

Freedom Bank Newsletter

"Dedicated to the lives of the Sago Miners"



A Personal View of Our Family Tragedy

By Our President & CEO Mike Hudnall

How many of us take so many things for granted! We turn on the lights each morning expecting to see brightness. We turn on our televisions, DVDs and computers expecting to be entertained or to learn something new and exciting. Unfortunately, until now, we most likely didn't think much about the men and women who were responsible for that electricity.

Monday, January 2 was a holiday. A day to watch parades and football and to await the playing of the Sugar Bowl for our beloved Mountaineers. Suddenly we see a news flash about a mine explosion at the Sago Mine in Upshur County. Even then, while we were saddened to hear such news, we really don't feel the impact.

In the afternoon calls started coming in to tell me that one of our employee's husband is one of those 13 trapped. Shortly thereafter, another call stating another employee has her brother in there. Another call announces that two more of our people are affected by having uncles (very close to them) trapped inside. Now we realize that we have family inside.

At Freedom Bank, we consider all of our employees as family. We know their spouses; we know their children and often their grandchildren. Yes, we have family inside...that tears at our very hearts and souls. We sit up all night glued to the TV hoping for the miracle. The next morning, Tuesday, is a scheduled work day. As each employee arrives, we see and feel the sadness that each is experiencing. Still, we have that inkling of hope that a miracle will come. Another call from Buckhannon indicates that a fifth employee has her cousin inside.

At every chance during the day, we take turns running upstairs to catch the latest news or the most recent press conference only to hear the same things over and over again. The day stretches out like never before. It seems it's taking forever to get to those guys. Still we have that thread of hope. And we feel deep in our hearts the turmoil of those families waiting at the Sago Baptist Church to hear whatever news they can, hopefully good, but willing to accept the worst.

That great victory by our WVU football team is almost forgotten. The glee that we would normally have is greatly diminished by the sadness that has begotten our families. As the day wears on and we all head for our homes, we begin to lose hope. Too much time has transpired; no words or sounds to indicate that our men are okay. We arrive at our homes only to sit down and keep our attention on the television and any positive news. The families of those wonderful men have now been up for 36 hours and refuse rest. We finally succumb to the tiredness and decide to go to bed to get some needed rest, saying one more prayer, despite the hopelessness, that the miracle will happen. We know it is in God's hands and He will do whatever is best, no matter the outcome.

It's midnight and we are awakened by the telephone. One of our Executive Officers is on the line. I hear my wife say "that is wonderful!" and immediately I realize that the miracle has occurred. The reporters are now saying the miners have been found and are coming out. The one miner that had lost his life was not one of our bank family. However, we still feel the sadness of his loss. We know how our families must be celebrating so many praises of our Great Father.

It is too exciting to go back to sleep. We stay up waiting to see the miners come out of that dreadful hole. We wait and we wait, listening to so many interviews being held with some family members, some politicians and some people who just happened to come by because it was "history". Hours pass by like years. Where are they? Why is it taking so long to get them out? Maybe the rescuers are checking them out thoroughly since they've been down there so long?

Then, 3:00 am, a date and time I will never forget the rest of my life. Shocking news! The reports are all false! Only one survivor, Randal McCloy, and he is in critical condition, being rushed to the hospital to be treated.

Without talking to anyone, I knew all of our bank families' hearts had sunken to the deepest depths possible. We cried for the miners' families, especially for those that are a part of our bank family. The next morning at work was probably the absolute worst day that any of us have ever had in our careers, no matter our age. However, it was time now to pick up our heads and be there for our employees. To try to console them in their horrible grief. To let them know we would be there for them. Since those days, we've healed some, grieving in our own private ways. We are back to normal. Actually we are back to the level of normalcy that a tragedy such as this lets us settle. Never will we be back to the level prior to January 2.

We know God's will was done. Some day we may understand the underlying Blessing. Better protection and rescue efforts for future miners? Better working conditions for those still inclined to go into the mountain so we all can be warm, be entertained and be safe? Who knows? We aren't to question His Infinite Wisdom.

To all twelve of the miners we dedicate this issue. And we especially acknowledge the lives and works of Jack Weaver, David Lewis, Jim Bennett, Marshall Winans and Tom Anderson who were truly a part of the Freedom Bank family. For the surviving members of their families, we again impart our message... "Whatever you need, your "other" family is here for you". And to Randal and his family, our prayers and thoughts are with you constantly. Never again should we take the flip of a light switch so lightly. We are not just a bank. We are family!

