



United Support & Memorial for Workplace Fatalities

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I'm here today to talk about an incident that happened in Mt Carroll – it's a small town in northwestern Illinois where my 19 year old nephew, Alex Pacas, was engulfed in grain and suffocated, along with 14 year old Wyatt Whitebread.

On that day, the boys were sent into a grain bin with 15 year old Chris Lawton and 20 year old Will Piper to “walk the corn,” an attempt to break up the corn, which is not allowed unless workers are wearing harnesses to ensure they won't be engulfed when the corn caves in.

In the course of doing that the two young ones – Wyatt and Chris – figured out they could break up the corn easier by sliding down it. So they were sliding down the corn. Now the corn crusts form a bridge, and there's a hollow pocket beneath it, and that's what makes it so dangerous to be in there.

So the crust broke, and Wyatt started sinking into the corn. The augers were running, and the augers are at the bottom of the bin and they bring the corn down, which is a big “no-no” while there are people inside the silo.

Wyatt started sinking; he was yelling “Help me, help me!” So Alex and Will tried to get to Wyatt. They grabbed ahold of him – they almost had Wyatt out – and corn is a great pressure, it takes a lot of pressure on you, so they were really struggling to get Wyatt out of this corn.

They almost freed him when the corn broke beneath Will and Alex. Wyatt sank awfully fast and was screaming “Help me! Please save me!” as the corn engulfed him – and Alex, my nephew – his best friend Will, were in there – and they were still trying to get to Wyatt.

Alex started screaming “Will, we're going to die!” and Will was like “No we're not, grab my hand.” Will was above Alex and he is pretty tall – and they grabbed hands.

Their hands started getting engulfed but Will had one free hand and the way my nephew was in the corn – he didn't have any free hands so the corn of course started flowing in around him and

he kept saying “Will, we’re going to die!” and Will was like “no we’re not. We’re gonna get out of here. Just hang on. Hang on!”

My nephew was the oldest of 7 children so he started talking to Will and he was saying, “You know, you need to tell my brothers and sisters how much I love them, you need tell my mom and dad” and Will was like “We’re gonna get out of here Alex, just hold on.”

As the corn was flowing around my nephew, he said the Lord’s Prayer, and it kept rising and Will kept trying to keep the corn out of his face, he kept brushing it back – trying to it out and of course, every time, the corn would flow back in and my nephew was straining his neck back as far as he could and he couldn’t stay above the grain. So, he became engulfed.

The rescue workers came and they managed to get a grain tube around Will to try to keep the grain from flowing around him anymore. What people don’t know is that when they did that, it was also around the body of my nephew. They were best friends – they had been best friends for years. Will was in there for, I think 6 hours while they tried to rescue him, staring at his dead friend – and he said at one point, he passed out, he became unconscious, because it’s really toxic in a grain bin and fell forward and right onto Alex.

Will was finally rescued, which we’re just so thankful for. But we had two boys die, and one who was trapped for hours.

Chris, the 15 year old, who witnessed the death of his 14 year old friend, keeps saying “I should have stayed; I should have stayed and helped.” He doesn’t understand if he had stayed, he would have been dead too.

The big thing about this is – first of all, none of these kids had training. There are safety procedures in place – the grain handling standard – and it’s been around since the 1980’s – it was not followed in any way, shape, or form. They should have had fall protection – and there was fall protection there – there were harnesses in the shed on the lot that the company had bought to satisfy an insurance requirement. But they had never given them to these kids. They never gave them training. The incident happened on Alex’s second day there.

They hired him as “cash under the table” labor. When the company got the call, when the owners got the call – that there was an accident at their grain bin, they did not know my nephew’s name. They called an attorney first – they didn’t even ask who the employees were that were involved.

It’s been over a year and the company has never issued any type of public statement or public condolence, nothing. They’ve gone through the OSHA investigation – they’ve gone through the wage and hour investigation.

They were given several willfuls and given half a million dollars in fines – not quite half a million – because of the number of youth they had working there – they negotiated that fine down – it’s still in the OSHA process – they have since sold the bin to another grain elevator.

They couldn't make sure their employees were safe. They couldn't follow the grain handling safety standard. They couldn't do any of that – and the regulations are out there – there's no excuse for it – but if you're not going to follow the regulation that's out there, how can we take away the enforcement?

We're very lucky OSHA's able to enforce this case to the degree it has – but there's been other cases it can't enforce and we can't away whatever teeth they have – and quite honestly, the amount of fines this company is going to pay – does not make up for the death of those 2 boys – does not make up for the nightmares that I know Will has – for the nightmares that this 15 year old has – for what those boys have to live with for the rest of their lives

For what my sister, and the Whitebreads have to live with, money doesn't make up for that, it never will – and we can't keep saying it's up to the employers to regulate themselves because, you know what, if they were doing it, we wouldn't have accidents.

Regulation is for the people who don't want to do the right thing and there is unfortunately always going to be a percentage of our population who doesn't want to do the right thing. And that's who we're targeting. We are not targeting the good employers – there are a lot of good employers out there – we're targeting people like this who have blatant disregard for human life.

I tell people this because I think it's important – I'm doing this for my nephew and for Will because their parents can't. They are barely functioning at this point.