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Graton family killed in plane crash

By Laura Hagar Rush
Sonoma West Editor
laura@sonomawest.com

On Wednesday, July 24, a twin-engine Beechcraft Baron carrying Damon Brown, 61, and Sarah Brown, 68, and their son Duncan Brown, 25, crashed just before landing at the Chadron, Nebraska, municipal airport at about 2:30 p.m., killing everyone on board. The family was returning from an aviation event in Wisconsin.

Sarah Andrews Brown was a geologist and mystery writer. Damon Brown, also a geologist, was a partner at EBA Engineering, a civil and environmental engineering firm in Santa Rosa. Their only child, Duncan, a graduate of Analy High School and Occidental College, earned his master's in architecture while working at Persinger Architects in Sebastopol. All three lived in Graton.

The report from the National Transportation Safety Board released on July 31 did not list the cause of the crash, though they did indicate that there was no fire or explosion at the site and that the plane's

fuel tanks were nearly empty.

It also relayed two witness accounts: one told officials he saw the plane as it was preparing to land suddenly drop nose-down behind the tree line. Another said she heard the plane sputter, then go silent, before the crash.

Those are the bare facts, but what these facts don't capture is the deep and quirky charm of this small Graton family and the outsized hole their sudden disappearance from this Earth has left in the hearts of those who knew them.

Sarah and Damon: Bonded through a shared love of science

Sarah grew up in an academic family in Connecticut. Her parents were prep school teachers, and Sarah learned early, as she wrote in her online bio, that "life is for learning, and everybody around you is a teacher."

Since childhood, she had a passion for the outdoors, including sailing with her father

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A CLOSE FAMILY — Damon Brown, Sarah Andrews Brown and their son Duncan Brown, all of Graton, were killed when their small plane crashed near Chadron Municipal Airport in Nebraska. Photos provided. Duncan Brown photo by Jameson Rush



Photo John Hershey

ON THE DAILY — Darris Nelson runs the Facebook page "Mama Loves the Beach," a personal photo journal of her daily explorations of the Sonoma Coast.

A daily journal of life on the coast

With camera and litter bag in hand, 'Mama Loves the Beach' captures the coast

By Laura Hagar Rush
Sonoma West Editor
laura@sonomawest.com

Darris Nelson loves the beach. That was clear years ago, when a friend asked her young son why they spend so much time at the ocean.

"Mama loves the beach," was her 4-year-old's answer.

"That always stuck with me," Nelson said, so when she started a blog on Blogspot in 2011, that's what she called it. In 2015 she moved Mama Loves the Beach to Facebook, where it resides to this day, a testament to one woman's love for the Sonoma Coast.

Nelson said she created Mama Loves the Beach "because the ocean was a passion, and I was seeing a trend of trash increasing on the beach. But I didn't want the blog to be heavy. I wanted it to be light and playful."

Somehow, she's managed to strike that balance. She visits the beach every day — Doran is a favorite — and records what she sees there: the waves, the sky, the animals (alive and dead), the people and, sometimes, the litter they leave behind.

"I just put in what strikes me every time I'm out there," she said.

"It really just comes from the heart."

Nelson, who was born in San Francisco and grew up in Marin County, moved to Sonoma County 30 years ago, first to Freestone and then to Bodega Bay in 2009.

She said she visits the beach so often because "I feel more connected there than anywhere, and I know I'm not the only one that feels that."

She has a personal reason for feeling connected to the ocean.

"I didn't get to spend much time with my dad — he died when I was young — and the times I remember feeling most connected to him was when we were walking on the beach," she said. "He loved the ocean."

What does Nelson love most about the ocean?

"It's wild, changing, yet constant presence," Nelson said. "The waves come in, the waves go out. There's this kind of surety and certainty that I love about being there."

"It's also different all the time. People say, 'How come you go out to Doran all the time? Doesn't it get boring?' and I say, 'It's different every day!' The surf is different, the people are different, the structure of the shore is different. It's always different. It's a combination of the certainty and the uncertainty and the wildness of the whole environment that I love."

Nelson doesn't just take photos and video of the beach for her

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Hopkins announces new district director

By Frank Robertson
Staff Writer

Fifth District Sonoma County Supervisor Lynda Hopkins announced the selection of her new district director last week, naming Leo Chyi to the job now held by Graton resident Susan Upchurch.

Chyi will start in two weeks working with Upchurch, who announced earlier this year that she intends to retire in October.

"Leo Chyi has an incredible background," Upchurch said in an email announcing Chyi's selection. Chyi's resume includes working with the city and County of San Francisco for more than 10 years, most recently managing a \$200 million budget for its Department of Children, Youth & Their Families, Upchurch said. "His educational background includes a Stanford undergraduate degree in Earth Systems (Lynda's field of study as well) and an MPA from the prestigious Princeton Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs."

Chyi, who has extensive experience in budget analysis and policy development, was looking for an opportunity "to work directly with our community in the Fifth District," Upchurch said. "He and his partner have been regular



Photo provided

THE NEW GUY — Leo Chyi has been chosen as the district director of Fifth District Supervisor Lynda Hopkins.

visitors to west county for many years, own a home here and are active CSA (community supported agriculture) members. He looks forward to ditching the commute, working fulltime in Sonoma County and more deeply connecting with our wonderful community."

Chyi was selected from a strong field of 35 candidates who applied for the job, with 18 applicants selected

for interviews, Upchurch said.

"Despite his lofty credentials — he speaks four languages including Spanish — Leo is very down to earth and committed to public service," Upchurch said. "Leo begins his tenure on Aug. 23, and I look forward to working with him. I believe that together we will be able

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Forestville's new superintendent

By Laura Hagar Rush
Sonoma West Editor
laura@sonomawest.com

The Forestville school district is starting the school year with a new superintendent.

Renée Semik has been the principal at Petaluma Junior High School for the past six years. Prior to Petaluma she was a principal in the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District. As is common in small west county districts, Semik will do double duty as principal of the seventh and eighth grade classes.

Semik has a master's degree from Cleveland State University in Ohio, a bachelor's in history/social science education from Grove College in Pennsylvania and a California teaching credential in social science.

She has worked in both large districts (Santa Monica and Nashville, Tenn.) and in small rural schools in Ohio and Saipan.

Semik, who is replacing retiring superintendent Phyllis Parisi, hails from the East Coast. She is the oldest child and only girl of four children in what she describes as "a big, close-knit, blended family."

She grew up in a small town outside of Cleveland called Eastlake,

where she graduated from the same high school that her mother did, a multigenerational tradition that's also common in the Forestville district.

She was the first person in her family to go to college, which she said was both exciting and overwhelming.

"I was used to calling my mom or dad when I needed help, but there were times I was navigating a lot of that by myself. I'll admit that I had these moments freshman and sophomore year where I said to myself, 'Do I belong here? Is this what I really want?' I have a pretty fierce sense of independence though, and that was helpful in allowing me to figure out 'How do I do all of this? How do I make this work?'"

Semik always wanted to go into teaching, and she entered college with the plan of becoming a math teacher, but soon realized math wasn't the right path for her. Luckily, at this crossroads, her mother gave her some great advice:

"She said, 'Here's the course catalog. Look through all of this and put a star next to any and everything that sounds interesting.' So I did that, and we looked through the book and she said, 'Well, what do you see?' And I said, 'Well I still want to be a teacher but probably a

social science teacher or art teacher because that was where a lot of my stars ended up being.' So I went back and immediately changed my focus."

Semik said she learned a lot from her mother about how to work her way through difficult situations.

"My mom is a problem solver by nature — both my parents are," Semik said. "She'd listen to me and then say, 'OK, what do you think your next steps are?' She's not someone who will readily give advice. She's someone who wants to hear what's going on and then wants to know what you think about it. She's really great at asking guiding questions."

"I carry that with me when I'm working," Semik said. "Seeing her model that all those years, it was just second nature to me."

"I've been told I'm a good listener, and I definitely pride myself on that," Semik said. "And it's not just about what you're saying, but what's really underlying that ... and where is everything coming from. It's about trying to get to the heart of what someone is really upset about or really excited about so you can support them moving forward."

Semik plans on doing a lot of

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