

Crash claims 9/11 widow heading to Jesuit school's scholarship event

WASHINGTON - Beverly Eckert, a victim of the Feb. 12 plane crash near Buffalo, N.Y., was en route to present a scholarship award in honor of her late husband at Jesuit-run Canisius High School in Buffalo.

Mrs. Eckert, a Sept. 11 widow, also had planned to take part in a weekend celebration in Buffalo of what would have been her husband's 58th birthday.

Her husband, Sean Rooney, died in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center. That day he spoke to his wife by cell phone up until the second tower - where he was trapped - collapsed. A vice president for risk management services at the Aon Corp., he worked on the 98th floor.

Mrs. Eckert, a resident of Stamford, Conn., was aboard Continental Flight 3407 from Newark, N.J., to Buffalo when it crashed into a home seven miles from the Buffalo Niagara International Airport, killing all 49 passengers and crew onboard and one person on the ground.

According to initial reports, the plane was coming in for a landing through light snow and fog. Witnesses said they heard the plane's engines sputtering before it struck the house in a fiery explosion.

Mrs. Eckert, 57, had long been an active voice for the Sept. 11 victims. She founded an advocacy group called Voices of September 11th. She also co-chaired the 9/11 Family Steering Committee, a group that investigated potential failures by the U.S. government that may have led to the terrorist attacks. She also lobbied Congress to pass intelligence reform, spearheaded protests for more land for a memorial at

ground zero, and pushed for a compensation fund for family members of the 9/11 victims.

In early February, Mrs. Eckert attended a White House meeting with President Barack Obama, along with other 9/11 activists, to discuss how the new administration would handle terror suspects.

“Beverly lost her husband on 9/11 and became a tireless advocate for those families whose lives were forever changed on that September day,” President Obama said during a Feb. 13 White House event.

“In keeping with that passionate commitment, she was on her way to Buffalo to mark what would have been her husband’s birthday and launch a scholarship in his memory,” he said. “So she was an inspiration to me and to so many others, and I pray that her family finds peace and comfort in the hard days ahead.”

At Canisius High School, Mrs. Eckert was active in the school’s capital campaign and in supporting the Sean Rooney Memorial Scholarship established in 2002. Mr. Rooney was a member of the class of ’69, one year behind another Canisius graduate, NBC News journalist Tim Russert, who died last year.

Mrs. Eckert, who met Rooney at a Canisius dance when they were 16, also had been raising funds to name one of the school’s new science labs in her husband’s memory.

The Feb. 13 scholarship presentation she planned to attend has been postponed.

“Beverly was a lovely woman who spent the last several years working hard to take the tragedy of Sean’s death and have something positive come from it,” said John Knight, president of Canisius High School, in a Feb. 13 statement.

“She was committed to Canisius and the outstanding education her husband

received,” he added.

The Rooney scholarship is awarded to a high-achieving student who demonstrates financial need. When possible, the award is given to a graduate of the Catholic Academy of West Buffalo, where Rooney attended elementary school, or to a west Buffalo resident.

The first recipient of the scholarship was Remy Uwilingiyimana, who fled from Rwanda in 1995.

Mrs. Eckert wrote in a 2006 letter to the school that the memorial scholarship had “more than exceeded my expectations of finding some way to counteract the destructive intent of terrorism.”