A burden of grief on their shoulders

Metrolink engineer's family mourns the loss of all 25 victims.

September 30, 2008 | Molly Hennessy-Fiske | Times Staff Writer

At 11:30 on the morning of Sept. 19, some 60 engineers and conductors gathered at a modest La Crescenta house. They had come to memorialize Robert Sanchez, the engineer killed a week earlier when the Metrolink train he was driving collided with a Union Pacific freight train.

The service was supposed to have been held at a mortuary, but after reporters learned of the arrangements, the family hastily moved the memorial to Sanchez’s home, hoping for the chance to gather privately with his former co-workers.

Since their arrival in California, their grief had been made much more difficult by a crush of media attention. They were accosted at every turn, and the pressure grew more intense after Metrolink announced -- far too quickly, in the family’s eyes -- that Sanchez had failed to stop at a red signal and caused the crash.

The mourners came bearing pizzas, sodas and cakes. One brought a flower arrangement in the shape of a cross, which Sanchez's family placed far from the window for fear that someone might throw a brick. Three Los Angeles County sheriff’s deputies stood guard outside.

A minister from Sanchez’s union, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, spoke. His co-workers recalled trading recipes with Sanchez and accompanying him to Mighty Ducks and Kings games. They told the family they would help find homes for Sanchez’s four Italian greyhounds.

At 4:30, John Sanchez was in the kitchen saying goodbye to the guests when a man from the mortuary arrived with Robert’s remains.

"He walked through the alley, the back gate, the back door and handed me Robert in a paper bag,” Sanchez said.

'I want vindication’

In the first interview he has given since the crash, John Sanchez told a Times reporter he is worried that his brother’s reputation is being destroyed and said he wants a more thorough investigation into whether Metrolink signal lights, radios and other safety equipment were functioning.

Sanchez said he and his family ache not only for their own loss but for the families of the 24 others who died in the crash. "There were no words to explain the magnitude of loss and what was in our hearts,” he said. "We do care. We are sorry.

"I want vindication, justice and truth to be known by the 25 families,” Sanchez added.

The last time Robert Sanchez visited his family, a little less than a year ago, he said he loved his Metrolink job despite a 53-hour-a-week, split-shift schedule that left him constantly tired. "When I get on a train, I forget everything and I’m focused,” his mother said he told her.

"He was mostly happy when he was on a train,” she added, "That was his whole life.”

When he called the family in late July, however, Robert Sanchez was upset because his train had struck and killed a pedestrian July 23. It was the second time in recent years, he told them, that a man had stepped in front of his train to commit suicide.

John Sanchez said the incidents may have been particularly upsetting because his brother was still recovering from the suicide of his partner, Daniel Charles Burton, who hanged himself in the garage of their home in Crestline on Valentine's Day, 2003.

Robert Sanchez told his family that after the initial investigation of the incident, he asked supervisors for time off and counseling but had been required to return to work before he was ready.

Ruth Otte, a spokeswoman for Veolia Transportation, the Oak Brook, Ill., company that supplies Metrolink engineers, confirmed that the July incident occurred, but said she could not comment about whether Sanchez requested time off. Engineers are entitled to counseling and at least three days off with pay after such incidents, another Veolia spokeswoman, Erica Swerdlow, said.

Metrolink General Manager Tommy McDonald did not return phone calls Monday to his home and office seeking comment. Metrolink staff members said they have been instructed to refer questions about the crash investigation to the National Transportation Safety Board.

Safety board spokesman Terry Williams said he could not answer questions about Sanchez, citing the federal investigation, and a union representative said Sanchez had not filed a complaint on the July matter.

"We will look at any requests he may have made for time off,” Williams said. "We are still in the fact-gathering stages.”

As recently as several weeks ago, Sanchez’s employer praised his job performance. In a Sept. 3 letter, Sanchez was notified that he would be receiving an employee incentive award bonus check.

"The measurements to receive your award include safety and rules compliance, exemplary attendance and other performance factors that contribute to the success of this operation,” McDonald wrote.
Fascinated by trains

Robert Sanchez, who was 46 at the time of his death, was the youngest of four sons born to Rose and John Sanchez, who both worked in manufacturing.

As a child growing up in Santa Monica, Robert counted the cars on every passing train, his brother said.

Once, at the age of 7, he disappeared from the family car, where he was supposed to wait while his mother ran an errand. She found him at some nearby railroad tracks, fascinated by an idling train.

"The engineer had him up in the cab and let him blow the whistle," John Sanchez said. "That was it. He was hooked."

When Robert Sanchez was 12, his family moved out of state, where he was active in 4-H and the Future Farmers of America.

His love of trains continued, and he often visited a nearby railyard.

After graduating from high school, he settled in San Diego for a time, driving Greyhound buses before he was hired by the railroads.

He started as a maintenance worker at Union Pacific and worked his way up to "the chair," becoming an engineer in the late 1990s, his family said. Soon after, he began working as an Amtrak engineer in Southern California, records show.

John Sanchez said the family has not been contacted by the National Transportation Safety Board since the Sept. 12 crash, but said his brother's supervisor, McDonald, had called to ask if Robert had any medical conditions that would have caused him to pass out.

Sanchez told McDonald that his brother had adult-onset diabetes but had never complained of complications. He said McDonald urged him to consent to a second autopsy at a cost of about $3,000 that would be paid by Metrolink. The family agreed.

"We just wanted the answer, whatever it took to clear his name," Sanchez said.

Avoiding the media

Sanchez said he still hasn't recovered from the shock of his brother's sudden death.

He was watching cable news on the afternoon of Sept. 12 when the first report of the Metrolink train crash in Chatsworth scrolled across the screen.

By 6 p.m., after seeing the mangled cab and learning that the train was the one his brother usually drove, Sanchez was convinced his brother was dead.

He realized he could not protect his 81-year-old mother from news of the crash.

That evening, he took her hand as he had at his father's funeral the year before.

"Be ready mom," Sanchez said he told her, "be ready for the worst you can ever imagine."

At 6:20 the next morning, he said, official word came. Robert Sanchez was dead. John Sanchez and his mother already had their bags packed, and they began the long drive to Los Angeles.

On Monday, Sanchez returned to his out-of-state home.

He asked that The Times not disclose where he lives, hoping to protect his elderly mother from more media attention.

He said he knows what to do with his brother's ashes.

Last year, after their father died, the Sanchez brothers talked about their own wishes of what should be done when they died.

Robert asked that his ashes be scattered on the railroad tracks.

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molly.hennessy-fiske@latimes.com