

THE REAL COST OF



SAFETY

BY RICHARD MCELHANEY

It was 3:00 a.m. on a Thursday morning, December 9, 2004. My crew and I had to leave a jobsite in Washington, DC, early enough to make a training session in Camden, NJ. The four of us were getting trained on using a 20,000 psi water lance. This lance was going to be used to cut concrete segments that were poured the wrong way. Due to some quality issues, the segments were poured six to eight inches too wide and needed to be cut so they would fit the other segments. The training started at 7:00 a.m., but ended unexpectedly at 10:30 a.m. One of my co-workers lost control of the water lance and spun around while the lance was at full power. Thankfully, he missed the rest of our co-workers and the instructor, but unfortunately, I was struck by 20,000 psi across both legs, just above the knee. During the training session, the goal was to rotate between workers so we could learn how to use the lance and the compressor. I was next in line and standing 12 feet away from the worker using the lance. The pressure of the water, even at 12 feet, was so great that it entered both of my legs in the front and exited out of the back, hitting both femoral arteries. There I lay, in a pool of blood, thinking “that did not just happen.” Throughout my training in advanced first aid and CPR, I knew I had only minutes to live. So what do you do when you only have minutes to live and you’re lying on the ground in a puddle of blood? I wanted to see my family. I had photos of my children in my wallet in my pocket. I asked my co-workers to get my wallet because I wanted to see my children before I died. Fortunately, my co-workers knew what to do: they applied pressure, elevated my legs, and kept me calm by showing me the photos of my children.

That day, my wife got an unexpected visit from the safety professional. “Mrs. McElhaney, there has been a terrible incident and we need you to come with us. Rich is still alive, but in critical condition.” She asked, “How can he be hurt, he’s the safety guy?” I was now asking, “what is the real cost of safety?”

As a 26-year-long seasoned safety professional, I understood and tracked each and every cost associated with occupational injuries. I would argue with upper management about tracking these unforeseen events linked to the injury. Through my training and experience I understood these unforeseen events added eight to 10 times more money to the injury cost and should not be written off as typical business expenses. These unforeseen events include: cost of repairs, clean-up, costs to replace the injured person, increased insurance premiums and litigation. But what I really understood most of all, was the impact it

had on the worker and the worker’s family. Over the years, I had to be the messenger to the families of two fallen co-workers. It is by far one of the worst duties of a safety professional, a manager, or an owner, having to tell a spouse that their loved one is not coming home.


What happened? What went wrong? It was a host of missed steps, from not reporting near misses, not pre-planning with the job safety analysis, worker fatigue, and most importantly, not holding everyone accountable in performing their job duties the correct way. These necessary and crucial steps were overlooked, which created a domino effect that caused the incident that almost ended my life. Fifteen surgeries, 30 units of blood, induced comas, and three years of rehab later, I am somewhat back to what some may call a normal life. I can’t feel my legs, they swell and they are in pain 24/7. I also have a blood clot in my right leg that will never go away. The hardest part is not being able to teach my children the things I learned growing up. I can’t teach them to snow ski, water ski, and other things like play football. I can advise them on these activities, but I cannot participate and share the experience with them, side by side. It is truly what affects me the most.

I now travel the globe sharing my story and teaching the participant’s lessons learned from my incident. In dramatic fashion, I reveal my injuries and its effects it had on me and my family’s lives. According to many audience members, they have left my training session a changed person. They say you will understand why the people in the safety profession do what they do to protect workers and workers families. I call myself a living lessons learned. So what have I learned from my incident? I have learned that the following six safety management principals are key to any company’s safety success:

1. Job Safety Analysis (JSAs) are the backbone of every safety program. Communication is the key to a company’s success. Look at JSA’s as a company’s language. Your employees need to know how to speak your language. Train employees on how to use these tools.
2. Daily safety “huddles” are a must. Review the JSA with your crew. A safety huddle should never be one way communication. You should always encourage two way communication. Ask the employees to share their experiences on the task that you are about to perform. Did it go well? Did it go poorly? Did you go above and beyond expectations to eliminate a certain risk?
3. Safety inspections should be done with a field level employee. A lot is missed if the inspection is only done by the safety



professional. Field level employees know the jobsite from end to end.

4. Behavioral Observation Surveys are key. When done correctly, it empowers employees to intervene if they see something wrong. It also gives the safety professionals a snapshot of what is going on out in the field so we can concentrate on what’s good and what’s bad. Remember, safety is everyone’s responsibility, not just the responsibility of the safety professional.
5. Create a robust lessons learned and near miss reporting program. We must all learn from our mistakes and never fear for our jobs if we report them. Teach your personnel the difference between a near miss and breaking a safety rule. An employee should never be disciplined for reporting a near miss. But when they break a safety rule, then you should follow your disciplinary program.
6. When new employees complete the new hire safety orientation, the “boss” should always sit down with the new employees and review their commitment to the safety management process. I have found that this sets the tone for safety within your organization and on the project. 



Richard McElhaney was born and raised in Western Pennsylvania. He has been in the Safety and Risk Management field for over 26 years. He currently provides safety

consulting services for many companies on a global scale. Over those twenty six years, he has presented and worked in Australia, Canada, China, Panama and Africa. Mr. McElhaney earned his B.S. in Occupational Safety and Health Management from Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania in 1992. He completed his M.S. in Safety Science from West Virginia University in 2011. His professional designations include, Certified Safety Professional (CSP) and Construction Risk Insurance Professional (CRIS). Rich still resides in Western Pennsylvania with his wife and three children.