

He fell with old 35W bridge; now he builds the new

By PAM LOUWAGIE, Star Tribune

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Jeff Ringate looks at the water below when crossing the Mississippi River in Minneapolis every morning. He parks his car on its northern banks, grabs his hard hat and goes to work hoping for some healing.

The construction site is not like he left it the last time he worked there: The strewn cars and giant chunks of crumbled concrete are gone. There are no sirens and screams of anguish. There are no people sinking.

Where the collapsed Interstate 35W once sat, a clean slate of snow-covered ground now teems with beeping concrete trucks and humming cranes.

To Ringate, it feels sacred.

For reasons he cannot completely explain, Ringate, who fell some 115 feet with the old bridge, feels a deep need to be a part of building the new one. He is the only construction worker who fell in the collapse to return to work there, he says.

"I look at it as a memorial."

At the site, he feels closer to his buddy, fellow construction worker Greg Jolstad, who died there with a dozen others.

He remembers how lucky he is to be alive and making new memories. "It just seems right to me to go work there."

Some of his construction colleagues told him he's crazy. Some told him they won't cross the new bridge.

It's not easy to move forward, Ringate agrees.

"I can still flash back to when it fell. ... I can be there. I can hear the sounds and I can feel that way," he says. "I remember it all just as plain as day, but I don't try to think about that."

Recalling the catastrophe

Home for months with an injured neck and back, Ringate, 30, replayed the catastrophe from every angle.

A few minutes later and more of his crew would have been in danger. A few minutes earlier and things might have turned out differently for him. As it happened, he and Jolstad and some others were preparing to pour a layer of roadway that evening. Jolstad, among

the crew's hardest workers, had cracked a joke as usual. Ringate can't remember what it was about.

Then, Ringate hopped onto a small construction truck in the center section of the bridge to move it out of the way.

At that moment, the road shook. Then he felt his stomach drop. Right away, he knew: The bridge was collapsing.

As he fell, gripping the steering wheel of the truck, Ringate thought of his pregnant wife, Kortnie, and their infant daughter, America, believing he'd never see them again.

The bridge landed hard on the river, sending giant waves of water and dust into the air. People screamed. His first thought was one of amazement: I'm alive.

He was stranded on a broad span of concrete in the river, but he was still breathing, still moving. Cars dropped into the water. People scrambled to get out, but even as he watched, some sank with a gurgle.

He spotted a co-worker in the water and grabbed a construction broom that was lying on the pavement to pull the man in. He hauled in as many people as he could, helping one man out from tangled debris with his bare hands.

Almost all of his co-workers were accounted for, except Jolstad.

No closure at the funeral

Recovery workers didn't find Jolstad's body for several weeks. Ringate and the others went to the funeral, but it didn't give him closure.

Jolstad, whom everyone knew as "Jolly," had made the days go faster with his quick wit. Ringate had worked with him for a few years. Even on the most miserable days -- when they were all stuck outside with rain pouring down and cars whizzing by -- Jolly managed to make his co-workers smile.

A crew leader, he thought up nicknames for everyone, dubbing Ringate "Thrasher" for his propensity to wreck tools on the job.

An experienced equipment operator, Jolly knew his way around the construction scene and pitched in everywhere. Ringate remembers while shoveling concrete one day, a young new worker commented to Jolly: *I've never seen an operator with a shovel.*

Jolly's response to the new kid was one of friendly competition: *I'll bury you with it.*

"I really looked up to Jolly, and he was a really good friend of mine," Ringate says. "He'd been around everything. He could do anything. ... He was a really hard worker and really someone to look up to and learn from."

'Let's get this thing up'

If losing Jolly wasn't enough, Ringate also had other trauma to think about: On Nov. 23, Kortnie gave birth to a baby boy, Dakota. But the delivery wasn't easy. The baby had to be revived, Ringate said, and Kortnie's health was in danger, too.

When 2008 began, he said, the couple was happy to face a new year. Things must get better.

As soon as the doctor declared him healthy enough last month, Ringate signed up to work on the new I-35W bridge.

A couple of workers who were nearby and saw the collapse were already working there, but he would be the first to return from surviving the fall, he said.

Now, spending his days on the banks of the Mississippi, his main job is managing a warehouse of parts and equipment, where his boom box cranks out rock and rap. Sometimes he helps outside, where the steady stream of concrete mixer trucks back in and out in a choreographed dance, forming the beginnings of gigantic bridge piers.

Ringate says it's a positive atmosphere; workers have a "let's get this thing up" attitude.

Later, when the piers are in and there is work to do on the highest points of the new structure, Ringate wants to be up there.

"I'd like to see this thing get done and get that road back opened up, and move on," he says. "I think this will give me ultimate closure."

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