

Paul Jackson

Speaker Profile

Secrets to staying alive on the job



Money for university, a break to plan his future, time to practise the music he loved since elementary school.

That's all 21-year-old Paul Jackson wanted when he became a production labourer at a sawmill near Fort St. James. He got more — and less — than he bargained for.

After two months at the mill, Paul was assigned to chip ice from the ground and clear the path of a floor sweep which drags a 15-foot steel bar that weighs hundreds of pounds, and collects log debris that falls from conveyors or other machinery. For a moment, Paul turned his back on the moving bar.

“I remember the bar crushing my leg,” he says, “seeing the leg wrapped ‘round the bar... Hearing the bones snap... Watching the flesh left dangling, and my boot and pant leg being swept away.”

It happened at lunch time. The other workers had gone to eat, and Paul was alone. He says three things kept him from dying: “Frigid cold slowed the heavy blood loss. I can be really stubborn, as my family can tell you. And then there was dumb luck.”

Another worker, late for lunch, passed by 15 or so metres away. “I’d been screaming for help, at the top of my lungs, for nearly 10 minutes. He heard me and got help, and I survived. I’m so glad he was there, this man I’d never seen before. But what if he’d gone to lunch on time?”

“One reason this is devastating is that being a drummer was my passion. I had a wicked right foot. Sure, I can play the drums with my prosthesis — like I can walk again — but it’s not the same. It never will be. Still, I’m so grateful to be alive.”

Exactly what the future holds is unclear, but Paul has thought a lot about how he reached this point.

“The truth is that I didn’t have to lose my leg,” he says. “I knew about the right to refuse unsafe work, and the need to lock out machinery. But I didn’t act on the knowledge”.

“The decision-making was complex — and emotional. I didn’t want to lose my job. I wanted to be a man. I wanted to fit in. I didn’t want to be afraid, and why should I? I was invincible.

“The problem is that I didn’t see all this until afterwards. People say life can change in one second, but that had no meaning for me ‘til it was too late.”

Now, Paul has a few “secrets” for on-the-job survival to share with other young workers and their bosses.

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