

To: NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
From: Dawn Stelling
Subject: Witness Statement: NTSB Identification: WPR18FA046
Date: January 19, 2017

The purpose of this statement is intended solely for use in determining the facts, conditions and circumstances, and the probable cause of the subject accident, which involved a Beach A36, registration N28SB that crashed on December 9, 2017.

My name is Dawn Stelling. I am the widow of Robert Stelling, who lost his life in the plane crash on December 9.

I am a Veterinarian with a practice in Southampton, NY. Robert was part owner and manager of a beach and tennis club in Southampton, NY.

On December 9, 2017, we were in California so I could attend a veterinarian conference in San Diego. The flight was arranged by Mike Zareski, who was our friend and former colleague of mine. Mike had worked for me in my veterinarian practice in Southampton, before he moved to California to start his own practice. When Mike learned that Robert and I were coming to California, he insisted on acting as a host and this included arranging the subject flight.

The flight was going to be a short tour of the California coastline. We went to the Montgomery-Gibbs Executive Airport in San Diego to meet the airplane. The airplane arrived about 4:15 p.m. We then got into the airplane, with Robert sitting in the front right seat next to the pilot. I sat right behind the pilot sitting backwards and Mike sat next to me also sitting backwards.

I did not know the pilot prior to the flight. He was introduced to me as Josh and I later learned that his full name is Josh Reikes. Josh's wife is a Veterinarian in Mike's practice.

The airplane taxied to the runway and took off normally. I do not have much experience in flying in small airplanes, but nothing seemed out of the ordinary to me during the takeoff. We were all wearing headsets, but the pilot set it up so that Mike and I could talk, but we could not hear Robert or the pilot.

A short time after takeoff and while the airplane seemed to be still climbing, I heard a very loud bang and the engine immediately quit. Mike reacted to the noise by saying "what the fuck." I sensed the airplane making a turn back toward the airport and then saw the ground coming up. Mike tried to comfort me as the pilot attempted an emergency landing. He told me that I needed to hold on.

I could not see what the pilot was doing because of how I was seated, but I did not hear the engine restart and I don't believe that it did after it quit. I heard no engine noise after the loud bang. I saw that we were descending because the houses were getting close.

The airplane made an emergency landing. During the landing, tree branches came through my window. We hit something. The airplane was on fire. My window was broken. I saw Mike was slumped over. I was able to look forward and I saw Robert leaning forward with his head pressed on the dash. I could not get to the door of the airplane, because it was on the right side of the airplane and the fire made it impossible to get to the door. The pilot told me to go through the broken window. He pushed me from behind. We both got clear. The pilot told me to get away from the airplane and I attempted to get help for Mike and Robert from people in the area. The pilot was burned and catatonic. I attempted to get back to the airplane, but I was restrained by some young men from an adjacent house because of the danger. I saw first responders spraying foam on the airplane and it seemed that they were trying to cut the roof out. I refused to leave the area until a fire fighter came to me and told me there were no survivors. I was then taken by ambulance to the hospital.

I am available to answer any questions and to assist with the investigation in any way that I am able.

DAWN STELLING

From: [eyewitnessreport](#)
To: [Smith Maja](#)
Subject: FW: San Diego aircraft crash 12/9/17
Date: Monday, December 11, 2017 4:22:48 AM

Statement sent to us.

Regards,

Erik

-----Original Message-----

From: Witness
Sent: Sunday, December 10, 2017 12:30 AM
To: eyewitnessreport <eyewitnessreport@[REDACTED]>
Subject: FW: San Diego aircraft crash 12/9/17

From: Eli Cook
Sent: Sunday, December 10, 2017 5:30:03 AM (UTC+00:00) Monrovia, Reykjavik
To: Witness
Subject: San Diego aircraft crash 12/9/17

This evening at approximately 1630 hours I was walking my two dogs in Olive Grove Park talking to a neighbor who was also walking his dog. We were in the southeast corner of the park near the fence separating the park and the playground of Lafayette Elementary School.

While talking we heard an airplane that had recently taken off from Montgomery Field overhead. The engine of the plane seemed to backfire and quit. We both looked up to see a single engine aircraft traveling westbound. The plane began making a northbound turn as we listened to hear if the engine were running or not. We heard several pops that sounded like more backfires but never heard the motor running.

I am familiar with Montgomery Field because I have flown on small aircraft from the airport numerous times over the past 5 years and knew the pilot was attempting to return to land. I could see the plane had retractable landing gear that was still up so I hoped the engine was running but the sound was being drowned out by other nearby aircraft. As the plane continued its course back to Montgomery I noticed it was losing altitude and saw the landing gear lower (by now the plane was traveling eastbound). At this point I realized the plane wouldn't make it back to Montgomery Field.

The plane had been heading eastbound towards Montgomery Field but made a sharp southbound turn and I realized the pilot was going to attempt a landing in the field behind the elementary school or the park I was in. By now the plane was very low and headed directly at me and my neighbor. We began running but I looked back to see the plane touch down approximately 30-40 yards before the end of the field. The plane quickly hit the fence separating the school grounds and the houses back yard.. the plane went through the fence and into a house with a very loud bang and instantly burst into flames..

There was a large party happening in the park as well as a group of people playing flag football and a small pickup soccer game.. multiple people rushed to the crash site in an attempt to help but were unable to do anything due to the flames. I myself didn't approach the crash. Somewhere between 5 and 10 minutes after the crash there was a large explosion but I don't know if it was the plane or the house the plane collided with.

I could see a man and woman had escaped the wreckage relatively unscathed. People in the crowd said the man was

piloting the plane. The woman was hysterical.

I assume the crash happened at 1634 hours because that is when I called 911, immediately after the crash.

I don't know if my statement is any help to your investigation but I'm happy and willing to answer any questions you might have.

Eli Cook



From: [eyewitnessreport](#)
To: [Smith Maja](#)
Subject: FW: San Diego Small Plane Crash
Date: Monday, December 11, 2017 4:21:14 AM

Hi Maja,

This came in from a witness. I advised him if you need any additional info you would contact him.

Regards,

Erik

-----Original Message-----

From: Chris King [[mailto:cmking99@\[REDACTED\]](mailto:cmking99@[REDACTED])]
Sent: Saturday, December 9, 2017 10:48 PM
To: eyewitnessreport <eyewitnessreport@ntsb.gov>
Subject: San Diego Small Plane Crash

I witnessed the plane struggling before the crash. He was flying low and slow over the nearby Soup Plantation parking lot where I was standing. The pilot was clearly struggling to stay airborne at slow speed as the plane was dipping left and right before he turned to the right towards the nearby airfield. The engine was oscillating and backfiring. I got 4 seconds of video showing the pilot dropping his landing gear just before impact but from quite a ways away. It's after he execute his right turn. Contact me if interested. I think it's a bit too large to email.

Chris King
[REDACTED]

Sent from my iPhone