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COCC mourns student killed in helicopter crash

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David Steele of Ashland was following his dream of becoming a firefighter/EMT in classes at COCC

David Steele, 19, was following dream to be firefighter

By Jennifer Burns, KTVZ.COM

The National Transportation Safety Board released its initial findings Friday into what happened leading to Tuesday's deadly helicopter crash near a Northern California forest fire, killing nine of the 13 people aboard, including a Central Oregon Community College student.

David Steele, 19, from Ashland, was following his dreams of becoming a firefighter, when his first professional job turned into a tragedy.

Steele's mother told NewsChannel 21 Friday he moved from Ashland to Bend last year to study firefighting and medical response.

"He wanted to be a firefighter because it was an honorable job and worthwhile to help people," Suzanne Steele said.

This summer, he turned to a southern Oregon wildland firefighting company, Gray Back Forestry, to get experience and fund his college classes.

"I was worried he could be injured," Suzanne Steele said, "but he was on the mop up crew, so my fears were not as great, knowing he was cleaning up the fire" and not on the front lines.

Steele and 12 other men were aboard a helicopter in a remote area of the Shasta-Trinity National Forest in Northern California to mop up the Buckhorn Wildfire.

The NTSB says the helicopter crashed into a hillside during a slow takeoff.

"The nose of the helicopter struck a tree, and there were several rotor strikes of trees that followed," said NTSB spokeswoman Kitty Higgins.

"The aircraft came to rest on it's left side about 150 yards from the takeoff site, and the helicopter quickly filed with very dense black smoke."

Fellow firefighters say they watched the helicopter burst into flames.

The NTSB says it is looking at maintenance records of the Sikorsky helicopter, which they say seem to be in good condition.

They also were able to locate the cockpit voice recorder in hopes it will give them more answers into what went wrong during takeoff.

The accident killed six Southern Oregon firefighters, a Carson Helicopter firefighting pilot, and a California Forest Service employee.

Steele's long-time friend and COCC classmate Dane Coke said, "I got a phone call from his sister and she was crying, and I was like, 'Are you crying?' So she goes, 'Yeah.' Oh geez, I knew

something, something was up."

A second firefighter pilot, and three other firefighters were injured. Two of those people are in critical condition and two are in serious condition.

Leora Frohreich, a survivor's grandmother said, "Their exhausted. You know worrying, naturally."

The NTSB says it is the worst helicopter firefighting accident in U.S. history.

Susanne Steele had a wish for the other grieving families: "We wish them the best, and they realize where their children have gone is a better place."

If you are interested in supporting the families of the fallen firefighters, you can do so through a relief fund, by donating to the Wildland Fire Foundation: <http://www.wffoundation.org/>.



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