

Honeymoon Tragedy: Groom, Family Grieve in Hospital

June 30, 2011

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/honeymoon-tragedy-parasailing-accident-groom-family-grieve-bride/story?id=13948183>

Victor Rodriguez Recovering Slowly in Orlando

"Friends, prayers ... overwhelming love and support -- that is what's getting us through," said his mother.

On Monday, Victor walked for the first time since the accident, but, his father said, because he "took a fall from a great height," it will be a while before he heals.

Kevin Linder, Victor's best man, said Victor is like a brother to him. They spoke Tuesday, the first day Victor wasn't hooked up to hospital machines.

"Mentally, he's just got a long road to go," said Linder.

On Wednesday doctors did an exploratory surgery on Victor's liver. Further details about Victor's medical condition are not yet being released.

Ruben and Jeannie Rodriguez, who called Crystal the daughter they never had, are devastated.

"I cannot tell you how much we loved her," said Jeannie Rodriguez, 55, who works as a ministry associate at Bayside Church in Sacramento.

A Beautiful Couple, Inside and Out

Friends said Victor and Crystal lifted other people's spirits with their positive energy.

Crystal was Victor's first serious girlfriend. They dated for about four years before becoming engaged.

"You could just tell," said Linder. "You knew they were going to get married."

The Rodriguez family said Crystal, or "Cutes," as Victor affectionately called her, was outgoing and upbeat.

"You couldn't help but fall in love with her," Jeannie Rodriguez said.

To say she lit up a room sounds cliché, said bridesmaid Jeanie Scott, but "it's so incredibly true. More true than any other person I've met."

A Joyous Wedding for Victor and Crystal Rodriguez



The California State University students, both 22, married in Roseville on June 4 at Valley Springs Presbyterian Church, surrounded by more than 200 family members and friends. Because both were big sports fans, they chose the San Jose Sharks' colors for their wedding: The bridesmaids wore teal.

One of the highlights of the evening was the couple's first dance.

It started out a traditional slow dance, Linder said, then turned into a dance-off set to Michael Jackson's "Thriller" and several other songs.

"It was awesome," Linder said. "It was totally funny."

When it came time for the mother-son dance, Jeannie Rodriguez cried and laughed as she and her son swayed to Celine Dion's "Because You Loved Me."

After the wedding, the newlyweds spent a few days in Los Angeles, visiting Disneyland before traveling to the Bahamas. Then, one day before they were scheduled to leave the Caribbean and return home, they went parasailing. That was when Victor lost his bride of 12 days.

Rob Maxey, the pastor who officiated at the wedding, said Victor was "crushed."

"It's O.K. to be angry, it's O.K. to be confused," Maxey said he told Victor. "You can be mad as hell and it's O.K. God can handle that."

Ongoing Parasailing Investigation Yields Few Answers

Police in the Bahamas are investigating Ocean Motion Watersports, Ltd., the parasailing company that owns the equipment used by the couple.

"We cannot give any comment until the police investigation is finalized," said Sarah Rolle, co-owner of Ocean Motion.

Loretta Mackey, spokesperson for the Royal Bahamas Police Force, said she could not share additional details about the accident because it is still under investigation. She is unaware of other incidents involving the company.

On their website, Ocean Motion advertises parasailing for \$70 a person and describes itself as "the largest watersports company on Grand Bahama Island."

Mark McCulloh, a U.S. parasailing expert who is often called on to testify in lawsuits, said the company turned in the equipment to authorities the day after the accident.

"I only take on cases I think are extreme," said McCulloh. "I don't deal with the guy who bumped his knee, broke an ankle ... the families who really need my help lost loved ones."

This case, he said, "really got to my core."

"Talking to Victor and walking him through this -- he's going through a tremendous tragedy here."

Data Murky on Parasailing Injuries and Deaths

There is limited data on parasailing injuries and deaths in the U.S. and its territories, and even less information about accidents in the Bahamas. The U.S. Coast Guard reported 12 casualties involving inspected passenger vessels and 64 casualties involving uninspected passenger vessels between 1992 and 2001.

McCulloh, who keeps his own database on parasailing injuries and deaths, says that between 1977 and 2011, there were more than 398 reported and unreported parasailing accidents in the U.S. and its territories.

Although the Coast Guard does not regulate parasailing activity, they are currently working with the Water Sports Industry Association, an advocacy group, and ASTM International, formerly known as the American Society for Testing and Materials, to develop a set of standards for parasail operators across the U.S.

"God help the parasail operator that ignores the ASTM standards ... because you would be pretty doggone naked standing in a courtroom answering a plaintiff's attorney as to why you ignored that standard," said Larry Meddock, executive director of the WSIA.

Meddock said it may be years before the standards are established, but WSIA is taking a proactive role to make it happen.

Sacramento Community Helps the Rodriguez Family

"You don't ever want to get a call like that, it brings you to your knees -- I don't care how strong you are or what you do for a living," said Victor's father, 60, who works as an emergency notification controller at the California Emergency Management Agency. "You get a little where you can't think straight for a bit -- that was where family and friends stepped in."

Ever since the accident, Jeannie Rodriguez said, friends and family have been helping her family and her daughter-in-law's family, too. A donation fund to help pay for Crystal's memorial service -- which is still being arranged -- and for Victor's medical bills has brought in \$15,000 so far, and one individual donor even offered to pay for Victor's medevac flight back to Sacramento, which will cost about \$25,000, according to a family friend.

Meanwhile, the bills add up, especially now that Victor enters his third week in the hospital with no word on when he'll be discharged. Neither Victor nor Crystal had health insurance or life insurance.

On July 16 Arena Softball in Roseville, Calif., one of the many places Victor worked, is hosting a tournament to benefit the family.

So far Victor's parents say 28 teams have signed up, and the Oakland A's have donated signed baseballs and tickets to the silent auction.

"That gives you a testament of who they were," Jeannie Rodriguez said. "They both loved family and family is so important to us. It didn't surprise us when [Victor] brought Crystal home ... such a beautiful young lady who loved the Lord."