

A stained-glass window in the town hall at Lockerbie shows the national flags of all the victims

United in remembrance

Thirty-five students from Syracuse University were among the 270 people killed when Pan Am flight 103 was blown up over Lockerbie.

In the 20 years since, a remarkable bond has grown between residents of the Scottish town and the college in New York state

By Ellie Levenson

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HANNON MCLOUGHLIN GREW UP IN ALTAMONT, A SLEEPY TOWN IN UPSTATE NEW YORK. NOTHING MUCH HAPPENS THERE OTHER THAN A WEEK-LONG COUNTRY FAIR EVERY AUGUST. In 2005 McLoughlin, who is now 21, enrolled at Syracuse University, a private institution in the middle of the state. After two years on her public relations and marketing course, McLoughlin joined her university's study-abroad programme. This took her to London for a term at Syracuse's London offshoot, which is housed in a nondescript office block in Holborn. Many of the students use their weekends to explore the capital or to go further afield, taking advantage of cheap flights to other European countries.

But it was to a small Scottish town not much larger than Altamont that McLoughlin decided to travel one autumn day in 2007. Boarding her train for the four-hour trip to Lockerbie, 20 miles north of the border with England, she wasn't sure what she would find. "But I had an urge to see the place I had heard so much about over the last three years."

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“I said I was from Syracuse and a stranger turned to me and said, ‘You are always welcome here’”

Twenty years ago this December, Pan Am flight 103 left Heathrow for New York’s JFK airport. It was four days before Christmas and 259 people were on board. The flight took off at 18.25, 25 minutes behind schedule. Just 38 minutes later, a bomb exploded in the baggage hold, ripping a hole in the underside of the fuselage. The aircraft broke apart 30,000ft over Lockerbie, scattering fuel, luggage, debris and bodies over 100 square miles. All of the passengers and crew perished, as well as 11 Lockerbie residents. It remains the greatest single loss of life to terrorism in the UK.

The biggest single group to die were 35 members of the Syracuse study-abroad programme, returning home from London and

Florence. Not even the gun massacre at Virginia Tech in 2007, when 33 people died, killed as many people from a single college. A member of staff at Syracuse, who doesn’t want to be named, admits: “There was a small part of me that hoped the number [at Virginia Tech] would be higher than our tragedy, so we wouldn’t be the highest any more. You don’t want people to die, but you also don’t want Syracuse to keep the top spot.”

The 19,000-strong student population of Syracuse University is far greater than that of the entire town of Lockerbie, where 4,000 people live. Had the flight taken off on time, the explosion would have occurred over the Atlantic, and few people in Syracuse, or even in the UK, would have heard of the Dumfriesshire town. But in dealing with the aftermath of the attack, Syracuse University has forged a remarkable link with Lockerbie.

“SHANNON JUST TURNED UP ONE DAY,” SAYS GRAHAM HERBERT, RECTOR OF LOCKERBIE ACADEMY, A SECONDARY SCHOOL ON THE EDGE OF TOWN WITH 800 PUPILS. “She came to the reception of the school and I was touched by her interest, so I showed her around.”

Herbert helps to administer a programme that is at the heart of efforts to maintain a bridge between Syracuse University and his own academy. Its main plank is a study scheme, through which two Lockerbie Academy pupils study at Syracuse University each year. The American college pays the costs. In Lockerbie, the students are known as Syracuse Scholars; in Syracuse they are Lockerbie Scholars.

Shannon McLoughlin was barely a year old when the explosion happened. Later, she heard about it when it was mentioned in the aftermath of 9/11. “But I didn’t realise its connection with Syracuse University until my freshman year, when I lived on the same floor as a Lockerbie Scholar.”

Lawrence Mason, a professor of photography at Syracuse, has also taught at the university’s London centre. He understands McLoughlin’s impulse to go to Syracuse – he has been the most frequent visitor to Lockerbie from Syracuse, returning several times since his first trip eight years after the explosion. “I was drawn to Lockerbie because I taught so many of the victims and knew a couple of them really quite well,” he says. “In 1991, I was teaching in London for the first time and I wanted to go to Lockerbie. But my wife talked me out of it. She said, ‘What’s the point, we should leave these people alone, they’ve had enough people invade their town.’”

“But in 1996, when eight years had passed, I felt like it was time, I don’t know why. I was hoping for closure because I was still haunted by the memories of those students I knew.”

He has, he says, been astounded by the hospitality of Lockerbie residents. “I was in a pub there once and mentioned to someone that I was a



From left: Lockerbie, population 4,000; Shannon McLoughlin, a Syracuse University student who "just turned up one day" in Lockerbie; a memorial to the victims in Lockerbie churchyard



professor at Syracuse. A stranger turned to me and said, 'In that case, you are always welcome here.' It felt like I was being given the key to the city."

Mason understands why McLoughlin felt compelled to visit the town. "The sense of grief on the campus when it happened was so pervasive and so strong, nearly everybody knew somebody at least in passing who was lost. We were victims, too – we were just long-distance victims. So we immediately began to feel a certain kinship with Lockerbie, a place we didn't know, because we were both victims of this thing."

That kinship has continued even for those of the generation who were babies when the explosion happened, such as McLoughlin. Adam Brooks was a 2006/07 Syracuse Scholar and now studies law at Aberdeen University. He opens the door of his parents' house in Lockerbie wearing the bright orange sweatshirt of the American university. "The links between Syracuse and Lockerbie are not just links because of the disaster," says Brooks. "We go out there and make friends – so it's got more to it now than just the disaster. You never forget the links are born out of tragedy, but they are now very strong. Syracuse and Lockerbie have become friends."

Syracuse University began to consider how to remember its lost students very soon after the disaster, says Judith O'Rourke, director of undergraduate studies. As well as the Lockerbie scholarships, a "Remembrance Scholars" scheme was set up.

The Remembrance Scholars are 35 Syracuse final-year students (since Shannon McLoughlin's first trip to Lockerbie she has been named as one of them). "PA103 was one of the first massive terrorist attacks on US civilians," says O'Rourke. "We are often thought of as the 'standard bearer' – the campus that people remember. We take that very seriously and have a dual mission. One is to remember the victims of the attack as individuals – not only our 35, but all 270. The second is to help our students – and therefore everyone that they touch – to recognise that we, individually and

collectively, are responsible for doing our part to promote peace and understanding throughout our world, our sphere of influence."

The 35 students selected each year are put in charge of organising Remembrance Week; seven days in October full of activities to remember the Pan Am explosion and the victims. Each student is allocated a victim to research and represent, wearing a badge with his or her student's picture on it. "They kind of become a living embodiment of the students who died," says Graham Herbert. "You see parents going up to the person representing their child and giving them a hug. They become that child for the day. It can be a bit emotionally disturbing."

Such public displays may seem strange to Britons used to a more low-key way of mourning. But many of the relatives of the lost Syracuse students say it has helped them to grieve. Peter Lowenstein's son Alexander, a student of English, was 21 when he died over Lockerbie. Lowenstein and his wife attended the early remembrance ceremonies but stopped when they felt that the focus was drifting away from the 35 who died. Last year, they decided to return. "We were so glad that we did. First, the ceremony had been much improved and the recipient students were totally aware of the life and times of the student that they represented," says Lowenstein. "The young girl who represented our Alexander in 2007 was a delight. She studied everything about Alex and his family. We have sort of adopted her and see her fairly often."

Lowenstein is not the only bereaved family member to feel a connection with the student representing a loved one – or even vice versa. Erin McLoughlin, 22, is from Moffat, 15 miles from Lockerbie, and has been both a Syracuse and a Remembrance Scholar. "I felt instantly connected to Florence Ergin, the mother of Turhan Ergin, and we continue to keep in contact. We write to each other and exchange holiday cards and for my graduation she sent me a very nice gift." >



“I became an ambassador for Lockerbie – talking about the events that brought me to the US”

McLaughlin says she was “flattered” by the attention she received as a Lockerbie Scholar. “I became an ambassador for Lockerbie and Scotland – I enjoyed talking about my home nation and educating people about the events that had brought me to study in the US.”

McLaughlin frequently visited the university’s Pan Am 103 archives, which house a collection of belongings donated by families of the victims. After she read the college essays of the students and saw the newspaper clippings describing their short lives she decided to organise a “Celebration of Remembrance” event. “I asked the other scholars to research the student victim they were representing and to share a poem, song or memory of that person from the archives. It made students realise that the victims, although 20 years older, had so many dreams in common with ourselves.”

TURN ON TO THE A709 AT LOCKERBIE’S ONLY TRAFFIC LIGHTS AND AFTER A SHORT DISTANCE YOU’LL FIND DRYFESDALE CEMETERY. SOME WAY IN IS A SMALL, UNSHOWY GARDEN OF REMEMBRANCE for the victims of Pan Am 103, with all 270 of the victims’ names on a wall and several more plaques around it. Elsewhere, discreet plaques and trees planted as living memorials mark sites where parts of the aircraft fell.

The cockpit and nose section landed in a field opposite the church in the village of Tundergarth, four miles outside Lockerbie. Some passengers were found still strapped into their seats. A small hut in the churchyard acts as a memorial room.

A casual visitor to Lockerbie and the surrounding area could easily fail to come across these memorials, which reflect a more understated, Scottish way of dealing with tragedy. “For people in Lockerbie it happened but perhaps you don’t want to be reminded of it all the time,” said one resident. Another said: “It happened to the town – it wasn’t anything to do with us, it just happened above us.”

Lauren Flynn’s parents lived in Lockerbie at the time of the explosion. Now, their daughter is one of this year’s Syracuse Scholars. “Remembrance Week is one of those things that you know when you apply you will have to take part in,” she says. “We were told not to apply if we weren’t confident about representing our community.”

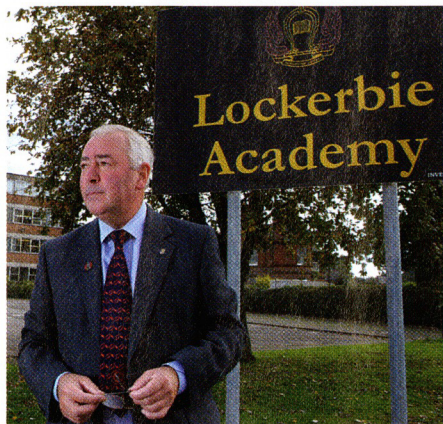
In Lockerbie, says Flynn, no one really speaks about the disaster, “But if someone asks about it, they tell them. It’s always there but there’s nothing in flashing lights.” And even though her parents and grandparents lived in the town when the disaster happened, she knew nothing about it until she noticed a memorial plaque where a part of the aircraft had fallen. The town will mark the 20th anniversary this year with a simple ecumenical evening service.

“I am conscious that it’s 20 years ago since it happened and our youngest students are 12,” says Graham Herbert, who helps to select the Syracuse Scholars and has visited the university three times. “We do have a ‘thought for the week board’ and the week before Christmas we put up information about the disaster and for the 13- to 14-year-olds we do a one-hour lesson on Pan Am 103. To some of them it’s a new story. Also we tell them about the scholarship. When the students first come here I say to them, “Two of you will be head boy and head girl and two of you will go to America.”

Moira Shearer, a Lockerbie resident, has met many of the families from Syracuse and elsewhere. She was one of many Lockerbie women



Clockwise from left: a notice board at the Memorial House in Tundergarten, Scotland, where wreckage from flight 103 landed; Erin McLaughlin, a "Lockerbie Scholar", in New York; a memorial at Dryfesdale; academy rector Graham Herbert



who worked in a warehouse on the edge of town washing and cleaning each item of clothing and luggage bought to them by the searchers after being cleared by the forensics team, ready to return it to the victims' families.

"The first few days after the explosion, there was dry weather but after that it started to rain, so when the belongings came to us there was a lot of mud. I remember a teddy from Harrods which was a present for the newborn baby of the sister of one of the passengers. We managed to clean that up and ensure it got to the baby," says Shearer. "There was also a bowling ball and lots of identity tags from the soldiers [on board] and there were lots of Christmas presents people were taking home. There was a Bible too. I ironed every page and put tissue paper between each one, and returned it to the family of the victim."

This act of friendship by the people of Lockerbie meant a lot to the American families. Daniel Cohen is the father of Syracuse student Theodora, who was 20 when she died in the explosion. He recalls: "I am a great Sherlock Holmes fan and when Theo was in England she bought me a deerstalker hat. It was returned; cleaned and in good condition. I still have it and it means a lot to me."

The first time Lawrence Mason visited Lockerbie, he took some of his photography students with him. They spent an afternoon touring the primary disaster sites. "I came home feeling like I had seen Lockerbie. I only learned that was wrong in the tenth anniversary year," he says. He was teaching in the US and one of the Lockerbie Scholars was a woman called Alison Younger. The university asked him to put up a photo show for the tenth anniversary and he asked Younger to help. What she wrote about the town surprised Mason: "It was about the human side rather than the disaster. It was about what she thinks about when she thinks about her town - the friends and the school and the stores and the friendship. She talked

about how she really didn't like to tell people she was from Lockerbie because it made it very difficult for people to relate to her. They would stop laughing and stop smiling. She didn't want people to relate to her in that way, so she'd just say she was from southern Scotland."

Nor was she the only one. "In the beginning I tried to avoid telling new people where I was from," says Elma Pringle, who took part with Moira Shearer in cleaning the belongings. "Now I can go on holiday and say I am from Lockerbie and people haven't heard of it. That didn't happen a few years ago."

NORMAN REUTER LIVES IN LONDON WHERE HE TEACHES VISITING SYRACUSE UNDERGRADUATES ABOUT THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY. TWELVE OF HIS STUDENTS DIED IN THE EXPLOSION. He was at home when the plane took off. "At 7pm I remember thinking that they must be on their way by now. I had the radio on and something very unusual happened. They interrupted the programme to say an aeroplane had exploded over Scotland, and it occurred to me that this could be the flight that the students were on."

Reuter is one of three members of the London faculty heading to Syracuse for Remembrance Week. It will be his first visit to the American campus. "I am not sure what to expect. I have some work from one of the students who died and if their parents are there I would like to return it."

The lecturer tries to keep an upbeat image of the people he knew. "One of my students had not handed in his coursework so he had to deliver it to my house the day before going back to America. I called him 'the smiler'. He was always late in doing things but always smiling. He told me that he was looking forward to the journey because the students were going to have a party."

This is what Reuter will be telling the relatives he meets this October: "That's how I like to think of them, in the middle of a party." ■