

"Proud to call him my big brother"

by Alex Tuff

Welding explosion steals the future from brothers who were also best friends



Kris Tuff

On Saturday, August 3, 2013, at approximately 9 o'clock in the morning, I was freshly showered and ready to tackle my day working at a local Wal-Mart when I received a voice mail from my stepmother Carol saying I couldn't go to work today. As an 18-year-old man, when I hear "you can't go to work", you don't have to tell me twice. I was pretty curious as to what she wanted, so I called back only for her to say "Alex, myself and your father are coming to get you". She had a sort of "uneasiness" in her tone of voice. I left it at that, knowing they'd be here any minute to tell me this news that couldn't dare be spoken over phone.

Being Newfoundland born and bred, what did I do?? That's right...I checked the news. Nosey bunch we are, and I knew if something went down, they'd have the story. But no luck – there was nothing reported. Immediately, I was convinced one of my grandparents was dead. Although, it would have been sad, that's life's sad reality. I went outside to wait for my father Gary and Carol, pacing back and forth, not knowing what was on the go. Suddenly,

they came down the road so fast; I didn't know how they were going to stop. My dad ran out, proceeded to hug me and that's when he said "your best friend isn't coming home, there's been an accident and he's been killed".

My best friend, my amigo, my buddy was not returning home after work that day. We were close – closer than friends. In actual fact...he was my brother.

I was in absolute, utter shock. It's like someone drove a knife in my chest and then did more damage by hauling it out. I thought about Mom and how she must have felt. I asked my father how she took it and it turned out she didn't know yet! Great... an 18-year-old who's been assigned the duty

to tell his mother that her other son was killed in an industrial accident. At that moment I stopped and asked God what I did to deserve this punishment. "I believe in you, I go to church; I pay taxes... WHY ME?"

My mother was working that day so we had to drive to her work. Going as fast

life forever". She saw me and smiled ear to ear, finding it kind of strange for me to visit on a Saturday when she knew I had to work. Just as I went to open my mouth, my words wouldn't come out and I found myself rapidly nodding my head back and forth unable to speak. I'm assuming it was the shock. I can't imagine what she thought of me but without questioning it, she quickly bolted up, went outside to meet my dad and he delivered the life-altering news.

To this day, when I close my eyes, all I can picture is her fists pounding on my father's chest as she struggles to catch a breath. I swear she must have said "my baby, my baby, my baby is dead!!" a good 50 times before calming down. By now, bystanders started to take notice and in fact a paramedic was in the area and actually came over worried for her health; all this disruption in our simple little lives because of an employer's possible negligence towards the health, safety and welfare of their work force.

Though the losses were different to each family member, the feelings were the same. "Be strong for your parents," said blurs of people at Kris's funeral service. I nodded, but inside me, something twisted. I stood in a daze as people streamed by, offering their awkward words and hugs. Be strong for your parents? I thought. I was barely breathing. I was barely standing here. Strong was the last thing I felt. My

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as possible, hazard lights on and possibly breaking every traffic rule in the book, we finally arrived "safely". Anyone who has had the responsibility of telling someone their loved one isn't coming home, can vouch for me. No training course, session or classes will prepare you for the pain I was about to encounter. I walked in, saw her working at her desk and I remember saying to myself "I'm about to change her

parents' lives, including my step-mother's, would never be the same. Their pain was almost visible, as if a piece of their bodies had been cut out and the wound just left open to the elements. I felt like our family had been a four-legged table and one leg had suddenly been torn off. The remaining of us wobbled and teetered, each morning waking to the horrible fact that Kris was gone.

Being a young man, 24 at the time of death, Kris was eager to continue his skills as a welder while working for a CBS (Conception Bay South) based welding company. The company picked up a contract with Nalcor's mega-project Muskrat Falls in Labrador and Kris was sent off. Little did we know this would be his last time home. With Labrador's extreme isolation and high cost of travel, workers generally don't come home on their days off; but rather stay up there and pick up other jobs. This was the case when Kris and his supervisor, Wayne, were spotted in their work truck and approached by a company to conduct a "quick job". The short, 20-minute jobs seem to be the ones where people are at greater risk of being killed or seriously injured. In my opinion, this is a combination of insufficient planning and a lack of supervision.

Do not be afraid (or too shy) to ask your employer to go over something to make sure you got it right, or to ask them to watch you to make sure you are doing something correctly. I think it's extremely important that if workers at any age think their own health and safety is in jeopardy, then their concerns should be brought forward to management. Ultimately, all employees, including students, have the right to refuse to do work that is unsafe, and employers cannot fire anyone exercising this right.

The job Kris and Wayne were asked to do involved a worker entering the diesel tank, which was attached to a truck, to remove baffles. A baffle is a device used to restrain the flow of a fluid, gas, or loose material. At the time, the truck was used for diesel fuel. Kris entered the tank under the impression that all required due diligences/checks and balances were taken by both supervisors present at the time of the accident. He began to cut into the baffles with a plasma cutter and it's at that very moment the walls spread apart, and the explosion resulted in his death.

My life feels incomplete without Kris. Everyone can master a grief but he who has it. This is why waking up for some in the morning is an enjoyable experience, but for me, it's a physical chore; sometimes I even wish I didn't wake up at all. When someone dies and you ask people how they're doing, they're always fine, aren't they? Brushing it off like it's nothing. What they don't tell you about is the depression, anxiety, suicidal tendencies and always feeling like the phone is going to ring or someone's going

to pinch you, causing you to wake up from the horrible nightmare.

doors. I remember this one funny story where me and Kris were in our mom's

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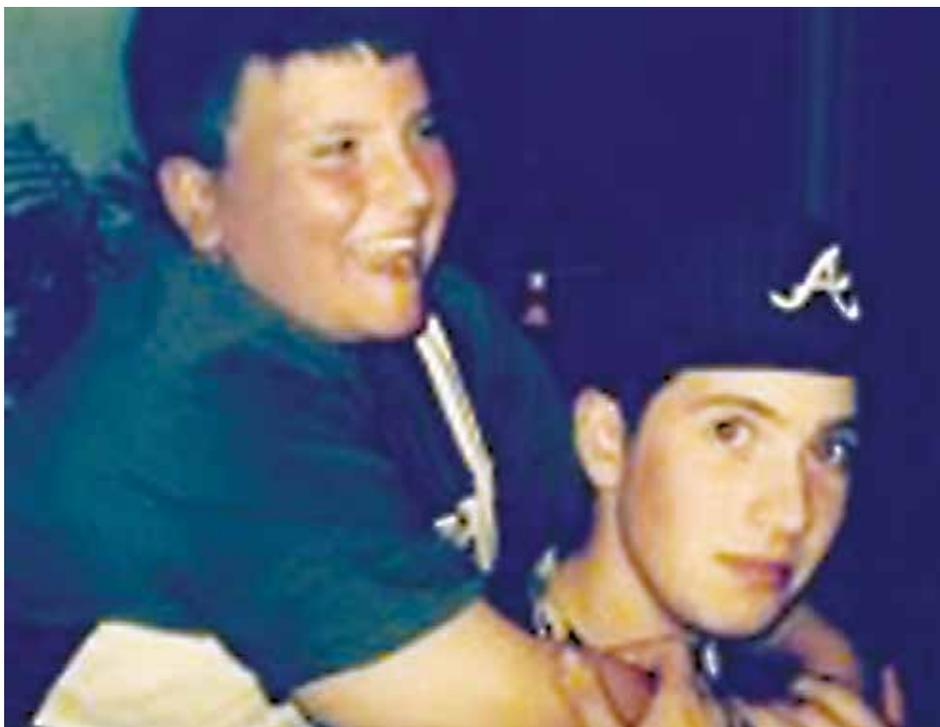
In simple terms, Kris was best kind. He's taught me so much and I'm truly proud to call him my big brother. He was always so quick to catch someone messing up so he could make you laugh and everyone always wanted to be in his life.

When Kris and I were growing up, we were like caulk and cheese. I just couldn't keep up with his desire to work with his hands. He always had to be picking at something, whether it was taking apart an engine or fabricating something out in the garage; occasionally letting his little brother help. Back then, it wasn't cool to have your little bro around in front of your friends. So with me being the pesky little one, our relationship certainly didn't come without arguments. Those usually ended with "MOM....MOM he hit me". Now that I think back, that wasn't too smart of me due to the fact we shared a room, so I'd always get it twice as hard behind closed

car fighting over the speed of the wiper, I wanted it slow, he wanted it fast, I wanted it slow, he wanted it fast...and then it cracked off! We had no way to tell mom, so we did the logical thing, waiting for mom to come out and saying it fell off by itself.

A combination of attention to detail, concentration, patience and knowledge of tools and equipment led Kris to pursue his passion in the construction industry, being able to weld various metals.

I think of Kris's big green eyes. His loud laugh. He was the co-keeper of my childhood; the person who was supposed to walk with me longer than anyone else in this life. All the good and hard times without him by my side: the deaths, marriages, births and so on. I cry for the nephews and nieces I will never have. I cry for my own potential children who will never know my brother, their uncle. How would I explain?



Alex and Kris: like caulk and cheese