Miner Killed in Accident Cheated Death in 2007

MARTIN GRIFFITH, Associated Press

(AP) — Elam Jones came close to death in a central Utah mine accident once before. He was preparing to begin his shift at the Crandall Canyon mine in August 2007 when a cave-in struck the section where he was to have worked, killing six miners and three rescuers.

The 28-year-old coal miner was not so lucky Friday. A tunnel roof collapsed at the Rhino Mine about 10 miles west of Huntington, killing him and sending a co-worker to the hospital.

Even though the earlier accident occurred only a few miles away, Jones loved his job and did not view it as particularly dangerous, said his mother Julie Jones, a Huntington city councilwoman.

"He loved the mine he was at and the men he worked with. They were family," she told The Associated Press on Saturday. "He always said he could get hit going to Salt Lake and get killed in a car wreck."

He also was a member of the ill-fated rescue team at the Crandall Canyon mine. Three rescuers died while trying to save the trapped miners. He later spoke at a vigil for those who died and were injured there.

"He told me that he had to be there. Those were his buddies," his mother said.

Jones also was an experienced outdoorsman who survived two avalanches and a serious ATV accident, his mother said.

A father of two young children, Jones' roots in coal mining went back four generations on his mother's side and three generations on his father's side. His father works for a nearby coal mine.

Coal miners love what they do because they consider themselves the "heartbeat of America," Julie Jones said. The coal they provide to power plants provides jobs for everyone and allows people to use microwaves, televisions and countless other things, she added.

"Elam was proud to be a coal miner," his mother said. "Unless you're a coal miner, you wonder why they do this. It's in their blood."

Friday's accident was the latest in a string of disasters to strike Huntington, a closely knit town of over 2,000. They include the Crandall Canyon mine tragedy as well as a 75-square-mile wildfire that triggered flooding, road closures and threats to the town's water supply last year.

"I've had people come up to me and say, 'How much more can one community take?'" Huntington Mayor Hilary Gordon said. "I guess we'll take whatever gets dished out and take it one day at time."

Elam Jones' life centered on his wife and boys, ages 4 and 5, Gordon said. He was an avid hunter, fisherman and snowmobiler who "lived life to his fullest," she added.

"He thought it was a safe job," the mayor said. "To say it's just one of those things sounds trite. But one (miner) gets buried and the other doesn't. I don't think three's ever a good answer as to why these things happen."

The injured miner, Dallen McFarlane, was treated and released from Castleview Hospital in Price.

The mine is part of the Castle Valley Mining Complex. Preliminary information showed that a roof fall occurred on a pillaring section of the mine after a large rock fell, according to federal mine safety officials. The Mine Safety and Health Administration was investigating.

Messages left with the mine's operator, Rhino Resource Partners, were not returned. The Kentucky-based company bought the mining complex in August 2010.

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