

# Hard Lessons

By Trisha Richards

*It took just a moment, a single step, to undo everything Scott Kovacs had worked so hard to achieve. Out of school for about a year, he was well on his way to crafting a career as a carpenter — just like his dad. Enjoying life, he had a car, he had a girlfriend and he had a job. What more could an 18-year-old want?*

## Looking ahead

“Scott was a kid who, growing up, was extremely shy,” says his mother, Linda Kovacs. “He had difficulty socially, a little bit, but he had just started coming out of his shell and getting his life together, and then this happened.”

This was July 22, 2005. Scott Kovacs had been working at a steel factory in Whitby, Ontario, east of Toronto, for just a few days. The apprentice carpenter for International Cooling Tower Inc., a company that constructs and repairs cooling towers and had been contracted by the factory, was working the night shift — something he was not used to doing.

On the nights prior to July 22, 2005, there had been another crew working below his area, providing light. On the night of the accident, however, there was no work activity, or light, coming from below.

Provincial investigators believe Scott Kovacs was walking along a work platform to obtain some fill material to be inserted into racks within the cooling tower. He had been instructed to disconnect from his harness to retrieve the material, his mother reports, although no such evidence was presented by the Crown during subsequent court appearances.



# Learned

The young worker fell about 20 feet through an uncovered opening, landing on the floor of an empty concrete well. The opening was not marked, guarded, and some argue, even visible.

Crown counsel Deanna Exner calls the work setup complicated. For the tasks being carried out, Exner notes, workers would move plywood boards over a large open space. Whatever the specifics of the work practices being followed, however, the possibility for workers to fall should not have existed, she contends.

An investigation by Ontario's Ministry of Labour (MOL) found that, at the time of the incident, the worker was wearing a full-body harness with a single lanyard and that he was unaware of the opening. The lanyard was not attached to a fixed support or lifeline to prevent a fall, an MOL statement notes. More training should have been provided to the worker to ensure the fall protection was properly worn and used, provincial investigators concluded.

When Scott Kovacs plummeted into darkness, his life was spared. His losses, however, were great: no more cruising in his car with his buddies; no more hugs for his girlfriend; no more opportunity to follow in his dad's footsteps.

He suffered a broken neck, a spinal cord injury, a fractured skull and other injuries. He is now paralyzed partially in both arms and completely in both legs.

For reasons unknown to the young worker and his family, the steel company was not charged, although the subcontractor, his employer, pleaded guilty to charges citing the need for proper lighting, equipment and training. Linda Kovacs says her husband later visited the factory. "My husband works in the trades, and he would have walked away from that facility."



## A clear view

Nothing is for certain, of course, but having more experience and information may have helped to prevent Scott Kovacs's debilitating injuries. New employees face a higher risk of work-related injury, something that may flow from the fact that too few are receiving the occupational health and safety training they need to recognize hazards and to know they have the right to voice concerns about work-related conditions.

Last year, in fact, researchers at the Institute for Work & Health (IWH) in Toronto reported that only 21 per cent of the more than 5,500 new workers taking part in a national study said they had received oh&s training — orientation, oh&s training or equipment instruction — in the first year of a new job.

"Not receiving this information might place the worker at greater risk as they will not know how to operate machinery, the location of workplace hazards or [will] be less aware of when work is becoming unsafe," says Peter Smith, a researcher at IWH and lead author on the study.

"Proper training is essential for all employees to ensure that each person understands the work they are doing, and the safety precautions they should take," agrees Mitzie Hunter, vice-president of external relations for Goodwill, Greater Toronto, Central and Eastern Ontario.

The IWH study results suggest requirements to provide health and safety training to new employees does not guarantee instruction will actually occur, even in high-risk groups. "High-risk" groups were defined as those previously shown to have higher rates of work-related injuries, Smith says. One such group was young workers, between 15 and 24; another was workers in jobs that require a lot of physical effort, such as lifting or standing in awkward postures.

Only 23 per cent of males and 20 per cent of females in the "young worker" range received safety training in the previous year, Smith says. Similarly, 19 per cent of non-manual workers received training compared with 24 per cent of those in manual occupations, this despite the latter group being more than three times more likely to sustain a work injury, he reports.

"Of course, if employees are not given training, some would suggest that they should just ask for it," Smith says. "But in reality, when you are young, new to a job, or need that job to get food on the table, do you really

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think a worker will want to create trouble for his employer?"

Think back, suggests Dwight Harper, vice-president of Local 598 of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers in Sudbury, Ontario. "Try to remember when you were a young worker," Harper says. "You were invincible and you had the attitude, 'It couldn't happen to me.' Also, remember you didn't want to get fired. Not much has changed."

But the costs of not asking — and/or not being informed — can be very high. "You can find another job; you can't 'find' another limb or life," Hunter says.

Smith suggests a more important question than why young workers aren't asking for training may revolve around why they need to ask in the first place. "Why shouldn't training always be provided — especially when there is an occupational health and safety act that legislates that it should be provided?"

## Speaking plainly

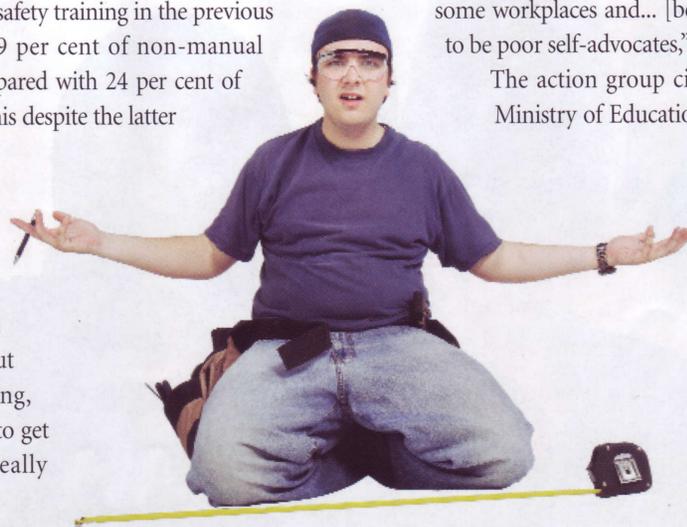
In the summer of 2006, the Minister's Action Group on Vulnerable Workers Under 25 was formed by then Ontario labour minister, Steve Peters, as chair.

Members of the group were charged with identifying gaps in communication, knowledge and skills that set the stage for work-related injuries and fatalities among young workers; seeking out best practices for a coordinated strategy to make workplaces safer for new, young and inexperienced workers; and suggesting methods, strategies and processes to provide appropriate oh&s awareness and education to workers who are under the age of 25 and outside of the education system.

Vulnerable workers may be so for a number of reasons, suggests Matt Wood, current executive director of the Ontario Association of Youth Employment Centres (OAYEC) in Toronto, and a former action group member. "It's not just inexperience, but also sometimes low levels of unionization, low levels of training in some workplaces and... [because of inexperience] tendency to be poor self-advocates," Wood says.

The action group cites information from Ontario's Ministry of Education that notes almost one-third of secondary school students did not graduate. Instead, they left school early and took on temporary and permanent work, falling under the jurisdiction of the MOL.

"Many youth, either early school-leavers or new graduates, enter Ontario workplaces, often taking on risky jobs and



## Safe Head Start

Nova Scotia is looking to get them (that is, children and youth) while they're young by encouraging injury prevention to be top of mind — each and every part of the day.

In late March, the provincial Department of Education announced the launch of a school-based safety program to help strengthen youth knowledge of injury prevention. Risk Watch, designed for primary to Grade 8 students, seeks to teach young people how to make safer choices, resist peer pressure and influence family members and others around them to take action to reduce risks.

Nova Scotia has become the first province to launch the program, which offers information on the eight leading causes of childhood injuries: motor vehicle incidents, fires and burns, poisoning, falls and playground injuries, firearm incidents, bike and pedestrian accidents, water and ice, and choking, suffocation and strangulation.

The resource is provided to schools by the Halifax Regional Municipality Safe Communities Coalition, Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency Service (HRFES) and the education department. "We have a responsibility to teach our children how to recognize and avoid everyday risks that can lead to injury," education minister Karen Casey says in a statement.

Noting that the majority of injuries to children are "preventable and predictable," Bill Mosher, chief director of the HRFES, suggests that elementary schools across the region and the province can use the program to incorporate safety lessons into daily activities in classrooms. Ultimately, the program can help "instill safer behaviours in future generations and help prevent injuries from occurring in the first place," Mosher adds.

facing unsafe conditions. Far too many are injured or killed. Sometimes, because of their availability and eagerness to work, they become team leaders, supervisors in charge of even younger workers," the report notes.

OAYEC and the IWH have "partnered to do a more in-depth study on vulnerable workers," Wood says. The online survey will be carried out over three years and will involve 2,000 young job-seekers to assess their workplace experiences.

Now disbanded, the action group concluded in its final report that the needs of out-of-school young workers who are vulnerable to serious workplace injuries are unique. "It is clear that traditional messages and delivery channels are not necessarily effective with this group of workers," the report notes.

Among the group's recommendations are the following:

- the MOL, the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) and other health and safety partners involved in developing social marketing and safety messages should make a special effort to understand and engage vulnerable, out-of-school youth;
- the MOL should consider ways to provide a youth-focused oh&s support system for those who need information about oh&s or want to report an incident in their workplace, perhaps, coordinating this with existing youth employment agencies and services or call centres, if possible, creating a single window for youth employment issues;
- the MOL and WSIB work with health and safety associations, government, employers and other partners to imple-

ment programs that will set benchmarks for high performance and exceptional orientation, training and supervision of new and young workers.

"Supervision is necessary to reinforce desired behaviour and discourage undesired behaviours," says Goodwill's Hunter.

Harper agrees, calling supervision the "kingpin in the health and safety link to the young worker." Unfortunately, he adds, some supervisors are not well-educated with respect to oh&s legislation and are under pressure to get the job done.

"Health and safety has to be pushed and demonstrated at all levels from the CEO of the operation to the worker doing the work. If the chain is dysfunctional at any level, the results will be predictable," Harper contends.

### A new approach

As part of her own research, Dr. Joanna Mitsopulos, a Toronto psychologist who counsels and assesses teens and specializes in workplace issues, examined methods employers could use

which may be a good fit with the approach and views to work safety commonly held by young workers.

"It is difficult to train out beliefs and thought processes that prevent young workers from asking questions regarding unsafe conditions because that requires knowing the psychological make-up of each young person," Dr. Mitsopulos explains.

Federal statistics in the United States show that teens are injured at a rate of at least two

