

Funerals begin for workers killed in oil rig explosion

Andre Damon in Mississippi
4 May 2010

About two hundred mourners attended the funeral Monday of Karl Kleppinger, a 38-year-old worker killed in the Deepwater Horizon Explosion, the deadliest US maritime disaster in decades. The explosion killed 11 men and has produced an ongoing environmental catastrophe.



A transocean worker (right) who attended Karl Kleppinger's funeral

The funeral was held in a church in Natchez, Mississippi, a town of about 18,000 people on the banks of the Mississippi River, about 150 miles northwest of New Orleans. Funerals are being held across Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas. The bodies of those killed have not been discovered.

Workers on the rig that exploded—owned by Transocean and leased by energy giant BP—came from all over the Gulf region. Karl's work schedule was typical of the grueling working conditions—12-hour shifts for 14 days in a row. After this rotation, referred to as a "hitch," was done, he would go home to Natchez and live with his family for 14 days.

By making the decision to work offshore, Karl was able to make enough to raise a family, but at the expense of a brutal work schedule and the immense dangers associated with oil rig work.



Framed pictures on display at the funeral

Stephanie White, a lifelong friend of Karl's widow, Tracy, told the story of how Karl became an offshore oil worker. Her brother, William Davis, told Karl, "I've got a job for you; all you need is a pair of steel-toed boots." Karl did not have the money to buy a pair, so William gave Karl his boots. That was 18 years ago.

Marianne Whitehead, a radio operator on another Transocean rig, attended Karl's funeral. She said that his line of work is the only way for people to support a family in a town like Natchez. "There is no work in towns like this. If you want to raise a family, you either have to move out or work offshore."

Natchez has a poverty rate of 28.6 percent. Among children it is even higher: 41.6 percent.

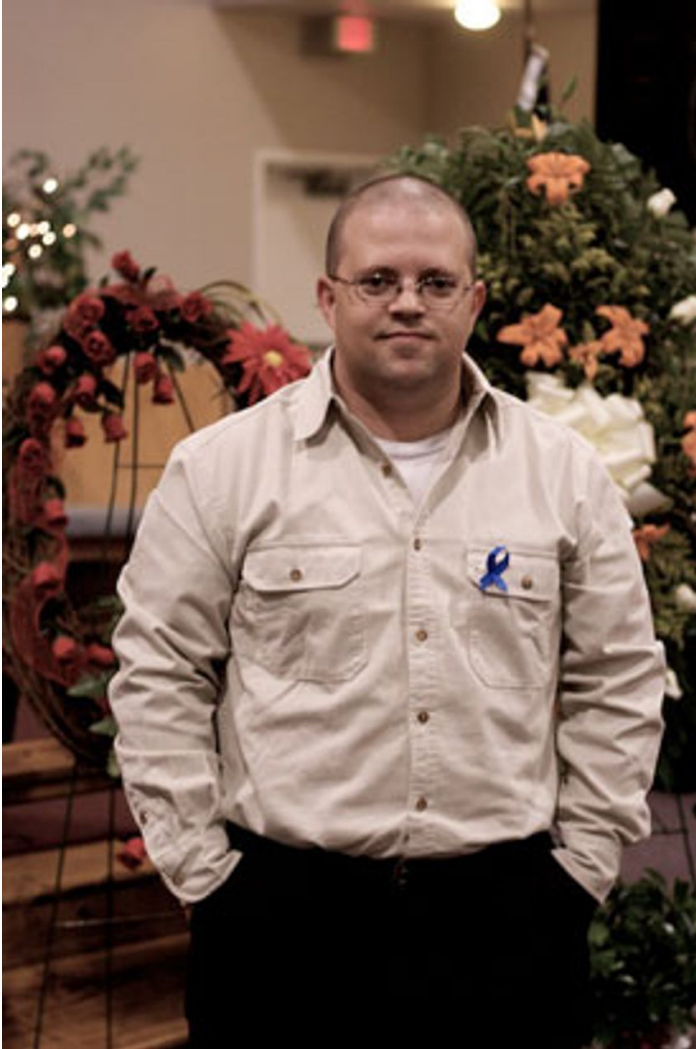
Marianne said that the blast "affects all of us who work offshore; this is a personal tragedy for all of us; it affects thousands of people."



Courtney Kemp

Courtney Kemp lost her husband, Roy Wyatt Kemp, 27, in the disaster. Roy was on the rig when the explosion happened. He was scheduled to go off duty within hours, when he would go back home. Their three-year-old daughter, Madison, always asks about her father. “She misses him greatly,” Courtney said.

Courtney and her husband lived in Jonesville, Louisiana, about 30 miles west of Natchez. “In a town like the one I’m from, there are no jobs that pay like going offshore. They just don’t exist.”



Matt Sudduth, Karl Kleppinger's brother-in-law

Karl’s brother-in-law, Matt Sudduth, works on an oil rig supply ship like the one that rescued the survivors after the Deepwater Horizon explosion. He had known Karl since he was 13 years old. He said that, like all offshore workers, Karl knew he could be injured in a blowout any day.

Matt said he did not accept the claim made by BP that there was no possible way to prepare for an accident on this scale.

“In order to drill safely, you have to accept the existence of the worst case scenario,” Matt said. “If they really did not prepare for something like this, then they had an irresponsible outlook.” He added, “These companies don’t think about the consequences, just their own profits.”

Matt said that the main reason to work offshore is economic: “You’re going to stay home and struggle, or you go offshore.

Around here, if you don’t work in law enforcement or Wal-Mart, you don’t have a job. Here in Natchez, there’s nothing. Now that the paper mill has closed down, there are no decent jobs.”

Karl’s widow, Tracy, echoed this sentiment. “Karl came out of Desert Storm; he had to leave the military because of the drawdown. He got a job on an oil rig because that was the only way to make a living and support his family.”

She added, “He was the kind of man who would give you the shirt off his back. He was just a good, good man, and I don’t know how we’re going to make it without him.”



Aaron and Tracy Kleppinger

Karl’s 17-year-old son, Aaron, said, “He was the best friend you could ever have. He wasn’t just a great dad, he was a great man.”

Despite the fact that this was the worst offshore disaster in decades, the White House has not made any contact with the families of the victims.

“In light of the gravity of this tragedy to so many people, I am surprised that the Obama administration has not sent its condolences,” said Jeff Seely, a lawyer for the wife and son of Karl Kleppinger. “He waited as long as possible to start speaking about the oil rig explosion, and he hasn’t even addressed the human tragedy.”



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