

TITLE: 2931 SHATTERED:

The Jeff Walters Story

17 MINUTES

PRODUCTION YEAR: 2010

PROGRAM SYNOPSIS:

This program combines testimonials, a live presentation and reenactments to teach important safety lessons. Jeff Walters, a young newlywed, was more interested in earning the respect of his co-workers than being concerned for his own safety. He saw a broken limit switch on a 19-foot elevated conveyor as his opportunity to impress his co-workers with his abilities and willingness to do whatever it takes to get a job done. After climbing the conveyor without doing a lockout or wearing fall protection, Jeff fell 19 feet to a concrete floor when the conveyor started unexpectedly. In this program, Jeff talks about his poor decisions that day and how they continue to impact him and his family. This program teaches the critical safety lesson that risk-taking is never worth it and that any supposed reward of a shortcut is only a facade.

SHOOTING LOCATION: An employee meeting room and a process area at a fiberboard plant.

INSTRUCTIONAL CONTENT:

JEFF SHARES HIS STORY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- Jeff Walters is an electrician who's been doing his trade for over 20 years now.
- "Something happened to me in the past that changed my life forever, and it's brought a passion to me that I share with people everywhere I go," Jeff says. "I share it in everyday life. I share it in my work life."
- "Most everything I do, this has become a part of my life and I'm going to share this message with you today," he adds. "It is a message of tragedy, but it's also a message of victory."
- Jeff says he's not the type of person to just look at the tragedy. "I want to find something in there that I can use, something that I can learn from that maybe can make a difference for somebody else."

JEFF'S HORRIBLE DECISIONS LEAD TO HIS 19-FOOT FALL

- Jeff was 22 years old and had worked at a fiberboard plant for two years. He returned to the plant after a two or three-day shutdown and began to work long hours.
- "On the outside of this press system, there was a conveyor. This conveyor had to run in order to send the boards down to the rest of the line down to the process to get it out of the way," Jeff continues. "If the belt wouldn't run, the plant would shut down."
- When the limit switch fell off of the conveyor, Jeff should have gone up and down four flights of steps to the electrical room to lockout the breaker on the conveyor, put the limit switch on, unlock the conveyor and then let the system run. "How many of you think I did that? No, I didn't. I made a series of horrible decisions," he says.
- Instead, Jeff asked John, a co-worker, to push and hold the stop button while he went out on the conveyor to put the limit switch on. This would have taken five minutes.
- John asked Jeff why he was in such a hurry. "I just got married alright. I don't have time to be hanging out with you guys all night. Now I'm going up; hold that button," he replied.
- "What about fall protection," John asked. "Never used it before; why start now?" responded Jeff.
- "The day I climbed on the conveyor I wanted to gain the respect of my coworkers. I saw an opportunity that I could shine, that I could show them that I could measure up and that I could get the job done," explains Jeff. "
- "What I didn't realize was that was a facade. Even if I had been successful with mounting that limit switch and finishing that job, I would have lost the respect of my coworkers because they knew it wasn't the right thing to do," he continues.
- He says his co-workers knew he should have locked out the conveyor and work fall protection. "That's the case anytime you take a shortcut or anytime you take risks that should not be taken in the workplace. The reward is a facade and it's not worth it."
- "I climbed out on the conveyor and the belt was about 18 inches wide," says Jeff. "I sat down on the conveyor belt and I grabbed the limit switch."
- When the belt started running at over 100 feet per minute, Jeff was slammed into a wall that was directly in front of him. His legs went between the six-inch gap between the wall and the conveyor, and then everything stopped.
- Jeff says that as he tried to regain his composure, two things went through his mind. Did John push the stop button to stop the belt or did he stay on the conveyor so long it overloaded and shut itself down? "I thought I'd been there a long time, so I figured one of these two things had to have just happened," he adds.
- When he pushed back against the wall with his hands, the conveyor started again. "This time, it threw me against the wall," says Jeff.

- "I fell 19 feet to a concrete floor. I'm laying there on the floor and I don't know if anybody even knows I'm there," he continues. John thought that Jeff hadn't gone out on the conveyor yet and didn't realize he had fallen.
- "So I'm laying on the floor and I'm yelling. I'm trying to get up, but I can't because my body won't let me. I physically can't get up and I stayed there for what I thought was a long time, and finally people started responding," Jeff says.
- When his co-workers arrived, Jeff could hear them talking about his fall, and what they were saying sounded a lot worse than what he thought had happened.

JEFF'S WIFE IS NOTIFIED OF HIS INCIDENT

- Jeff's wife, who worked about five miles from the plant, was notified of the incident just as she was leaving work and rode in the front of the ambulance on the way to the hospital.
- "That one phone call, men, that you do not want your wife to receive, or ladies, that you do not want your husband to receive, is a phone call that says, 'there's been an accident,'" Jeff says.
- "This particular day, the phone rings at work and it is one of the secretaries from the place where he worked at that point," says Jeff's wife. The secretary said she had some bad news, that Jeff had been in an accident.
- "She was telling me that there had been an accident, that Jeff had fallen and that I needed to come to him. So I left work, went to the plant where he worked and they were going to transport him to the hospital," his wife says. "And I could tell by the look on Jeff's face that things were not very good, that he was in a lot of pain."
- Jeff says that although the ambulance ride was physically uncomfortable because of the backboard and all the injuries he had, his wife's was equally traumatic but in a different way. "Hers was more psychological and it was almost a state of panic because she had seen the condition that I was in and saw physically what I was going through."
- "And then for 45 minutes, she had to listen to the lingo of the ambulance and the hospital talking about the obvious problems that they knew were problems, but also about the possible neck injuries and the back injuries and not knowing what the long term effect would be. So it actually made her trauma even worse. It compounded it for her," he continues.
- "I rode with him to the hospital and you know, I'm hearing all of the vital signs and what had happened and them calling into the hospital. That was very scary," she adds.
- "Then we get to the hospital and it's more of the same. She can't see me then; it's a long time before she knows what's going on and nobody can give her an answer as to whether I'm going to live or die or what my permanent condition is going to be, if I'll ever walk again, or what our life together could possibly be like," Jeff says.
- Their reverend visited the hospital and Jeff's wife thanks him for coming.

JEFF & HIS WIFE LEARN THE EXTENT OF HIS TRAUMATIC INJURIES

- "The next day, the doctor comes in, and this is one of the most traumatic things that has ever happened to me, probably the most traumatic," Jeff says. "When the doctor comes into my room, he didn't have a whole lot of bedside manner."
 - After Jeff's wife tells the doctor they've been waiting since the previous day to find out what was going on, the doctor says, "These things take some time to sort out. Seems your husband's a very lucky man, but does have some serious injuries."
 - Jeff's wife asks if he's going to be okay and the doctor replies, "he has two severely sprained ankles, but no fractures. So those should heal with time, but he does have a broken coccyx and several fractured vertebrae in his lower back."
 - When Jeff's wife asks about his back being broken and if it will be okay, the doctor says it would be okay in time after several weeks of therapy and having to wear a brace. "But what we're really concerned about is his left arm. It's shattered into a million pieces."
 - Jeff and his wife ask if the arm can be pinned, but the doctor responds, "There's nothing to pin it to. I mean, it's shattered like a million pieces; it looks like grains of sand. I don't know what we can do for it yet. When we have some options, we'll let you know."
 - "When the doctor told me that my arm was shattered into a million pieces and it looked like grains of sand," says Jeff, "the first thing that went through my mind was 'What am I going to do to support my family? Am I going to be able to work?' If I couldn't use my arm, I couldn't work."
 - "There were just so many emotions and so many things we had to figure out, and it affected so many aspects of our life, financially, emotionally, physically," adds his wife. "Just everything had changed because of a quick decision not to do the right thing. It really started to change our life."
 - Jeff doesn't think people think about their families when they make quick decisions at work because they don't believe anything is going to happen to them. "It's not because they don't care about their family or their loved ones," he says. "They do, but they really don't think the risk they're taking is going to affect them or that they're going to get hurt. I'm here to tell you, they can get hurt."
 - "The reality is, the decisions that you make don't just affect you. This is not something, that when you make this decision you're just making it for yourself; you're making it for your family," notes Jeff's wife.
- "Initially after my injury, my ability to produce income was affected," adds Jeff. "I didn't know how bad it was going to be, I didn't know if I would ever be able to work again like I had previously."
- "Jeff's income stopped the day he fell. We had bills to pay, we were newly married, we had, I had to work. I had to make sure that we had an income coming in," says his wife.

Jeff said it took awhile before he could get back up to his normal condition to where he could work again, "because I had to do rehab on my arm and also on my back and it took about a year before I was back to about 85 or 90 percent of my normal working ability." "He was the provider, he was the caretaker and now, because of this one decision that he made, he had changed our life, maybe forever," Jeff's wife concludes.

SHATTERING THE UNSAFE ABC'S

- "From my story I want people to take the understanding that shortcuts and taking chances, they're not worth it," says Jeff.
- Jeff says what he takes from his experience is the shattered part. "What can we do about it? We can shatter unsafe conditions, unsafe behaviors and unsafe attitudes. We can shatter the unsafe conditions."
- "I actually like to call them the ABC's because I like to keep it simple," he adds. "Coming from where I do, you keep it simple and that makes it easier to keep up with. We can shatter those unsafe ABC's, the attitudes, the behaviors and the conditions."
- As an example of an unsafe attitude, Jeff asks the audience if they have ever seen anybody who has worked at the same place say they've done things the same way for 30 years; that's the way they've always done it. "That doesn't mean it's right," he notes.
- "I've done this hundreds of times and never gotten hurt doing it. Why do we need to change now?" is another example Jeff uses.

- "What about the attitudes that are passive, the ones who just don't care?" he asks. "Or there are some that are negative."
- Jeff says he was once working on some lights in the roof of a building that was about 20 feet high, and as he started putting on his fall protection, a co-worker told him he didn't need to put it on. "Marion, have you ever fallen from there before?" Jeff asked him.
- When Marion replied that he hadn't, Jeff said, "Well I tried it and you wouldn't like it." He adds that Marion didn't understand what he had been through and never bothered him about it again, "but sometimes, we have to take a stand."
- "How about taking shortcuts, like I did? How about looking for the convenient way to do something, like I did?" he continues. "Those are unsafe habits that we can change."
- Jeff says some companies are reactive to injuries; when an injury happens, they do something about it. "Why can't we be proactive?" he asks. "Let's start identifying the hazards and making some changes to improve the conditions."
- Making improvements is nothing major or difficult, according to Jeff. "Now we can expand on this for a long time, and hopefully you guys are thinking about things right now that you can add to the list, because this is just a little bit to make you think that we can shatter the unsafe behaviors. And we can shatter the unsafe attitudes and the unsafe conditions instead of them shattering us."
- "I'm so proud of Jeff and the stand that he's taken on safety," his wife says. "He is very enthusiastic and excited about sharing his story, not only the tragedy but the victory, in making sure that one person at a time, one worker at a time, one action at a time, people stop and think about what they're getting ready to do. Do the right thing and take the time so that your life doesn't change, because it can in an instant."
- "Do you believe that a traumatic injury or incident at work could shatter somebody's life into a million pieces? Absolutely," he says. "There's no question about it. Do you believe that if we shatter the root causes, that if we shatter the unsafe ABC's, that we can make a difference? Absolutely."
- "My message to you this evening is this: you and I, we have the talent, the ability and the courage to prevent people's lives from being shattered into a million pieces," Jeff concludes.