

Workplace fatalities: Grisly death at a Klamath Falls mill

By Andrew Theen
The Oregonian/OregonLive

PORTLAND (AP) — Frankie Crispen Jr. had a lot to look forward to this past November. He was set to take the rigorous exam that could elevate him to journeyman electrician after four years as an apprentice. Thanksgiving came the day after the state test, then it would be time to get serious about Christmas shopping.

On his final break the night of November 17 at the Columbia Forest Products mill in Klamath Falls, Crispen texted his fiancée Ashley Albers, as he always did, teasing out the answers to his 11-year-old, soon-to-be stepdaughter's math homework.

About an hour later, he responded to a call for an electrician over the intercom at the mill that sits on the banks of the Klamath River.

He was never seen alive again.

The 28-year-old's death in the final hours of a swing shift made him Oregon's 68th workplace fatality of 2017, according to preliminary figures from the state's Occupational Safety and Health Administration. At least six more people have died on the job since Crispen fell into a vat of scalding liquid that November night.

More than half the

estimated 74 workplace fatalities in 2017 thus far occurred from natural causes, according to state estimates. Employees also died in car crashes and workplace accidents, data show.

State safety leaders say they don't place much significance on single-year tallies because workplace fatalities have dropped significantly over time. In the private sector, the rate has plunged from 11.1 deaths or injuries for every 100 full-time workers in 1988 to roughly 3.7 in 2015, the most recent data available. Though construction and logging remain the most deadly sectors, safety measures designed to reduce falls have resulted in fewer accidents.

The number of compensable deaths, those eligible for workers' compensation insurance benefits, has declined as well. The annual figure has hovered near 30 each of the past five years in Oregon, and claims accepted in 2017 to date appear headed on the same trajectory.

Michael Wood, the state's administrator for workplace health and safety programs, said the stories behind dozens of deaths go untold each year. Despite significant advancements in workplace safety in the past two decades and

a lower fatality rate despite a significantly larger workforce, he worries that death rates are merely leveling off "at best."

"People die in this state on the job," Wood said, "and they die unnecessarily from things we know how to prevent."

Crispen's grisly death shocked friends, family and colleagues in Klamath Falls, a community of 21,500 just north of the Oregon-California border. There's no criminal inquiry, but the incident is under investigation by the state's Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Though all workplace fatalities must be reported to the state within eight hours, the agency does not investigate all deaths. The agency declined to comment on Crispen's case, other than to say it would release a report on its findings within six months.

The mill, one of two Columbia Forest Products locations in Oregon, specializes in hardwood plywood manufacturing. In a statement, the company said it was "deeply saddened by the untimely death" and fully cooperating with the investigation.

The Greensboro, North Carolina-based company has

more than 2,000 employees in the U.S. and Canada and bills itself as the largest manufacturer of hardwood plywood and hardwood veneer products in North America. The Klamath Falls plant opened in 1999.

Compounding the heartache of a life cut short, Crispen's family is struggling with the lack of information.

His mother, Kay Moyette, said she's been waiting to hear more about the investigation, but other than a brief story in the Klamath Falls newspaper, there's been no media coverage or significant updates from authorities.

"It was like some lives have value and some don't," said Marc Waits, Crispen's brother.

Crispen usually got home from work at 10:45 p.m., some 15 minutes after clocking out.

By 10:43 p.m. on Nov. 17, according to 911 calls, it was

clear something was horribly wrong.

The dispatcher had summoned emergency workers to "a possible confined space rescue" on the back side of the 18-acre mill on U.S. 97.

Fire crews were the first to arrive, followed by Klamath County sheriff's deputies at 11:06 p.m. By that time, Sheriff Chris Kaber said in an email, Crispen "had not been seen for a couple of hours."

Albers started calling and texting when Crispen didn't arrive home at his normal time, but her calls went straight to voicemail. She wondered whether he might have picked up an extra shift, something he did on occasion to make extra cash.

By 3 a.m. she was "terrified" and drove to the mill. She spotted their Ford Mustang in the parking lot. Crispen's phone charger and

See **FATALITIES** on page 25

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