

## Survivor tells tale of desperation after avalanche

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**DAWN WALTON**  
GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE  
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SPARWOOD, B.C. — Avalanche survivor Jeff Adams recalled the "gut-wrenching" decision that he and two others made to leave eight friends behind after they survived a series of avalanches.

"It's unexplainable how long it felt. I keep replaying in my head all the time whether it was the right thing to do," he told reporters Wednesday morning.

"I'm truly sorry to the families that we couldn't find them," he said to the relatives of his dead friends, "We all knew the backcountry."

For the first time, the 29-year-old talked publicly about Sunday's devastating backcountry ordeal near Fernie, B.C., which killed eight local men.

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A family's pain

Relatives of Sparwood, B.C.'s avalanche victims speak of their loss

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Eight B.C. snowmobilers trapped in avalanche

There are an unknown number of fatalities in connection with an slide that occurred near Fernie, B.C. Sunday night, according to the RCMP

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Search resumes for missing snowmobilers

More than 15 avalanche technicians are being transported by helicopter to the scene

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He wants people to remember his friends simply.

"That they died doing what they loved and that they died trying to save one another," he said.

Only Mr. Adams, James Drake and Jeremy Rusnak walked away from a series of avalanches that buried their group of 11 snowmobilers.

Yesterday RCMP confirmed the identities the 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 and Danny Bjarnason.

The group of 11 were aware of the avalanche warnings in the area and had taken care to sled only in the bowls of the backcountry they drove through, said Mr. Adams, adding that the rush of snow that buried him and his friends would have been impossible to outrun.

"I felt the weight of the snow come over me and I was pretty sure that was it for me. But for some reason I popped out on the surface," he said.

Seated at the Sparwood courthouse, Mr. Adams' fiancée, Jennifer Colmer, was holding his hand and his friends were seated nearby for support.

"We're glad to have three home but we're still mourning the eight we have lost," she said amid tears.

Sparwood's mayor, David Wilks, who has been the voice of reassurance for the community as the tragedy unfolded, was also on hand.

"They were the all the best of friends all the way through school and everything," said Randy Roberts, Mr. Bjaranson's father-in-law. "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.

On Tuesday 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 Tuesday, 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.

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

"They'll get on with their grieving process," said RCMP Cpl. Chris 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 and yet they were willing to go in there to one would think initially to attempt to rescue, but eventually to conduct a recovery. I know they are happy that all of the bodies are recovered. So their job on the mountain is done for today, but you can bet that they're going to be called out again," 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. 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.

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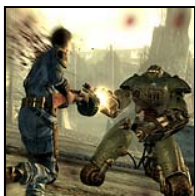
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