

Update: Brookfield pilot dies in crash

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Article Last Updated: 08/13/2008 05:20:02 PM EDT

BROOKFIELD — A well-respected local activist and church leader transporting a Long Island couple to a Boston hospital died with his passengers Tuesday morning when the single-engine airplane he was piloting crashed in a supermarket plaza parking lot 30 miles south of the city.

Realtor Joe Baker, an employee of McCaffrey Realty in Brookfield and a volunteer pilot with Angel Flight Northeast, was taking 46-year-old Robert H. Gregory, of Riverhead, N.Y., and his 37-year-old wife, Donna, to a Boston hospital where the husband was undergoing cancer treatment when the crash occurred, officials said.



Slideshow: [Click here to see pictures of the crash scene from the Associated Press.](#)

Angel Flight Northeast is a nonprofit organization based in North Andover, Mass., that provides no-cost flights to people requiring medical treatment.

This is the first crash in the northeast organization's 12-year history.

Baker was flying a single-engine Beechcraft Bonanza that belonged to Janet Keene of Brookfield, a 1956 aircraft that Keene said originally belonged to James Roosevelt, the son of former President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She inherited the plane from her father, who died in 1970. Keene said Baker, who maintained and flew her plane, kept it in Bridgeport and frequently flew for Angel Flight Northeast.

"Oh my God," said Brookfield High School swim coach Brian Reiff when learning of the tragedy. "I'm just blown away."

Reiff said he had known Baker for years as a neighbor, a swim team supporter, and devoted member of Brookfield's political, civic and faith community.

"He is someone who exudes life," Reiff said of Baker, who always wore a smile and seemed happy to live everyday.

Brookfield's Matt Grimes described Baker as the "godfather of swimming in Brookfield."

Baker and his wife, Terri, a school physical therapist, have three children -- Peter, who now lives in Oregon; Martha, a medical student at



Boston University; and Jeff, who lives in Arizona. The family was assembling together Tuesday after learning of the tragedy.

"He was just a phenomenal community member," Reiff said of the man known throughout town as someone always ready to volunteer his time and talents to his community or those in need. "He just transcended Brookfield. He was part of the fiber of so many things. He was just so special."

Angel Flight Northeast founder Larry Camerlin said the crash, which occurred about 10:30 a.m. in Easton, Mass., came as a devastating shock to everyone in their organization.

Easton Police spokesman Officer George Allen said their deputy chief was on patrol when he learned of an airplane in distress. Soon after, the department received about 10 emergency calls of an explosion in the Hannaford Supermarket plaza parking lot. When police and the fire personnel arrived, the plane was engulfed in flames, and it was confirmed that all three people on the plane had died, Allen said.

The cause of the crash has yet to be determined. The National Transportation Safety Board is conducting the investigation.

FAA officials on Tuesday confirmed that Baker had never before had any accidents or enforcement actions as a pilot.

Though Camerlin said he did not personally know Baker, he said the organization considers every pilot and patient who participates with

them to be family.

"I was devastated," Camerlin said.

Since the organization was started in 1996 it has safely flown 53,000 people on 30,000 medical flights about 8 million miles, he said. "It is unimaginable the amount of grief we're experiencing here today. It's never happened to us before."

A month ago, an Angel Flight in the south suffered a crash in Tampa, Fla., that killed a 49-year-old cancer patient, a 15-year-old boy and the 81-year-old pilot.

Camerlin said he has more than 950 pilots from the New England states as well as New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania.

"We take extremely seriously our moral obligation to provide the highest level of safety and highest level of care for all these people we fly," Camerlin said.

Camerlin said the men and women who donate their time and talents to provide these flights are "wonderful, generous, loving, conscientious men and women who love to fly and pride themselves in their flying skills as well as the safety and quality of their airplanes. And they use their gifts to help other people."

"I pray everyday that God watches over all our pilots and patients. But accidents happen," Camerlin said.



In Brookfield, Baker was mourned.

"I'm, personally, in shock," said the Rev. David McGuire, pastoral care consultant at Valley Presbyterian Church, where Baker served as the church treasurer.

His wife is active in the choir and various other church activities, McGuire said. "Joe is one of those easygoing types. He takes you in, and you take him in."

He said Baker flew him and his wife, Helen, on a trip to Martha's Vineyard. He said he was always impressed with his piloting skills because he was so meticulous about every safety detail.

"So it's hard to understand what happened ... I just can't believe he's not going to be around," he said. "Quite frankly, I'm at a loss for words."

Fellow Valley church leader and 25-year friend Lynn Harrison felt the same.

"I feel quite devastated," Harrison said as she struggled against her tears. "I just think this is so tragic, especially because he was trying to do such a wonderful thing."

She said she knows the church will rally around the family.

"I know this church is going to have a hard time recovering from this," she said. "I just feel so very sad."

Republican Town Committee Chairman Marty

Flynn said he finds it hard to fathom that on Monday night Baker was in his home with a group of fellow Republicans preparing fliers for an upcoming golf tournament fundraiser.

He recalls that once their work was finished, he offered Baker a beer. Baker declined because he said he had a flight in the morning.

"He was someone who was very familiar with how government works, and if you had a question, he was someone you could go to," Flynn said. He added Baker served in the 1990s as vice chairman on the Board of Education and more recently was chairman of the town Charter Revision Commission and the Board of Assessment Appeals. "He could disagree with you without being disagreeable. He was just a nice guy."

A former school board colleague and neighbor, James Davies, who now lives in Florida, recalled spending many a cold winter morning at their mailboxes talking town politics. Davies said Baker's whole focus was always "how to make Brookfield a better place."

"I respected Joe immensely," Davies said. "He had the courage of his convictions and the willingness to act with commitment to make Brookfield a better place to live even in the face of political unpopularity during a difficult time in Brookfield's political history. He was a giant in Republican politics. He was incredibly confident, well-spoken, and did his homework well. He left outspokenness to the more flamboyant while he channeled his ideas and frustrations into a



strong commitment to get it right."

Another fellow school board member and friend, Bill Tinsley, agreed Baker was a man devoted to the service of others. Tinsley's son, Brian, is in medical school with Baker's daughter.

"He was a real giving person," Tinsley said, his voice quivering with emotion. "I'm very sorry that he's gone. And he left us providing service to other people."

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Newsday contributed to this report.

NOTE:

Joe was an Eagle Scout and long time Scouter. Joe's scouting career included being assistant scoutmaster of all 3 troops in Brookfield, 5, 8, and 135, where he was also a merit badge counselor for numerous merit badges. He served on the Scatacook district committee as finance chairman and was a long standing member of the committee. He also was active in the cub scout packs in Brookfield, where his sons started their road to Eagle.