

Father of workplace accident victim brings message of safety to youth

CYNTHIA REASON

October 1, 2009

What does a workplace safety champion look like?

That was the question Rob Ellis, founder of Our Youth at Work, tried to answer for students at Father John Redmond Catholic High School this week.

The answer, provided by the example of 17 such champions from the local corporate, hospital and union communities, was an easy one - someone who shows their concern for their employees by keeping the workplace happy and safe, prioritizing training and orientation, and encouraging employees to ask questions on the job.

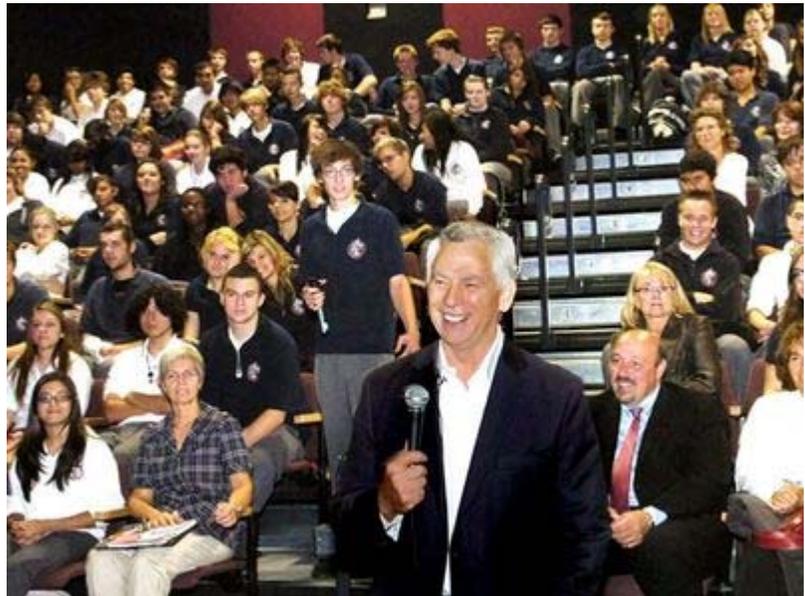
For Ellis, who knows first-hand the tragic pitfalls that can befall youth who are hired on by non-safety champions, that lesson was a poignant one he learned too late in life. His 18-year-old son David was fatally injured just two days into his first post-high school job at a Burlington bakery in February 1999.

In his impactful presentation on Thursday morning, Ellis invited Redmond students along for the tumultuous ride as he relived those fateful moments after first hearing about his son's accident.

"I want you to come with me on this journey, because I can't make it alone," he told the students, recalling the frantic call he received from his wife informing him of the accident and how they needed to get to the hospital immediately. "But before we get in the car, I want you to picture a person that is close to you - your mother, your father, sister or brother. We drive to the hospital, and the doctor is waiting for us at the door to walk us to where our loved one is.

"My knees were shaking. I'd never been more afraid. I thought I was a tough guy, but I'm not tough at all. My son Dave was lying on the bed. His blood was dripping on the floor, spattered on the walls. He was gasping for breath. It was my job to protect my son from this, and I couldn't do it."

One of Ellis' last memories of his son after that first day on the job is one that has haunted him. Ellis asked David how it went, and David just shrugged. Ellis left it at that.



Father of workplace accident victim brings message of safety to youth. Rob Ellis, founder of Youth At Work, talks to students at Father John Redmond Catholic Secondary School about workplace safety. Ellis' son David was killed while working at a bakery in 1999. *Staff photo/ IAN KELSO*

"I should have asked more questions; I should have asked if he had any training or orientation, and if the safety precautions had been laid out for him. But I was an old school thinker who thought that, with a good attitude and an open nature, he'd do fine," he said.

On his second day at work, David was working alone with a large industrial mixer. What he didn't know, Ellis said, was that government officials had recently done an inspection of the bakery and ordered his employer to install safety devices on that particular piece of equipment - a recommendation they had yet to act on.

"Dave went in and worked his shift for \$7.35 an hour, put his head down and did his work. Somehow, through a power surge, the mixer accidentally turned on and he was pulled down into the sharp blades," Ellis said. "He didn't have a chance."

In the aftermath of his son's tragic death, Ellis said he was inundated with questions from David's friends, asking how it could have happened. Ellis had no answers for them, but vowed then and there to protect them from the follies that ended his son's life.

Since then, Ellis founded Our Youth at Work, a non-profit group that gives youth the platform to come face-to-face with CEOs and executives to talk about workplace issues not always addressed in their job-hunting process. At Thursday's presentation, students were given the opportunity to question senior executives from Goodyear Canada, Lafarge, Loblaw Companies Ltd., Ontario Service Safety Alliance, and University Health Network, among others.

For Cierra File-Murby and Monika Baird, both 16-year-old co-op students, the message of the presentation came through loud and clear.

"I learned to ask questions, no matter what," said File-Murby, who's just finishing up her first week at a placement with the Institute for Sports Medicine.

"And I know now that I have to stand up for my rights, especially being a girl," added Baird, who's interning with a local event planner.

Although both girls said they received more than adequate safety training both at school before they embarked on their placements, and through on-the-job orientation, they now have the confidence to ask even more questions of their employers, both now and in their future careers - which is just the reaction Ellis was hoping for.

"I've made it my mission that not one of you will have to go through what we went through with David," he told the students. "I'm not going to let that happen."

This article is for personal use only courtesy of InsideToronto.com - a division of Metroland Media Group Ltd.
