

Freak accident claims life of Niles telecommunications specialist. NILES -- Despite his pursuit of a profession that involved scaling radio communications towers, some of them hundreds of feet high, Larry Prelog wasn't one to take risks, a family member and acquaintance said Tuesday. That's why his death on Sunday at the Borgess Medical Center in Kalamazoo, a day after a tower collapsed during a Field Day competition near Watervliet, was so difficult to accept. Prelog's daughter, Mindy Bittle, of Akron, Ohio, said the 57-year-old Prelog had a 40-year background in telecommunications tower installations and had climbed towers as high as 500 feet. Although he never discussed the dangers of his profession with his family, he didn't take chances when he was on a job, Bittle said. "He was very meticulous about being safe," she said. "He didn't talk about the dangers. Why would he want us to worry?" The competition he was involved in Saturday was nothing new, she added, pointing out he had taken part in the annual event for decades. Contrary to the impression some might have, Matt Severin, public information officer for the Blossomland Amateur Radio Association, said Field Day is not about who climbs towers the fastest. Instead, it involves amateur radio operators who attempt to position equipment on towers that result in the most radio contacts over a 24-hour period. "The antenna installation, there's no competition in putting those up. We set those up on Friday night or Saturday morning," he said. "Larry was a very particular, safety-type person. He always made sure things were done properly and safely." The tower Prelog was on was 30 feet high, not 60 feet as stated in initial reports, Severin said. He said the accident occurred when the lower portion of the tower collapsed. "This was an accident, a tragic freak accident," he said. "The tower essentially folded at the base." Prelog had been a ham radio operator since his teenage years, his daughter said. A telecommunications specialist, he worked most recently for Lakeland Regional Health Care System, she said.

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