

**REMARKS OF  
HAROLD RUCHELMAN**

**BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
COAST GUARD AND MARITIME  
TRANSPORTATION**

**September 19, 2007**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today. My name is Harold Ruchelman and I understand that I am here to help you determine how the cruise line industry should deal with tragic events. My story is an example of how they should handle such situations.

My story is about what Celebrity Cruises did for me in March of 2006. It was Thursday, March 22. We docked in Arica, Chile. One of our friends had made arrangements for a tour – a tour that was not sponsored by Celebrity. It was an enjoyable one and we were on our way back to the ship when the accident occurred. An accident that changed my life forever. Our driver lost control of the van and we toppled down the steep slope of the mountain. The next thing I remember was coming to on the side of the mountain with a broken right leg. My friends' bodies were strewn about the mountain with the remnants of the van near the bottom of the slope. I could not see where my wife was. The guide, the only one who was mobile, told me that most of the people perished including all the women. That meant that I had lost my wife.

Here I was – in the middle of nowhere. How do I get in touch with anyone? What do I do now? I felt cut off from my world and totally helpless. All I could do was wait and see.

It took about an hour and a half before any help arrived. No one spoke English and I didn't speak Spanish. It was so bad that when people asked me how I felt, I thought they were asking for my name.

I was taken by ambulance to a hospital in Arica. My clothes were cut off in the emergency room and I was taken for X-Rays to determine my condition. Coming back from that procedure, I got my first taste of the care that Celebrity Cruises would be giving me. One of the doctors and one of the nurses from the Millennium, the ship we were cruising on, were there at the hospital. When I was in the ICU, the doctor asked me if there was anything I needed on the ship. I suffer from sleep apnea and use a CPAP machine which was in the cabin on the ship. I asked if he could get it, as I doubted that the hospital in Arica had one. He also told me that the doctors there said my X-Rays indicated I may have a problem with my Aorta. I was taken for a CAT scan. When the doctor came back with my CPAP machine, he conferred with the doctors and told me that my CAT scan proved negative.

I was concerned about the cost of everything and how I was going to pay for it. Seeing my anxiety over this issue, the doctor, after taking it upon himself to look into this matter, told me that Celebrity would pick up all costs associated with the accident. I was astounded, as this excursion was not sponsored by them.

I was then moved to a ward which I shared with the guide and the other surviving member of our group. Being in a hospital in a small town in a third world country was unsettling to say the least. Air conditioning was opening a window – which let the flies in. The food left much to be desired – even for hospital food. But the worst was the language barrier. My leg, now in a full cast, kept me bedridden and if I needed anything, how did I let them know. Two American volunteers, from a nearby university, came to help. They remained until Celebrity Cruises brought two people from the states to remain with us (myself and the other survivor) for the duration of our stay in the hospital. They stayed with us day and night – just in case we needed anything. These two wonderful people were my connection to the rest of my world. The attention they provided was both comforting and greatly appreciated. They treated me as if I was family. When I stirred during the night, they jumped to see if I needed anything. I will never forget them.

They were only one facet of the help and concern offered by Celebrity. A member of their “strike force” came to see what he could do for us. He was constantly on the phone, trying to make all sorts of arrangements. Seeing what gyrations he was going through gave me a secure feeling, a feeling that I was not alone in Arica – there were people who were extremely concerned with my situation.

Celebrity flew in a Rabbi from Florida. Being of the Jewish religion, we avoid autopsies if at all possible. However, when one is required by law, certain procedures must be followed. This Rabbi was there to make sure that religious protocols were followed in our wives’ autopsies as well as meeting our spiritual needs. They thought of things that I was in no condition to think of. They even flew in a counselor to talk to me.

Many people came in to see us. A Rabbi from Santiago, an individual from Israel, officials from the US embassy, officials from Chile, but the ones that stood out as trying to do the most for us were the people from Celebrity Cruises. They were obviously making a concerted effort to meet our every need and bring the situation to a satisfactory conclusion. They made arrangements for my children to fly down to Chile. You could imagine how welcome that news was since I thought I would be in that hospital for some time. Later that day, I was told we would be flying home Friday afternoon. I asked if my children knew of the change in plans and was told that they had been informed. Another problem was solved – how could I get in touch with

my children and let them know that I was OK. I was elated when the person making all the arrangements handed me his cell phone with my son-in-law at the other end of the line.

My two guardian angels, the two who stayed with me overnight, went out and purchased clothing for me to travel in. Remember, all my clothes had been cut off in the emergency room.

Soon I was whisked off to a waiting ambulance and taken to a local airport and together with the other survivor was put on a chartered plane. I could not believe what was being done for us. Celebrity chartered a plane just for the two of us and the remains of our wives. On board, were my guardian angels (who made sure that all my belongings from the hospital were taken), the doctor, the nurse, the counselor and the Rabbi. They, along with the flight crew, were constantly checking up on us. The doctor, in order to monitor us, sat facing us the entire trip. All of Celebrity's people planned to deplane in Florida and most of them did. The doctor, however, accompanied us all the way to Newark, New Jersey. The plane landed at Newark and taxied to a private hanger where our children came on board. The doctor checked me out one last time, to ensure I was well enough to go home. I was then put in an ambulance that took me to my daughter's house.

I cannot begin to express the feeling I had then, or have now, at the consideration, concern and efforts the Celebrity Cruise organization extended to me. And to think that this all began with an excursion they had not sponsored. Yet they still chose to do something. And they did an astonishing job. They more than extended themselves in helping me get through my ordeal. I do not know what I would have done without them. I will be eternally grateful for their humanity, compassion and thoughtfulness.

I don't know if my case is an aberration, but Celebrity has set a standard that the rest of the industry should emulate.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to be here today.