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MR. IMOGENE – Ultra running legend Rick Trujillo pointed out his favorite trails across Ouray last Thursday. Trujillo is the longtime director of the Imogene Pass Run. Read about Trujillo and the Imogene’s history in The Watch’s Adventure Guide, on the racks this Thanksgiving. (Photo by Alec Jacobson)

THE DAY THEY DIED

Remembering the Revenue Mine Tragedy

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT

O U R A Y COUNTY – For Cory Geist, Sunday, Nov. 17, 2013 started out just like any other day at the Revenue Mine. He’d been working there for a year or so – long enough to become accustomed to the daily routine at the historic mine, perched high in the mountains above Ouray, that had recently been acquired by Star Mine Operations



THE PORTAL – Leading into the Revenue Tunnel. (Photo courtesy of MSHA)

and was busily ramping up for production after decades of inactivity.

The morning shift started with a skip ride to the “doghouse,” a small underground chamber that doubled as a lunch room at the back end of the mile-and-a-half-long Revenue Tunnel, the main artery leading from the portal to the underground workings.

Here, shift boss Rick Williams went over the plan for the day with Geist and fellow miners. Their shift the previous day had ended with a bang; several members of the crew had helped dispose of a large batch of deteriorated explosives at the back of the Monogahela Drift, a long underground passageway near the terminus of the Revenue Tunnel.

Among the guys that had helped with the blast was Nick Cappanno, a new kid on the block, who had just started working at the mine a few weeks

back as a “powder monkey,” or blaster’s helper. Cappanno and Geist had a lot in common. They both lived in Montrose, and, like many of the other young and inexperienced miners employed at the Revenue at the time, both had growing families to support.

After graduating from Ouray High School in 2007, Geist had gone to Texas to do oilfield work and metal work. Eventually, he made his way back to Colorado. By then he’d married his high school sweetheart, Tiffany Hudspeth (part of Ouray’s Tankersley clan).

“I didn’t start mining until we had our second set of twins,” Geist said (the boys are now 5, and the girls are about to turn 4.) He got hired on, and found it was easy work. “You could train a monkey to do this kind of stuff,” he said. For Cappanno, a 32-year old father of two and former oilfield worker with no prior mining experience, working at the Revenue still had the trappings of a great adventure. At the end of their shift the day before, Geist recalled how they hung around in the parking lot at mine headquarters in Ouray, talking about the big explosion. “Nick was so excited, he told a bunch of people,” Geist recalled. “It’s just like that. Blasting’s cool.”

So it made sense to Geist, when they got to the

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City/County Mend Fences Over Dispatch Center Fee

BY KRISTA SHERER

MONTROSE – The City and County of Montrose and the Montrose County Sheriff’s Department have reached a tentative agreement regarding Regional Dispatch Center fees for 2015. In a City Council Work Session at Friendship Hall on Wednesday, Nov. 6, a group of councilors, officials and officers agreed to work together for the benefit and safety of the community.

Mayor Bob Nicholson summed it up, saying, “The premise of all of this is that we are in actual agreement at this table, which is really a great thing.”

To that end, the city has agreed to pay the full 2014 budget balance for Dispatch Center fees assessed by the sheriff and county. In 2015, the county will add \$250,000 to their extant \$600,000 contribution, covering expenses

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Friends Gather to Say Farewell to Jonathan Yazzie

BY ALLISON PERRY

MOUNTAIN VILLAGE – On Sunday, with Wilson Peak hovering in the distance, 20 people shared memories, laughter and tears while saying goodbye to their friend, Jonathan Yazzie, who died in a car accident in the early morning hours of Saturday, Nov. 1. They vowed to use his death as a catalyst to bring change to the drinking and driving culture in town.

Although Yazzie, 23, had lived in Telluride for less than two years at the time of his death, he

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A CONTAGIOUS SMILE – By all accounts, Jonathan Yazzie had the ability to brighten up a room the minute he walked in. (Photo from Facebook)

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doghouse the next day, that the first thing Cappanno wanted to do was to go check out the blast site.

Geist offered to come along. “No man should go by himself,” he explained. “I didn’t really want to go back there, but I wasn’t going to let Nick go alone. I remember how I was excited for my first blast.”

Geist recalls asking the other more experienced miners in the doghouse, including Williams, “if it was OK if we go back there, and they said that should be fine.”

Geist and Cappanno set off on a “motor” (a motorized cart that runs on rails) toward the blast site at the end of the Monogahela Drift. When the rails ended, about halfway down the tunnel, they continued on foot.

“It was like walking through a haunted house with a bunch of fog,” Geist recalled. “It totally looked like that, back in that drift. It was always muggy and foggy back there.”

As they approached the face of the tunnel where the explosives had been detonated the previous day, Geist recalled, “I started to feel something funny. It didn’t feel right at all. Something was wrong.”

Neither he nor Cappanno had a gas detection monitor. As far as he knows, the only one of those at the mine was locked

‘It didn’t feel right at all. Something was wrong.’

– Cory Geist

up in the manager’s office. But being a smoker, he did have a lighter on him.

“I lit the lighter, and it told me there was bad air and to get out of there,” Geist recalled. “I told Nick, ‘This ain’t no good back here.’”

Although Geist and Cappanno were both carrying self-rescuers (emergency masks that convert CO to harmless CO2) when they encountered the bad air, “I didn’t think to put it on,” Geist said. “There was no thinking that, after it hit you, because your brain just went dumb. I didn’t know what it was; I’ve never been exposed to carbon monoxide before.”

Just then, Cappanno looked at Geist and said, “I don’t feel right,” and passed out, collapsing on the ground.

Geist picked him up, shouted for him to come to, and “made him walk a ways.” When that didn’t work, Geist slung Cappanno over his shoulder, staggering under the weight.

“I dropped to my knees, and he passed out again,” Geist recalled, speaking a mile a minute

as the memory loomed large. “I said ‘Nick, I’m going to go get help; hang on.’”

It was the last time Geist saw Cappanno alive.

Geist staggered a few more steps, but “I couldn’t walk straight for the life of me,” he said. “I felt like I’d drank five bottles of Jack Daniels.”

As he stumbled along, weaving back and forth, Geist smacked his head against the side of the tunnel and passed out for a little bit, but then “I come to and got back up,” he said. He had almost reached the motor when he fell again.

“I feel that angels lifted me up and put me on that motor,” Geist said. From there, somehow, he made it back to the doghouse where he told the other miners, “Nick’s back there passed out. There’s bad air, be careful.”

And then: “Get me to the surface...I can’t breathe.”

FRANTIC RESCUE EFFORT

What happened next remains a blur. “I had oxygen on me, and

there were a whole bunch of messes going on,” Geist said. “I told Surface, ‘Call 911; we are going to need it.’”

But he can’t remember too much after that. “It got to my brain pretty good,” he said. “There were people just running all over the place. It was pure chaos with everyone trying to go back in there and pull them out.”

One emergency responder who was there that morning, who asked to remain anonymous, recalled “the look of shock in everyone’s eyes. They were like the walking dead....There was no one in authority giving any advice, support or comfort. Some were so young, but the shock was in everyone’s eyes, and their effort to try to look brave while being on the edge of breaking apart was hard to watch.”

Underground, a frantic rescue effort was underway, as miners risked their own lives, by twos and threes, to try and drag Cappanno and Williams out of the toxic tunnel. Many of these acts of heroism were chronicled in the Mine Safety and Health Administration’s recently released 60-page fatality report.

But in Geist’s mind, Rick Williams was the true hero of the day. “He was back there giving Nick CPR and he ran out of oxygen. Someone tried to give him oxygen and he said, ‘I don’t want it.’ He was like a captain, going down with the ship.”

Ultimately, Geist and 19 fellow miners were taken to the hospital and treated for exposure to the lethal levels of carbon monoxide that had saturated stagnant air in the Monogahela Drift, following the previous day’s blast.

“When I went to see the doctor, he said, ‘You should have been back there [with Cappanno and Williams] too; you are lucky,’” Geist recalled. The doctor’s theory was that smoking had saved Geist’s life, by heightening his resistance to carbon monoxide.

After the accident, Geist said, “They put me on unpaid leave until the investigation was over.”

He’s not sure why he was singled out in this way. “It beats the hell out of me. They never said. It’s a bunch of bullshit. I had a family to support, and they put me on unpaid leave.”

Geist is adamant that he was not the least bit culpable for what happened. “I didn’t sign off on the ventilation plans,” he said. “I’m not the one that kept the only carbon monoxide detector locked in the office. They never showed us nothing like that. I always thought that was funny. Usually you see miners with that stuff hanging off their belt.”

But at the Revenue, he said, nobody carried one.

“It was push, push, push, push, push and nobody cared about safety,” he said. “They always wanted to push us. There was a real push and a lack of safety training. This is what happens when you do that kind of stuff.”

ENTIRELY PREVENTABLE

A detailed 64-page fatality report released by MSHA investigators last month revealed a tangled mess of falsified ventilation plans, negligent management practices, inadequate training, lack of communication between shifts, dangerous explosives handling practices and blatant disregard for basic safety protocol that ultimately contributed to the deaths Williams and Cappanno, a mile and a half inside the historic mine on the morning of Sunday, Nov. 17, 2013.

Ultimately, the feds concluded that the tragedy was “entirely preventable.” They blamed mine management for improperly disposing of deteriorated explosives in a remote, unventilated portion of the mine, and for then failing to seal off or properly ventilate the area, which had subsequently filled with toxic levels of carbon monoxide from the blast.

Former mine operator Star Mine Operations has been fined \$1,077,800 for violations that led to the two deaths – the second-largest fine ever assessed to a non-coal mine, according to MSHA officials.

The mine has recently changed hands, and is now owned and operated by Fortune Minerals, a publicly traded Canadian mining company.

Meanwhile, a year after the accident, Geist’s life is still not back to normal. He gets tired easily, and under physical exertion, “My face turns purple,” he said.

He thinks it’s connected to what happened in the Monogahela Drift, “from breathing so hard, trying to gasp for air back there, and thinking I was getting oxygen, but I wasn’t. I hope it goes away; that would be nice.”

Geist bears psychological scars as well. “Being in a garage or something, like when I’m starting up my snowblower, it scares the crap out of me,” he said.

But the post-traumatic stress is “not too bad,” he said, “because my kids keep me sane.”

He has a new job now running excavators, and says he hasn’t kept up much with his former workmates at the mine.

Meanwhile, in Ouray, the memory of the accident weighs heavily on hopes for the mine’s eventual success.

“We all want our neighbors to have good-paying jobs,” said one long-time Ouray local. “We also want them to have a voice in their own safety issues.”

Contact Samantha Wright at swright@watchnewspapers.com or Tweet @iamsamwright



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