A Waynesville man who works for Norfolk Southern Railway was buried and killed by a landslide in the middle of the night Sunday while surveying tracks for storm damage following a weekend of unrelenting rains throughout the region.

The tragedy left a widow and three young children fatherless.

Joseph Drewnoski was inspecting a rail line near Black Mountain in McDowell County that morning at 2 a.m., when a mudslide came shooting down the mountain. It took emergency workers five hours to recover his body from the rubble, mud and debris.

The 32-year-old was an assistant foreman for Norfolk Southern’s engineering department. Drewnoski worked for the railroad for about eight years. Track maintenance and repairs were a key part of his job.

Drewnoski was traveling the line with a co-worker to check the site of a mudslide that had come down on the track. Drewnoski had gotten out of the specialized rail-running truck, which can drive on railroad tracks, when another landslide came down the mountain.

His coworker was still inside the truck. It was knocked off the track and that man survived. However, Drewnoski died.

Responders from McDowell County received an emergency call at 3 a.m. and arrived on site with fire and emergency dispatch personnel. However, it took until 7:30 a.m. to dig Drewnoski’s body out of the mudslide.

The company had other workers in the field that night, and landslides covering sections of the track were not an uncommon during heavy storms, according to Robin Chapman, a spokesperson for the railroad.
“It’s not an unusual occurrence in a heavy rain situation,” said Chapman. “Inspecting lines was part of (Drewnoski’s) job.”

The fatal incident has sparked an investigation by Norfolk Southern as well as the Federal Railroad Administration, which is standard policy when a railroad worker is killed. The administration currently has two inspectors on site accompanied by an inspector with the N.C. Department of Transportation.

A Federal Railroad spokesman wrote in an email that the administration would not comment on the investigation while it was ongoing. The final report on the incident could take as long as a year to produce and the agency can implement penalties if fault is found.

Drewnoski was a native of Florida and has lived in Haywood County for the past six years. He left behind a wife, two sons and a daughter. An obituary remembers him as a loving husband and father.

“He loved spending time with his family and especially enjoyed sharing the Star Wars Trilogy, Boy Scouts, and volunteering at The Open Door (Soup Kitchen) with his sons,” the obituary read. “Joe loved the outdoors, enjoyed going fishing and hunting, and was also an avid reader and Duke basketball fan.”

Funeral services will be held at 1 p.m. on Friday, May 10, at Grace Episcopal Church in the Mountains. Burial will follow at Green Hill Cemetery. The family will receive friends from 6-8 p.m. on Thursday evening at Wells Funeral Home in Waynesville.

In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to The Open Door Soup Kitchen, 32 Commerce Street, Waynesville, NC 28786.


Joseph Drewnoski

1980 – 2013

Joseph Mark Drewnoski
Waynesville - Joseph Mark Drewnoski, age 32, of Avery Patrick Lane, passed away on Monday, May 6, 2013.

A native of Palm Beach, Florida, he had lived in Haywood County for the past six years moving here from Madison County. Joe was the son of Michael Drewnoski, Jr. and Mary Johnson. He was preceded in death by one brother, Michael Drewnoski, and paternal grandparents, Thelma and Michael Drewnoski, Sr. Joe was an assistant foreman for Norfolk Southern and had worked for the railroad company for the past eight years and was also a member of Grace Episcopal Church in the Mountains. He loved spending time with his family and especially enjoyed sharing the Star Wars Trilogy, Boy Scouts, and volunteerism at The Open Door with his sons. Joe loved the outdoors, enjoyed going fishing and hunting, and was also an avid reader and Duke Basketball fan.

In addition to his parents, he is survived by his wife of five years, Ashley Patrick Drewnoski; a daughter, Emily Anne Drewnoski; two sons, Tyler Mark and Alexander Michael Drewnoski and Tiffany Ramsey, the mother of Joe's boys; three sisters, Elizabeth and Michaela Drewnoski and Jessica Johnson; maternal grandparents, Harget D. and Marie Waters; mother and father in-law, Lynne and John Patrick, II; sister-in-law, Rebecca Janke and her husband, Jim; brother-in-law, John Patrick, III and his wife, Amy, and their sons, Walker and William Patrick.

Funeral services will be held at 1:00 p.m. on Friday, May 10, 2013 at Grace Episcopal Church in the Mountains with The Reverend Arlene Lukas officiating. Burial will follow at Green Hill Cemetery. The family will receive friends from 6:00 until 8:00 p.m. on Thursday evening at Wells Funeral Home of Waynesville.

In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to The Open Door Soup Kitchen, 32 Commerce Street, Waynesville, NC 28786.

An on-line memorial register is available at "Obituaries" at "www.wellsfuneralhome.com"
An early morning mudslide killed a railroad worker in western North Carolina, according to rail officials.

After a few days of heavy rain, areas across the Upstate and western North Carolina saw rising flood waters. More

Robin Chapman with Norfolk Southern said two workers were checking out a mudslide a couple miles outside of Black Mountain around 2 a.m. when a second mudslide occurred, knocking over the high-rail truck the workers were driving.

One worker inside the truck called for help, Chapman said. He said when McDowell County emergency crews responded they found the second worker's body in the mudslide around 7a.m.

All train traffic on the track has been halted until the area is cleared and safe.

The worker's names have not been released.

An early morning mudslide has claimed the life of a Norfolk Southern Worker. Joseph Drewnoski was investigating a slide on some tracks in McDowell County when a second mudslide took his life. Another worker made it out alive. It all started around 2 a.m. Monday morning on Old Fort Mountain. The two Norfolk Southern Employees were investigating a mudslide on the track. Thats when another mudslide occurred, knocking their high-rail vehicle off the track. One employee was inside the vehicle and was able to clear the mudslide, but Drewnoski was buried. His body was recovered about 7:30 a.m. Monday. The name of the other employee has not been released. Drewnoski was an assistant foreman and had worked with Norfolk Southern since 2005. His family says Drewnoski was a father of three. He was a great worker and an incredible dad.

Joseph Drewnoski, age 33, assistant foreman with Norfolk Southern, was killed early this morning in a mudslide near Black Mountain. Drewnoski, a resident of Waynesville, had been with the company since 2005. At about 2:00am, Drewnoski and another employee of Norfolk
Southern were investigating a mudslide in the vicinity of Black Mountain when another mudslide occurred, knocking their high-rail vehicle off the track. The other employee was able to clear the mudslide, Drewnoski was buried. His body was recovered about 7:30am.