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Everything Oregon

The Oregonian

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Aboard the crashed Sikorsky

Life and death on the fire lines

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The Oregonian

The contract helicopter that crashed and rolled in a fiery heap this week near California's Iron Complex wildfires took 13 people down with it. Nine died and four were injured -- three of them severely -- in what some officials are calling the deadliest firefighting air crash in U.S. history.

The man with his hand on the control stick was from the northeastern corner of Oregon, but virtually everybody else on board was from somewhere in the southern part of the state. They ranged from college students to industry veterans, from parents of teenagers to teenagers themselves.

Those who died

Shawn Patrick Blazer

Saw the beauty in fires

Shawn Patrick Blazer, 30, had worked other jobs, but when he started fighting fires last year, he discovered his calling.

"He found something he adored doing," said Carole Holman, his aunt. "The fires were so exciting to him. He loved to take pictures of the wonder and the beauty of them.

"I'm sure," she said, "the camera went down with him."

Blazer grew up in southern Oregon, attending high school in Talent. Holman described her 6-foot-1, 195-pound nephew as a shy, redheaded, late bloomer who "turned into the incredibly tall, gorgeous hunk that he was."

He loved to hunt and fish, play online computer games, spend time with friends -- "just be full of life and ready to go," Holman said.

Blazer spent part of his teen years with foster parents who cared for boys in the juvenile justice system. Rosanna Hicks, his former foster mother, remembered him Thursday as strong, serious-minded and dedicated to whatever he was doing.

"When he came here," said Hicks, who lives in Drain, "he made up his mind to follow all the P's and Q's."

At the time of his death, Blazer lived in Medford, where he cared for his disabled mother, Verna Blazer. His

father, Steve, and sister, Jamie Nodwell, live in California.

Working on his mother's car this summer, Blazer suffered a nasty cut on his thumb, causing him to miss fighting one or more fires.

"He just couldn't wait," Holman said, "to get back in the action."

-- Katy Muldoon

Scott Charlson

A budding journalist

Scott Charlson, 25, was a student at Southern Oregon University with a strong interest in becoming a journalist.

He was majoring in communications and two years ago was the sports editor of the student newspaper, The Siskiyou, said D.L. Richardson, chairman of the communications department at the university. Charlson, who was from Phoenix, Ore., and would have been a senior in the fall, also worked in the university's sports information office.

Richardson recalled one instance when the accuracy of a quote in one of Charlson's stories was challenged. He said the student-journalist responded by producing a tape recording of the conversation verifying the quote.

"That's how good he is," Richardson said. "He backed up his tracks. He had a great future ahead of him as a journalist."

Richardson said Charlson, whose family lives in Eugene, brought the same commitment to his studies.

"He's one of those kids who could challenge you in class, and it would provide a great dialogue for the whole class," Richardson said. "You didn't feel challenged or threatened. You felt, 'Gosh, I'm glad you brought that statement in.'"

-- Edward Walsh and Wade Nkrumah

Edrik Gomez

Emerging as a leader

Edrik Gomez, 19, was spending his first year as a firefighter, said Lauri Red, a next-door neighbor.

He would have been a junior this fall pursuing double majors in communications and political science at Southern Oregon University. He had been living with two of his four brothers on campus in Ashland.

"He was just a really good soul," Red said, wiping tears from her eyes. "He always had a smile. If the lawn needed mowing, he'd mow it."

Christine Florence, executive director of marketing for Southern Oregon, said Gomez went to Coquille High School and arrived at the university after transferring from Southwestern Oregon Community College in Coos Bay.

D.L. Richardson, chairman of the communications department at Southern Oregon, said Gomez impressed him as having "a compassion for his fellow man."

"He was one of those students who would go out . . . and pour out his heart to help people," Richardson said. "You could see it in class . . . he was an insightful student, very dedicated to his studies."

Outside the classroom, Richardson said, Gomez was very involved with the Latino Student Union.

"I think he was a driving force behind really helping bring the Latino Student Union to the forefront and helping the different groups of the multicultural coalition come together, be a united force and do great things in the community," Richardson said.

In that respect, Gomez was emerging as a leader, he added.

-- Wade Nkrumah

Bryan Rich

Football and nature

Bryan Rich loved the outdoors. He felt blessed to live in Central Point, near southern Oregon's forests and rivers.

"Nature gives me peace of mind," he wrote on his MySpace page. He loved to get out of the rat race and go to the river, he said.

Rich, 29, loved football, too. The backdrop of his page is the Denver Broncos' logo, and he lists John Elway as his hero.

His friend Justin Miller said they spent a lot of time on the river, fishing for salmon. Miller praised his friend's professional skills. "Bryan probably was one of the best framing carpenters in this town," Miller said.

Rich had taken up work as a firefighter because the slumping construction industry made it hard to find work. But he loved fighting fires.

Miller spent time with Rich at a barbecue just before Rich left to fight the Iron Complex fire in Northern California.

"He was excited," Miller said. "He was ready to go down there."

-- Jacques Von Lunen

Roark Schwanenberg

Pilot lived for family

Veteran firefighting helicopter pilot Roark Schwanenberg died the way he would have preferred, said his wife, Christine.

"He was flying," she said. "It would be the way he would want to enter heaven."

Schwanenberg, 54, was at the controls of the Sikorsky S-61N firefighting helicopter that crashed in Northern California's rugged Shasta-Trinity National Forest late Tuesday.

When Christine, 55, got the call notifying her of her husband's death, she was by the phone, "waiting for him to call," she said Thursday from the couple's living room. With her were daughters Deena Tsiatsos, 22, and Margo Schwanenberg, 17. A son, Chris, Deena's twin, was en route from a forestry job in Montana.

She'd spoken to her husband shortly before the crash, and that last telephone conversation "was a true gift," Christine said. "He knew the last time he went up in the air that he was loved."

The 6-foot, 250-pound Schwanenberg had been in California less than a week, battling a 27-square-mile wildfire. He told her little about the fire when she talked to him, and he was still grieving the death of his younger brother, Jon, 48, of Klamath Falls, about a month earlier, she said.

"Everybody's heart is just broken and bleeding," she said.

Roark Schwanenberg graduated from high school in Klamath Falls and learned to fly helicopters in the Army. He discovered northeastern Oregon's picturesque Wallowa County while fighting wildfires. Later, he and Christine, a Lostine native, met and married.

"He basically lived for his family," she said. But when he had free time, he enjoyed riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, target shooting and playing with their three big dogs, Beau, Wriggley and Dante.

Sometimes, when off on a fire, he even left whimsical phone messages for the dogs, Christine said.

"They would perk up their ears and their heads would lift," she said.

-- Richard Cockle

David Steele

'He was our hero'

Manning the line for his varsity football team, David Steele was a passionate player, a hard worker and a devoted teammate.

"He absolutely wanted no honor or glory for himself," said Ashland High School Principal Jeff Schlecht. "It was about what he could do for the team."

That instinct to help others led Steele, 19, to set his sights early on becoming a firefighter.

"I think he thought the job was honorable," said his mother, Susanne.

After graduating from high school in 2007, David Steele headed to Bend, studying at Central Oregon Community College to become a firefighter and emergency medical technician.

Last summer he battled forest fires to pay for his education. This year he signed up with Grayback Forestry again. He was fighting his first fire of the summer in Northern California.

"He died doing what he wanted to do," said his father, Paul.

On Thursday his family and friends also remembered Steele as a beloved older brother, a solid student, and a fun-loving friend. They marveled at his dedication to making a difference, rereading the motto on his MySpace page: "Live for something or die for nothing, it's your choice."

"He was the only guy I can say unconditionally loved me through thick and thin," said Tysin Senestraro, his best friend. "I know I have someone watching over me now."

"He was a big, strong boy with a heart of gold," said his father. "He was our hero. He put himself at risk to protect others. Most of us don't have that in us."

-- Arthur Gregg Sulzberger

The survivors

William Coultas

Co-pilot seriously hurt

William Coultas, the co-pilot on the Sikorsky helicopter that crashed Tuesday in Northern California, survived the crash with serious injuries. Coultas, 44, and his wife, Christina, own a video and electronics store in Cave Junction.

-- The Associated Press

Jonathan Frohreich

'A typical' teenager

Leora Frohreich said her grandson Jonathan Frohreich is "a typical" teenager, earnest and polite, with good friends, who always helps her with chores. Frohreich, 18, of Medford, is a recent graduate of South Medford High School, and his grandmother said he is hoping to attend a mechanical program run by Boeing, which sponsors the Manufacturing Engineering Technology program at the Oregon Institute of Technology.

She said this was her grandson's second fire after taking a job with Grayback Forestry this summer. The first was in southern Oregon, where he was on a tanker truck spraying water on hot spots.

For that reason, the family thought he would be safe.

She said he has injured two vertebrae in his lower back and suffered light burns to his face. There is also a burn on his shoulder that may have been caused by a melting seat harness.

She said the accident has persuaded him to pursue education beyond high school.

-- The Oregonian

Richard Schroeder Jr.

Getting another chance

Ricky Schroeder, 42, of Medford knows a thing or two about second chances. After a two-decade struggle with drug addiction, the Medford man found redemption in a job at Grayback Forestry Inc.

"Fighting wildfires was something he'd wanted to do for a long time," said Linda Parks, 60, Schroeder's mother, " but he didn't have his life straightened up."

Two years ago, inspired by his now-31/2-year-old daughter, Ruby, Schroeder got help. Once stable, his mother said, he started looking for work that would take him into the woods. He heard about fighting wildfires -- and how much it paid. "He was sold on doing it," Parks said. "But he knew it was dangerous."

Last summer was Schroeder's first wildfire season. Parks said her son, who also has two teenage children, returned home in the fall, exhausted but exhilarated. "He said it was awesome but dangerous and scary," his mother recalls.

Parks said that she isn't surprised her son got out of the crash with the least severe injuries of anyone. "He finally got his second chance at life," she said. "And he didn't want to lose it."

Parks said her son told her he'd whispered one thing over and over again as he struggled to escape the broken, blazing helicopter.

"I'm not dying. I'm not dying. I'm not dying."

-- Michelle Roberts

Michael Brown

No information was available Thursday about Michael Brown, who survived the crash. Two others who died remain unidentified.

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