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Uranium mine victim remembered for his kind nature, 'love of life'

by Danny Chandler

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Before his death on May 26, Hunter Diehl had only been working in the Pandora uranium mine for 10 weeks. According to those close to Diehl, a native of Moab, the San Juan County mine wasn't necessarily where he wanted to be.

"He wasn't a miner," explained Diehl's sister, Alisha Diehl. "He loved working as a mechanic, but working in the mine was just work."

On May 26, Diehl, 28, was working a job in the mine called "scaling a rib," which involves using a crowbar to break loose rocks from the ceiling and walls of areas that had previously been blasted open with explosives.

Unexpectedly, in an accident that is still under investigation by the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA), Diehl was fatally injured by falling rock. According to preliminary information provided by MSHA, Diehl was struck by a falling rock that measured approximately 11 feet high, 15 feet wide and 4 inches to 30 inches thick.

"At the end of the day, there wasn't a thing he could do," Alisha said of the accident, tears welling in her eyes.

Though no official report has yet been issued, some details of what happened that day in the mine have been relayed to family members, Alisha Diehl said.

When fellow mine workers rushed to assist Diehl, he was still conscious, she said.

"Those boys in that mine that got to him initially... what they did was amazing," she said.

Workers stayed with Diehl, administering CPR for up to half an hour before rescue personnel arrived, family members were told.

Despite best efforts, Diehl died as a result of the injuries he sustained in the mine. An MSHA report on the accident is expected in coming months, but Diehl's sister said she does not expect any surprises.

"It was just an accident, just a very sad and tragic accident," she said. "He was too young and it was too early, but it was just his time to go."

Reliance Resources, a Moab-based company that operates the mine for Canada-based Denison Mines Corp., had two injury accidents prior to Diehl's since the mine reopened in 2006, neither of which was fatal, according to MSHA records. In 2009, the company received 15 citations from MSHA inspectors, though none were related to the type of circumstances that led to Diehl's death, according to MSHA records.

Diehl's funeral was held June 5 at the River of Life Christian Fellowship Church in Moab. Friends and family are still coming to terms with their loved one's death, Alisha Diehl said.

"There are good days, and there are bad days," she said, adding that her brother's death left a tragic hole in the lives of those who knew him.

Hunter Diehl was known for his fun nature, his willingness to help, and his love of life, Alisha said.

"You'd see it in his face," she said. "He was always giving the 'rock on!' sign."

In the wake of the tragedy, Diehl's family, including his mourning fiancé and her daughter, has experienced an outpouring of support from the community.

"It's amazing how people can come together to support a family, even one they don't know," Alisha said.

A memorial fund has been established to help the family with expenses. Contributions may be made to the Hunter Diehl Memorial Fund at Wells Fargo Bank, 4 North Main Street, in Moab.

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