

TEN MINUTES CAN LAST A LIFETIME

A CONSTRUCTION WORKER DIES IN THE TRENCHES IN QUEBEC

By Kimberley Labrecque

October 5th, 2007 is a day I will always remember: it's the day my husband Fabien died at work. Like many workplace fatalities, Fabien's could have been easily prevented.

Ten minutes is all it would have taken to install the metal cage to keep a wall from caving in and killing my children's father. Fabien would have come home like any other work day. Trying to save 10 minutes caused my husband to be completely buried alive in a trench.

Fabien was only 38 years old. Our three children were 4, 6 and 15. He was a devoted husband and father; he had a kind and giving heart, a real "people person", he just loved to talk to everyone! He could talk up a storm with any stranger. He loved practical jokes, would laugh at anything, a genuine kid at heart. He was also a hard worker, working in his home town for almost 20 years, where nearly everyone knew him. So we weren't grieving alone, the whole town was grieving with us.

October 5th started out like any regular day. It was an early, beautiful Friday morning. My son Marc-Antoine, age 6, asked his dad to come apple picking with us because it was his younger brother's preschool outing and Fabien said, "Daddy has to go to work son. Another day, I promise." Fabien also had to bring our daughter Amanda, 15, to his parents on his way to work so she could spend the day with them because she had no school. Marc-Antoine was disappointed but accepted without too much of a fuss, not knowing that "another day" was never to be. I clearly remember thinking, "Maybe I should try and convince him to come with us," because I knew that it wouldn't be difficult – he was a 'yes' man – but I didn't want to make him feel guilty or pressured, so for once I kept my mouth closed. How I wish now I hadn't!

Fabien gave us all a kiss goodbye. He whispered to me that we would have some alone time that night which was long

overdue (we had just patched up a little spat we had a couple of days before). Little did we know that the next time I would see him would be five days later in his coffin. Who knew the alone time we were so looking forward to would be at the funeral home?



Kim and Fabien with Amanda and Marc-Antoine

That fateful day the boys and I had a wonderful morning picking apples. Amanda was with her grandparents just a few streets from the work site. They could hear the different sirens going off, but like the boys and I, they were totally oblivious to what was happening to their dad and the turmoil that lay ahead for all of us. Fabien's mother had lunch ready for him like every work day, not knowing he was never to come through her door again.

The school bus dropped us off at our home. As I unlocked and opened the door I heard the phone ringing; the kids, as usual, ran down stairs to play without a thought. I still remember the time: it was 11:55 a.m. and the name on the caller ID said "Oka". I thought it was Fabien. "Hi honey" I said, in a cheerful mood, thinking my love was calling me early, but a lady's voice said, "No." Now my mind was going a million miles a minute trying to figure out why this lady is on the other end of the line and not Fabien. I never thought...she said, "It's Celine at work and I don't have very good news. There has been an accident and Fabien was brought to the hospital. Can you get there?" "Yes!" I shouted. I hung up the phone, flying out the door to ask my neighbour to take the boys, panic stricken. I thought that it must be really bad because usually people say, "Don't worry, it's not serious, take your time getting to the hospital." I rushed to get my boys to my neighbour; I knew I had to restrain my panic so they wouldn't be alarmed. I sped off to the hospital which was about 15 minutes away; on the highway everything was in slow motion, even going 125 km per hour felt like I was going 20, and every vehicle I passed on the way seemed to be going even slower than me; it was like nothing I've ever experienced before.

At the hospital's ambulance entrance, the first thing I saw was a gurney full of mud, outside of an ambulance. It was empty, by itself, no one was around. Even if I didn't know what Fabien was doing at work that day I just knew that gurney was his. I ran in the hospital in a full panic, asking where my husband was, trying to find him on my own but not knowing where to go. I was asking really loud and in tears, "Where's my husband? Where's my husband?"



Fabien with his children having fun

A paramedic told me to follow her. As we walked quickly in the hallway, I saw she was bringing me to a room called the "Family Room". Not good, I thought, but I never expected the words I would hear. She said the doctor would be in to see me soon, and I said very firmly, "No, tell me where he is now." I was almost hyperventilating at this point. I will always remember the look of sadness in her face and eyes; she must have seen that I was getting angry on top of being in a panic. She hit me with those shotgun words: "He died."

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At that second I knew my life and my children's lives were changed forever. I lost my breath, I bent over, my hands went to my mouth as if to keep the screams from coming out. I sat down; I wanted to be alone. I knew I had to call Fabien's family and mine and I couldn't remember one single digit. I had to walk to the van to get my cell, my legs so wobbly I thought for sure I was going to drop to the ground. I called my sister: now was the first time I would have to say those dreadful words "Fabien died." After spending hours trying to process what happened, I now had to go home and tell our boys. How? How was I going to tell them?

I found out through the investigations and talking with some of the people present, what really happened that terrible day. At the work site there were three workers, the foreman, the stripping shovel operator and Fabien, and to my knowledge, Fabien hadn't received any certified training on trenches or its hazards because I never saw a card or certificate for him and courses weren't mandatory before his death.

Some of the safety measures put in place that day consisted of having the operator stand above the trench to "keep an eye" on it and to yell if he saw anything. Well he saw something,

something black moved, the wall started to cave in and the operator yelled, "Fabien get out!" Fabien only had time to grab the step on the ladder before being thrown against it by the falling earth and buried alive. The two workers went in the trench to dig him out by hand; they could hear him under the earth scream in panic, "Help me"...then nothing. So they decided to use the stripping shovel. A few minutes later there were five people in the trench at once, everyone of them

knew Fabien; they were risking their lives trying to dig him out, but it took over 20 minutes and everyone knew that was too long to survive.

An investigation by the La Commission de la santé et de la sécurité du travail du Québec (CSST) followed. Fabien's employer received a \$16,000 fine for not ensuring his safety. Following the CSST's investigation it ordered that all municipalities send at-risk workers to training courses on trenches and its hazards, and they had to send confirmation to the CSST. All of the municipalities in Québec and 95% of all excavating companies complied. The CSST also sent out small posters to the municipalities and other related employers throughout the province explaining what happened to Fabien and how to prevent another worker from being buried.

There was also a criminal investigation by the Québec Provincial Police for negligence causing Fabien's death but I was told by the prosecutor that since there was no criminal intent no charges would be filed.

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Since Fabien's death, my goal has been to prevent other families from going through what we've gone through, to prevent another mother from having to tell her children that "daddy has died." I truly believe that telling Fabien's story keeps him alive and helps save lives. I've been working with government officials to initiate different petitions; I have two Bills in development at the moment, and Bill 35 was passed in June 2009 tripling fines for employers who defy the health and safety regulations (which hadn't been revised since 1979). Bill 35 ensures that the fines will be raised every year. Through my efforts I can only hope that Fabien's tragic death will never be in vain.

