

GRETCHEN DATER ART WEEK

Celebrating a life taken too soon

BY CHRISTINA HERNANDEZ
Of Suburban News

RAMSEY - As they have every year for 20 years during the third week of May, the John Y. Dater Elementary School community is celebrating a life taken too soon.

Two decades have not eased the pain of that loss; nor has a financial settlement only finalized last year by the government held responsible for that loss.

"It stays with you for the rest of your life," Tom Dater of Mahwah said of the death of his daughter, Gretchen, aboard Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in a 1988 terrorist attack. "It's evident we are handling things better, but the word 'closure' we laugh at."

The Syracuse University student was returning from a semester

studying art in London along with 35 of her school mates when the bombing, engineered by Libyan terrorists, ripped apart the plane she was on, killing 270 people.

Her middle school art teacher, Michael Gratale, now principal of Dater, remembers learning about the bombing as if it was yesterday.

"I was coming out of what was Dater school at the time because I coached basketball for Smith school and we were practicing there. I turned on the radio in my car and that's when I found out about the plane...She was such a sweetheart, a great kid."

She would have turned 41 on Sunday, May 17.

In October, the Libyan government settled on a \$2.7 billion compensation package for the families of those killed aboard the Pan Am

flight and in a bombing of a German nightclub. Although reports indicated the families would each receive \$10 million, Joan Dater, Gretchen's mother, said she was prohibited by a non-disclosure agreement from talking about its details.

She said, however, that what money the family has received is being put toward the programs and scholarships that have been established to honor Gretchen and the Syracuse students who died, including an annual scholarship for Ramsey High School seniors and the events at Dater during what has become known as Gretchen Dater Art Week.

Gretchen's love of art figures large in this now annual event at the school she once attended. An art room at the elementary school was dedicated in her honor last year, and art-related activities are part of the students' curriculum throughout the week. The commemoration concludes with a luncheon attended by Gretchen's childhood friends and family members.

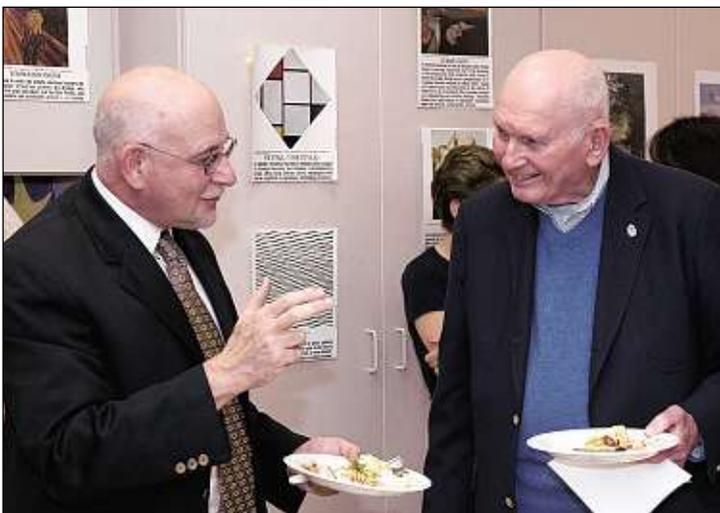
Joan Dater said she was able to cope with the "shock" and "devastation" of Gretchen's death because of all the support the family received from neighbors, friends and family. But what pulled her out of her slump was a desire to "fight back."

She began meeting with other parents who lost children in the Pan Am bombing in early 1989 and formed an advisory board to seek justice for it. In addition to meeting every quarter, they lob-

Artist Cliff Mendelson, above, creates pottery during the art week, then talks about different styles with students, left.



Gretchen's parents, Tom and Joan Dater, with their son Chris.



Dater Principal Michael Gratale talks with Gretchen's father, town historian Tom Dater.

bied politicians for legislation seeking retribution by the Libyan government. Joan Dater credits Sen. Frank Lautenberg for the financial settlement secured last year.

Although Gretchen's brother, Chris, 35, said that "legally, for the most part, I think it's come to a close," closure on an emotional level is a "lifelong process."

On Thursday, members of the Dater family and their friends sat around tables draped in yellow cloth and a centerpiece of flowers to share their memories in the very school named for Gretchen's great-grandfather.

Joan Dater, who was an English professor at William Paterson University, said her daughter was "vivacious" and "loved life and was a lot of fun to be around."

"She was very loyal and you could always depend on her," said Chris, who was five years younger than Gretchen and of whom she was said to be "protective" at times.

Gretchen Dater Art Week, her mother said, "keeps her memory alive and educates our future leaders about terrorism."

E-mail: hernandez@northjersey.com

ADVERTISING	973-569-7280	CLASSIFIEDS	1-800-472-0163
FAX	973-569-7259	FAX	973-569-7440
CIRCULATION	1-888-504-4280	EDITORIAL	201-612-5415
		FAX	201-612-5421
		suburbannews@northjersey.com	

RAMSEY
SUBURBAN NEWS

41 Oak Street (entrance on Walnut Street)
Ridgewood, NJ 07450-3805

©2009 North Jersey Media Group Inc.

Ramsey Suburban News, USPS 308-810 ISSN: 0746-052X publishes every Wednesday. Average circulation verified by Certified Audit of Circulation. Member C.A.C.

Periodicals Postage paid at Ridgewood, NJ 07450 and additional offices. Single copy: 25c Subscriptions: \$99 per year For subscriptions, call 1-888-504-4280.

Photo Reprint Service and PDF Full-Page Sales
We will reprint most staff and freelance photos and PDFs of pages that appeared in this newspaper since 1/1/02. Photos and PDFs are sold for personal use only. All commercial and/or other uses are strictly prohibited and may subject one to civil penalties. Visit www.northjerseyimages.com or call 973-569-7017 or e-mail reprints@northjersey.com