

Body of last missing Impact Plastics worker lost in Helene's flood water recovered

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4 November 2024

The body of Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso, the final missing Impact Plastics employee who died after the semi-trailer she was clinging to capsized in flood waters during Hurricane Helene was found in a debris field in Erwin, Tennessee, last Thursday.

Andrade Reynoso and eleven other Impact Plastics workers sought refuge from the swiftly rising waters of the Nolichucky River on September 27 on the back of a semi-truck when the parking lot of Riverview Industrial Park became impassable. The trailer overturned after being struck by debris, tossing all eleven workers into the rushing flood waters.

Six workers died. In addition to Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso, the victims were Monica Hernandez, Bertha Mendoza, Johnny Peterson, Lidia Verdugo, and Sibrina Barnett.

According to the latest reports, Hurricane Helene's death toll has risen to over 230 people across multiple states, making it one of the deadliest hurricanes in recent US history. Search and recovery operations are still underway in many affected regions, meaning the total could still change as officials continue their assessments and investigations.?

As efforts continue to restore basic infrastructure in areas hardest hit by the catastrophic storm, more information about the final moments of the six Impact Plastics workers has come to light.

Supervisor Johnny Peterson had been employed at Impact Plastics for over 35 years. While senior management fled the premises in time to exit the industrial park where the plastics plant is situated, Peterson remained behind to lead workers outside, saving them from certain death inside the factory as walls caved in and shelves began to topple.

Peterson was in contact with his daughter Alexa throughout the morning, sending video updates until the semi-truck was finally overcome by the flood waters, tossing everyone clinging to the cargo on the bed of the trailer into the rapids.

Peterson's family is now filing a wrongful death lawsuit, which claims that workers were forced to stay even when

management was aware of the growing danger.

In anticipation of the potential damage from Helene, Impact Plastics CFO Susan Chambers sent an email on September 25 telling managers and supervisors to turn off their computers when they left Friday "since power will be down over the weekend."

On Friday, September 27, the National Weather Service in Morristown, Tennessee sent out its second urgent flash flood emergency text alert at 9:20 a.m. instructing people to move to higher ground immediately. Eight minutes later, at 9:28 a.m., production controller Sarah Vance sent an email pushing a 10:30 a.m. meeting to 1 p.m. According to the family's lawsuit, the email shows that Impact Plastics managers were preparing for business as usual for the rest of the day.

At 10:39 a.m., the power went out at Impact Plastics. By this time, the parking lot was already underwater. Video taken by Peterson shows ankle deep water in the breakroom of Impact Plastics. It took supervisors 11 minutes to finally dismiss workers, but by that time it was too late to get out of the industrial park which only had one way in and one way out.

At 10:44 a.m. Peterson texted a video of the flooded parking lot to his daughter Alexa. He wrote:

"Can't get out."

"It's bad Lexie."

"I love you all."

At 1:30 p.m., in response to his daughter's urgent requests for him to answer her calls, he texted, "I can't."

Making clear that the loss of life was entirely preventable, neighboring businesses in Riverview Industrial Park heeded flood warnings. Foam Products Corporation closed on September 26, well before the storm arrived, and advised employees to remain home on September 27 due to serious concerns about the approaching weather. This marked the first time in the plant's 15-year history that it shut down over worries about dangerous weather conditions.

To the north of Impact Plastics, Old Hickory Buildings opened on September 27, however, managers closely

monitoring National Weather Service emergency alerts started sending employees home at 7:42 a.m.

Even so, factory manager Ron Kell at Old Hickory Buildings used a tractor to create an alternate path to higher ground, scoring a path through the brush to railroad tracks because the only road in and out of the industrial park was impassable.

The Peterson family's lawsuit also claims that there was no emergency action plan, despite the fact that the entire industrial park was situated in a federal flood plain. According to Knox County engineering director Jim Snowden, facilities of more than 62,000 square feet require multiple access points.

Impact Plastics, along with several other buildings along Riverview Industrial Park, reached that threshold and would therefore have been required to provide "two separate and approved fire apparatus access roads" according to the latest guidelines.

On October 3, Gerald O'Connor, CEO of Impact Plastics, released a video statement denying any liability in the incident. In his clumsy effort to distance himself from responsibility, O'Connor endeavored to invalidate the claims of his employees, professing that employees were told to leave the plant 45 minutes before the flooding hit the industrial park.

O'Connor also stated in the video "employees were not told at any time that they would be fired if they left the plant. After checking to make sure everyone was out of our plant and to rescue important files, I was one of the last people to leave the plant and luckily escaped."

In contradiction to O'Connor's statements, Johnny Peterson's daughter revealed that O'Connor called her family and said, "he was sorry to hear dad died and that he wanted me to know dad was there helping people and that dad did not leave with them when he had the opportunity to."

Alex Little, the Peterson family's attorney, stated that there is substantial evidence that O'Connor was among the first to leave, and had instructed workers to work that day because they "wanted to meet order deadlines."

It's clear that O'Connor, who was seen at the plant only a day later, checking on his Porsche that was left in the factory, values profit above the truth and above human life. No cover-up or video statement will hide that truth from workers.

Four of the six employees who were swept away by the violent flood were immigrants from Mexico. Lidya Verdugo, Bertha Mendoza, and Monica Hernandez had each lived in the small Appalachian community for two decades.

Mendoza, who worked in quality control at Impact Plastics, leaves behind her husband and four children.

Mendoza worked alongside her sister, Araceli Mendoza, at the plant. After being thrown into the rushing water, Mendoza found refuge on top of a submerged van long enough to call her family, telling her husband and children that she loved them before she was overcome by the force of the flood. Her body was found two days later, not far from the factory. Araceli Mendoza was among the survivors.

Rosa Maria Andrade Reynoso lived in Erwin for almost eight years, working at Impact Plastics in order to bring her 10-year old son to the United States. Reynoso had also been in communication with her family throughout the morning. In her last messages to her husband, Reynoso told her husband to take care of their children.

Hernandez' sister, Guadalupe Hernandez-Corona, expressed the confusion and anger felt by the families who lost their loved ones at Impact Plastics. She told a translator "We ask: Why? Why did she go to work? Why did she stay?"

Many in Tennessee's Hispanic community have been frustrated that state officials were unable to do more to support survivors. Phone lines for reports on missing people were spoken only in English. State officials claim they were unaware of the scale of Spanish-speakers in the area. In Erwin, over 8 percent of the population is Hispanic.

The tragic loss of life at Impact Plastics is a sobering reminder that, even in the face of natural disasters, the capitalist class is willing to sacrifice the lives of their workers in pursuit of profit. There is no progressive way forward under such a system. It is up to the working class, as the sole social force capable of overthrowing the capitalist system, to unite on an international basis and reorganize society based on a socialist program.



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