Sister of U.S. ambassador recalls ‘good brother,’ good man

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Young siblings Anne and Chris Stevens on Mt. Tamalpais, north of San Francisco, in 1965. “We all grew up hiking there,” Anne said. “Chris wanted to retire there.”
Two weeks after U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens was killed during an attack on the consulate in Benghazi, Libya, his sister Anne Stevens, a Seattle pediatrician, remembers her big brother.

When Anne Stevens said goodbye to her older brother, Chris, in an airplane hangar in Maryland two weeks ago, she was overwhelmed to find 800 other mourners had come to pay their respects as well.

President Obama was there, and so was Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, and the Libyan ambassador to the U.S., Ali Aujali.

Hundreds of employees of the U.S. State Department were also there — people who thought of her brother as family.

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Stevens, a pediatrician at Seattle Children’s hospital, is a sister of J. Christopher Stevens, the U.S. ambassador to Libya who was killed Sept. 11 in a raid on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.

When the Stevens family walked into the cavernous hangar at Andrews Air Force Base, “it was completely silent,” she said. “No one could hear anything but our footsteps.”

Said Anne Stevens: “It helps to have the world mourning with you. It helps to know he was appreciated.”

As the Stevens family privately mourns their loss, the death of Chris Stevens continues to draw the world’s attention. On Tuesday, President Obama evoked his name as the embodiment of American ideals.

“Today, we must affirm that our future will be determined by people like Chris Stevens, and not by his killers,” Obama said in an address before the United Nations.

“Today, we must declare that this violence and intolerance has no place among our united nations.”

The tragedy, which also led to the death of three other State Department employees, is still under investigation.

“I read everything,” Anne Stevens said. “I want to understand how this happened.”

The Stevens family has deep roots in Washington state. Through their mother, Mary Commanday, the Stevens siblings are the great-great-great-great grandchildren of Chief Comcomly of the Chinook Tribe, who gave assistance to the Lewis and Clark expedition when it arrived at the mouth of the Columbia River in 1805.
After Chris Stevens, 52, was killed, tribal chief Ray Gardner wrote about the death in the tribal newspaper, telling other Chinook members: “This will be a hard time for their family and they will need our prayers.”

In Ilwaco, Pacific County, home to the tribal headquarters, the tribe held a prayer ceremony for Chris, then sent a single oar out into the water, to help him in the next phase of his journey.

Anne Stevens said her family often worried about Chris’ safety, but “he’s been in dangerous places for a long time,” she said.

Her brother started his international career in the Peace Corps in Morocco, and also served in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Israel and Egypt. During the Libyan revolution, as a U.S. diplomat, he was dispatched to Benghazi in April 2011 and worked with the Libyan opposition during the revolution.

His safety has been “a continuing worry, but that’s where he wanted to be,” she said. “Nobody ever tried to talk him out of it.”

Stevens said she hopes some goodwill can come out of her brother’s death. To that end, the family created a memorial to her brother online, rememberingchrisstevens.com, to promote communication and understanding between the Western and Arab worlds.

Both the Libyan government and philanthropist Gordon Getty have made large contributions to the fund.

“I want to keep hoping the progress will continue,” Stevens said. “We can’t run away and say it’s too scary and dangerous. We have to keep collaborating.”

A pediatrician who researches the causes of the autoimmune-disease lupus, Anne Stevens said her brother regularly sent long emails to family and friends from Libya, reporting on his progress.

He also sent personal messages — most recently, congratulating Anne on making Seattle Magazine’s list of top doctors in the area. Anne Stevens was recognized for her work in pediatric rheumatology.

When they were children, growing up in California’s Bay Area, Chris was her close
protector.

The two were a year and a half apart in age, and Chris was the first one in the family to see Anne standing on her own two feet in her crib.

Family members have told her Chris went running through the house, shouting that Anne had learned to stand.

“He was a good brother,” Stevens said. “I was lucky to have such a brother.”

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