

Hundreds attend viewing for young miner fatally crushed in Pennsylvania coal mine

By Samuel Davidson
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Hundreds of family, friends and fellow coal miners attended viewings Tuesday evening to offer their condolences and pay their last respects for a 25-year-old coal miner who was killed last week in a mining accident in southwestern Pennsylvania.

Tanner Lee McFarland, of Washington, Pennsylvania, was crushed to death when the wall in a section of the mine where was working gave way, crushing him with tons of coal and rock.

He was killed shortly after 6 p.m. Thursday while working at the Consol Energy Enlow Fork Mine in Washington County, part of the company's Pennsylvania Mining Complex, where miners had long been warning of safety conditions due to management's incessant drive for production.

Tanner was only 25 years old when he was killed. He is survived by his wife Casey and their 2-year-old son Gavin Lee. Casey is soon expecting their second child. Tanner also leaves behind two sisters, his paternal grandparents and several aunts, uncles and cousins.

"Tanner was probably one of the nicest persons I've ever met in my life," said his cousin Chris Caltuna.

"He was nice to everyone, he would do anything for you. He loved his family and was always taking them camping and doing outdoor things with them."

Tanner graduated high school in 2012 and went on to earn an associate degree in Mining Technology from Penn State University. He had worked at Consol for six years.

Tanner and Casey met in 2012 and married three years later in 2015. Their son was born June 1, 2017.

"They were right for each other," said Hannah Tracy, who was there with Alyssa Strausser, both friends of Casey. They lived in Uniontown and had gone to college with Casey. "You could tell that whenever you were around them."

"They are a very tight knit family," added Alyssa. "We

are here to support Casey. She is being strong for the people around her, but it is going to be very hard on her."

They were both concerned about their son and the baby on the way. "It is always hard for a child without a father," said Hannah. "They always did everything together."

A GoFundMe page has already raised over \$41,000 to help support the family. This is well above its goal of \$25,000, which in addition to family, friends and co-workers, included support from miners throughout the country.

Tanner worked hard and he knew he was fortunate to get a job at the mine. "Good jobs are hard to come by in southwestern Pennsylvania and people who have them work hard to keep them," said Tyler Uhlman, who had worked in the mine with Tanner.

"He was a good person. He was always smiling and in a good mood. If a person was in a bad mood, he would cheer them up. He was that kind of a person."

Tyler left Consol after 7 years. "I'm an outside kind of person," he said. "If you are outside [the mine] it is really hard to get a job."

Poverty and unemployment remain high in Fayette and Greene counties, which never saw the promised recovery under either the Obama or Trump administrations. Both rural counties have some of the highest poverty rates in Pennsylvania.

Once a center for underground mining in western Pennsylvania, with dozens of underground mines, Consol's mines are among the last remaining major mines in Washington, Fayette and Greene counties.

Fifteen hundred miners and contractors work at Consol Energy's Pennsylvania Mining Complex, which is made up of three massive underground mines, Bailey, Enlow Fork and the Harvey mine. The complex is often referred to as the Bailey mine, the first of the three mines to open in 1984.

Once considered one of the safest mines in the country, Consol Energy, like all coal operators, is under enormous pressure to increase production and cut costs. For the past few years the mine has run at near 100 percent capacity, producing more coal each year than the previous year.

The United Mineworkers no longer plays a significant role in the lives of miners. Decades of betrayals of miners' struggles and collusion with owners have reduced it to insignificance. The Bailey mine itself was the first nonunion mine in the region, opened under terms of a sweetheart agreement signed by the UMW in 1984.

Towards the end of 2017 Consol split its coal mining operations into a distinct company, separating it from its more profitable gas drilling business. The boom in fracking and lower natural gas prices has led to natural gas replacing coal in power generation.

Several miners who were not witnesses to the accident, but learned details from co-workers, explained what happened. They asked that their names or photos not be used for fear of retaliation by the company.

"This was preventable," said one. "They knew the rib was giving way."

The accident occurred, not on the face of the mine, but in an underground tunnel that connected to the face. Tanner was the foreman of a crew working one of the longwall sections of the Enlow Fork Mine.

"This was the only way to get to or from the face. Everyone knew that the wall was weak. The wall was bolted when the miner [machine used for mining coal] first went through, but they had started to give way."

Bolting is a reference to long bolts drilled into the walls and ceilings of mines to provide support for the mine walls and roofs. Walls, like roofs, are under enormous pressure from the mountain above. Walls often give out, in what are referred to as rib falls or rolls.

Miners could get to and from the face safely by crossing over the beltway and walking along the beltway's path, which parallels the tunnel. The beltway is part of the system that moves the coal from the longwall to the surface.

Needless to say both the Mine Safety and Health Administration and Consol will try and place the blame for the accident on Tanner himself, saying he should have shut down the beltway and exited.

But shutting down the beltway would have also forced the longwall to stop production.

"Each time production is stopped the foreman has to answer for it," the miner explained. Asked why they didn't fix it when they knew of the problem, the miners

said the company should have.

The miners didn't know why Tanner was there. "Usually the foreman will be getting supplies or something that was needed."

The miners explained that a good foreman wasn't so much a boss, since the miners knew what needed to be done, as someone who would keep the job going. "Often they would do things that they wouldn't ask their men to do.

"Maybe he did this a hundred times and nothing happened, but this time it did."

In his campaign for president, Trump had promised to restore coal mining from its long decline.

Robert Murray, who heads Murray Energy Corporation, the largest mining company in the United States, is one of the largest donors to the Trump campaign. Most Consol executives gave to Trump's 2016 campaign and will do so again for the 2020 election.

Trump has repaid their support and then some. Since taking office he has provided massive tax cuts to mine operators and other big businesses and has cut safety and pollution regulations.

One measure has been the appointment of company officials to head the Mine Safety and Health Administration. David G. Zatezalo, who was appointed by Trump to head MSHA, is a former coal executive.

MSHA has yet to even report on Tanner's death. It will be months before they complete their investigation. Then a warning will be issued throughout the industry to watch for the danger of wall rolls and Consol may be hit with a small fine.

For its part, Consol will most likely appeal the fine and get it reduced, give workers a few safety lectures, and Tanner's young life will be written off as the cost of business.

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