



Posted by [Dan Whisenhunt](#) on May 4, 2012.

50 years later, Orly a painful memory

This June, Atlanta will mark the memory of an event many of its residents have tried to forget.

To this day, the June 3, 1962 plane crash at the Orly Field in Paris, France is a sensitive topic. Many of the people who remember it were young then, the children, friends and relatives of the crash victims. Out of the 130 people who died, more than 100 were Atlanta arts benefactors. Their loss stunned the community, taking from it a generation of philanthropy and civic leadership.

Buckhead Coalition President Sam Massell was serving on Atlanta City Council then.

“It was an extremely depressing day in Atlanta’s history,” Massell said. “As Vice Mayor, I was charged with the responsibility of answering family, media and public questions on an hour-by-hour basis overnight from City Hall, while Mayor Ivan Allen was traveling to the Paris site.”

There will be a full day of memorial events June 3 at the Woodruff Arts Center, a building that was called the Atlanta Memorial Arts Center when it opened in 1968.

On May 11, Buckhead Heritage will host a lecture by Anne Uhry Abrams, author of “Explosion at Orly: The Disaster that Transformed Atlanta,” and Chris Moser, producer of the 2001 documentary film “The Day Atlanta Stood Still.” A lecture and screening of the film will begin at 7 p.m. at the Cathedral of St. Philip, 2744 Peachtree Road.

The Orly disaster was the world’s deadliest plane crash at the time and it reverberated through the artistic, social and political communities, according to newspaper archives and other records.

When Abrams began doing research 10 years ago for her book, one of the people she contacted warned her not to reopen old wounds. Many people she contacted hadn’t spoken of it in decades.

“It was the Titanic of our city,” Abrams said. “When it happened, it took a lot of leaders, important people at the time.”

Many do not know the Woodruff Arts Center was conceived as a memorial to the victims of the Orly crash. The Rodin sculpture at the High Museum, “The Shade,” was a gift to the city from France.

Those who are familiar with the event might not be aware of its impact.

International air travel was relatively new at the time, and news of the crash splashed across headlines around the globe.

Rickey Bevington, Georgia Public Broadcasting’s senior news editor, lost her grandmother and great-grandmother in the crash. Her father was 10 years old at the time.

“Commercial air travel was so new, which I think added to losing so many people at once ...,” Bevington said. “People weren’t accustomed to plane crashes. It was such a new technology, so I think it was a different experience in one’s imagination in 1962.”

Condolences from world leaders poured into the city.

Malcolm X celebrated the crash at a fiery speech in Los Angeles, words Martin Luther King, Jr. repudiated, according to the book “Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years.” King and Harry Belafonte cancelled an Atlanta sit-in, a gesture of respect for a city in mourning.

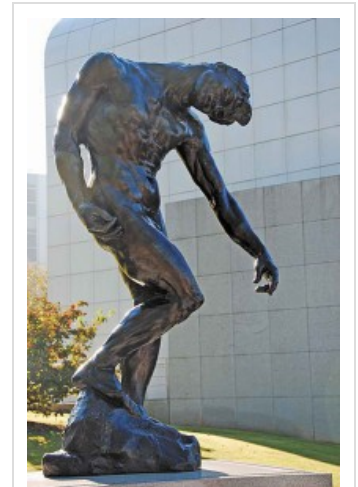
Pop artist Andy Warhol painted the front page of a newspaper published after the event, a work he titled “129 Die in Jet.”

The page in question featured the picture of the burned airplane wing tilting toward the sky.

In 1962, the plane was headed back to Atlanta after touring Europe. According to reports, the pilot attempted to abort a failed take-off, but the Boeing 707 was traveling too quickly and there wasn’t enough time. All but one of the 130 victims died instantly when the plane overran the runway.

Public mourning then was not the same as it is today, Abrams said. Days after learning their parents had died, children returned to school.

One of the men she interviewed said there wasn’t a funeral until months later, when the families received the remains. He told her he saw another funeral



“The Shade,” a Rodin sculpture at the High Museum, was a gift from France.

for a crash victim the same day and it made him realize he was not alone.

“Today if there’s a mass tragedy, there are ways to get in touch with each other and have this communal mourning,” Abrams said. “In those days there wasn’t and after it died down in the community that was it.”

Bevington said people today have more resources to deal with grief and do so more openly.

“It’s a generational matter,” she said. “It was a time when Americans and Southerners dealt with trauma with a stiff upper lip.”

Abrams remembers first hearing about the crash on the radio on a family trip back to Atlanta from Tennessee. She understands it’s hard to discuss. The interview process for the book brought closure for some, she said. Abrams said it’s a reminder to not bury grief along with the dead.

“When something is wrong, talk to as many people as you can about it, take as much advice as you can,” she said. “They didn’t do it in 1962. It took them a long time.”

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My grade-school friend, Ellen Bull, was killed in the crash, along with her parents, her sister and grandmother. I think about Ellen often and all that she had ahead of her and all that she missed. She was a sweet girl with a lot of promise. Only 10 years old when she died.

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Buckhead Heritage Society is also hosting an event Saturday, May 12th at Millennium Gate Museum, The Orly Tragedy Through The Eyes Of Artists. Artists have created works to tell the story of the era, the crash and the affects on families and the City. We'd love to see that added to the article. Thanks.

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