peter in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Peter, who graduated in 1994 from Scarsdale High School and in 1998 from American University, was representing Bloomberg LLP at a training breakfast at Windows on the World on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

The plane that ripped into the north tower tore a jagged hole through the Aldermans' lives as well. Time in this close-knit family split into Before, when there were dinners with friends, jokes, games, travel and holiday celebrations, and After, with daily reminders that Peter, the youngest of the three Alderman children, will never come home again.

Everyone's best friend

It tells you something about Peter that all his friends from Scarsdale High School, an exceptionally close group even now, nine years after graduation, considered him their best friend. "Sensitive, generous, warm, kind," are the words they use to describe him. "Peter was always everybody's favorite," said Greg Janis, a friend since kindergarten at Fox Meadow. "He knew how to make you smile. Peter was the kind of person that would light up a room simply by walking into it."

"My friends from Scarsdale were all pieces of a puzzle that fit together beautifully," said Jon Rich. "We still have a special group, but one of our biggest



Liz and Peter Alderman in Rousillon, France, on Sept. 4, 2001.

middle pieces is missing. You know, that piece that touches everyone, holds you together. What I miss most about Pete is his smile and his arms wide open as he is about to hug you."

Peter's older sister Jane said she is not just idealizing a brother who died young and tragically. "Everybody talks about people who have died — how wonderful they were," she said. "I feel like I have to make them understand how really wonderful Peter was. He had the gift of making you feel

good about yourself."

The bonds that Peter forged in his happy life have outlived him. Jane moved back to her parents' house in the summer of 2002 for mutual comfort. The family is in close contact, by phone, e-mail and visits with Peter's friends, not only to lend support to each other in their grief, but as a way of keeping their son/brother/friend's memory alive. "My friends and I have had multiple meals, brunches and mini-parties with the Aldermans," said Janis. "It is truly something special. Peter would be proud of how we have stuck together during such a trying time."

"I always feel better when I go to see them," said Jeff Gold, one of six friends who visited the family on what would have been Pete's 27th birthday a few weeks ago.

Brad Bernstein, who is now living in L.A. but visits whenever he is in New York, said, "The Aldermans constantly tell me that they don't want it to be an obligation. I think deep down they realize we call not out of obligation but because we love them. I call them because they've now become my family. I call them to make sure Peter stays in my consciousness. I call them to find out about the foundation. And I call most of all so they will know that no matter how bad it is we are all here for them forever. Peter is gone but the people he grew up with are not going anywhere."

Time spent with "the boyz," as she

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calls them, is bittersweet for Peter's mother Liz. She loves to hear about new jobs, new apartments and new girlfriends, even though it sometimes makes her cry. "I miss him desperately, but the worst part is that he can't live his life," she said. She doesn't want her tears to silence his friends. "Don't mind me," she tells them, "I cry all the time."

She has not found relief with the passage of time. "It's only gotten worse," she said. "I was kind of numb the first year."

'I'm scared'

The family was vacationing in France in early September 2001. Peter and Jane left on the 9th to get back to their jobs, hers in Washington, his in New York City. Most days Peter worked in midtown. Sept. 11 was the only day he was scheduled to be working in the World Trade Center.

Jane was the first to learn of the attacks. She e-mailed Peter, asking him where he was and whether he could get out. He wrote back on his Blackberry. "No, we are stuck."

"People kept telling me, don't worry, they will get them out," said Jane, and she believed it. Then the Pentagon was hit and she was evacuated from her office in the Watergate building. Peter wrote to Jane that the room was filled with smoke and he was scared. It was 9:15 a.m. She wrote back, again and again, even after she had seen the towers collapsing on TV. So did Peter's friends and colleagues at Bloomberg. No one got an answer.

Back in France, a storekeeper told Liz and Steve Alderman something terrible had happened in New York and Washington. They were concerned for Peter and Jane, but did not know Peter



Some of "the boyz" in high school days: Front row: Brian Kantor, Peter Alderman, Jeff Gold, Greg Janis, Geoffrey Chang. Back row: Brad Bernstein, Marcus Soifer, Jon Rosee, David Lipner.

deeply cared about people," his father said.

Later this month, the Peter C. Alderman master class on healing and trauma will be held in Orvieto, Italy. The class, offered in conjunction with

of accepting the money for the foundation, and Liz finally had to agree that it would make a good capital base for the foundation's work. But she still sees the fund as "blood money" intended to prevent survivors from suing lax or

the al Qaeda cell that planned the Sept. 11 attacks lived.

"Every piece of evidence we find Motley takes to the defense department," said Steve. "We don't care about the money — this suit will go on

was in the World Trade Center until their son Jeff called to tell them the terrible news. They were unable to get a flight to New York, but Michael Bloomberg, Peter's boss, sent his private jet to bring them home.

Home at the time was in Armonk, a beautiful, warm, spacious place that was a weekend magnet for Pete and his Scarsdale friends and scene of a memorial gathering attended by around 100 of them a week after his death. "We knew we had to do that for the kids," said Liz. "They needed to be together." It was an emotional but spirited celebration of Peter's life and his extraordinary capacity for friendship. The family has since moved to a smaller house in Bedford, where his friends have planted a memorial copper beach tree.

"Other things occur to distract people," said Steve, of two years that have passed since the tragedy. "Like it or not, the way of the world is to go on. People are losing the sharpness, the acuteness, of it — but they should."

For Peter's family, though, things will never be the same. "My life is defined by the fact that I lost my son," said Steve. "I no longer care about having a long life — happiness is beyond our grasp, I'm no longer afraid of death. The focus of my life is to be a reservoir of memory for my son. Anything that will advance Pete and his name and the cause."

"The cause" for the Aldermans has taken various forms: Determination to hold the United States government responsible for what they see as inexcusable negligence; a desire to be involved in planning a memorial at ground zero followed by the realization that decisions were driven by developers and politicians. The family has joined a class action lawsuit against members of the Saudi royal family and Saudi banks that they hold accountable for supporting terrorism.

Underlying all of these is the deeply felt need to memorialize Peter. Last December, Steve spoke at the dedica-

the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, is targeted toward doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists working through a country's primary health care system. Facilitators from Harvard, the universities of Rome, Naples and Edinburgh and the Vatican will work with a small group from Bosnia, Macedonia, Rwanda, Uganda, Chile, Spain and Colombia. Another class, underwritten by the Fullbright Commission, will be held next spring.

The program's goal is to make better use of indigenous healing resources for victims of violence in places where health care is hampered by a lack of supplies and little knowledge of psychiatric medicine. Indigenous healers have the peoples' trust and do not come and go like the NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), Steve explained.

The genesis for the idea was a television program Liz saw in the winter of 2002. Richard Mollica, a psychology professor at Harvard, and founder of the Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, was being interviewed by Ted Koppel on "Nightline."

Mollica told how he founded the program 20 years earlier in response to the plight of the Cambodian "boat people," many of whom had relocated to Lowell, Mass. Though it's commonly thought the Asians somatize emotional pain by developing ulcers or other physical conditions, Mollica found that many of the Cambodian refugees were able to talk about the experiences if approached in the right way, and that it helped them.

Interviewing other refugees, he observed the same symptoms. Whether from Cambodia, Bosnia or Rwanda, two-thirds of the refugees suffer clinical depression, one third have post-traumatic stress disorder, and nearly all experience humiliation. They hesitate to ask for help for fear of being thought insane.

After seeing the show, the

incompetent government agencies.

"I have a real problem with it," she said. "Whatever anger I have is not at terrorists but at our government. If everyone had been doing their jobs — the FAA, intelligence, immigration — this would probably not have happened." She is incensed at every revelation of how much government agencies knew — if the INS, for instance, had followed its own rules, many of the 19 hijackers would not have been issued visas. "The government is not being generous — they're just covering up, taking the right to sue away from us and making sure their liability is limited," said Liz.

Liz said lawsuits are worthwhile because "they uncover information in the discovery process that is not available through any other means ... I would feel awful if two years down the road we couldn't be part of a class action lawsuit against the FAA."

(A court last week ruled victims could sue the airlines, the Port Authority and other entities.)

Since 9/11 Liz has made a lot of contacts with people who have ongoing interest in what happened that day, why it happened and how it might have been prevented. The "what ifs" still torment her — what if the stairways had been built of concrete instead of Sheetrock, what if there had been access to the roof, what if the police and fire departments hadn't disagreed over who was in charge of helicopters. Might people have been rescued from the top floor?

She has become close to two FAA whistleblowers, who told her that they had a 95 percent success rate smuggling weapons on to planes: "They feel security hasn't improved one iota, it's all window dressing," she said. "You can see codes that employees are punching in, searches are conducted in the open." Nearly every week there's something else to be angry about in the news: the commission report detailing

forever, we want to stop terrorism.

Beauty hurts

Following the news, working on their foundation, communicating with "the boyz," and other people they've met since 9/11 occupy the Aldermans these days.

Distraction from the central tragedy of their lives has not been an option. "I love opera, but I can't even go to the movies now. I loved photography — now I see beauty and think, he can't see it," said Liz.

Holidays, which used to be an important part of family life, Passover, Easter, Christmas, New Year's — they celebrated everything — are mostly ignored. "All the occasions we used to look forward to are horrible now," said Liz.

As for the friends, "It has been two years and it is obvious that the 'the boyz' have not and will not recover from this loss," said Jon Rich. "This is not to say that we won't move on and live our lives, but it is to say that there is a spark that is missing."

Owen Grant wrote an op ed piece, "Today was a bad day," about his continuing grief for Peter, published in the Inquirer last March.

Brad Bernstein said, "Wherever I go in the world for work or pleasure, he's on my mind every day. And I know that is true for all our friends. When we walk down the street and see a lanky guy with dark hair we look twice because we think he resembles Pete. When we turn on the TV and see a feature on CNN we think of him. I don't think we'll ever 'get over' Peter — and I never want to."

Bernstein, a freelance producer now based in L.A., is working on a film for New Wave Entertainment, part of an eight-hour series called "Letters" for A & E. Bernstein, whose segment is on presidential letters, was in a production meeting when someone noticed his tattoo, a Maori band symbolizing life and death. The band, which is inscribed

tion of a Rotary Club memorial to the town's six victims of 9/11 in a park in Armonk and attended by a dozen of Peter's Scarsdale friends.

Calling the attack "the slaughter of 3,000 unsuspecting innocent souls who were cruelly ripped from their families," he said, "Peter's death represents us all — it could have been any one of us there that day. It was simply his and our very great misfortune that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

In the lobby of the building where Peter worked is a memorial that bears his name. Two columns form twin towers or an 11 — and cameras trained on the sky make them appear transparent. A couple of weeks ago, a memorial bench was dedicated to Peter's memory in Princeton, where he lived for a year while in training for Bloomberg. And at long last there will be a memorial plaque in Scarsdale, where he lived most of his life, outside the new high school library. Liz Alderman is grateful that there will be a memorial in the school. But she wishes the Village of Scarsdale would do something to memorialize Peter. He loved Scarsdale, she said. It was his home. And many here loved him.

"I must say that I am very disappointed in the town of Scarsdale," said Janis. "Armonk has honored him and he barely lived there."

Peter's remains have not been found.

Foundation will aid survivors

The most meaningful memorial for the Alderman family is the Peter C. Alderman Foundation, the family's effort to aid survivors of war, torture and terrorism. It's appropriate because "Peter was loving, compassionate and

Aldermans felt they had found their mission. Liz and Steve drove to Cambridge and spent a day with Mollica in the spring of 2002, "the first good day" they'd had since Sept. 11. Later they went to observe the program at the center for Cambodian refugees in Lowell, and were moved by the stories they heard. Mollica was appreciative of their interest and understood their need to be more than a footnote in a Harvard program.

"We all knew this was the direction we wanted to go — since Pete was killed by terrorists, if we could help any of the walking wounded this was what we wanted to do," said Liz.

The Peter C. Alderman master classes will train healers, and establish a regimen of treatment that can be used anywhere in the world. The program is not limited to psychiatric care, but also provides physical care and has other possibilities as well. Eventually the Aldermans hope to assist in setting up micro-industries in war-torn places where war victims can regain a sense of self-worth through work. "A small amount of money can accomplish a lot in a place like Rwanda," said Liz.

Jane is now enrolled in an M.B.A. program at the University of Connecticut with the goal of becoming a director of the Peter C. Alderman Foundation. Her brother Jeff is accompanying Liz and Steve to the Orvieto conference.

To file a claim or not?

Working on the foundation helped Steve and Liz resolve a difficult dilemma: whether or not to file claim with the victim compensation fund established by Congress. Steve was in favor

poor follow-through on intelligence reports, suppression of warnings about air quality in the downtown, plans to build on the footprint of the World Trade Center, the poorly thought-out invasion of Iraq. But the most productive outlet for their anger may well be the class action suit against the financiers of terrorism.

Bankrupting terrorism

As members of a group called 9/11 Families United to Bankrupt Terrorism, Steve, Liz and Jane Alderman signed on to the lawsuit against members of the Saudi royal family, NGOs and banks which engaged in laundering and distribution of money to terrorist organizations. Organized and run by attorneys Ron Motley, who led the pioneering product liability litigation against asbestos, the tobacco industry and Firestone, and Alan Gerson, author of "The Price of Terror," which tells how the families of Pan Am 103 successfully sued Libya, the Saudi suit holds those who fund terrorist groups financially accountable for the damage the terrorists do.

Steve and Liz appeared on three nightly news programs last winter discussing the Saudi lawsuit with Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw and Dan Rather.

"Once we made the rounds we'd had our 15 minutes of fame. I insist that Pete's picture be shown because you have given a face to this," said Liz.

The attorneys have investigators working in 13 countries investigating mysterious money transfers and following leads that link members of the Saudi royal family with terrorist groups. A lot of data is coming out of Hamburg, Germany, where members of

with Peter's initials, is broken around his triceps to show that Peter's life was not completed. When Bernstein told them the story behind the tattoo, New Wave asked if he thought the Aldermans would be interested in having Peter's story, focused on his last e-mails from the World Trade Center, in the series. He thought they would. The crew filmed the part of the segment, called "Last Letters," at the Aldermans' house last week.

As the second anniversary of 9/11 comes and goes, the emphasis, for some of Pete's friends and family members, is shifting ever so slightly from mourning his loss to remembering the gift of his life and the spirit that made him so well loved by so many.

Recalling how, in August 2001, he skipped a dinner with his friends to stay late at the office, Jeff Gold vows to "live each day to the fullest and not let work be my be-all and end-all."

"I don't cry as much now," said Jane, who admits she even laughs sometimes. "I didn't want to accept his death — I felt like I was giving up on him. At first my friends would say, 'You're lucky you had a wonderful brother for 25 years and I'd say, 'What? Are you kidding? It wasn't enough!' But now I feel that way."

"Peter's death has made me appreciate my life more," said Janis. "I will never again take for granted the time I get to spend with anybody important to me. I will cherish all that I have."

The family welcomes contributions to the Peter C. Alderman Foundation. They may be sent to the Peter C. Alderman Foundation, 41 Great Hill Farms Road, Bedford, NY 10506.

Washington, they were shocked to find Peter and Jane, but did not know Peter

The class, offered in conjunction with

the suit as "good money" intended to prevent survivors from suing tax or

money, Steve and Liz, who had talked about the money — this suit will go on