

# THE LIFE-LONG IMPACT OF A WORKPLACE INJURY

“I became aware of how close I was to not being here...”

by **Bob Ocrane**

**N**ine months before my incident, our family moved to a small town approximately one hour west of Saskatoon. We moved to the community so that I could start at a new job. When we arrived there we decided to build a new house. Our family was getting settled in the community and we were in the midst of the completing the finishes inside our home.

The day our family’s life changed forever was Feb. 20, 1987. That day, I went to work, and I was scheduled to work four hours and then go with my wife and son and his hockey team by bus for a playoff game.

I was working as a labourer at a grain processing company, and that day my task was to clean a six-foot diameter fan. To work on the fan, I was required to lock it out and suit up in a rubber suit, boots and gloves and a face shield, but no fall protection. Once that was all done I had to crawl through a hand-rail and mid-rail and down a stationary ladder approximately 20 feet. A water hose was then put in the area and away I went to clean the fan.

As I was cleaning it, I could smell the mold and slime and did not like that smell. So I climbed out of the area and went and put on my full-face respirator and cartridges. I was cleaning the fan for about three hours when my co-workers told me that my time was up, and I had to get out.

I started to climb up the stationary ladder. I got up to the top and put my hand on the mid-rail and my hand slipped and I fell back



Bob with his family, a few years after his injury

to the bottom of the fan area. I hit a pipe that was approximately six inches in diameter and about three feet above the floor and then I landed on the sloped floor of the fan shaft. I was lying face up, and I remember my co-workers that were on the main floor asking, “are you okay”. Not knowing the extent of my injuries, I said “yes”. One of the workers was a paramedic and he came down and was to check on me. My only fear was that he was going to fall on me and it was really going to hurt.

I was in and out of consciousness and I remember them opening a small hatch beside me with an air ratchet. The next thing I remember was being put on a stretcher. There were a lot of people around me at that time and from a little further away my supervisor said “Ocrane, if you really wanted

the day off why didn’t you ask me”. I tried to sit up as I wanted to hit him, but I could not.

An ambulance transported me to the local hospital and my wife was called to meet me there. They had told my wife that I had a little fall and hurt my leg. She was shocked to see the seriousness of the injuries. I was crying because I could not go to my son’s hockey game. I was sad because I had to tell my wife I couldn’t go to the hockey game. Do you think that she didn’t know that?

I was taken by ambulance to Saskatoon and it was a very painful trip.

While in the emergency department at Royal University Hospital I would wake up intermittently. I remember the doctor using a pin to see if I my foot had any feeling. I felt the pin and I knew that it was a good thing. We learned that I had a broken femur, separated

pelvis and minor head injuries. I required surgery to repair my broken leg.

While lying in a bed prior to the surgery, I remember one of my sons asking my wife if dad was going to be okay. I could not answer because I was sedated. I felt so helpless when I heard that comment and could not respond to my son.

They did the surgery a couple of days later as they had to fly a piece of metal in from Toronto. They installed the metal rod in my leg. My femur was broken but not sticking out of my skin. Thankfully the surgery went well.

I learned after the surgery that the full-face respirator I was wearing was smashed and saved me from serious facial injuries or even worse. I can thank the respirator for saving my life as most of the guys just wore a face shield while cleaning the fan.

While I was in a hospital bed, my wife

had to take care of three children, all teenagers, while working part time. This was a huge stress on her, especially not knowing if I would ever be able to work at my current job and our home finishing was not complete.

I spent two weeks at Royal University Hospital and then two more weeks in our local hospital. I came home in a wheel chair approximately one month after the incident. When I got home, it was also very stressful for the family to see me in a wheel chair. Everyone had to help in my care as I could not walk. It was very troubling for my wife and our children to see their dad in this condition. Our world had changed forever.

When I went to my surgeon's first appointment following surgery it was strange to me that his goal was to ensure he had lined up my leg properly during the surgery. I could not imagine going through the surgery process another time. If he had said it was not

good enough I am sure I would have said that I was not going through another surgery.

I really hated being in a wheel chair as I was not like everyone else around me. The day I got my crutches my wife and I went to a department store. I was going faster than I should have with the crutches. My wife said to slow down and I said "You have never been in a wheel chair". Boy did it feel great to be normal again.

The road to recovery was very long and painful. At times I was wondering if I was going to walk normally ever again. I had to work my way through the stages of wheel chair, crutches, walker, walking with a limp, conditioning camp and then returning to work full time. I received a great amount of support from my family and I know they were really were wondering if I was ever going to get back to walking normally.

## During my recovery:

- I became determined to find ways of preventing another similar incident happening to another person.
- I began to understand how many people were affected by my incident: my wife and three children, numerous relatives and friends. *What a ripple effect!*
- I became aware of how close I was to not being here to write this article.

Prior to returning to work, the company that I had worked for was sold to a large multinational company and they wanted a safety officer. I was offered the job and have worked in the safety field for approximately 21 years. After creating a strong safety culture with that company, we moved to Saskatoon. In Saskatoon I worked to improve the safety culture for three large companies. It still frustrates me today when I hear of a workplace death or serious injury. I am always trying to find new ways of improving safety at my workplaces and the community I am living in.

I learned of Threads of Life in approximately 2009 and got a group of safety professionals together to start a safety barbecue. The goals of the safety barbecue were to bring safety awareness to the men and women working in construction and industry and raise funds for Threads of Life. In reality I was the first volunteer for Steps for Life in Saskatchewan.

In 2012 we started our first walk in Saskatoon – actually the first walk in Saskatchewan. We formed a committee and still today, we have two members that have been a part of planning every walk. The first walk had almost 100 participants and in 2019 we had just over 150 participants.

The walk is a great way of getting the safety message out to the province. This year as the family spokesperson for the walk I was interviewed three times on the radio, two interviews on the local television and the newspapers in Regina and Saskatoon.

My message this year was for every worker to take the time to look around their work area for hazards. If you observe a hazard, either fix the hazard or report it to your supervisor and set a plan in place to fix the hazard.

**Remember:** a family member or friend is counting on you to do the right thing.



Having a new granddaughter makes safety even more important to Bob!