



The Oregonian

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Southern Oregon campus feels the void left by crash

Mourning - Three of the firefighters killed had attended the university in Ashland

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ASHLAND -- The leafy Southern Oregon University campus was left reeling last week as students and administrators grappled with word that three of the firefighters killed in the Northern California helicopter crash were or had been students at the school and two other victims had strong ties.

Edrik Gomez, 19, was an incoming junior double-majoring in political science and communications, and Scott Charlson, 25, was returning for a final year in the journalism program. Steven "Caleb" Renno attended SOU from fall 2005 through winter 2007.

Ashland-raised David Steele, 19, attended Central Oregon Community College in Bend, but his sister is scheduled to start at SOU in the fall and his mother, Susanne, is a returning grad student. And Ricci Coultas, daughter of co-pilot William Coultas, who survived the crash but remained in critical condition late last week, is a junior communications major.

"Ashland is a small town," said associate professor Dennis Dunleavy, who taught Gomez and Charlson, as well as Steele's mother, in the communications department. The impact of the disaster, he said, "is felt all around us."

More so than most campuses, in Oregon or elsewhere, SOU has a large number of students who make money working dangerous summer jobs -- fighting wildfires, for example, or working as a deckhand on crabbing or fishing boats in Alaska. Proximity to the jobs and the high potential payoffs are too much to resist for many students.

"It's not book money," Dunleavy said. "They're supporting themselves during the school year on summer salaries."

D.L. Richardson, chairman of the school's Department of Communications, on Friday remembered Charlson, who was one course short of graduation, as "a testing student."

"He would challenge you and make you think," Richardson recalled. "He was on the path to becoming a great journalist."

Student Nicole Jolly, 21, who worked with Gomez in the Latino Student Union, described him as a passionate, thoughtful scholar who worked night shifts during the academic year as a janitor in the basketball arena. "Edrik had so much potential," she said, wiping her eyes.

The students who died last week, Dunleavy wrote on his blog, "paid the ultimate price for being able to support themselves through their college years."

"They will be remembered," he wrote. "They will be missed."

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