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▲ A protest on the deck of the *Majesty of the Seas* in May.

# The Cruise Ship Suicides



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unfolded, crew members struggled to cope.

By Austin Carr

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At first, Jozsef Szaller's crewmates didn't think much of his absence. Szaller, after all, usually skipped going to dinner on the *Carnival Breeze*, the cruise ship where they were all living under the strange and surreal conditions of a floating Covid-19 lockdown. The socially distanced buffet line could take 30 minutes to get through, and cruise workers were allowed outside their cabins at mealtime for only an hour or two. Instead of eating, he preferred using the open-air breaks to smoke on deck or grab a \$1.75 vodka soda from one of the bars that was still open. Anything to survive the monotony.

Szaller had been working on Carnival ships since January, but the new coronavirus brought the industry to a halt. After pausing sailings in mid-March, Carnival Corp. and its main competitor, Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., went to great lengths to repatriate vacationers, sending passengers home by chartered flights. Crew members didn't receive the same treatment. After the guests went home, tens of thousands of workers stayed at sea for months. Some described feeling like prisoners or pieces of cargo with no ETA.

It was May 9, a Saturday, when colleagues realized Szaller had missed his daily temperature checks. Friends said they hadn't seen him since Wednesday. According to interviews with crew and official documents, a team was dispatched to check on him but found his cabin door blocked by something heavy. They managed to push it open a crack. A crew member reached through, felt a shoulder, and shook it. No response. Then they went into the adjacent room, stepped out onto the terrace, and, with the Atlantic Ocean swelling below, climbed over the railing onto Szaller's balcony. Once inside his cabin, they found their colleague's slumped body. Szaller's face and arms were blue. Blood trailed from his mouth to his white T-shirt. A belt was around his neck.

## Two time zones away, in Domsod, Hungary, Jozsef's parents, Vilmos and



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check in on him from their home near Budapest, an hour's drive away. But when they returned home that evening, the police were waiting. An officer had Vilmos dial a Hungarian consulate in the U.S., which gave him a number for Carnival. He called and was put in touch with what sounded like a roomful of company representatives, along with a Hungarian-speaking interpreter. "They said they found my son dead on the ship," Vilmos recalls.

He struggled to make sense of what he was hearing. Jozsef was 28 and in perfect health, at least as far as his parents knew. Something terrible must have happened. Was this an accident? Could foul play have been involved? Carnival offered few details. "We were told 15 times that we're not being told for our protection," Vilmos says.

He says he pressed until something resembling a story emerged. "I asked them where they found the body," he recalls. "They said, 'In the room.' Where in the room? On the bed? 'No, not on the bed.' In the bathroom? 'Not in the bathroom.' On the floor? Finally they said, 'Yes, on the floor.'" They mentioned that crew had gone in by way of the balcony, so Vilmos figured that Jozsef had been pressed against the door, blocking their entrance. He asked whether a doorknob was involved—had his son hanged himself on it? "They didn't clearly answer, but they kind of suggested it," he says. Jozsef, as far as his parents could tell, had taken his own life.

Vilmos says communications with Carnival broke down soon after. As the Szallers tried to organize the retrieval of their son's body, including figuring out which jurisdiction would have to declare him legally deceased, they began to see the cruise company as having had a role in their son's death. Its labyrinthine corporate structure—a web of international entities designed to lower Carnival's tax liability—compounded their grief.

"We are saddened by the passing of our crew member and extend our deepest sympathies to his family and loved ones," says Chris Chiames, the chief communications officer for Carnival Cruise Line, the subsidiary that operates Carnival-branded ships. Chiames says that crew health and safety were a priority throughout their repatriation and that the company provided counseling resources and regular communications about self-care.

## He adds that Carnival supported the Szallers in returning Jozsef's remains



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periods, failed to routinely monitor his well-being despite days of absence, and didn't provide adequate training on how to deal with the mental effects of isolation. Chiames says Carnival "made every effort to make this situation as comfortable as possible," and that Jozsef's interactions with onboard medical staff and human resources never suggested he was having mental health challenges. Chiames says the company would have taken quick action if there had been signs of trouble.

The Szaller family is seeking monetary damages, but Vilmos stresses that he's interested only in the truth behind what caused this tragedy. "Nothing will bring back my child, but it may give us some peace," he says. "If the cruise company did something wrong, then I don't think we'll ever find out, because it's such a huge entity and there's such a vast financial network behind it. They just ignore us."

Cruise ships were an epidemiological nightmare during the early days of the pandemic—combining prolific international travel with line dancing, endless buffets, and indoor karaoke—and they've also been a disaster for the mental health of some of their crew. Separated from families, confined mostly to tiny cabins, with no obvious legal recourse and at times no pay, sailors experienced a more extreme version of the household lockdowns that have sent people tumbling into depression.

It's a trend Dr. David Cates, of the University of Nebraska Medical Center, calls a "pandemic within the pandemic." He cites a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in August that showed a

## startling 11% of 5,470 adult respondents among the U.S. population had



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amount of time, in a small space—that really checks all the boxes,” says Cates, who treated some of the first rescued cruise passengers at UNMC’s national quarantine center. In addition to the estimated 100 or so passengers and crew who died of causes linked to Covid, there have been at least a half-dozen other fatalities among crew members who were trapped at sea. Most of these are suspected suicides.

Interviews with affected crew members and their families suggest that despite assurances from cruise operators that crew were well cared for, their mental health was at times an afterthought. An October 2019 study on the mental well-being of crew, commissioned by a group affiliated with the International Transport Workers’ Federation, the big maritime trade union, found that even before the pandemic about a fifth of mariners surveyed said they had suicidal thoughts. High levels of depression stem from the jobs’ long contract lengths and stressful demands. Lower-level crew—such as junior housekeepers and galley staffers—often come from poorer countries and commit to half-year stints or longer at sea, working 8 to 10 hours, seven days a week. Their salaries can range from about \$650 to \$2,000 a month, depending on seniority. The pay per hour is low by American standards, but workers say that it’s more than they could earn at home and that they appreciate the opportunity to travel the world.

After the pandemic hit, workers had to put their lives on hold as Carnival and Royal Caribbean clashed with government authorities over how to get them home safely. It was one thing to offload a group of American passengers in California or Florida and arrange private transport stateside. But what about the convoluted logistics of repatriating crew from India, the Philippines, or Ukraine—all while most of the world was closing its borders to stop the virus’s spread?

Workers blamed the CDC for imposing onerous restrictions on travel, such as requiring company executives to sign off on a litany of health processes for disembarkation through U.S. harbors and airports at the risk of criminal penalties. But they also faulted cruise operators for seeming unwilling to pay for chartered flights abroad. A Carnival spokesperson says the conglomerate ended up spending \$300 million and chartering 225 flights to get crew home to more than 100 countries, but fluctuating travel

## rules made it so “even the simplest crew movements required weeks of

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This left many crew members with a tedious confinement that started in March and April after passengers disembarked. The ships were eerie—like an “empty ghost ship,” as one Royal Caribbean worker puts it—especially for those who had to quarantine after being exposed to the coronavirus. For some, that meant being stuck for nearly three weeks in an economy room, one that barely fit a bunk bed, desk, and minifridge, with a porthole window.



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▲ Jozsef Szaller, who planned shore excursions for cruise guests, was hoping to study photography and dreamed of going shark-cage diving in South Africa. COURTESY SZALLER FAMILY



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▲ Mariah Jocson, a ship waitress, had always dreamed of becoming a seafarer, according to her father. COURTESY JOCSON FAMILY



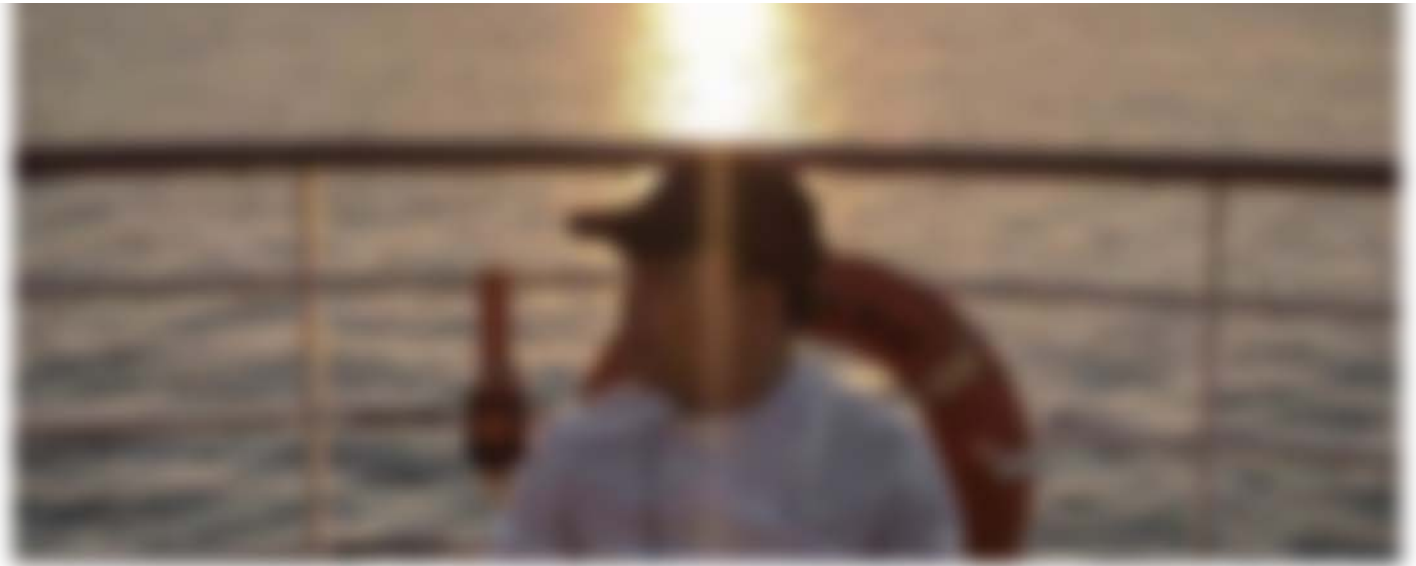


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## Memorial Donations For Kennex Bundaon

▲ A GoFundMe page in honor of cook Kennex Bundaon described him as an avid traveler with the “chillest vibe.” GOFUNDME



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It wasn't just the claustrophobic environment that was distressing. Workers say cruise companies constantly changed repatriation schedules, offering only vague guidance on when or how they'd return home. Without customers on board, Carnival moved many contractors off duty, meaning they could sort of enjoy the amenities of the ocean liners. But that also meant their salaries were eventually cut off—a scary situation for those supporting families on land. The weeks dragged on with limited entertainment options. Internet access was complimentary on some boats, but it could be painfully slow or strong enough only for social media and texting.

Inevitably, some struggled. Karika Neethling, a shop employee on a luxury liner run by MSC Cruises SA, a big European operator, grew terrified upon learning she was pregnant while aboard the ship. The strong curries served to employees made her nauseous, and after developing stomach pain in May, she sought prenatal vitamins from the ship's doctor. She was told they didn't have any. "You just need to stay calm and stay in the cabin," the doctor told her. Neethling recalls spending hours on her bunk, while her mind circled around the indefinite stay. She was in a dark place. "If I couldn't get off, I wouldn't have wanted to have a baby on the ship," she says. (An MSC spokesperson said pregnant crew were provided extensive medical care and prioritized repatriation. Neethling made it home to South Africa in June and gave birth to a healthy baby boy on Dec. 17.)

On April 29, an electrical engineer from Poland on Royal Caribbean's *Jewel of the Seas* disappeared while the ship was anchored in the Saronic Gulf, south of Athens. Ship security cameras captured him leaping into the water that morning, according to Greek authorities. Two weeks later, on May 10, Evgenia Pankrushyna, a waitress from Ukraine, died after jumping overboard from Carnival's *Regal Princess* near Rotterdam. Around this time a Chinese contractor was found dead on Royal Caribbean's *Mariner of the Seas*. A crew member aboard the ship says many believed it was another suicide, though the company said he'd died of natural causes. Next was a Filipino cook, Kennex Bundaon, who was found dead in his cabin on Carnival's *AIDAblu*. Four days later, another worker from the Philippines died in an apparent suicide on Virgin Voyages' *Scarlet Lady*. (Virgin Voyages didn't respond to requests for comment. Royal Caribbean says the company doesn't comment on individual deaths out of respect for crew privacy.)

Morbid news continued into June. Mariah Jocson, a waitress from the Philippines stranded on Royal Caribbean's *Harmony of the Seas*, which was

docked in Barbados, was last seen asking a friend for a teapot. According to

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## Mariah Jocson

COURTESY JOCSON FAMILY

To those hunkered down on board, it felt as if every week brought news of another death via industry blogs. Soon after Pankrushyna's death, workers began passing around a video on WhatsApp and email that apparently showed, in graphic detail, her limp body being dragged onto a rescue boat. Carnival and Royal Caribbean each offered a confidential phone line to dial a therapist for psychological support, but several crew members say they abstained from calling those numbers or disclosing emotional problems to human resources staff on board because they worried it might jeopardize future employment.

Back on land, Krista Thomas, a former crew member living in Canada who'd started a Facebook group to advocate for seafarers during the pandemic, was receiving increasingly panicked private chats from distraught crew members. "I'd get messages like, 'The doctor gave me anti-anxiety medicine, and my plan is to take the whole bottle,'" she says. She enrolled in an online suicide prevention course to learn how to respond.

Not all workers suffered in silence. In mid-May, acts of desperation erupted on several ships as workers tried to call attention to their plight. On Royal Caribbean's *Navigator of the Seas*, crew members started a hunger

strike to pressure the company to get them home faster. On the deck of



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the snips' captains took steps to resolve each situation.

Szaller, friends say, was never one to complain. He'd started doing gigs on cruise ships in 2014 and was always bubbly and social. A regular at the crew bars, he played card games such as Exploding Kittens and was forever buying his co-workers beers and bags of chips. He was also known as a hard worker who woke before dawn most mornings. The alarm on his Casio watch was set for 5:52 a.m.

He'd been an assistant shore excursion manager on the *Carnival Elation*, a job that involved organizing touristy adventures in ports of call. In early March, a little over two months into Szaller's contract, the *Elation* docked at Freeport in Grand Bahama for a few weeks of scheduled repairs. By this time, Covid outbreaks on several ships had resulted in scores of infections. "It was very scary," says Jessica van Rooyen, a colleague of Szaller's on the *Elation*. "You'd put on the news, and it's all this horrific stuff."

In mid-April, Szaller was transferred to *Carnival Magic*, where he remained in limbo for about two weeks. Some members of the crew, normally relegated to the lowest quarters of a ship, were allowed to move to now-vacant guest suites. But Szaller was stuck in a spartan staff cabin, according to his family. "He was effectively in a private cell," says Vilmos, his father. "How would you feel if you were confined to a windowless cell and could only go out once or twice a day?"

## Jozsef Szaller

COURTESY SZALLER FAMILY

Life on the *Magic* was regimented. Workers were allowed outside their cabins only during set times, were required to wear masks, and had mandated curfews. About an hour was allotted for breakfast, but the lines were slow and crowded. It could take 45 minutes just to get a coffee. With free internet, Szaller was able to stay in touch with his family and his girlfriend. Every other day, he Skyped with his parents or chatted with them on Facebook. They tried to stay upbeat. "We were supporting him morally

and emotionally,” Vilmos says. “Whenever we could and it was convenient



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watched *Breaking Bad*, *Dexter*, and *Modern Family*. Otherwise his refuge was the smoking area of Deck 11, where he'd puff Marlboros and shoot the breeze with friends. But even getting cigarettes could be a pain: The line at the ship's convenience store often snaked with more than 100 people. When his stash ran low, he joked that he'd happily trade his phone for just two more packs, Vilmos recalls.

In their conversations, Vilmos was struck not just by how isolated Jozsef seemed but also that he was kept in a “state of total uncertainty.” Back home in Hungary, the government had extended its nationwide lockdown indefinitely, which helped Vilmos “understand what my son was going through—what it's like to feel enclosed.”

But Vilmos, an arborist for the city of Budapest, was confined at home for only three days before receiving permission to work outside again. (“They realized that it'd be kind of difficult to transport a massive tree to my house,” he jokes.) Jozsef, meanwhile, told his parents about Carnival's ever-changing plans for him. First he was informed that he'd be home by Easter, but the date was postponed without explanation, then postponed again. He told his dad a co-worker was advised to pack a suitcase for a flight home, only to be sent back to his cabin at the last minute. Crew kept a close eye on a third-party travel app that listed plane tickets Carnival had booked in their names. A close friend of Jozsef's says they saw about five different flights home issued for them and then canceled. A Carnival spokesperson says the company provided frequent updates to crew and blamed the reschedulings on constantly changing travel restrictions.

Cruise operators ultimately decided to sail remaining employees to seaports in their continent of origin, where it'd be easier to get them home by land or air. In an effort to consolidate crew by home region, the *Magic* transferred European crew by lifeboat to the *Carnival Breeze*, which was set to travel to England. By May, Szaller had moved into a guest cabin on the *Breeze* with a window and, even better, a balcony. He told his dad he was happy to finally be able to see the sun and the sea from his room. He started making post-pandemic plans, telling friends and family he wanted to learn photography when he made it home. In the near term he would quarantine near Budapest in his parents' weekend cottage. Colleagues say he never even hinted at being depressed. If anything, he'd tried to cheer others up.

Life on the *Breeze* that May was still structured—Carnival issued a precise timetable dictating when crew could leave their cabins for food or a twice-daily “60 min fresh air break.” Just as on land, people began to let their

guard down, socializing more and worrying less about the virus. Everybody



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On the evening of Wednesday, May 6, Szaller got drunk with a group before everybody went their separate ways. The close friend says that was the last night they saw Jozsef. He missed temperature checks that week and didn't respond to texts. His body was found three days later. "I absolutely blame myself," this friend says. "Even now, when I think about it, I feel responsible. How is it possible I didn't see something like this would happen?"

Vilmos says his own grief was worsened by Carnival's refusal to discuss the specific circumstances of his son's death. He theorizes it's in the company's legal interest to disclose as little information as possible. He was especially rattled by their first call, when representatives said it was for his own "protection" not to go into detail about the matter. A Carnival spokesperson says that the company's crew medical coordinator had at least 15 subsequent email exchanges with Vilmos, and that at no time did he indicate his questions weren't being answered. Carnival says it suspended contact after learning of the family's pending legal action.

Like Vilmos Szaller, Cirilo Jocson is desperate for closure. His daughter, Mariah, was the waitress discovered hanged on a Royal Caribbean ship in June. "We just want to know how they found my daughter," he says, sounding on the verge of tears. "Really, even just a photo of the crime scene. We need the truth."

"She kept on telling me, Daddy, I will be home on this day, on this day, on this day," he says. "The schedule was always changing." He is still in disbelief over her passing. When asked if she ever showed signs of depression, he responds, "No, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing at all."

In the months that followed his son's death, Vilmos says he contacted as many crewmates as possible to find out what happened. He's frustrated that, as far as he knows, nobody from the ship's management or medical staff bothered checking on Jozsef for several days after he began missing temperature checks. Carnival declined to comment on this matter.

In November, a coroner in Winchester, England, concluded that Jozsef had died due to hanging and suggested it was likely "an impulsive yet intentional and self-administered act under the influence of alcohol." A previous postmortem examination of Jozsef's body noted that his blood



alcohol had been triple the legal driving limit. This last fact is a key point in

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company should have known the hazards of isolating employees for indefinite periods and provided them with the appropriate mental health support—not “unfettered access” to booze, wine, and beer. “They allowed [employees] to purchase as much alcohol as they wanted, confined them to their little cabins, and then didn’t check on them,” she says. “They had a duty to make sure [employees] were safe physically and mentally.”

## Life Under Floating Lockdown



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The line for the ship store aboard the *Carnival Magic*. Workers were allowed only limited time outside of their cabins, much of which was spent waiting.





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The no-sail order from the CDC expired on Oct. 31. Before allowing cruises to resume in U.S. waters, the CDC will require ship operators to simulate voyages with volunteer passengers to prove their new protocols, which include social distancing rules and onboard testing, are sufficient to prevent outbreaks. It's unclear whether these efforts will work. A Royal Caribbean cruise in early December from Singapore, following similarly strict protocols from local health officials, was forced back to port after an 83-year-old traveler tested positive for Covid-19 during the four-day trip. (Royal Caribbean says the case was later determined to be a false positive and that the ship has continued sailing without incident.)

Seafarer advocacy groups are pushing for better cabin conditions and more control over working hours and contract length. Crew members say it

would also help to have onboard psychologists among the medical staff,



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outbreaks recur. The Maritime Labour Convention, ratified by 97 countries, limits stints aboard ships to 11 months and requires participating nations to disembark ill seafarers, but Dyring says those conditions were violated with impunity numerous times during the pandemic. “They’re blatantly disregarding the convention,” she says. “It’s just atrocious.”

Despite these concerns, cruise companies will have little trouble persuading crew, many of whom have gone months without pay, to return to sea. Van Rooyen, Szaller’s colleague on the *Elation*, says she reached her “mental breaking point” when she heard about Jozsef’s death and other suicides. She found herself sitting in her cabin on a different ship for hours, “looking at the four walls” and waiting for someone in a position of authority to acknowledge Szaller’s death. No acknowledgment or condolences came. “It was shocking,” she says.

Even so, van Rooyen says she definitely wants to get back to cruising with Carnival, echoing a discordant sentiment expressed by almost every worker interviewed for this story. Crew members described disturbing conditions during their time at sea, while lauding cruise operators for providing free food, housing, transportation, and other support during the complex repatriation. “The company was amazing,” she says. “Carnival looked after us.”

Vilmos says the pandemic complicated the return of Jozsef’s remains to Hungary from England, where the *Breeze* had docked. (Carnival says it had repatriated 99% of crew by early August.) He requested his son be cremated, and the family received his ashes in July. Two packages of Jozsef’s belongings, including his Casio wristwatch and a wallet with \$12 inside, came separately. Vilmos asked Carnival about missing possessions such as his smartphone, which might shed light on the circumstances leading to his death, but he says the company told him they couldn’t locate the device. Carnival declined to comment.

Even now, the Szallers have been unable to have Jozsef declared legally deceased. Vilmos says the coroner’s report should move things forward, but it’s been frustrating enough coordinating with U.K. authorities on behalf of his son, a Hungarian citizen. And that’s not even half the headache. As Vilmos frames it, how do you officially process a death that occurred in international waters, on a ship registered in Panama, that’s owned by a company operating in the U.S.?

Vilmos says he’s sometimes felt suicidal himself. “The first question you ask is, ‘What the hell am I still doing here? Why don’t I just get in the car,



push down on the accelerator, and ignore the next curve?”



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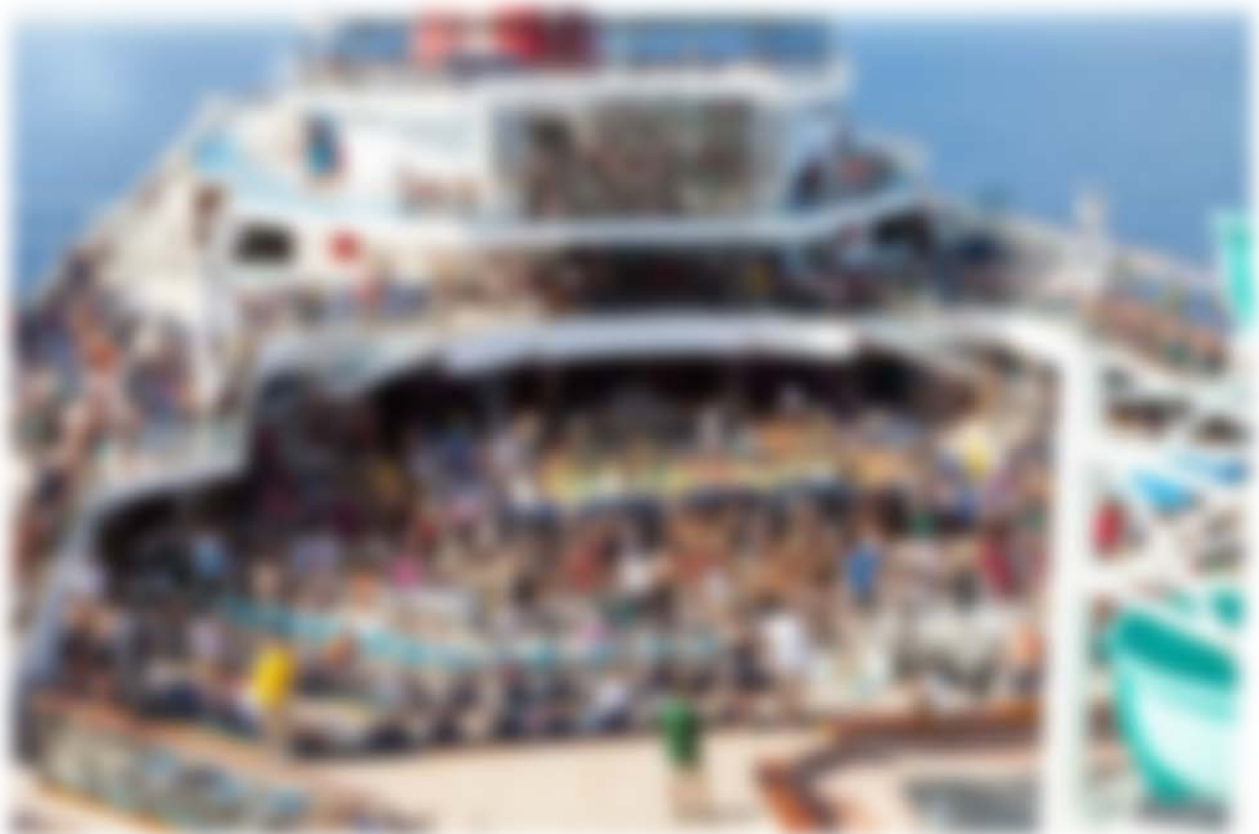


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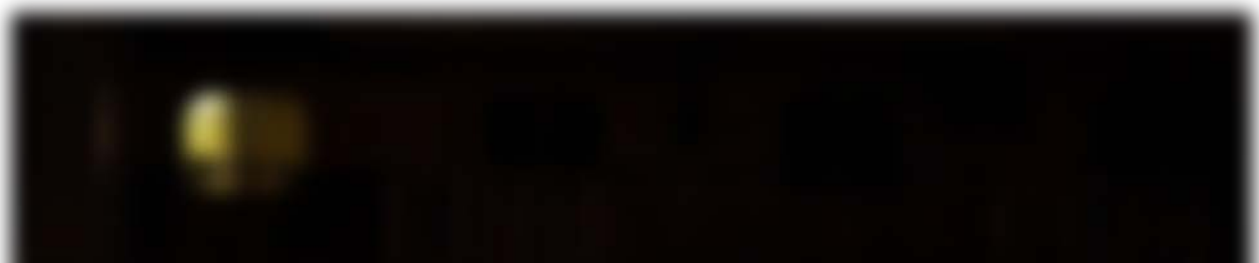
ne said at a public forum earlier this year.) He says the work gives him meaning. Lately he's been putting in as many as 18 hours a day, often collapsing into bed afterward. He wears his son's old Casio watch, its alarm still set for 5:52 a.m., so that Jozsef can wake him up each morning. "I know I'll never have a chance to cuddle my grandchild," Vilmos says. "But I can talk to other children about why they should love trees and how to treat them." –*With Zoltan Simon and K. Oahn Ha*

*If you or someone you know is having suicidal thoughts, the National Suicide Prevention hotline is 800 273-8255.*

## Related Stories



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