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safety AT WORK

life after a workplace death

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interview with

paul kells

Founder of the Safe Communities Foundation in Canada

WSS How did the Safe Communities Foundation start and where is it at?

PAUL My son was 19 years old and he was killed in an accident in a small warehouse in a suburb of Toronto. In this little shop, it was a small business with only 4 or 5 people there. He got the job through a friend whose Father ran the business. It was the second or third day on the job and he was asked to go back and decant some fluid from a large drum to some small vessels. The action violated every OHS regulation in the book. There were multiple ignition sources, there was no grounding. A spark went off and lit up the fumes that went back in the drum and it exploded over my son. He died 24 hours later.

As a family we went through an inquest. Frequently these are held into deaths in unusual situations in Canada, in which a jury is asked not to affix blame but to come up with a series of recommendations that would prevent this kind of thing from happening again. I represented our family at the Inquest. There were lawyers for the other people involved and the Crown Prosecutor was very helpful to me personally. We put together a number of recommendations that revolved around some fairly basic principles.

Most individuals who do not have direct responsibility for safety have no clue as to what level of carnage there is in the workplace. Injuries are an unknown contributor, by most people, to death and hospitalisation. I would consider myself to be one of the great unwashed masses in not understanding that.



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WSS Did you know of any of the OHS laws prior to Sean's death? Or was his death and eye-opener?

PAUL A big eye-opener. I had very little knowledge of it.

WSS What industry were you in at the time of Sean's death?

PAUL I had my own company in Canada. A business that doesn't come under the OHS authority's laws. It was a consultancy with four or five office staff. The only real dangers we faced were some of the clients we have. We did work for banks and I considered them to be very dangerous. I wasn't familiar with any of the laws and, moreso; I didn't know that there was a problem in this field.

WSS Family members in Australia have complained about the way that the authorities and companies have handled and communicated the death of their family member. What was your experience with Sean's death?

PAUL Very different but that's not to say it's always the same for everyone. I was fortunate, for closure's sake that there was an inquest. In other provinces in Canada, it isn't held routinely. I have heard of many cases in other provinces where there is almost no satisfaction in understanding what happened, who's to blame... You may never find out exactly what happened.

I personally, partly because I got onto it, began to understand the whole process. First and foremost I went to the Labor Unions, even though I am a dyed-in-the-wool capitalist. I figured if anyone knew what an inquest process was about, they would. And they did indeed. They helped me and educated me and I took it from

there. So, not only was I satisfied at the time about finding out things but ever since, I have followed what's been changing in a couple of Canadian provinces.

WSS Safe Communities is based on a WHO concept. How did you come to choose this to apply to your foundation?

PAUL There were really two inspiring concepts. One was the WHO concept, the Safe Communities concept, the other was a small incentive program in a small community in a very rural area in Alberta. They tried an experiment with some twenty businesses in the area, none of

..if the claims were \$100,000 and they wind up being only \$50,000 this year because of the efforts, the \$50,000 that would otherwise have been spent will be given back.

which had any direct relationship with each other. There was a Laundromat, a car dealership, a motel, restaurant... And the folks said, "let's put you all together and look at your previous claims histories for your businesses. If you guys can do better than that then we will provide a financial incentive." For instance if the claims were \$100,000 and they wind up being only \$50,000 this year because of the efforts, the

\$50,000 that would otherwise have been spent will be given back. They were quite meticulous about compiling those records so that they had a real baseline.

I heard about both of these concepts at the same time from the same people – the Industrial Accident Prevention Association. I did a little reading on the Safe Communities program and it seemed to be perfect in not ghettoising workplace death and injury. I began to look at Safety as a cultural issue and not just as a narrow "silo" of definition.

So I took those two things and combined them with small business to try to achieve real results and spreading that into the community to become an umbrella for all of these different "silos". We tried it and very quickly we got Government support on the incentive's piece, a community that volunteered, and people within that community to unite and ask themselves to prioritise their injuries and work from that.

WSS Your foundation has existed for five years. How have you managed to maintain your enthusiasm?

PAUL I wouldn't be doing any of this if I had been awakened by my personal tragedy and I connect the personal to the Foundation as I believe that emotion and passion and people believing that their children are at risk is the key to making anything happen. But how I feel about Sean, when I feel him, it touches me as a very private thing. So any thing I have gone through and go through I somehow manage to park that off.

The foundation side simply works. We have made a lot of progress and we have reduce injury rates in many communities. And our progress has been

statistically proven. So I know that it is doing some good. We now have thousands of people involved in it. That encourages you.

WSS Can the concept be easily exported?

PAUL I do and that's why there are Safe Communities in many different countries around the world. Australia already has a Safe Community framework but it is different from the one here. It is based on the belief that people can really change things around them by taking the initiative individually.

Marching in a parade doesn't really save anyone's life. It is your action with your neighbour, your daughter or your son that will make the difference.

should be safe is not enough. I would need convincing. I would need some evidence.

WSS Do you need to talk about safety in dollar values to get the attention?

PAUL I think it helps but I don't think that anyone has made the case. The problem with injury is that most people don't believe that it will happen to them. With the Safe Community program we set up there is an economic hook for businesses. Every group of people needs different triggers to get their attention. Finding the trigger is where the time is spent.

The best way to pressure a businessman is to get his wife on the case, or his father or mother. If

to convince them of the program's benefits?

PAUL In Canada, there are five or six Big Banks that dominate the landscape. They do not have a reputation of being close to their communities, close to their customers. They are regarded with a fair amount of cynicism and the Banks have a need to overcome that perception. If they want to merge and get bigger, they don't want to be confined economically by the regulatory structures. They have to be mindful of their audience.

Some of the most vocal critics were small business and the Banks saw an opportunity here to

- Form a supportive connection to small business
- Establish a community base

It is absolutely true that they saw this as a social contract and they have yet to cotton on that there may be some benefits to them internally. They have their own programs and procedures but they are not active in a volunteer way. They fund us, they sit on our Board, in fact their initial commitment was only for two years but they have renewed for five and they are staying on for six.

Marching in a parade doesn't really save anyone's life. It is your action with your neighbour, your daughter or your son that will make the difference.

WSS Small businesses often are ignorant of OHS obligations. Was that evident in your experience?

PAUL I'd say it is right across the country, partly because the big institutions that handle safety find it real easy to deal with large companies where they can cover thousands of people at a time. They can deal with unions and cover large groups but small businesses come and go. At the current rate in Ontario there are 40,000 new small businesses registered each year and an equal amount goes out of business.

I am intimately aware of how hard it is to get the attention of small business. Telling me that I

you can get enough people talking about it then maybe it will work.

WSS Why did you approach Banks for sponsorship first?

PAUL Because I have worked as a consultant in the banking sector. I knew a couple of people well enough to ask their advice on establishing the program through getting the five Canadian banks together. They helped me plot the strategy.

I went there because I thought that that was where I could get some money and we did.

WSS Banks consider themselves to be quite safe environments. How hard was it

WSS Has the dominant community cynicism of the Banking sector devalued to Safe Communities program?

PAUL No, in fact I joke about it. I joke about it with them and with the people I talk to. I mentioned before that the only danger in my workplace was dealing with the Banks. I'll say that publicly, for fun. Audiences always laugh but then I go on to say that they have really done something here.

The Banks offered seed money. At the time it was a fair chunk, about \$750,000 over a two-year commitment. Now we have other

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sponsors – Dupont, Noranda, CM Rail is a new one, we have an insurance company. Many of the new sponsors are a more natural fit. Ontario Hydroelectrical generation is there. We have moved it out from the seed capital to other organisations that all have large organisations and communities.

CM Rail, for instance, their whole workforce is spread across the country and it will all become involved in this as the premier volunteer obligation

WSS Where will you be in 10 years time?

PAUL I haven't thought that far. We are now in two Canadian provinces and will have four more in the next three months. I want to see a true national effort and I would hope that within ten years we would have two to three thousand communities involved nationwide.

The one thing I am certain of is that everyone does it differently. I know that in Canada we do it

differently from everyone else. I think we are one of the few; we may be the only one, which is privately based and mostly privately funded. The rest seem to go through the health and medical establishment. But a lot of that is from the Government though.

I am just doing what works here and I'll help anyone anytime who wants to try it in his or her patch.

WSS Will the Safe Community Foundation have sufficient momentum to continue to exist if Paul Kells stepped aside?

PAUL Worldwide, I was never there to begin with. It was invented before I came around. It's been going for almost fifteen years worldwide. In Canada, there will be two communities who will be designated WHO Safe Communities. What has happened is a permanent change in those communities. If it all shrank down to just that, I know that there would probably be fifteen to twenty

people still alive in ten years that otherwise wouldn't be alive. That's enough for me.

Paul Kells is the founder of the Safe Communities Foundation in Canada. He will be speaking at a Symposium on the "Global Perspectives on Effective Workplace Safety Strategies" in Melbourne, Australia on the 15th and 16th of March 2000 and will go on to speak at the "5th International Congress on Work Injuries Prevention, Rehabilitation and Compensation" on 18th to 21st in Adelaide. Safety At Work will be providing more information on these events in the coming issues.

More information is available at:
www.safecommunities.ca
<http://www.workcongress5.org>
http://www.workcover.vic.gov.au/dir090/vwa/home.nsf/Pages/conf_march

