

Difficult journey of remembrance

As the 38 injured bus passengers continue to heal, they return to the site of the accident to honor the 17 who died and those who came to their aid

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Oct. 5, 2008, 10:57PM

On the bus, a husband recalled the gentle slope of his late wife's features. A mother clasped a framed picture of her dead daughter. A man spoke of the day he nearly died.

Millions of Americans ride the bus every day. It connects them to jobs, malls and restaurants. It links them to their city. But for the 55 Vietnamese passengers on the two gleaming white buses traveling north on Interstate 45 on Aug. 8, buses are vehicles of death.

Sunday, however, relatives and friends of the 17 victims set aside their fears and suspicions to journey by bus to the crash site in Sherman.

The four-hour drive was particularly difficult for Thanh Hoang, a slender 21-year-old man marked by deep scabs across his forehead from the two dozen stitches he needed after the front tire blew out and the bus smashed through a guardrail and toppled from a bridge at 12:40 a.m.

"I swore I would never travel by bus again," said the mechanic student, eyes cast downward. "I

don't want to ever revisit that horrible night when dead bodies of relatives smashed on top of injured loved ones, trapping survivors inside a nightmare of tangled arms and legs."

And yet, here he is, sitting on navy velour seats with other church members from the Vietnamese Martyrs Catholic Church, Our Lady of Lavang and Our Lady Lourdes. The hum of the engine cuts through the silence, hanging somberly over the motorcoach.

The passengers gazed out tinted windows framing pastoral slopes lined with pines and wildflowers.

"It seems all so normal, doesn't it?" noted 12-year-old Katherine Bui, who was on the bus with her family during the crash. "I had imagined the area near the crash to be darker, scarier. But it just looks like a hundred other roads. Only it isn't. This one changed our lives."

Her father, Thiep, now relies on a walker. He goes to therapy three times a week. Her mother, Thuy Le Tran, was recently released from the hospital. She's still not whole. Most days, she lies in bed, staring into space. She's too weak to stand or sit for very long.

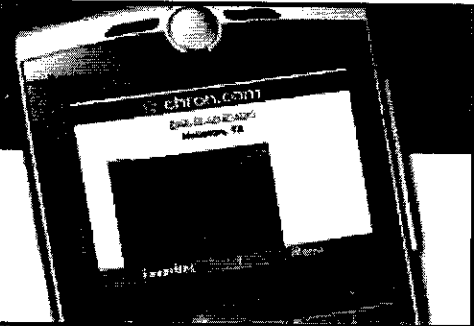
As Katherine Bui spoke, Hoang nodded. Others have recounted similar stories. Thirty-eight were injured.

"My fear of getting on a bus was overridden by my duty as a survivor. I wanted to represent those who couldn't make it today because they're still too weak or too paralyzed by fear," Hoang said. "So I'm here to represent them. I not only want to show respect to those who died, but appreciation to the city of Sherman. The police officers and firemen were so kind to us."

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Hoang scanned the road ahead. His lips pursed and lines furrowed his forehead.

"Are we there yet?" asked Hoi Thi Pham, clutching the photo of her daughter, Thuy Thu Pham Vu.

She was told that her baby, the youngest of six children, died instantly. Thuy was 27, the youngest of the victims. An accountant, she had just gotten a promotion the day before the accident.

Since her daughter's death, Pham has been unable to sleep. She wakes up at 3 a.m. every night. In her mind, she sees the soft glow of her child's pale skin against shoulder-length black hair. Then she buries her head into the pillow to drown her screams.

"I see blood, every night I see her lying still on the ground. I know she died a horrible death, but you can't squelch a mother's need for answers. I need to see the place where she died."

Minutes later, just past 12:30 p.m., Pham lets out a scream, followed by uncontrollable tears.

"We're here," Hoang said, watching the mother of his friend crumble forward in pain. "I was sitting by her daughter when the accident happened. She was right beside (me) and then, she was gone."

The families and victims piled out of the buses. Around their necks, narrow white linen scarves signify their grief. Daughters wrapped their arms around their mothers to support them as they walked toward a shady grassy knoll where their loved ones died.

"Here, Lord, is where husbands lost their wives and wives lost their husbands," said the Rev.

Hung Nguyen. "Here, Lord, mothers lost their children and children lost their mothers."

As the ceremony proceeded, a 5-foot white cross was placed at the edge of the bridge. Around it, white candles and single-stem vases for the 17 red roses, representing each person who died. Songs and prayers followed.

"There is no loss in life," a young woman reminded the crowd. "Life has simply changed."

After the ceremony, the congregation boarded the bus to Sherman City Hall to show thanks.

"The mayor, police officers, nurses, doctors held our hands when our hands were cold," said Peter Pham, who lost his grandmother. "They cried with us. They also demonstrated the love that God has taught us to show unto others. They're Earth angels, surely. They offered hope."

Hope, meaning for changes in bus regulations that would require motorcoaches to have seat belts, like the buses that took them back to Sherman. And requiring bus windows to be glazed with a fiber film, so in an accident the shattered shards wouldn't fly into the faces of passengers. Most importantly, the families of the victims hope that Washington will pass a law that would outlaw bus companies from installing refurbished tires on their motorcoaches.

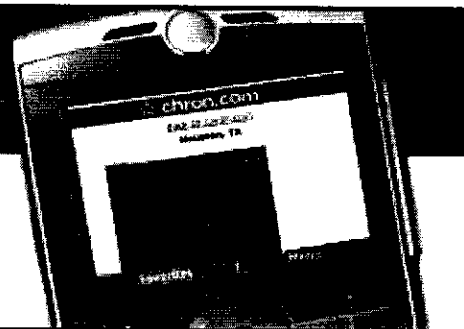
"I believe that some good will come out of this," Hoang said. "Surely it must. I believe that the lives lost in Sherman, Texas, will save the lives of many in the future. This can't happen again."

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