

From Tragedy to Prevention

By Jim and Velvette Sandford

This article is an excerpt of a speech co-written by Jim and Velvette Sandford and delivered by Jim, a Threads of Life family member and a Speakers Bureau volunteer, at the WSIB's Day of Mourning memorial on April 28, 2007 in Toronto. Jim's eldest son, Jim, died while on the job. This was Jim's first presentation about his son.

Jim was the eldest of our four children. He had two younger brothers, Jay and Cole, and his little sister, Shelby. He was always there to offer advice, settle squabbles and start a few of his own. They truly were a tight knit group, doing everything together.

Jim and his brother Jay, only 17 months apart in age, were inseparable best friends. They did everything together, from their first swimming lesson and on into high school, developing an intense competition in everything they did. During high school they went their own way for a short time but once the struggles of teen-age years passed, they again became constant companions, spending a lot of their spare time together.

Constant debates dominated family get-togethers as Jim and Jay planned trips to attend a pro game, go camping on the Bruce Peninsula or hiking in Algonquin Park. As they shifted gears and moved into adult life they still planned their spare time together, the focus changing to family and football pools where the competition continued. To this day I continue to

take Jim's place in the fantasy football league. As the manager of his beloved Iona Ramblers, I draft his fantasy team every spring and compete against Jay and all of their high school buddies for the league championship.

All the way through school Jim was involved in sports, soccer, football and running. In his senior year at HB Beal Secondary School he became the 400-metre champion in London, played both offense and defense on the Raiders football team and volunteered his time to coach a little league football team. When Jim had completed university he continued to play in an indoor football league.

Some of my fondest memories are of the years Jim and I co-coached his younger brother, Cole's, minor league soccer team. In our second year of coaching, our team won the league championship. Following his death,

the league kindly dedicated the championship trophy to Jim's memory and his team went on to win the league championship again.

Jim's leisure time was spent in the outdoors, camping, canoeing, fishing and hiking. He had a true appreciation for nature and our natural resources. At the cottage, Jim would monitor the way I cut trees and cleared brush, constantly badgering me about the necessity of removing trees, always wanting to conserve whatever he could. Even in death, Jim's appreciation of trees became an issue. The funeral director questioned our decision to have Jim cremated in a cardboard coffin, recommending a nicer wooden version. All of us were adamant that Jim would be very upset to know we chose to destroy a tree for his funeral.

When Jim graduated from university he moved to London. I helped him



Jim at Day of Mourning observance.

get his start in the elevator trade as an elevator constructor, having worked in the elevator industry since 1973. In 2003, I became a grandfather to Jim's son, Zachary. His birth was one of the happiest days of my life. Zach became Jim's life, he spent all of his spare time



Jim Jr. and his son, Zachary

loving and sharing with his son. Jim started making plans for Zach's future, immediately preparing him for school by reading to him constantly. If you had seen them together you would have been able to feel the love they shared.

The absolute worst day of my life came on March 29, 2005. That morning, I received a call that my son had fallen and was seriously hurt. As my wife and I rushed to the hospital, we heard radio reports of an explosion at the building where Jim was working. When we arrived at the hospital, staff told us that Jim was seriously injured. Volunteer staff tried to keep us informed, but we still hadn't seen our son. After what seemed an eternity we learned that Jim was on life support. The next few hours were filled with phone calls to family and friends, informing them of Jim's fall and that it was serious.

Later that night we were told that Jim had no hope of recovery; his head injuries were too serious. The following day on March 30, 2005, in the presence of family and friends, Jim was removed from life support and succumbed to his injuries at the

age of 30. We then met with organ donation people, doctors and funeral directors. Time had no meaning as we made arrangements to bury one of our babies instead of watching him grow. Knowing that I can never again hug my son and tell him that I love him is devastating.

Afterwards we tried to find out what had happened. The explosion we heard about on the radio was actually the sound of the elevator frame ramming into the top of the elevator shaft. The weight compensation on the elevator was too heavy and had pulled the elevator platform up at freefall speed. Weeks of investigation by the Ministry of Labour confirmed what I already knew: miscalculation and lack of supervision had killed our son.

The emotional drain from this needless tragedy was compounded by the fact that Jim called me for advice minutes before he fell. If Jim had done exactly as I advised he might be here today. Numerous times I have gone over in my mind what I could have done or said differently.

The reality is that the company Jim worked for didn't have the right processes in place to prevent this tragedy. The company was charged with failing to provide proper training to Jim and his immediate supervisor, and a fine was levied against the company. My wife and I attended the sentencing and read victim impact statements, trying to convey to the court and the employer the devastating effect our son's death has had on our family.

Since losing Jim the shock has diminished, but every day there seems to be a constant reminder of the magnitude of our loss, especially as I watch Zachary grow up. I have developed a new rapport with my

grandson, trying to fill in as a father figure and confirm to him how much his father loved him. Zachary was not quite two years of age when Jim was killed and didn't understand where his dad had gone. So, we told him that his dad was on the moon, and to this day, he says "hi" to daddy every time he sees the moon come up. At parties and events when children receive balloons, Zachary always releases his to send it up to his daddy.

The guidance and support of the Workplace Safety & Insurance Board (WSIB) grief counseling and Threads of Life helped put us back on track. Through it all, Threads of Life has continued to support us, share our tears, encourage us when we need it and advise us when we need to slow down.

By sharing Jim's story I hope to leave you with this: You have the right to feel, and be safe in your workplace. We all need to work together to stop these needless tragedies.



From left to right: Shelby (Jim Jr.'s sister), Zach (son) and a little girl lay a wreath with the Hon. Steven W. Mahoney, Chair of the WSIB to remember those who have lost their lives on the job.