

'Here's to the boys' mourners say to avalanche victims

BY JAMIE KOMARNICKI JANUARY 4, 2009 1:22 PM



Photos of eight snowmobilers line the stage before a mass memorial in Sparwood, British Columbia January 4, 2009.

Photograph by : Reuters

SPARWOOD, B.C. — Friends and family members of eight local men who died in a series of avalanches exactly one week ago described the victims as men who loved the outdoors and were passionate about their families at a mass memorial service Sunday.

Only 2,000 seats were available inside the centre so officials set up a nearby curling rink with large TV screens to accommodate hundreds more mourners. Two snowmobiles sat propped up at the front of the Sparwood arena.

Family members spoke about each one as white lights shone down on images of each of the dead men — Danny Bjarnason, 28, Kurt Kabel, 28, Warren Rothel, 33, Kane Rusnak, 30, Len Stier, 45, his son Micheal Stier, 20, Thomas Talarico, 32 and Blayne Wilson, 26.

Bjarnason was remembered as a hero to his brother Jordan and a man of few words who always put family first. He loved all sports and was passionate about bowling. He was loved deeply by his girlfriend Teresa.

A friend of the Kabel family, said Kabel was admired for his personality and he loved his family and wife Laurie and young son, Eric. He recalled good times with Kabel shooting gophers and travelling on all-terrain vehicles.

"Kurt did everything to the best of his ability and never gave up," said the family friend. "He was the first one to nail your shirt to the roof and the last one to stop laughing about it," he said.

"His passion excited you, his humour lighted your day . . . his trust overwhelmed you."

Joe Deluca, a friend of Rothel's said he and "the love of his life" Erin were a force to be reckoned with. Deluca said Rothel loved his two children more than anything and lived by the 'go big or go home' motto.

"He lived for adrenalin and excitement. If it raised the hair on your neck he had to try it — twice," he said.

Rusnak was described by his uncle Sonny Saad as someone who lived and breathed hockey and was often referred to as Superwrench because of his ability at mechanics. His son Joey was "his world." Bambi Bodie, Rusnak's sister, spoke briefly as her voice shook with emotion. She said the support the family has received from the community and friends has been "tremendous."

The Spiers, Len and his son Micheal, were also described as men with a passion for outdoor sports. While "Laidback Lenny" always loved going out into the backcountry, Micheal had been snowmobiling since he could walk.

Brianne Jaegli said all of her best friend Micheal's spare time went to "anything with a thrill" and he was very protective of his sister Lana.

Wilson's wife of nine years, Amy, said her husband had an "infectious smile" and was an avid hunter, fisherman and snowmobiler. He was a mechanic who "could fix anything."

As the ceremony came to a close she asked the mourners to shout, "Here's to the boys."

Sparwood Mayor David Wilks read a message from the local church and from a soldier in Afghanistan who went to school with some of the victims.

"To the families of those who perished in this great tragedy. My heart breaks for you," said Pastor David Purdy.

"To the three survivors. Be thankful. Do not accept the blame of the ignorant who have not walked a mile in your boots . . . There will be difficult days ahead but you are surrounded but loving friends and family. Do not carry the burden alone," he said.

Capreece Bowers, a funeral organizer, read a poem about snowmobilers and said it was amazing to see how the family and community has stood together to say goodbye to such "adventurous" men.

"These men are all about playing hard and playing safe," she said. "This was a group of men who were taken by mother nature."

Area MP Jim Abbott and provincial MLA Bill Bennett both spoke at the service. The prime minister and Governor General each sent their condolences.

"Playing in the mountains is part of our culture here in the Kootenays," said Bennett. "We know we can't take away the anguish, we feel helpless because we can't go back in time but together we can give our unqualified support."

Tables held photos, sledding equipment, tools, trophies, hunting gear — snapshots of each of their

lives.

Mourners lined up as early as 8 a.m. in -20 C weather before packing into the seats for the service to say goodbye to the snowmobilers who perished in a series of avalanches in southeast B.C.

Officials were prepared for the community of 3,600 to swell to nearly double its size during the service and hope the mass funeral will bring a sense of closure to the town.

Last Sunday, the eight men died as a sequence of avalanches swept down the slopes where they were snowmobiling near Fernie.

The three survivors — Jeff Adams, James Drake and Jeremy Rusnak — were rescued by a helicopter.

On Wednesday, Adams recounted the terrifying chain of events as the avalanches crashed down on the alpine bowl where the friends were snowmobiling, burying all 11 of them.

Adams freed himself, then helped dig Drake and Rusnak out with his bare hands. He described the "gut-wrenching" decision to leave behind their eight snow-immersed friends in the mountainous backcountry.

The group knew the avalanche risk was elevated that day, but were well-equipped with safety equipment, Adams said.

That gear was swept away in the slides, he said.

The B.C. Coroner's office is conducting a review of last Sunday's deaths.

Many families have already held private services for their loved ones and others will be held this week.

The town has also hosted a number of vigils to help the community grieve.

Calgary Herald with files from Tiffany Crawford, Canwest News Service

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