

Highway Maintenance Worker Struck Down

Marlene died keeping highways safe for others

Ron Rauhut



Marlene as a little girl

This story is about my sister Marlene Rauhut-Lucu, whose life ended prematurely. Marlene worked for LaPrairie Group Contractors Ltd. in Whitecourt, Alberta, which provides highway maintenance services. She worked in a male-dominated workforce. Marlene was a snowplow truck driver who plowed the snow off the main highways, along with salting and sanding and general highway maintenance. She was very dedicated to her job working in the middle of the night – even on holidays – to keep the highways safe. Marlene was married to Karl Lucu who also was a snowplow truck driver with LaPrairie Group.

She grew up on a farm near Mackay Alberta. She was a tomboy and had no time for, or interest in, playing with dolls. She could operate almost any kind of farm equipment, including a grader. We grew up working together on the farm with our parents.

Marlene could take the ugliness in the world and turn it into kindness.

Marlene was a very funny person. People were drawn to her like a magnet; she was a good listener. She could take the ugliness in the world and turn it into kindness. She had a kind heart; she would bring spiders outside rather than step on them. She hardly ever got angry, but when Marlene was a teenager she was constantly bullied and teased on the school bus. One day Marlene and this boy twice her size started a fight. They were both getting in the punches until Marlene got a left hook in, knocking him out. The bus driver cheered her on and the boy never bothered her again!

She was also very adventurous; we did many things together, like going to Alaska and Germany. In Germany we visited friends and family and rode in a bicycle tour along the Rheine River. When we were in a restaurant one of the guys played a joke on her and ordered her a litre of beer in a stein. They had a laugh while we were drinking and thought she wasn't man enough to drink hers, but she knocked it back and got back on her bike. When that same man had to stop for a leak behind the bushes she told him to watch out for the mosquitoes because they bite! She had the last laugh then!

Once we took my airplane and flew to Texas and then to Key West, a 5000 km flight from home. On our way to Florida we

had two major storms to juggle and when we arrived in Panama City, Florida, we found out a tornado had hit the town six hours before. We worked together planning the flight and navigation and working the radio; she even took the controls of the aircraft so I could rest, and that's how we made it back to Canada.

2008 was supposed to be Marlene's last winter working as a snowplow truck driver. She and Karl planned to buy a mobile home, mortgage-free, and put it on the family farm to start a family of their own. Karl was going to keep working as a highway maintenance worker and a new phase in Marlene's life would begin.

The machines were keeping her alive, and it was very clear that we, as a family, had to make the worst decision of our lives to unplug her life support and let her go.

On January 29, 2008, came the most devastating phone call of my life. I was in the basement thawing a frozen water line in the well (it was -45 °C that morning) when my mother called crying; Karl had called and said that Marlene had been hit by a truck and it was bad, that she would probably die. I tried to calm her down and reassure her.

My parents, my wife, Karl and I drove together to Edmonton to the Royal Alexandra Hospital to see her. We learned the terrible news that she had massive head trauma and that she would probably not survive the night. Karl stayed by her bedside until morning when the doctors called the family back in to tell us that she would never recover. The machines were keeping her alive, and it was very clear that we, as a family, had to make the worst decision of our lives to unplug her life support and let her go. Marlene passed away in the same hospital she was born in. She was 40 years old.

Marlene had arrived at work and was told a semi-trailer truck had broken down on Highway 43 east of Whitecourt at 9 p.m. the night before. But at 2 a.m. a drunk driver had slammed into the back of this trailer, killing himself instantly. She needed to clean up the debris and direct traffic with her one-ton arrow board truck until the tow truck came to pick up the broken-down semi.

Karl drove his snowplow right by Marlene and waved to her and she smiled and waved back. A few minutes later Marlene radioed Karl and said she could see trucks coming but some of them didn't want to move over. He told her to be careful

and she said she would call back in 15 minutes. That would be the last time Karl would talk to Marlene. At around 8:23 a.m. Karl heard a click on the radio; he kept trying to reach her by radio but got no response. He didn't know that she had been struck by a B-train dry-cement truck.

A witness stopped at the collision scene to see if anyone was hurt and saw Marlene lying in the ditch. He had first-aid training but nothing prepared him for what he saw. He was horrified. He had no cell phone so he tried Marlene's radio to get help, then the broken-down semi and then the cement truck. After waving down some cars one finally stopped and he called 911. While the witness stayed with Marlene, the driver of the cement truck appeared and said, "I don't know what I hit."

The mother of the witness told me later that her son has lost weight and that this event has greatly disturbed him; images of Marlene still haunt him. The RCMP did an investigation but not really to our satisfaction. The real answers came out when the accident reconstructionist was hired by the prosecuting attorney.

According to their findings, Marlene got out of her truck and went to the back to get the only sign she had. Two semi-trucks were coming when the first one blasted her with cold air and at -43 °C it would have been like getting hit in the face with an ice cube, so she turned around and the air would have been very loud all around her. Marlene was standing behind her truck when the cement truck (a semi-truck with a tank) doing at least 110 km hit Marlene and her truck.

Her head was struck with such a force that blood sprayed out onto her truck and when the semi hit her truck her legs were pushed under its deck. More than 70,000 pounds per square inch of force caused double compound fractures to both femurs, breaking her pelvis in half, and sending some body parts on the highway. Her truck was pushed to a speed of 76 km/hour with Marlene pinned in the middle until its front wheels hit the snow bank. Her upper body slammed forward causing a second blow to her head and knocked her front teeth out.



Marlene on her snowplow

The driver had never applied the brakes from the time he hit Marlene until the truck came to a stop in the ditch. Telephone records showed that the driver had placed a call from the semi-truck but not to 911! He called his boss instead while my sister lay outside dying on the highway. The report also noted that LaPrairie Group was at fault for not having any signs out and because the arrow board on the truck wasn't working, and that the RCMP should have seized both vehicles and brought them in for forensic tests at the time of the collision. Marlene was blameless.

Our family found the court system to be an emotional roller coaster and frustrating. In the end the driver was charged with careless driving and paid a \$402 fine. Our relationship with the judicial system is currently stalled.

Now at every family gathering there is always one empty chair. Our family, Mom, Dad, Marlene and I used to run on four cylinders but now it only runs on three. Farming, travelling, fishing, and flying will never be the same. Marlene was a huge presence in our family. My mother and father have lost an only daughter and I have lost my only sister. There is not a day that goes by that Marlene is not in their thoughts. My father survived the atrocities of war and had seen death all around him. He used to make coffins after the war for children's bodies but it is when you bury your own child that it really hurts.

She left a special gift behind – an aviator watch she had purchased for me two months before she died.

Family was always on Marlene's mind. I celebrated a birthday almost two months after her death. She left a special gift behind – an aviator watch she had purchased for me two months before she died. She had also bought a birthday card that talks about the relationship of a brother and sister; these gifts will forever mean a great deal to me. But how can I thank her?

Careless driving cost us dearly. Vehicles are a loaded weapon under your control. Slow down, observe the rules of the road and weather conditions. Marlene provided a service to keep highways safe – this was her workplace and for thousands of others too. The next time you pass by an arrow board truck remember that people like Marlene keep transportation going; without them there would be no more highways. They would fall apart. Trucks transport the necessities of life so we can live. Let's allow them to do their job safely so we can get to ours.

Editor's Note: Ron is now a member of the Threads of Life Speakers Bureau. He'll be walking in honour of Marlene in his first Steps for Life walk in Edmonton on May 2nd.