

ECHOES OF THE BLAST

One year after Clairton Coke Works explosion, heartache lingers

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Photos of Timothy Quinn alongside other mementos in the home of his sister, Trisha Quinn. Timothy was known as “Nature Boy” because of his love of fishing. At home, he was a caretaker, looking after his three children and his disabled mother, who died six months after her son was killed in the blast.

The five-tier wooden shelf in the corner of Trisha Quinn’s dining room has dozens of photos attached. “Lord of the Rings” action figures, Irish books and Hot Wheels cars in their original packaging dot the shelves. At the bottom, a box is etched with a fish jumping out of the water.

Her brother’s ashes are inside. “I just want him to be part of my home,” said Trisha, 40, of Sewickley Township, who has a slice of bread smeared with jelly tattooed on her wrist, just below a red heart with a handwritten note from her brother.

“It brings comfort.” Timothy Quinn never got the chance to get the tattoo to complement his sister’s — a slice of bread with peanut butter.

The 39-year-old was killed in an explosion at U.S. Steel’s Clairton Coke Works on Aug. 11, 2025. His co-worker, Steven Menefee, 52, also died in the blast. At least 10 others were injured, some critically.

The memories of the two men and the aftermath of the explosion are all around. Stuffed bears made from Timothy’s old shirts are held close by his loved ones. Inside the Bible Alliance Church in West Newton, Westmoreland County, Steven’s fellow congregants pray beside a cross made in his memory sitting on the altar.

For Clairton workers and those closest to the victims, the heartache hasn’t waned one year after the blast. The sting is still all too fresh.

“I never thought your heart could actually hurt,” said Steven’s wife, Danielle Menefee, 46, of East Huntingdon.

“That’s how some days feel.”

Timothy Quinn called off work on Sunday, Aug. 10, 2025, to attend his niece’s baby shower.

There, he and Trisha had one of their famous food fights. That was how many of the parties that the siblings went to together often ended: with someone getting caked in the face.

Trisha described the day she spent with her brother as “complete bliss.”

“To think that the next day, going from that bliss to complete trauma and chaos, it has me still on edge.”

The next morning, leaked coke oven gas at the Clairton Coke Works ignited in the room connecting batteries 13 and 14, causing a massive explosion that rocked the Mon Valley.

Before the blast, workers had been turning a large gas isolation valve in preparation for repairs on another piece of equipment. The valve was difficult to maneuver, and workers used high-pressure water to coax off debris that was blocking it.

U.S. Steel's written protocol in such situations was to use steam, not water. And while the valve was rated to handle pressures up to 50 pounds per square inch, the pressure of the water was later found to be many times that.

Employees have said U.S. Steel relayed to them that the contractor it hired over pressurized the valve, causing it to crack, which let the highly explosive coke oven gas escape and fill the small space in the reversing room.

It didn't take long for the gas to find a source of ignition.

From where Andrew Macey Sr. was standing at the south end of the plant on the 80-plus-degree sunny morning, the explosion sounded like trains colliding.

A deafening silence followed. Radio chatter started. Frantic calls and texts were sent — and received. Emergency personnel spent hours digging through the rubble.

"It looked like it was a war zone," said Macey, a 71-year-old mechanical repairman. It was the third explosion he'd experienced in his 44-year career.

"To think that people had survived was a miracle."

Bill Steiner, an investigator with the U.S. Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board, described how quickly it all unfolded. After workers heard the valve pop and began to smell the coke oven gas, they swiftly moved to evacuate the area.

Workers in the basement under the battery ran upstairs and yelled for others to get out.

"They made a radio call to initiate the evacuation and tell everybody to leave, and less than a minute after that radio call, the explosion happened," Steiner said during a community meeting hosted by the Allegheny County Health Department in May.

Danielle Menefee was about 20 miles away at the dentist, waiting for her two daughters, Eliana, 12, and Ariella, 9, to get their teeth cleaned, when she got a call from her friend who worked at AHN Jefferson Hospital.

She went home to find dozens of people parked in her driveway, all anxiously waiting to hear whether her husband, Steven, was OK.

Hours went by. She was told that her husband was the last person that crews were searching for, but they hadn't found him yet.

Rumors began circulating that Steven had been recovered safely from the debris. His daughters were told he survived.

But a call from officials later confirmed Steven had died. She had to deliver the news.

"That was the worst moment of my life," Danielle said.

"That's how some days feel."

A memorial behind a gate leading to Clairton Coke Works honors Timothy and Steven and other lives lost in the workplace on a stone plaque.

Inside the plant, workers are still trying to move on. Some still haven't returned to work.

U.S. Steel spokesperson Amanda Malkowski said employee support and counseling services were immediately made available at the site. Workers are still able to access the employee assistance program.

"We all know how dangerous it can be. How dangerous it got," said Lucinda Dodds, 37, of West Elizabeth, Timothy's girlfriend who worked with him in the heating department. "So we all find comfort in each other."

A preliminary report from the chemical safety board noted the discrepancy between what U.S. Steel's procedure called for and what was done the day of the explosion. But it also focused on another area of concern: that people were working in areas where they couldn't be protected in the event of another such blast.

The explosion remains under investigation by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

U.S. Steel conducted a "comprehensive review of the circumstances surrounding the explosion and implemented a number of safety enhancements," Malkowski told the Post-Gazette. Teams have established standardized best practices for industrial valve cleaning, she said, and employees have completed comprehensive training on "new program elements and procedure updates."

“Operations continue while maintaining a strong focus on safety and continuous improvement,” Malkowski said.

Still, United Steelworkers District 10 Director Bernie Hall, who chairs USW bargaining with U.S. Steel, said, “It’s clear that we need to continue pushing U.S. Steel management to make improvements.”

The union is proposing structural inspections, additional training for union safety representatives, improved equipment for on-site emergency responders and more robust training for electricians, a spokesperson said.

USW is also calling for a joint labor-management facility siting committee to review and make recommendations on construction-related decisions and for access to mental health resources for those impacted by fatal catastrophes at work.

Both Danielle and Trisha have filed lawsuits alleging negligence and wrongful death against Nippon Steel and other entities.

“Occupational health and safety is a top priority for our union,” Hall said in a statement to the Post-Gazette. “Workers are the ones who will experience the first and most extreme consequences of a failure, and they must have a strong voice in evaluating siting decisions, hazard assessments and reconstruction plans.”

Larry Baldwin’s raw feelings the day of the explosion quickly manifested into rage.

The 58-year-old from Belle Vernon man was in the control room, just 100 yards away from his friend Steven, whom he had known from church for over 15 years, during the blast. He put on his gear and ran outside to see fire tearing through the plant.

“Everyone was looking for someone, something to blame,” said Baldwin, who has since relocated to a different battery to be farther away from the explosion site. “It made you realize real quick that tomorrow isn’t promised.”

Macey, a repairman who used a crane to remove concrete barriers after the explosion so that rescuers could reach the area, said his approach toward his work has shifted.

“It may not have changed how you do that job, but it changed what you’re thinking about when you’re doing that job,” he said. “You’re crossing the T’s and dotting the I’s.”

Dodds was sitting on her porch just over 2 miles away from the plant during the explosion. On a workday, she would have been standing against a battery as her boyfriend, Timothy, pushed the coke out of the oven.

Working side-by-side for eight years gave them the time and space to get to know one another. They had been dating for the last three years.

Dodds couldn’t get herself to return to work for months after the explosion. But how she felt when she went back to the plant for the first time in May — and in the days since — surprised her.

“I felt comfort because that’s where we met, that’s where we connected,” she said. “It feels like I’m supposed to be there.”

“He’s not coming back, but at the same time, I still have a little piece of him that’s not going to go anywhere, at least not right now.”

Sherry Eicher knew Steven Menefee from teaching him at Schwartz’s School of TaeKwon-Do in Scottsdale, Westermoreland County. He and Danielle — who both earned black belts — later ran the school themselves.

When Eicher thinks about Steven, she is reminded of a muddy obstacle course race at Seven Springs Mountain Resort that she attempted in fall 2021.

Steven had already finished as Eicher struggled to get herself up a hill. While other racers attempted to hoist her up, Steven came back down and offered her words of encouragement the whole journey to the top.

“He knew exactly what I needed,” she said. “He came back down to climb it again with me ... just like he does for everyone.”

After Steven was killed, his daughters slept in sweatshirts they call their “Daddy hoodies.” On the back of each reads a Bible verse he lived by: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Another passage he came to follow: “May the work I have done speak for me.”

“It definitely challenged the rest of the people in the church to live a life like he did,” said Frank Todaro, pastor at the Bible Alliance Church.

Steven, a church elder known as the “missionary to the mill,” was “truly a man of grace,” Todaro said.

Timothy, meanwhile, was known as “nature boy” because of his love of fishing. His urn has a fish etched onto it.

At work, Timothy was a mentor. At home, he was a caretaker, looking after his three children and his disabled mother, who died six months after her son was killed in the blast.

Timothy has since missed his son’s high school graduation and his daughter’s first day of kindergarten.

Trisha says she still catches herself wanting to text her brother before realizing she can’t. And Dodds said she has lost the goofy side of herself that Timothy brought out. Their emotions have intensified as the anniversary drew near.

“Like your throat’s closing in,” said Trisha, who has a white hard hat signed by her brother’s former coworkers. “The elephant in the room.”

On Tuesday, flags will be lowered to half-staff across the Mon Valley Works’ three local plants. Employees will pause for a moment of silence.

They’ll also gather for safety discussions and meetings, “recognizing that the best way to honor our fallen colleagues is to remain steadfast in our commitment to ensuring every employee returns home safely at the end of every shift,” Malkowski of U.S. Steel said.

“The loss remains deeply felt,” she said.

Bryan Dascani, 53, a friend of Steven’s for more than 40 years, isn’t sure anyone will ever “get over it or get past” the trauma of the explosion.

Instead, he said, “It’s a matter of trying to figure out how to live with the grief.”