

College professor knows pain of losing family to oil disaster

She and her student are studying BP's response to current oil disaster

- By [Steven Alford](#)
- Posted June 10, 2010 at 4:33 p.m., updated June 11, 2010 at 4:05 a.m.

BP's oil response



CORPUS CHRISTI —BP employee Raymundo Gonzalez was repairing a pipe with two other workers in Texas City when a pipe valve wasn't functioning and exploded.

One worker was killed instantly from the 500 degree steam, another was severely burned. Gonzalez, 54, was in a hospital for two months before succumbing to burns covering more than 80 percent of his body.

That was in 2004, nearly six years before BP's oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, the largest offshore oil spill in U.S. history, that killed 11 workers.

Gonzalez's niece Michelle Maresh was studying communications at Texas Tech University when she heard about her uncle's death. She wrote her master's thesis on the company's response to the accident. Since then, Maresh, an assistant professor at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, has studied how companies react to crisis situations.

"BP was very quick to blame the workers and not take responsibility of the accident for themselves," Maresh said of her uncle's death. "They didn't want to focus on the feelings of those who lost family members and friends."

On March 23, 2005, another explosion at BP's Texas City refinery killed 15 workers.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration fined BP \$21 million, though that number was raised to \$87 million in 2009 after OSHA said the company failed to comply.

The company gave \$12.5 million to the University of Texas in memory of the 15 workers and later another \$12.5 million to Texas A&M University.

But little was said about Gonzalez and his co-worker who died, Maresh said.

Gonzalez's four daughters paid to erect a billboard outside of BP's Texas City refinery on the two-year anniversary of the explosion.

"We remember September 2, 2004," the billboard read. "In loving memory of Ray and Maurice."

Now having received a doctoral degree in communications, Maresh said she and her students are following BP's response to the Deepwater Horizon spill.

The company announced this week that the net revenue from oil recovered from the Gulf oil spill will be donated to create a new wildlife fund to protect wildlife habitat along the Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida coasts, according to a BP news release.

"I understand that BP is in a tough situation," she said. "But when you're dealing with the public, companies need to be sensitive to people's reactions. There's nothing wrong with saying you're sorry that it happened. That doesn't imply blame. It just shows that you care."

BP launched a series of radio, television and print ads last week, apologizing for the oil spill. President Barack Obama criticized the ads saying the money should be spent on cleanup efforts instead, according to The Associated Press.

"I just want BP to know that are dealing with people, not machines," Maresh said. "Hopefully someone in the industry will pick up on the fact someday that they could be doing a better job communicating with the public."

Maresh said A&M-Corpus Christi has plans for a fall course in crisis communication on an industrial level.

"I wish these companies would learn from their mistakes and invest in prevention rather than cleanup," she said. "It would be nice to know that other families won't be hurt like that again."

© 2010 Corpus Christi Caller Times. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.