

# **Tentacles of grief reach throughout small mining town**

By Lori Culbert and Chad Skelton December 31, 2008 12:02 AM



**Mourners gather at a mass service for the victims of the avalanche that claimed the lives of eight men Sunday. The mass was held at St. Michael's Catholic Church in Sparwood on Dec. 30, 2008.**

**Photograph by : Ted Rhodes/CNS**

When a town of 3,600 people loses eight men in one day, the tentacles of grief touch nearly everyone in the community.

In Sparwood, a mining town tucked into the southeastern corner of B.C., it seems that almost everyone worked with, went to school with, or was related to, at least one of the victims killed by an avalanche Sunday.

The tragedy claimed the most victims of any single accident in the province in 2008.

“My wife’s best friend, her son was one of them,” said Jim Banks, a district councillor. “My neighbour’s son

was one. And the deputy librarian, where my wife is a volunteer, her nephew was one of the men who died.”

Banks has only lived in the community for five years, after he and his wife moved there from Parksville. But even he doesn’t have to look far to see the impact of the deaths of the eight snowmobilers in the Elk Valley.

“Everybody knows somebody or is related to somebody or were impacted because they worked with the people,” said Banks. “It’s quite pervasive throughout the whole town and valley.”

Much of that closeness, no doubt, comes from the fact Sparwood is essentially a one-industry town, where most people work for one of the five coal mines in the area, or in one of the many spinoff industries that support them.

Half of Sunday’s victims were employees of Teck Coal, which is making two company-owned houses available to out-of-town relatives.

"For us, it's a blow as well," said Nic Milligan, Teck's manager of community and government affairs.

Some 670 employees who work at Teck’s four coal-mining operations around the Elk Valley live in Sparwood, Milligan said, as did four of the dead men: Danny Bjarnason, a heavy-duty mechanic's apprentice; Thomas Talarico, a warehouse supervisor; Len Stier, a foreman; and his son Michael Stier, a mining student at the College of the Rockies who was serving a work term at Teck’s Elkview mine.

"So you can imagine in a community of that size and a workforce that significant, people generally tend to know one another," Milligan said.

That community has rallied around the men’s families.

The local grocery store, Overwaitea, has stocked the two Teck houses with food so family members don’t have to shop when they arrive in town.

Mayor David Wilks has opened two trust accounts for the eight families, and how the money will be spent will be determined by the grieving relatives.

The mayor is also meeting today with a local funeral home to discuss the possibility of a group funeral, so the eight men who died together doing their favourite hobby could also be put to rest together. It is possible the service could be held in the local arena, and Overwaitea has also offered to provide food.

But whether there will be a joint funeral will be up to the families.

On Tuesday night, Sparwood residents mourned the men at memorial services at St. Michael’s Catholic Church and the Sparwood Christian Centre.

“It [was] a time for people to get together, pray and ... basically to bring comfort,” said Christian Centre minister Ross Powell.

Besides working together, Sparwood’s residents also play together — going out on weekends to explore the breathtaking wilderness that surrounds them.

“You look out and there’s miles of unbroken snow,” said Powell. “When you’re up the mountain, you can see for miles.”

And while some explore the area on skis or four-by-fours, snowmobiles are the favourite option for most.

“Not everybody can ski,” said Powell. “But you can hop on a snowmachine at the edge of town and away

you go.”

Snowmobiling is so popular that many residents feel it could have easily been them caught in Sunday’s accident.

One local man told Powell his two sons had planned to join the group caught in the avalanche but he convinced them at the last minute to stay home and help with some chores.

“He was so relieved, because he had managed to convince his boys that he needed some help so they decided not to go,” said Powell.

Some people have criticized the dead men for going into the back country when there had been avalanche warnings.

But Sparwood Chamber of Commerce manager Paul Wortley said those critics should be ashamed of themselves, since the victims were aware of the risks and had taken precautions by having the proper equipment.

“These guys were protected. They had their [beacons]. They had their shovels,” Wortley said.

The avalanche risk warning for the Elk Valley when the accident occurred Sunday was ‘moderate’ below the treeline and ‘considerable’ at and above the treeline.

‘Considerable’ means you should have avalanche training, good trip planning and the ability to navigate hazards before venturing out, said Ilya Storm of the Canadian Avalanche Centre.

The centre doesn’t advise people not to go into the backcountry during a ‘considerable’ rating, but encourages “more cautious decision making,” Storm said.

Tom Ryan, a snowmobiling enthusiast with extensive avalanche training, estimated hundreds of people would have been in the local backcountry Sunday and said there are safe places to ride, such as in fields or trees, under such conditions.

Ryan, 46, was out of town Sunday, but if he had been home, he would have been enjoying the scenery and camaraderie with his own buddies in the backcountry, he said.

Ryan, who lives in nearby Fernie, said it is possible the group was “doing everything right” by snowmobiling in generally safe areas, but stopped to dig out one sledder when he got stuck and then got trapped in a series of sudden, fast-moving avalanches.

He added he does not know the exact details of Sunday’s accident but noted the men were prepared for the backcountry — and knew how to use their gear to dig out one of the survivors before fleeing for their lives.

“These guys, the efforts of the people who ended up dying trying to save their friends — they are like ... heroes,” Ryan said. “I’m sure they all went in there not thinking of themselves.”

Ryan is a member of the Fernie Snowmobiling Association, which on Tuesday posted a message of condolence to the eight fellow sledders on its website.

Powell, the minister, said he was also struck by the fact some of the victims died while trying to pull their friends to safety.

“I think it’s typical of the people out here,” he said. “You see someone broken down and, whether you know

them or not, you try to help.”

Donations to the families can be made through Royal Bank account 5080-  003-5077425 or CIBC account 03070-010-7573138.

“There are a couple of families with young moms with young kids that are definitely going to need some help. This will be a massive funeral, and that will cost some money,” Wilks, the mayor, said of how the money could be used. “The mood in town is pretty sombre. Just walking through the mall, there are people reminiscing and hugging.”

Mining has employed generations of Sparwood residents, but as those jobs get fewer, the town is reinventing itself by building a new golf course and attracting more tourists to the area.

“We’re very proud of the heritage of Sparwood, we’re very proud of the fact that we’re a mining community, and we will never forget that,” said the chamber’s Wortley. “But it’s good to find diversification.”

Sparwood's main attraction is the Terex Titan, a seven-metre tall, 250-tonne offroad dump truck that it bills as the “largest truck in the world.” More than a third of the town's workforce is employed directly in resource industries, like mining, and most make a decent living. A typical full-time worker in Sparwood makes \$61,003, according to the census, higher than the provincial average of \$42,230.

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With files from Derrick Penner

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