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## Miners Risked Death in Efforts to Save Two Who Died

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT

**OURAY** – Miners at the Revenue-Virginus Mine risked their own lives in a desperate and futile effort to save their shift boss and a fellow miner from carbon monoxide poisoning on the morning of Sunday, Nov. 17.

“Their story has not been told,” said Eric Keep, the brother of deceased miner Nicholas Cappanno. “They saw my brother go down. Those guys all had the ability to get out of there, but they sacrificed their health to try to get him out.”

Many of the miners involved in the aborted rescue mission have reached out to Keep and his family in the days following the acci-

dent that killed Cappanno and his supervisor, Rick Williams, a mile and a half inside the historic mine. The Revenue-Virginus dates to the 1870s and was taken over by its current owner/operator, Denver-based Star Mine Operations, in 2011.

Cappanno, 33, had taken the job there a few weeks before his death, so he could be closer to his Montrose-based family than his previous job in the oil industry allowed. He had no prior mining experience.

Williams, 59, lived in Silverton for much of his life, and was a seasoned, well-trained professional miner. He began working at the Revenue-Virginus about a year-and-a-half ago, according to



**MULTI-AGENCY RESPONSE** – Flanked by members of the multi-agency response team that handled Sunday’s fatal accident at the Revenue-Virginus Mine, Star Mine Manager Rory Williams fielded questions from journalists at a press conference at the Ouray Community Center Sunday night. From left: Ouray City Administrator Patrick Rondinelli, Ouray Board of County Commissioners Chair Mike Fedel, Ouray County Emergency Medical Services Chief Paramedic Kim Mitchell, Ouray County Emergency Manager Glenn Boyd, James Williams and Rory Williams of Star Mine, Ouray County Sheriff Dominic “Junior” Mattivi, Ouray Police Chief Justin Perry, and Undersheriff Joel Burke. (Photo by William Woody, Watchnewspapers.com)

his wife Judy, and was recently promoted to shift boss.

The details that surviving miners have recently shared with Keep confirm a statement issued by the

Mine Safety and Health Administration on Monday, that Williams was attempting to revive Cappanno, even as his own life slipped away.

“He died trying to save my

brother,” Keep said. Bruise marks on Cappanno’s chest indicate that Williams attempted CPR. Williams

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## Telluride Sees Surprisingly-Scarce Seasonal Housing

*Big Billie’s, Shandoka And Village Court Are All Full*

BY SAMUEL ADAMS

**TELLURIDE** – The slow off-season months in Telluride and Mountain Village typically see an increase in seasonal employees looking to work at the Telluride Ski Resort, the region’s largest employer. But for the 2013-2014 ski season, affordable housing in the region for these employees is increasingly scarce.

The number of applicants hoping to live at the Village Court Apartments in Mountain Village, for example, far exceeds the number of available units, according to

complex manager Steven Spencer. “It’s safe to say that VCA is effectively 100 percent full through the ski season,” he said. Many Telski employees choose to live at VCA because it offers six-month leases that closely match the length of the ski season.

The Shandoka Apartment complex in Telluride is facing a similar shortage.

“Basically, if you’re applying to live in Shandoka you’re dependent on someone flaking out on an application that’s ahead of yours, or a surprise move-out that we don’t expect,” said Shandoka manager Dave Johnson. Still, Johnson encourages people to apply for housing there, “because openings

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## Immigration Reform Now, Supporters Say in Montrose

*‘This Activity Was to Send a Message, a Very Strong Message, To Our Congressman, Scott Tipton.’*

BY WILLIAM WOODY

**MONTROSE** – Speaking for those who do not have a voice, or are too afraid to let themselves be heard, a large group of immigrants and supporters of immigration reform organized a rally in downtown Montrose last weekend with one unified message: immigration reform must be a priority and must be passed by Congress.

As evening fell on Delmont Park on the corner of Main Street and Townsend Ave. Saturday, local immigrants, some of them farm workers, gathered with other com-

munity members holding signs and telling stories in English and Spanish of the hardships of living in the United States illegally and struggling to becoming a citizen.

“This activity was to send a message, a very strong message, to our congressman, Scott Tipton, that 70 percent or more of Americans support immigration reform,” said Ricardo Pérez, the executive director of the Proyecto de Asuntos Hispanos (the Hispanic Affairs Project), a Montrose-based nonprofit whose mission is to serve the needs of immigrants in Western Colorado. “So far, he said no.”

Pérez, an immigrant from El Salvador, said 20 percent of Montrose’s population are immigrants, primarily from Mexico, and that in Olathe their numbers soar to 50 percent. The immigrants work in local agriculture, construction and restaurants, and represent a large

portion of the economy of Western Colorado.

“Our participation in the economy is strong,” said Perez.

Laura Figueroa, who attended Rep. Tipton’s Oct. 26 town hall meeting in Montrose, said she feels more empowered than ever to speak for the 11 million undocumented individuals already living in the United States. An immigrant who is now a naturalized citizen, Figueroa remembers a time when she lived in this country illegally. “It’s hard to raise a family, get a job or even drive a car,” she said. “A lot of people here want reform,” and “this country would benefit.”

Figueroa attended the rally with her brother, David, and friends Maria and Jose Pacheco and Maria Gonzales; the group also attended Tipton’s town hall

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also gave Cappanno his own supplemental oxygen, Keep said. "He thought he had enough to get out."

When two other miners working in the area realized what was happening, they “grabbed my brother and drug him,” Keep said. “Rick was still alive at the time.”

Cappanno, it turns out, was not. "They drug my brother out a ways, until they knew he was dead. Then they went back for Mr. Williams."

But by then it was too late for Williams, as well. Realizing this, Keep said, the miners aborted their rescue attempt and evacuated the mine.

“From what I understand, my brother was dead within seconds,” Keep said. “The tragedy of it was, they didn’t use their self-rescuers. Self-rescuers would have saved them. But they had been trained to use their self rescuers when they see smoke, and they didn’t see smoke. And somehow, that drift wasn’t ventilated.”

Carbon monoxide, known as the “silent killer” because it is colorless, odorless and tasteless, is a byproduct of explosives used in mining. When inhaled, CO enters the bloodstream through the lungs and binds with hemoglobin, interfering with the blood’s ability to deliver oxygen to the tissues. Initial symptoms include mild headache, fatigue, nausea and dizziness. Exposed to the gas in lethal quantities,

the victim suffocates as the result of chemical asphyxiation.

All miners are required by MSHA to carry an approved one-hour self-rescue device in case they encounter CO within a mine; the device converts the deadly CO into harmless CO<sub>2</sub>. One of the mysteries that will surely be investigated by MSHA authorities in the following weeks and months is why the miners involved in Sunday's Revenue-Virginus tragedy failed to use their self-rescue devices.

Another unknown at this point is the source of the deadly CO gas that killed Williams and Cappano. Keep offered a potential clue. "They were burning old powder back in there; it's a practice they have used forever – it's a safe way of dealing with it, if you get the ventilation," he said. This report calls into question the adequacy of the mine's ventilation system, which appears to have failed in Sunday's tragic chain of events.

Keep said he hopes that MSHA authorities can unravel these and other troubling questions in their upcoming investigation.

“That mine is almost 140 years old,” he said. “Why, this one time, did all the pieces fit in all the wrong ways?”

Keep is optimistic that the answers will come with time. "People reassure me MSHA is really good at what they do," he said. "If there is a problem, they will find it. I am not angry with anybody, other than

the way the rules are taught; why were they trained to use a self-rescuer only when they see smoke?"

Keep emphasized that in spite of what happened to his brother, he is not on a personal vendetta against Star Mine or the mining industry in general. "But I don't want anything to happen to any other boys going underground. I want something good to come from this, nothing bad. The tragedy has happened. Let's try to find the good, and save the work environment for our miners."

Such consequences may take years to unfold.

In the meantime, with Cappano and Williams both dead, Kee said, the most pressing concern at the moment is the condition of the 20 miners who attempted to save their lives. The evacuated miners were taken to regional hospitals after their evacuation, where they were treated for varying levels of carbon monoxide exposure. According to mine operator Star Mine, all 20 have since been released.

"The miners are number one. You can only imagine what those guys took into their bodies," he said. "It's so unfortunate. Our thoughts and prayers are with all those men."

## A TROUBLING SAFETY RECORD

The historic Revenue-Virgin-ius mine is located near Yankee Boy Basin, 6.9 miles southwest

of Ouray, above the Camp Bird Mine, and below the Ruby Trust. The mine shut down in the 1940s, but record-high silver prices in 2011 fanned new interest among investors. It was being readied for reopening by Star Mine Operations LLC, a subsidiary of the Denver-based private mining company Silver Star Resources, which obtained a mining permit for the Revenue-Virginius in February 2013 to mine silver, gold and sulfide minerals from vein deposits on patented mining claims purchased under a lease agreement by the company in 2011.

Star Mining's work force had swollen to close to 100 in recent months. Work was proceeding feverishly, with three shifts of miners working 20 hours a day, seven days a week, and surface workers putting in 10-hour days, five days a week.

Mining crews were focused on rehabilitating the historic underground workings that probe some two miles into the mountain-side, and laying rail into the very back of the mine. Recently, they were poised to put in some raises to access ore veins in previously untapped regions of the mine, as work also progressed toward installing an underground mill capable of processing up to 300 tons of ore per day.

With Sunday's tragedy, all of this came to a screeching halt, with all work at the mine suspended pending the outcome of the MSHA investigation.

Not surprisingly, Revenue-Virginius' safety record has come under scrutiny since the deaths of the two miners.

At a press conference on Sunday night, Star Mine Operations Manager Rory Williams defended Star Mine's safety record. "We always keep safety as our number one priority," he said. "We never want an injury, a death, or anything of any nature which harms a person, an individual or an employee to occur on our mine site. I believe our safety record has been strong. We have not had any incident of this nature ever, and I never intend to have another one."

Williams also told *The Watch* that Star Mine has strict training requirements for all of its workers, from long-term employees to new hires. Cappanno had recently completed a 40-hour MSHA training as well as an eight-hour refresher course (Rick Williams had also recently completed an eight-hour refresher course).

Even so, MSHA records reveal that Star Mine has a troubling safety record. “There are a lot of problems we see with this very new mine,” said Ellen Smith, publisher of the online publication *Mine Safety and Health News*, in an interview on Colorado Public Radio’s show *Colorado Matters* earlier this week. “They did not have a proper mine plan when they opened; and their miners had not been properly trained.”

According to MSHA records, prior to Sunday's accident, the mine had previously reported five accidents in 2013, and four

in 2012 – giving the mine an accident rate that is 115 percent above the national average. Most of these accidents were not of a serious nature.

“Guys are getting stuff in their eyes, smashing fingers,” Smith said. “It might show that they need to slow down, but it’s nothing serious.”

MSHA also pronounced the mine's "violations-per-inspection-day" rate unusually high – 1.47, compared to the national average of .47 for underground metal/non-metal mines, as the result of 25 violations since August of 2012.

Retired MSHA inspector and supervisor Ron Renowden, who now runs a small safety and health consulting business in Silverton, did some safety consulting for Star Mine shortly after the company acquired the Revenue-Virginus property in 2011.

"I am surprised they are above the national levels on their injury rate," he said, although he has heard some "scuttlebutt kind of stuff going on" among the Silverton miners who are employed at the mine.

"The company has received a lot of negative feedback from miners off and on since they started operating," he said. "I helped [Star Mine] get started in the very beginning and cautioned them they need to stay on top of all these things, and reminded them of their responsibilities. Mining is inherently dangerous; you have to use extra-special precautions when operating in a mine or working in a mine; everyone has to stay on board and have a commitment to safety."

## A DANGEROUS BUSINESS IN A DANGEROUS ENVIRONMENT

The tragedy at the Revenue-Virginus Mine has been a poignant reminder for many in Ouray and the surrounding communities that mining is indeed a dangerous occupation.

The Miner's Heritage statue near the Ouray Hot Springs Pool has become a gathering place for the bereaved, and a place of quiet contemplation over the past several days, with flowers, notes and small commemorative objects piling up at its base.

Ouray resident Dee Williams, who visited the statue Tuesday afternoon, summed up the feelings expressed by many here in Ouray.

"I was reminded of Ouray's history. How in the past 140 years lives have been lost in mining accidents, or in avalanches on the way to and from the mines. It's a dangerous business in a dangerous environment," she wrote in a Facebook post. "Thankfully there are people who are willing to take the risk mining involves. Ouray wouldn't be here without them, and a good portion of Colorado wouldn't be here if it weren't for the industry and prosperity mining brought to our state."

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## COMMUNITY



## Remembering the Fallen Miners

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT

### NICK CAPPANNO WAS A MAN OF FAITH AND FAMILY

Nicholas Cappanno, who died in the Sunday-morning accident at the Revenue-Virginus Mine, had worked there for just a few weeks.

He is survived by his wife, Martha Cappanno, and their sons Brayden, 5, and Barrett, 2; by his parents, Audrey and Dan Keep, and by his siblings, Rob-in Johnson and Eric Keep.

Cappanno grew up in Olathe, and had deep, multi-generational roots in the Montrose area. Born into the Keep family, he and his wife adopted his family's ancestral name, Cappanno, when they married.

"Nick felt it was important to honor that heritage," explained his sister-in-law Katie Caufield, speaking on behalf of the Cappanno family.

Nick and Martha met at church; she was a high school senior, and he had already graduated.

"Martha and Nick had an amazing relationship," Caufield said. "It was really special. Sometimes I felt almost jealous; they had that extra spark that not all couples do. The passion was there. It could be feisty, but they were so, so in love with each other, and had so much fun together." He was equally passionate about being a father. "The number-one reason he took a job at the mine was that his previous job in the oil industry kept him away from his family," Caufield said. "He wanted to have dinner with his family, and tuck his kids into bed at night."

Cappanno told remarkable bedtime stories, weaving together fact and fancy. He was the kind of dad who knew how to make ordinary, everyday events into something fun – from eating cheese and crackers to inventing a makeshift bicycle train for taking his sons to the park.

"His boys adored him," Caufield said. "He had a teacher's heart; he encouraged them to ask questions, be inquisitive, and to pursue their passions and dreams. There are a lot of good fathers out there, but he was a great father."

Cappanno's brother, Eric, agreed. "He was a fun-loving, wonderful father. He loved those boys to death."

Eric remembers that his brother had a fascination for dirt bikes as a kid. Fun-loving, quick-witted and mischievous, he was forever the prankster of the family.

"He always had a smile on his face," Eric said. "He was always going fast." Recently, he had turned his inquisitive

mind toward the making of malt brews, which he loved. It was his dream to have a fully-functional malting operation, and he had just started malting barley in his garage shortly before he died.

Cappanno briefly attended college, but never graduated. Instead, he worked in several different industries, including agriculture, the oil industry, and, finally, mining. He enjoyed physical work. "He really had an ability to work with his hands," Caufield said. "He was creative; he could think outside the box, for sure."

Although he didn't spend much time at the Revenue-Virginus mine, he had already made plenty of friends among the miners there, many of whom have reached out to his family in the days since the accident.

"Guys were asking to take him out after work for a beer because he was such a nice guy, and so funny," brother Eric said.

Cappanno's Christian faith was at the core of his identity, said Caufield. "He had a deep belief and it didn't waiver. Martha admired that about him. He didn't question. He knew without a shadow of a doubt where he would go after he died. That might have been why he lived his life with so much enthusiasm. When it was his turn, he was ready to move on."

### VISITATION AND FUNERAL PLANNED

Visitation for family and close friends of Nick Cappanno will be held Thursday, Nov. 21, 4-6 p.m., at Grace Community Church, 16731 Woodgate Road in Montrose, followed by public visitation at the church, 6-7:30 p.m. His funeral will take place Friday, Nov. 22, at 3 p.m., at Grace. Cremation will take place after the service.

### CAPPANNO FAMILY MEMORIAL FUND

The Cappanno Family Memorial Fund has been established through the generous support of Alpine Bank. Check donations may be dropped off at any area or statewide branch location or mailed to: Cappanno Family Memorial Fund; Care of Alpine Bank - 2770 Alpine Drive, Montrose, CO 81401. Online donations can be made at [cappannomemorialfund.com](http://cappannomemorialfund.com). All donations will be sent directly to the Cappanno Family Memorial Fund and will be used at the discretion of Nick's wife, Martha.

### RICK WILLIAMS EMBODIED SILVERTON'S MINING HERITAGE

Revenue-Virginus Mine Shift Supervisor Rick Williams' love of mining and of the mountains ran deep. Williams died of apparent carbon monoxide poisoning on Sunday while trying to save miner Nicholas Cappanno, who also died in the Sunday-morning accident at the mine, which sent 20 surviving miners to regional hospitals.

Williams was husband to Judy Williams; father to two sons, Nathan, 25 and Aaron, 23; and grandfather to Marley, 4. He was born in Moab, and grew up in and around Silverton. In 1993, married with two young sons, Williams moved 50 miles south to Durango.

"He was a wonderful father and son, and brother and neighbor," said Judy, his wife of 28 years. "He was kind, reliable and very well liked by friends, neighbors and family."

Williams adored his young granddaughter, Marley. "She was the apple of his eye," Judy said.

An accomplished carpenter and a trained, certified miner with many years of experience, "He was a hard-working person who did what he needed to do to make a living for his family," his wife said. "He loved what he did. He loved the mountains."

Growing up in Silverton, Williams naturally gravitated toward the mining profession, and after graduating from Silverton High School, he found work at the then-booming Sunnyside Mine, where he worked for years.

Like many in Silverton, Williams got out of mining when the Sunnyside shut down for good in the early 1990s, starting a contracting business, Silverton Renovations. For years, he made the beautiful daily commute between Durango and Silverton.

When the economy took a turn for the worse, Williams began traveling farther afield for work. "He traveled everywhere, doing mining or contracting construction projects," Judy said.

In June 2012, Williams found a steady job closer to home, at the Revenue-Virginus Mine; at 59, he was among the oldest workers there. He displayed a remarkable work ethic, putting in seven days in a row, then traveling back to Durango to spend time with his family on his days off.

"I think those young ones looked up

*'It's a death for everyone.'*

– Judy Williams

to him," said Judy, who works as a nurse in Durango. "There were a lot of young ones up there. He really liked working with the guys."

Williams didn't talk much about his work in the mines. "If they truly tell you what they think, the spouses don't sleep at night," Judy said. Even so, over the many years that she spent as a miner's wife, she admitted, "I spent a lot of time pacing the floor, worrying and everything."

Recently, Williams announced his promotion to shift supervisor at the Revenue-Virginus.

"What do you do?" Judy asked him.

"I'm pretty much a nipper," he joked – a nipper is an entry-level worker in a mine, an errand-boy for more experienced miners. "I do whatever needs to be done to get the job done."

Working at the Revenue-Virginus was a homecoming of sorts for Williams and many other former Sunnyside miners, who went to work there after a two-decade hiatus from mining.

"They all knew each other up there," Judy said. "In Silverton, everyone knew each other. There is a camaraderie around mining in Silverton. In the mining industry, it's a family."

"It's a death for everyone. They are all grieving, and I feel heartbroken for everyone."

### FUNERAL AND GATHERING PLANNED

Rick Williams' funeral will be Friday, Nov. 29 at 2 p.m. at the Greenmount Cemetery in Durango, with a gathering immediately afterward at the Durango Community Recreation Center.

### WILLIAMS FAMILY MEMORIAL FUND

A memorial fund for the Williams family has been established at Wells Fargo Bank.

There will be a vigil for the fallen miners this Saturday, Nov. 23 near the Ouray Hot Springs Pool at 4:30 p.m.