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Texas Bus Crash Survivors Honor Responders

The Associated Press

SHERMAN, Texas --

Pilgrims who survived a bus crash and relatives of those who died returned to the area Sunday to celebrate Mass and honor city officials for their help, declaring that a bond had formed between this small north Texas city and the Houston area's Vietnamese community.

Arriving on buses and in sport utility vehicles, about 50 people gathered near where the tour bus carrying members of a Houston-area Vietnamese Catholic group came to rest Aug. 8. A vase for each of the 17 victims was set up, forming a semicircle around a 6-foot wooden cross.

After Mass, the group went to Sherman's city hall and lauded Mayor Bill Magers and the city's emergency crews.

"You gave us strength in our faith in our darkest hour," said Thai Pham, president of a victim's group, noting the new ties between the Vietnamese community and the Sherman area. "We're thankful that our loved ones found somewhere humane and dignified during their last moments of life."

Pham thanked the local police and fire departments, hospitals, health department, and American Red Cross for their help, presenting the mayor with a plaque.

"Your loss is our loss, and we feel it every day," Sherman Fire Chief J.J. Jones told the group.

Officer Rob Ballew, one of the first police officers on the scene, said Sunday's gesture was unexpected.

"I was really impressed that they would do this after such a terrible ordeal," he said.

The bus carrying the 55 pilgrims on a trip from Houston to Carthage, Mo., blew a tire and broke through a guardrail and came to rest down an embankment.

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