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'You don't give up hope'

As the stress of waiting intensifies, family members of the 11 missing oil rig workers are praying for a miracle

By JENNIFER LATSON, PURVA PATEL and LINDSAY WISE
HOUSTON CHRONICLE
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Billy Smith II Chronicle

Feelings ran deep for oil rig survivors and their families. Transocean officials said they were doing "everything possible" to keep families informed about missing workers.

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Wyatt Kemp's mother had chest pains that turned out to be an anxiety attack. Karl Kleppinger's dad planned to get a tattoo of his son's rig. Shane Roshto's wife filed a lawsuit.

Families of missing oil rig workers handled the stress in their own ways as they struggled through a second day of waiting for word on their loved ones, even as other families planned homecomings for workers rescued from the sea and returned to shore after Tuesday's fiery explosion.

"You just keep praying and you don't give up hope," said Mary Way, an aunt to one of the missing, 27-year-old Wyatt Kemp of Monterey, La. "They said earlier that it's not looking too good, but we're not giving up."

The ambulance came for Kemp's mother in Monterey Wednesday night. She clutched her chest in pain that stabbed deeper the longer her son remained missing.

Medics told Peggy Kemp her heart was OK, at least physically: She was suffering an anxiety attack. But Transocean officials couldn't ease her pain — all they could say was that Wyatt was still missing, and they were still looking.

Two lawsuits filed

At least two families of missing people filed lawsuits Thursday against Transocean, which owned and operated the rig that erupted into flames late Tuesday, giving workers only moments to flee and leaving 11 crew members unaccounted for.

Shane Roshto's wife filed a federal lawsuit alleging that Transocean was negligent in the explosion, and said she is suffering from post-traumatic stress and depression while wondering whether her husband is alive or dead.

Even though her husband's name was on the missing list, Natalie Roshto rushed from the family's Mississippi home to the Louisiana dock where survivors were arriving Wednesday, in the hope that her husband might miraculously emerge from the boat. He didn't.

"She's obviously very upset," said her attorney, Ronnie Penton. "Most of the guys (on the rig) were either knocked off or jumped off to safety, and we still don't know how he got off the vessel, or whether he did get off."

A second lawsuit was filed in Harris County by Houston-based law firm Gordon and Eliason behalf of 38-year-old Karl Kleppinger Jr., alleging that the oil rig was unseaworthy.

Somber tribute

In Zachary, La., Karl Kleppinger Sr. planned a somber tribute to his son even as he held out hope for better news. If he doesn't hear anything by the weekend, he said, he will get a tattoo of his son's rig, to remember him by.

"That way I can carry him with me," he said.

But the elder Kleppinger hadn't given up yet. On Thursday morning, he started driving toward Venice, La., to search for his son among the survivors, then abandoned the plan when he learned that the landed crew members had already dispersed.

Meanwhile on Thursday, the younger Kleppinger's wife, Tracy Kleppinger, said she was starting to accept the possibility that her husband might not be found safe. She said a human resources director at Transocean warned her that there was little hope he was alive, based on reports from survivors who saw the blast.

Kleppinger last spoke to her husband, a roustabout who assisted the rig's drill crew, on Monday night. He said he couldn't wait to come home the next day, and that he loved her. They were making plans for their 18th wedding anniversary on May 2.

On Thursday, Kleppinger tried to comfort their 17-year-old son, Aaron, who has special needs and is not taking the news well.

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Company response

Kleppinger said she tired of calling Transocean repeatedly to ask about her husband's whereabouts during the blast and for any other details, only to be told there were none, and to call back later.

"I exhausted every resource I could to find my husband," said Kleppinger, who appeared on CBS' *The Early Show* with one of her attorneys Thursday morning. "When I reached a point where I could do nothing else as a layperson, I decided to hire an attorney."

Transocean declined to comment directly on the lawsuits Thursday.

"We've been in close contact with the families, and we understand their concerns," said Transocean spokesman Guy Cantwell. "And we're doing everything possible to provide information."

'A good family man'

Sheila Clark said she found the hourly calls from a Transocean representative comforting, if not informative. Her missing husband, 49-year-old Donald Clark, worked on the rig as an assistant driller. When the rig exploded, Sheila had been looking forward to the three weeks her husband was about to spend at their home in Newellton, La.

"He was supposed to come off (the rig) the following day," she said.

While she clung to hope for a miracle on Thursday, she caught herself referring to her husband in the past tense when speaking of the dangers he faced and the sacrifices he made for her and their children.

"This is a small, rural area. He did what he had to do to provide for his family," Clark said. "He was — he is — a real good family man."

For those whose loved ones made it back in rescue boats, Thursday marked a celebration of the end to a harrowing wait.

Jed Kersey's son, 33-year-old Jonathan Kersey, worked as a roughneck on the rig. The Leesville, La., family waited seven hours on Wednesday for word from Transocean.

Company officials finally called around 1 p.m. to say the younger Kersey was safe and on his way to shore in a boat with other survivors.

"You can't describe a feeling like that," said his brother, Michael Kersey. "Just relief."

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