



American Memorial Collection members Lisa Grogan Sams '80, Chairwoman Judy McGinnis and Susan Armacost Fisher '82, stand by one of the stained glass windows dedicated to the Owens family, who were killed in the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am flight over Lockerbie, Scotland. The windows, a brass plaque and 2,000 books donated through the AMC are memorials to the ASL families lost in plane crashes in the '70s and '80s.

# Our past, Our future

Thirty years ago, the American Memorial Collection was started to commemorate ASL families killed in a Paris plane crash. Over the years the organization has grown, and more than 2,000 books have been donated to ASL's libraries. Teacher **Alice Leader** delves into the history of the organization, and speaks to two current AMC members who knew the families lost in the tragedy.

She also looks at how the organization provides a positive and meaningful exchange between ASLers from one generation to the next.



There's something very mysterious in the Mellon Library. It is most visible on dark days, when the outside world is black from dawn till dusk and only streaks of light strain through the gloom at noon. Go into the study rooms, built against the window wall, on either side of the central meeting room. Stand still and look at what lights those rooms. Set deep into the bookshelves in each room, is a seven-foot-high stained glass window, with inner light shining out from behind, gently spilling into the room. Who are these people? How old are these windows? They're saints! Look more carefully, at the names painted onto the glass. Something is wrong. The names are strangely painted. This is your first clue.

The second clue has been openly before you every time you've been in either of ASL's libraries. Glance along the shelves of books. Notice anything different? Certain books here, there, there, have gold stripes along their spines. Open them. There, glued to the inside cover, is a love letter, a dedication, a personal message from one member of the ASL community to another.

The third clue is a brass plaque on the library wall, listing 15 names:

Mr. & Mrs. Loren M. Hart  
Terri Diane Hart  
Nancy J. Hart  
Robert Hart  
Ronald L. Smith Jr.  
Dr. & Mrs. Wayne Wilcox  
Kailan Ayres Wilcox  
Clark Neill Wilcox  
Mr. & Mrs. Thomas P. Wright  
Sheryl Fay Wright  
Jackson Wright  
Karlaine Wright

What is all this? Is there any connection between these clues? How are we all affected?

The story began in March 1974, just outside of Paris, when a cargo door blew off of a Turkish plane. The pilots lost control of the plane and it crashed, killing everyone on board. Among the dead were 15 members of ASL's community: seven parents and eight students. Some had boarded in Paris, others in Istanbul, where the flight originated. The group in Paris had originally been scheduled on a British Airways flight but a strike left them stranded. They were reassigned to the Turkish flight, which was stopping in Paris en route to London.

Two schoolmates of children who died in that Paris crash are now ASL parents: **Lisa Grogan Sams '80**, mother of **Claire '13** and **James '15**, and **Susan Armacost Fisher '82**, mother of **Sara '13** and **Christopher '16**. Lisa was a student at ASL from 1972-78, and

returned as a parent in 2005. Susan had been at ASL in two separate stretches, once for the 1973-74 school year, and again from 1977-79. She returned as a parent in 2004.

Susan can vividly remember the tragedy. She was in Grade 4, and classmate Shelley Wilcox had lost her family in the crash. The youngest member of the Wilcox family, Shelley had not gone to France on holiday, but stayed in London with friends. When the dreadful news was known, Shelley's aunt and uncle came to London to take her back with them to Illinois. Susan remembers going over to the Wilcox home with her mother "to play with Shelley" while her mother spoke with Shelley's aunt. To this day, Susan is strongly affected by the tragedy. She was old enough to see and remember the television footage of the crash, and can still feel the awful responsibility to "play" with a classmate who had just lost her family.

Lisa's memories are just as strong. She was in Grade 6 in March 1974. Her father had worked for Loren Hart, another victim, in Cities Service, and the two families occasionally got together. When the Harts died, Lisa's mother cleared out their apartment. Lisa well remembers the memorial service, held shortly after.

In response to the dreadful and untimely deaths of those 15 ASL parents and students, the American Memorial Collection was founded by a group of parents, faculty and staff including Chris Siegfried, then director of the library, and teacher Alan Heath.

Over the past 33 years, the AMC has evolved into a celebration of the positive ways students, teachers, administrators and parents have contributed to our community, according to Chairwoman Judy McGinnis. The collection features books on American culture and history, and has grown into an outstanding resource on American heritage. As Judy pointed out, when the collection began, finding books in the UK on American history, culture and authors was difficult, as most had to be shipped over from the USA.

Fourteen years after the AMC was started, the ASL community faced another tragedy. In December 1988, Libyan terrorists detonated a bomb on board a Pan American plane, bringing it down over the town of Lockerbie, Scotland. Everyone on board was killed, including the Owens, an ASL family. Many at ASL donated books to the AMC in memory of them, and Mr. Owens' employer, Rohm and Haas, purchased two 1920s stained glass windows from a demolished church in Plymouth and donated them to the Mellon Library in memory of the family. One window is of the Venerable St. Bede, the other of St. Joan of Arc. To this day, the AMC uses a detail of the St. Bede window as the cover of

its handsome dedication card.

When Susan and Lisa found themselves at ASL as adults and parents, they decided to serve on the AMC committee. After all, Susan said, they knew what had inspired the AMC and who had died, and they both think it's "nice that it's still going on."

Susan's sense that "it's still going on" raises vexing questions. Can a transient community, like ASL, have a collective memory? A generation at ASL may be five years. Families, faculty and administrators come and go. What we share always is the present. We accept the international-life reality that our duration here may be limited, that our past is not directly relevant, and our future is unknown. What we do have is the present, each other and a great school.

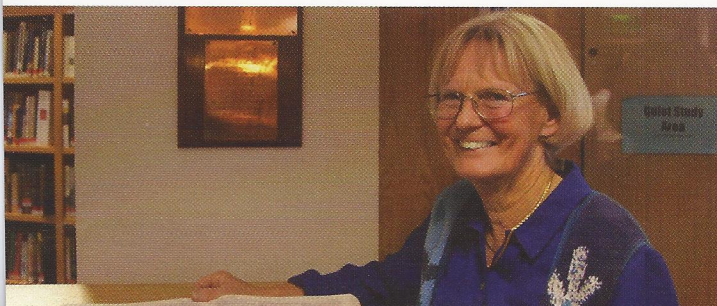
But, in truth, we don't only have the present together. The present passes over into the past every nanosecond. Five years or six or three are significant durations when important events take place. Lifelong friendships are forged among the parents and the students. People's lives are enriched and changed forever. When 15 ASLers were killed, the community united in mourning, gathering, almost immediately, at a memorial service. Within a year, the AMC was formed.

"Donating a book marks a passage," Ms. Siegfried recently said. That passage could be from Grade 8 to High School, from High School to college, or from teaching to retirement. She thinks people might donate a book to mark a birthday or to say good-bye to a family leaving ASL. When Bill Mules retires this June, grateful parents and teachers may well feel that books donated in his name to the Mellon Library would be perfect gifts. As Ms. McGinnis said, "It is a great way to honor someone you care about and provides a gift that is shared with the whole community for years to come."

Perhaps because we only have the present together, we respond intensely to each other. The AMC has been and is a way to channel that intensity. We ASLers have a bond with the ASLers on the Paris and Pan Am flights for, like them, we live in and know about this precarious world. But we are also connected to them, and to all the donors and recipients of the AMC books, by our knowledge of the pleasure of international, London and ASL life. Each book, with its gold stripe, is a recognition and celebration of that pleasure.

Go. Find the windows and the plaque. See the gold stripes. Choose a book, open it and read the personal message. It's an ASL thing.

*For more information about the American Memorial Collection, including how to donate a book, email [amc@asl.org](mailto:amc@asl.org).*



Former Library Director Chris Siegfried stands by the brass plaque commemorating the ASL parents and students lost in a 1974 plane crash near Paris. Ms. Siegfried was among the group of faculty, staff and parents who helped start the American Memorial Collection in recognition of these families.