Mine disaster brings back tragic memories for Novak
By Ian Rollins
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The news about the coal mine tragedy in West Virginia has been hard for Joseph Novak of Albany to hear.

Novak, 70, owner of Novak's Hungarian Restaurant, grew up in Hungary, worked in a coal mine after high school and saw his share of tragedies. Watching the news about the mine explosion, and the 12 miners who died, brought it all back to him.

He remembers one coal dust explosion in particular from his mining days, in which he helped pull one victim out of the mine and saw others badly burned.

"I helped pull him out of the shaft into the sunshine, and we leaned him up against the wall with everyone else," Novak recalls. "They were all screaming 'I can't breathe, I can't breathe.'"

The explosion had filled their lungs with carbon monoxide, which blocks the lungs from receiving oxygen.

Besides that experience, Novak says, his father and brothers all worked in the same mine. They have either died since or they suffer today with lung ailments related to the mining work.

"It's stayed with me, so when I saw this last night, I thought 'Oh God, oh God,'" Novak says.

Like the families, he experienced the euphoria Tuesday night upon hearing that 12 of the 13 miners in the West Virginia explosion had been found alive. A devout Christian, he said he spent a lot of time last night thanking God and praying for the families.

Hearing this morning that 12 of 13 had actually perished "tears me up inside," he says. "We need to pray for these people, that God would give them understanding."