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Paul Desruisseaux

UC Santa Barbara Researcher Dies in Mammoth Mountain Gas Vent Accident

A UC Santa Barbara researcher was among three men who died at Mammoth Mountain in the eastern Sierra on Thursday, April 6, when the trio, all members of the local ski patrol, fell into a volcanic gas vent as they tried to rope off the unsafe area.

Charles Walter Rosenthal, 58, was an assistant specialist with UCSB's Institute for Computational Earth System Science. He was based at a field site in Mammoth known as the Sierra Nevada Aquatic Research Laboratory (SNARL). It is a component of the Valentine Eastern Sierra Reserve, which is a part of the UC Natural Reserve System. He also was employed seasonally as a member of the ski patrol at Mammoth Mountain. He reportedly died when he tried to rescue two colleagues who first fell into the hole, called a fumarole, near the bottom of the China Bowl run.

Rosenthal, who was known by his middle name, had worked as a researcher for the Institute for Computational Earth System Science (ICESS) since 1991. He earlier had been a teaching assistant in the Department of Geography, where he earned a master's degree. He was expecting to return to UCSB in the fall to continue work on his Ph.D. He resided in Mammoth with his wife, Lori, a printmaker in the eastern Sierra Nevada, and their 14-year-old daughter, Lily.

In a statement, UCSB Chancellor Henry T. Yang said: "Our UCSB family is deeply saddened by the tragic loss of our colleague Walter Rosenthal. He was a researcher doing important work in the field of snow hydrology. He was a highly respected guide and mentor for many, known for his spirit in helping others. Our hearts go out to his family and loved ones, who have suffered such a terrible loss. Our campus community will miss Walter, and will always remember and appreciate his many contributions. Our campus flag is lowered today in his memory."

Rosenthal was involved in snow hydrology research and remote sensing. He worked closely with geographer Jeff Dozier, the founding dean and a professor at UCSB's Bren School of Environmental Science and Management.

Said Dozier: "As our friend, colleague, guide, and teacher, Walter had an insightful intellect and an engaging enthusiasm for the study of snow. He had worked in the ski area since the early 1980s, but had always maintained an interest in research and had returned to the university in his 40s to complete his master's degree in geography in 1994."

At the time of his death, Rosenthal and Dozier had been awarded a grant from the National Science Foundation to examine sintering in snow, the process by which snow grains bond with each other and increase the stability of the snow pack.

"Having realized that four decades of sintering theory were at odds with observations and with theories for other materials, Walter was planning to enroll in the Bren School's Ph.D. program next fall," said Dozier. "His work would have changed the way the world thinks about processes within the mountain snow pack."

Daniel Dawson, the director of the Valentine Eastern Sierra Reserve of the UC Natural Reserve System, called Rosenthal "a gifted mathematician who did novel work in image processing." He noted how Rosenthal had been a ski patrol member for many years and had served as the lead avalanche forecaster for Mammoth Mountain. "Supposedly, April 1 was his last day at the mountain and he just went back in yesterday to help out, knowing they would be shorthanded after the big storm."

A memorial service for all three ski patrol members who died -- James Juarez, Scott McAndrews, and Rosenthal -- will be held Friday, April 14, at 6:30 p.m. at the old gondola station, Main Lodge, Mammoth Mountain. The memorial is open to the public.

A memorial fund to benefit Rosenthal's family has been established at the Union Bank of Mammoth Lakes. Contributions to the Walter Rosenthal Memorial Fund can be sent to Union Bank, PO Box 2729, Mammoth Lakes, CA 93546.

About UC Santa Barbara

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