

Man drowns in rock quarry

Relatives mourn the death of a house painter trying to build a better life for himself and his parents in Mexico.

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PITTSBORO — There's a small house in the Mexican town of San Luis Potosi waiting for Felipe Baez.

It is a monument to the three years Baez spent in the Triangle, where he earned money painting the houses of others. His labor supported his parents in Mexico, put his brother through college and built that house.

It was nearly complete when Baez, 23, drowned Sunday in Chatham County's Sugar Lake on a mischievous summer day that began with



Baez

some friends sneaking into the private swimming hole. The day ended when Baez suddenly, mysteriously, sank in the middle of the abandoned quarry.

"No sabemos que paso [We

don't know what happened]," said Jose Jimenez, Baez's 27-year-old cousin, shrugging his shoulders. "No podemos explicar [We can't explain it]."

Jimenez sat on a couch in the crowded, dim apartment in East Durham that Baez shared with his extended family. Sheets covered the windows and the couches where a dozen cousins, aunts and uncles sat.

They gathered here to grieve in isolation. It was a sadness that they couldn't share with many neighbors. With Baez gone, no one speaks English.

A local man found them all regular work, sometimes enough to keep them busy seven days a week, according to Modesto Baez, Felipe Baez's 53-year-old uncle.

They each found a different reason to justify living as migrant laborers. For Felipe Baez, it was his family and his plans for the future.

"The most important thing to him was helping his parents," said Modesto Baez.

His nephew was a quiet, hard-working man who sent almost every penny home to his mother, father and seven siblings. The money helped pay the bills that his father's truck-driving job didn't cover. It also paid tuition for a younger brother who studies architecture, Modesto Baez said.

In the winter months, Felipe

Baez returned to Mexico, where he worked on his own house. It was nearly complete.

He had been back in Durham for seven months Sunday when he took some rare time off to join three friends at Sugar Lake, a large, abandoned rock quarry in northeast Chatham County.

With its steep cliffs and cool water, it once drew hundreds of visitors who would swim, listen to bands and party. The owners pulled the plug a few years ago and placed "No Trespassing" signs around the property.

That hasn't kept everyone out. "I know we shouldn't have gone there," said Lisa Gill, Baez's girlfriend. "But everybody goes there."

Baez had jumped from a cliff and began paddling across the lake at 3:45 p.m. He was half-way across when he began yelling and splashing. His friends thought he was playing until he went under, Gill said.

It took more than three hours before rescue workers finally found Baez's body in about 40 feet of water.

His family will leave their apartments this morning for Hudson's Funeral Home on South Miami Boulevard, where they'll view Baez's body.

Then, later in the week, Baez will make one final trip to San Luis Potosi, where he will be buried.