Amtrak engineer voiced concerns about dying before fatal crash, brother says

JOHN BACON | USA TODAY
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The Amtrak engineer killed when his train slammed into a parked freight train in South Carolina had told his brother he was worried about dying on the rails.

Rich Kempf told the New York Daily News his brother, Michael Kempf, had expressed safety concerns after several recent train crashes and Amtrak budget cuts.

"Me and him always talked about this," Rich Kempf, who lives in Mesa, Ariz, told the paper. "He was voicing concerns about getting killed."
Michael Kempf, 54, of Savannah, Ga., died Sunday when Miami-bound Amtrak Train 91 out of New York rear-ended an empty CSX train in Cayce, S.C., 10 miles south of Columbia, authorities said. Also killed was the Amtrak train's conductor, Michael Cella, 36, of Orange Park, Fla.

More than 100 people were injured, and eight of them remained hospitalized Monday. The wreck came just days after a chartered train for Republican members of Congress heading to a retreat collided with a garbage truck in rural Virginia, killing the truck driver. In December, three people died and dozens were injured outside Seattle when 13 Amtrak train cars derailed and dangled off a bridge.

Michael Kempf, a married father of three, was an Army veteran who had worked for more than a decade in the rail industry, first at CSX and then Amtrak. Rich Kempf told the Daily News his brother had been looking after their mother since their father died 12 years ago.

"He's been taking care of my mom, his kids and his wife," Rich Kempf said. "He was a good guy."

Cella, a married father of two, was soft-spoken and always smiling, friend Michael Callanan told wistv.com. Callanan described Cella as a family man and said Cella had recently bought a house.

"When I heard it was Mike it was very emotional because he's a very nice guy," Callanan said.

Callanan said he fears CSX and Amtrak will begin playing the "blame game" — and said Cella deserves a better legacy.

“They'll point their fingers at each other because there’s no accountability,” Callanan said. “I want his legacy to be that they improve safety on the railroad because of what happened Sunday.”
The crash occurred on a side track, and Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson said it was not clear why the Amtrak train was diverted off the main rails. The signal system, operated by CSX, was not functioning and the train’s movements were being managed by a CSX dispatcher, Anderson said.

Investigators have focused on the switch that sent the southbound Amtrak train onto a siding where the CSX train was parked. Robert Sumwalt, the chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, said the probe will seek to answer why the switch was locked to send trains onto the siding.

“For whatever reason, that switch was, as they say in the railroad industry, lined and locked,” Sumwalt said. “We were able to see that it was literally locked, with a padlock, to make it go into the siding.”

The crash has also brought braking technology called Positive Train Control back into the spotlight. The control coordinates signals between trains, tracks and dispatchers about track speeds and blockages, and can slow down a train when the engineer isn’t responding.

The system was not operational in the South Carolina crash, and Sumwalt said it might have prevented tragedy.

Anderson, a former airline executive who took over Amtrak last year, said he plans to make the passenger railroad safer.
"In a word, we've got to bring the same focus and safety culture you have at an airline to the railroad industry of America,” Anderson said.

*Contributing: Bart Jansen/USA TODAY; The Associated Press*