

## 'Here's to the boys'

-  Article
-  Comments 
- 

**BILL GRAVELAND**  
THE CANADIAN PRESS  
JANUARY 4, 2009 AT 6:05 PM EST

SPARWOOD, B.C. — "Here's to the boys."

Two thousand mourners shouted out that phrase in unison Sunday in a vocal tribute to eight snowmobilers who were swept to their deaths in a string of avalanches a week earlier.

To the strains of bagpipers, mourners filed into the local hockey arena, where the photos of the eight men stood on a makeshift stage.

Through the tragedy and the tears, a celebration of the lives and the passions of the men came shining through.



[Enlarge Image](#)

Photos of eight snowmobilers line the stage for a mass memorial in Sparwood, B.C. Sunday. The snowmobilers perished in a series of avalanches in the mountains of southeastern British Columbia on Dec. 28. (REUTERS/Todd Korol)

### Related Articles

#### Recent

- A cold new year in the valley of tears
- Deaths at B.C. ski resort prompt immediate changes at Whistler

### Photogallery

- A town in mourning



Smiling pictures of Daniel Bjarnason, 28, Kurt Kabel, 28, Warren Rothel, 33, Kane Rusnak, 30; Thomas Talarico, 32, Blayne Wilson, 26, Michael Stier, 20 and Michael's 45-year-old father, Leonard Stier, lined the back of the podium at the Sparwood Recreation and Leisure Centre.

Brand new Arctic Cat snowmobiles were proudly displayed on each end of the podium as the community embraced the fact snowmobiling was a passion for the men, who died after a series of fearsome snowslides in a mountainous backcountry area named Harvey Valley.

"My daddy's sled is faster than your daddy's sled," proclaimed a child's T-shirt displayed at a table containing memories of Warren Rothel. There was also a snowmobile helmet, gloves and a plaque that noted "The one who dies with the most toys - wins."

A poem called "Our Passion for Snowmobiling" filled the back page of the program.

"We are men, feeling wild and free. Is this not the way it's supposed to be? We're like eagles, yet flying through snow," the poem reads.

"We laugh together, we tell good jokes, we talk about memories from the past, because we are friends, we are snowmobilers."

Models of snowmobiles, trophies, countless photos and other cherished treasures completed the displays for the victims.

"You were my best friend and my soulmate. I want to tell you that you were a man that left an impression on everyone's heart," said Amy Morrow, who read a letter to her husband Blayne Wilson.

"I wanted to grow old with you but unfortunately someone has different plans. Blayne, I will keep living and walking in your footsteps for the rest of my life," she said softly.

For Danny Bjarnason there was Calgary Flames memorabilia and a certificate congratulating him for winning a gold medal in boxing at the 1995 B.C. Games.

Brianne Jaegli spoke of her life-long friendship with Michael Stier and the fact he had been snowmobiling since he learned how to walk.

"He would come to me and give me the biggest most comforting hug. There was times when even if he had a really busy day he would lay with me for hours, rubbing my back if I was sick and talking to me," she said, choking back tears.

"He was my best friend, my anchor and my safe spot. I will miss him so much but I will think of him every day and he will not be forgotten."

A group of 11 snowmobilers was hit by repeated slides up to five metres in height that came thundering down the slope at 150 kilometres an hour.

Jeff Adams, James Drake and Jeremy Rusnak made it out to safety after digging themselves and each other out of the hard-packed snow, sometimes with just bare hands.

"To the families of the eight men who perished in this great tragedy, my heart breaks for you," said Pastor David Purdy, a former Sparwood resident who came back to pay his respects and participate in the memorial.

Purdy hailed the sacrifices of all 11 snowmobilers, several of whom were in the throes of trying to rescue those buried by the first avalanche when the second one came

rumbling down the slope.

And he offered soothing words to the family members left behind.

"As you begin the transition of knowing these men in time and space to knowing them in your memories and in spirit, cherish the good times that you shared," Mr. Purdy said.

"Invite them into your future. Still speak of them, and to them, and celebrate their memory".

The three survivors were forced to make what Mr. Adams called a "gut-wrenching decision" to leave their entombed friends behind in the unstable area where there had already been several avalanches.

"Do not accept the blame of the ignorant who have not walked a mile in your boots," Mr. Purdy told them.

"Discover the tasks that you have yet to fulfill, and live with renewed purpose. There will be difficult days ahead, but you are surrounded by loving friends and family. In your time, talk to them, and do not carry the burden alone."

Jim Abbott, the federal MP for the riding of Kootenay-Columbia, was also on hand to offer sympathy and condolences to the community.

"When we're faced with a tragedy of this magnitude, we gather together as community," Mr. Abbott said.

"Sparwood is more than a location on a map — it's a special, unique group of residents, and we're gathered here today to grieve, and to support the families."

Officials had predicted up to 7,000 would people to attend the memorial but the turnout appeared to be significantly smaller, likely due to poor weather in the area.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper would be writing individual notes to each of the eight families, said Mr. Abbott, who also read a letter issued by Governor General Michaëlle Jean.

"At a time when we should be celebrating the bright possibilities of a new year," Ms. Jean wrote, "instead we mourn those lost to the unpredictability of nature".

Residents of this tight-knit mining community have banded together since the tragedy a week ago.

The musical dedication during the two hour service was John Mellencamp's "Small Town."

"I was born in a small town. And I live in a small town. Probably die in a small town," went the lyrics.

"No I cannot forget where it is that I come from. I cannot forget the people who love me. Yeah, I can be myself here in this small town. And people let me be just what I want to be."

-  Article
-  Comments 
- 

Recommend this article? 6 votes

View the most recommended

## Open House



**A house with a secret legacy**

## Autos



**13 reasons to look forward to 2009**

## The Rules



**Success in any endeavour**

## **Globe Campus**



**Where to turn when you have the soul of an artist**

## **Personal Tech**



**The best and worst  
of gaming in 2008**

© Copyright 2009 CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.

CTVglobemedia

globeandmail.com and The Globe and Mail are divisions of CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc., 444 Front St. W., Toronto, ON Canada M5V 2S9  
Phillip Crawley, Publisher