

this year, things went horribly wrong for the Ottawa man described as "one of the nicest guys you'd ever meet."

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Michael Kim had to wait until he was 23 before enjoying the chance to go on a spring break vacation. But when the opportunity finally came this year, things went horribly wrong for the Ottawa man described as "one of the nicest guys you'd ever meet."

Mr. Kim, who had joined two friends on the long-anticipated trip to Cancun, Mexico, died there on Wednesday in the waters off the idyllic Caribbean resort.

Mexican police said his body was found Thursday. The drowning death, they said, was likely caused by a strong current.

Last night, friends and family gathered at the Kim family home in Barrhaven to mourn the only son of Hy Kim and Dary So, immigrants from Cambodia who escaped their war-torn country and came to Canada in 1982.

"I came here so my kids can have a safe and stable future and have a good education," the elder Mr. Kim said in an interview last night.

"I am the only person in my family who had a son, and he (Michael) is the only son I had. Now that he just passed away, I've lost everything. My world. My world is gone."

The younger Mr. Kim was a father to a two-year-old daughter, Valerie Michaela. He also leaves behind his girlfriend, Luda Pak, 24, and two sisters, 19-year-old Daryda and 25-year-old Ouksany.

His best friend, Michael Lambe, was still trying to deal with the news last night.

"It's hard. It's very surreal. It doesn't seem like it has happened yet," Mr. Lambe said. "He was one of the nicest guys you'd ever meet. We did everything together."

Mr. Kim worked full-time in housekeeping at the Extencicare Starwood nursing home in Nepean and had just started taking night carpentry classes at Algonquin College.

His sister, Daryda, said her brother had dreams of one day becoming a police officer.

"He wanted to accomplish so much. He was planning to go back to school full-time. He was almost done paying for his car. He already opened an RRSP for himself and an RESP for his daughter. He was on track. It just sucks because it was his first time (having) fun."

Mr. Kim's father said he had planned to take the family to Cambodia in May. It would have been their first vacation together, as well as the first time they'd returned to their homeland since he and his wife left more than 20 years ago. "I wanted him to see his roots and where he came from. Michael and everyone was excited."

Friends remember Mr. Kim as a star athlete who loved to play hockey and rugby. They also described him as a dedicated and caring father who loved his daughter more than anything in the world.

"He always had so much fun with" the child, said Mr. Kim's girlfriend, Ms. Pak. "She gets extra energy whenever she sees him. He was a great father, for sure."

Ms. Pak said she and Mr. Kim had recently separated and that he had moved back home with his parents. "Even though there were tough times between us, he always came back and made sure everyone was OK," she said, her voice breaking.

Mr. Lambe agreed. "His daughter was the favourite thing in his life. He would never stop talking about her."

Mr. Kim's older sister, Ouksany, could not hold back her tears as she tried to make sense of her brother's death.

"It hurts because he was really trying to be a better person. And then this happened. It's not fair," she said, sobbing. "I miss him so much."

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