Nation

Relatives Fear the Dead Oil Rig Workers Are Forgotten

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Doug Simpson Contributor

(May 23) -- While the world remains fixated on the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, L.D. Manuel says people are forgetting an important fact: 11 men, including his son, died when the oil rig blew up.

"I'm following the coverage, but I don't know that I like what I'm seeing. Everyone talks about the birds and the damage to the gulf and everything, but they never talk about the guys that got hurt," said Manuel, who lost his son Blair in the explosion. "That really bothers me."

Cindy Shelton, AP
Adam Weise, 24, is one of the 11 workers who died in the April 20 Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded just over a month ago, on April 20, and relatives of the 11 men who were killed said that it's understandable that the news media and the public are focused on environmental concerns, government regulations, politics, the future of offshore drilling.

But they fear that the 11 victims -- their husbands, sons, grandsons, brothers -- have been forgotten.

"I can see that, definitely, the oil spill is everyone's first priority now. It's such an environmental problem. I understand that," said Nelda Winslette, whose grandson Adam Weise was killed in the blast.

"But those 11 men were trying to prevent that spill. Nothing ever gets mentioned about those men, and who they were."

A memorial service on May 1 was held for the 24-year-old Weise at the Lutheran church in Yorktown, Texas, his hometown. Relatives said it seemed the whole town came to pay their respects.

"It was filled to capacity in the balcony. That was really something, and it showed what a special young man he was. It was unfortunate he only had 24 years," Weise's sister, Judy Henze, told AOL News.

Weise was a standout lineman on the Yorktown High School football team. He was a sportsman who caught redfish, speckled trout and flounder in the gulf. He hunted deer and bobcats.

"He was a fisherman, a hunter, he was a prankster. He was the kindest hearted young man," Winslette said. "He would drop whatever he was doing to help anyone else."

Winslette said Weise began working in the oil industry soon after graduating high school, working on land rigs. Then he got a job with the Swiss drilling company Transocean, and began working offshore, she said.

"Money was naturally the reason he went there. The money was better than on land rigs," she said.

Another memorial was held Saturday in Bay City, Texas, the hometown of another man who was killed, Jason Anderson, a father of two.

Transocean, owner of the Deepwater Horizon, is flying relatives of the victims to Jackson, Miss., for another memorial on Tuesday, Winslette said.

Others lost in the accident included four Mississippians: Aaron Dale Burkeen, 37, of Philadelphia; Karl Kleppinger Jr., 38, of Natchez; Shane Roshto, 22, of Liberty; and

Dewey Revette, 48, of State Line.

Four other Louisianians were killed: Gordon Lewis Jones, 28, of Baton Rouge; Donald Clark, 49, of Newellton; Stephen Curtis, 39, of Georgetown; and Roy Kemp, 27, of Jonesville.

Manuel's son Blair was a native of Eunice, La. He grew up on a rice farm.

"Whatever needed to be done, he was there, willing and able. He drove tractors, did whatever needed to be done," his father said.

Blair Manuel, 56, attended Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where he studied petroleum engineering, his father said. He had worked on offshore rigs for more than a decade.

He had season tickets to LSU football and baseball games, and was the proud owner of a baseball signed by members of the school's 2009 NCAA championship team.

He and his fiance, Melinda Becnel, planned to marry in July. Their honeymoon was planned for New Orleans.

"He had everything planned: the honeymoon, the wedding, everything else," his father said.

L.D. Manuel said he last spoke with his son about a week before the explosion.

He summed the aftermath of the blast this way: "It's unreal. The loss of a child is very, very sorrowful."

Henze said she hoped the public remembers that the disaster in the gulf had more than environmental consequences.

"When I hear anybody talk about it, they're always talking about the environment," she said. "But this is also a human tragedy."
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