International Workers’ Memorial

Anne Murphy

When I was 11, my uncle, John Walsh, was killed when the job of a crane gave way and he was crushed. He died of his injuries a few hours later. I only remember parts of that day but I remember the devastation and the ripple effect through the family.

My father, Mike Hourigan, grew up in Traralgon and worked as a partner in the family business, Hourigan & Walsh Bridge Builders, until he left Traralgon for NSW in his late 40s. My parents bought a business in Coffs Harbour and the younger members of the family grew up there. At a later stage my father went back to bridge building and worked in parts of northern NSW. My father worked on various sites around northern NSW and southern Qld for different employers. Over his working life Dad had a number of roles within his own partnership and working for employers. He was a bridge builder, crane driver, rigger/scaffolder, concreter, heavy vehicle driver and business owner. When the then Dept of Labour in Victoria were formalising trades and issuing ‘tickets’ in recognition of tasks undertaken, Dad was issued with 6 different tickets.

In November of 2002 my father was working on the highway duplication near Grafton. His job, on this site, was driving the water truck to dampen down the roadworks. The job was due to close for the Christmas break on the 28th of November 2002 and my father was due to retire on that date as his 65th birthday was in late January of 2003. On the morning of the 27th of November my father was crushed to death by the work truck. As you can imagine, this was a major and catastrophic event within the family.

My mother was informed by the local police in Coffs Harbour and the family in Coffs were able to get together. I was at work on that lovely sunny November day. I had just finished doing the wages and looked up to see the reflection of my uncle in the glass window of the office. Funny how each part of that day is imprinted on the mind for a long time! My uncle and cousin came to my workplace to tell me that my father had been killed. It was only weeks later that I realised that this was my uncle’s brother as well. It must have been an horrendous thing for him to have to do – gather himself together and put his grief aside so that he could tell his goddaughter that she had lost her father. My cousin stayed with me and drove while I had the horrible task of ringing my siblings to tell them the news. I had to go to the basketball stadium in Traralgon to inform one of my sisters, I had to get a fellow worker to stay in the office with another sister when I rang her and I had to listen to the abject grief pouring from these members of my family. I had to go to the school to get my son and then ring my daughter’s workplace and get them to bring her home so that I could inform her. My other daughter was babysitting her young cousins in a suburb of Melbourne so I was not able to tell her immediately until her auntie had been informed. She still blames me for not telling her on time and no amount of explanation can take away her perceived hurt! I also had to contact my husband’s workplace to get him home as well and he was working in far east Gippsland at the time. In all I had to inform five siblings and my own immediate family. This is not a task I would wish on anyone.

In the ensuring years this family death has had implications that we could not have anticipated. There are often times that my mother has said things like “this is the sort of thing your father would have handled” or “this wouldn’t have happened if your father was alive”. My mother also stated that she felt she was ‘just existing’ since Dad has passed. At the time of Dad’s death his 9 children ranged in ages from 41 (me) down to 22. There are currently 27 grandchildren and 5 great-grandchildren in the family and 11 of these grandchildren and the 5 great-grandchildren have not had the opportunity to know their grandfather as they were born after November 2002. There has been 5 weddings without Dad as well as a number of 21st birthdays and other family celebrations that have all been lessened without the vibrant, gregarious, fun-loving man that was my father.

My father had wonderful plans for his retirement although he felt he was not going to be able to travel as he had wanted to. We, as his children, were in the process of rectifying that – we had opened a bank account where we were each contributing $10 a week and we were going to present that to our parents as a gift to enable them to travel. We were going to wait until the bank account was two years old – Dad died when the bank account was one year old.

Four years ago this June my brother-in-law came to my house on a Sunday morning, early, to inform me that his daughter had suicided. My niece was an apprentice spray-painter at a major car yard in the Latrobe Valley and had been the victim of workplace bullying by the males who worked with her in the body shop. This was not the reason behind her suicide but it was a major contributing factor. My beautiful niece was 19 years old and the middle child in her family. My brother-in-law said to me that he knew the news by the faces of the policemen that came to inform him. He said that their faces had the same look that the policemen had when they informed his grandparents that his mother had been killed.

Again I was in the unenviable position of having to inform family members of a horrible loss. I had to contact a brother-in-law in Western Australia who was estranged from the father of this girl. I had to contact my husband who was on a barge in the middle of the Timor Sea. I had to tell my children, two of whom were living in Western Australia, that they had lost their cousin.

My brother-in-law had been to the workplace of his daughter, wearing his union shirt, to let them know that he was aware of what was happening in an effort to get their actions stopped. His daughter did not want him to do anything more because she felt it would only inflame the situation. It was only after her death, when we were all talking together, that we found out the extent of the bullying she was going through and the implications it had on her whole life and the decision she ultimately made. Part of it was that the other young tradesman, who was 24 years old at the time, felt she was taking a job from ‘another bloke’ and, as a girl, she should not want to work where her passion was. The older man working there was in his late 30s/early 40s and participated in the bullying. The things they did to her were horrible. Her tragic death must have far-reaching implications for these men. I know of one lovely gentleman who worked where my niece worked, in a different department, who felt guilt that he hadn’t noticed anything. My niece did not tell him anything and he could not have known of anything happening as he, obviously, could not have imagined people he worked with being so nasty.

Mine is just one family in the greater Gippsland community that has suffered the tragedy of losing a member to a workplace accident. There are also the accidents that injure people permanently that have implications for their families. I would not wish the pain and heartache that we have suffered on my worst enemy. It is a pain that only dulls in time but never goes away. We, as a community, must continue to fight to make our workplaces safe so that, as the ad says, ‘they can come home’ to us.

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