

AVALANCHE TRAGEDY: 'HE'S GOING THROUGH A LOT OF INNER TURMOIL NOW'

After losing eight of his friends, survivor leads crews to final victim

With all bodies recovered, the grieving process begins for the close-knit community of Sparwood

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SPARWOOD, B.C., VANCOUVER -- Still clad in his snowmobile suit and fresh off the mountain where eight of his buddies perished under a wall of snow, Jeff Adams clutched the hand of his wife on one side while his father walked on the other.

The 28-year-old had just come back from the snowy valley where he had helped find the last of his snowmobiling friends, Danny Bjarnason, in the southeast corner of British Columbia. Mr. Adams - returning to the scene of the tragedy just hours after he and the two other survivors were forced to make the agonizing decision to leave the area - was credited with helping searchers find Mr. Bjarnason's remains after little more than an hour in the debris field.

Now, turning away from a group of journalists, Mr. Adams broke into sobs.

"I can't," he said.

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Instead, RCMP Corporal Chris Faulkner gave voice to the young man's emotional anguish.

"He lost eight of his friends and he's going through a lot of inner turmoil now as you can expect, questioning why he's here and not them," Cpl. Faulkner said. "It's a crap shoot, I guess, who God calls and when they call them, who they leave behind and why they leave behind."

Last night, about 150 townsfolk crowded into the Sparwood Christian Centre, including relatives of the victims and survivors. Mr. Adams was there, embracing friends and loved ones.

"I thought, what could I possibly say?" Pastor Shawn Barden said. "What words could I possibly scrape together? ... My words and anyone else's words seem woefully pitiful in the face of your pain."

Earlier yesterday, Craig Thomas, on-site commander of the search effort, said Mr. Adams helped guide searchers to Mr. Bjarnason's body, about 50 kilometres southeast of Fernie. Mr. Adams worked with Mr. Thomas's crew, recalling where Mr. Bjarnason was when the avalanche hit.

Then he travelled to the site of the fatal slides where the team made a grim discovery.

"We said to him, 'We've got a strike with the probe,' and you can tell pretty easily if it's a person you're striking so he actually removed himself from the area. He was just a little uncomfortable with that," recalled Mr. Thomas, president of the Fernie Search and Rescue Society. "He was actually pretty good at the scene."

The community of volunteer searchers, who worked with probes, shovels, metal detectors and dogs after being ferried to the site by helicopters and snowmobiles, have never had to deal with anything like this before.

"We have had fatalities we have had to deal with but, for the most part, we have been fairly lucky," he said.

The recovery of the last body is a relief to relatives and the community.

"They'll get on with their grieving process," Cpl. Faulkner said. "They'll get on with their preparations for memorial services. And some time in the next few days, few weeks they'll get on with life as well."

Cpl. Faulkner praised the dozens of people who scoured the hillside for victims over the past two days.

"[They] are heroes in their own right in that they were willing to go out there facing a situation that had already claimed so many lives," he said. "I know they are happy that all of the bodies are recovered

Sparwood, a mining community of about 4,000 people, has been in deep despair since the tragedy occurred, but hours before Mr. Bjarnason's body was recovered yesterday, loved ones remained hopeful.

"Yes, there's hope," Mr. Bjarnason's father-in-law, Randy Roberts, told the media.

"My hope and my prayer is that Danny's out there and still okay. There's always that chance he may have got pushed off to the side or got up and started walking away and walked the wrong way."

But then, Mr. Roberts, in tears, seemed resigned to his son-in-law's fate and future for his daughter Teresa, without her long-time companion.

"He'll be found today," he said.

About 70 relatives of the dead men clung to each other for support. Cellphones rang incessantly. Family from all over called to offer their condolences and kind words.

"[We were] talking about the good times that we had with the men. We all watched these kids grow up," Mr. Roberts said.

Mr. Bjarnason was described as an "all-around good kid" who had just purchased a new snow machine and was gearing up for a winter of sledding with friends and family.

Mr. Roberts said the men caught up in the slide were experienced sledders and had all the proper avalanche gear including probes, shovels and "peeps" - transceivers that send a signal to locate people buried in the snow.

Officials said Mr. Bjarnason's transceiver may have been in a search mode from one of the initial slides and was therefore not transmitting, which stymied search efforts.

RCMP confirmed the identities of the other deceased: Kurt Kabel, 28, Warren Rothel, 33, Kane Rusnak, 30, Len Stier, 45, and his son, Michael Stier, 20, Thomas Talarico, 32 and Blayne Wilson, 26. The survivors were Mr. Adams, Jeremy Rusnak and James Drake.

"They were the all the best of friends all the way through school and everything," Mr. Roberts said. "They were just a big group of kids who want to play." And playing in the snow was their passion. Mr. Roberts included himself in that group. Talk of quitting the sport in light of the tragedy is not an option. People will still go out, he said.

Mr. Roberts offered words of comfort to the survivors: "Nobody's at fault. Don't blame yourself. It's an act that happens."

Terry Smith, British Columbia's chief coroner, said it will be several months before he receives a recommendation on whether to conduct an inquest into the tragedy.

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