

Make it safe

Tim Hamilton lost his life while working on a summer job. Now, his mom, Julie, travels the continent to raise awareness about the dangers students face in the workplace.

BY DINA O'MEARA

ILLUSTRATION BY JORDAN DROUGGE

Julie Hamilton was ecstatic when her 19-year-old son, Tim, came home one day in April with a job at a local company. Her first-born was making his way in the world, taking the initiative to find work and save up for college in the fall. The job seemed perfect for the tall, generous young man: outdoors, good money, manual labour and teamwork.

But the dream job turned deadly three months later when the 28-foot pole Tim and another young man were erecting from under a canvas came too close to a 27-foot power line. More than 14,400 volts of power arced from the line to the pole, killing Tim instantly and sending his co-worker to the Foothills Medical Centre's burn unit for weeks.

The two weren't working blind; an experienced adult was supervising the work outside the tent, and the site had been cased for almost six months before the incident. But no one had taken the time to measure the pole or the clearance from the power line.

"We thought that other adults were going to be thinking and behaving like we would, and that would be that you don't put somebody else's kid in that kind of danger," a heart-broken Julie says, nearly nine years later. "Tim's death was 100 per cent preventable, there's no way on the face of this earth that kid should have been hurt."

Tim's story is not unusual. Every year, approximately ten young people die in work-related incidents, from being electrocuted to dying in a car crash while delivering pizzas.

According to provincial statistics, being young, inexperienced and male increases your chances of being injured on the job. In 2005, youths between 15 and 24 years of age made up

18 per cent of Alberta's workforce, but suffered 20 per cent of the injuries. In contrast, people 45 and older represented 36 per cent of the workforce, but accounted for only 32 per cent of the injuries.

The number of lost-time claims due to workplace injuries increased three per cent in 2005 to 35,460, according to provincial statistics. And the harsh reality of Alberta's sizzling job market, where inexperienced workers can pick and choose where to work, has experts concerned. About 46,000 people moved to Alberta in 2006, many of them new immigrants with poor language skills, and more with little if any manual labour experience.

"Now, some people will tell us that with a greater increase in workers you might expect to see a proportionate number of injuries," Karen MacDonald, with Workplace Health and Safety, says of injury claims. "From my perspective, I suppose that's a nice statistical explanation for it. What it really tells me is we need to get our eye on the ball for the whole safety process. This includes adequate training and proper supervision of new workers, completion of job hazard assessments before starting to work, and expecting safe work attitudes on your site."

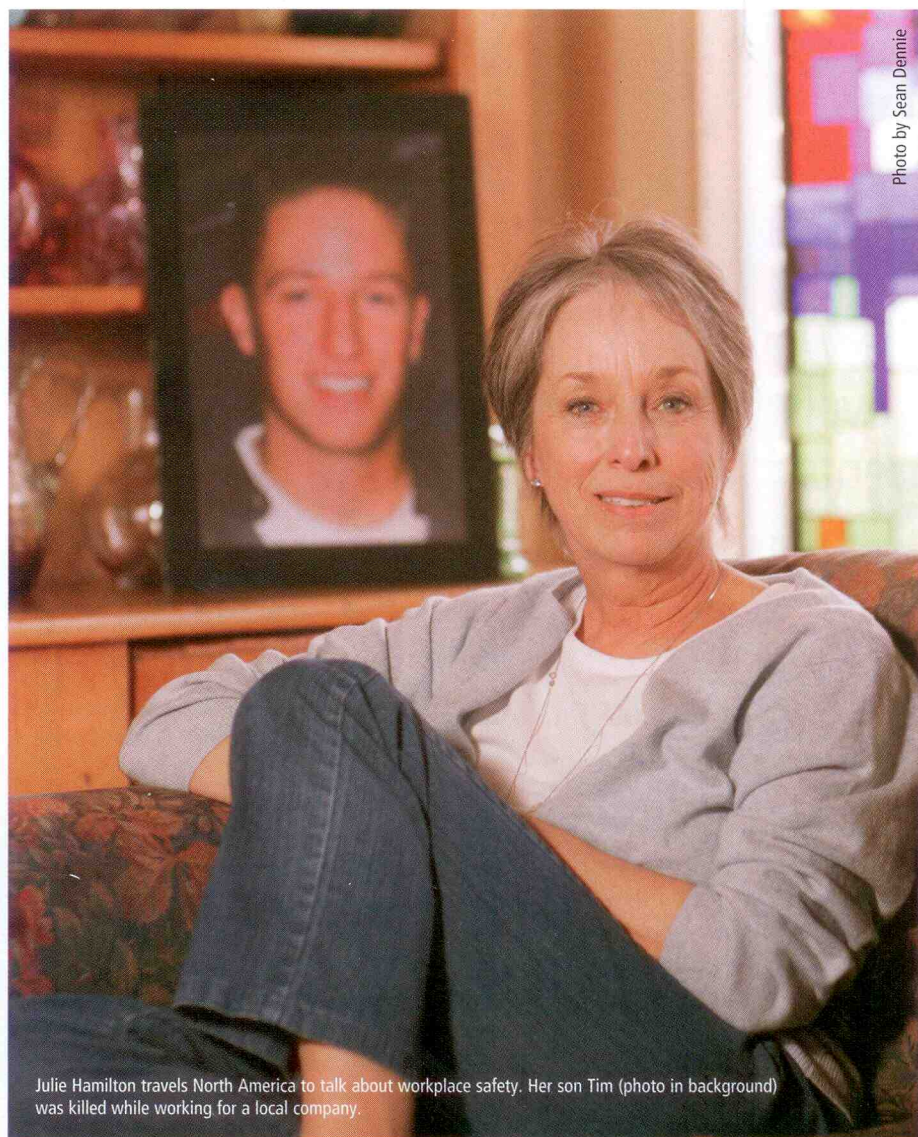
The Alberta government offers a number of programs aimed at making safety a top priority, both for employers and employees. The pro-

vincial Partners in Injury Reduction program and the Workers Compensation Board team up to offer incentives like Certificates of Recognition to employers meeting its standards, and in turn, the WCB lowers mandatory premiums. The province seeks input from industry on safety issues and solutions, spreads the information out among different agencies, encourages the exchange of ideas, and promotes mentorship. "We really need them to become engaged in safety and drive it," MacDonald says of employers. "If they get really entrenched in it, they start to own it."

But safety experts say young people have to take responsibility for their own safety, too, as well as for those around them, and parents play a big role in creating that awareness. Don't just talk to your kids about safety, they say, ask them about it, ask about the job site, be it a coffee franchise or a construction site, and teach them to not be afraid to ask questions, too.

"When we think about the situation of young workers, we have to consider their preparation for the job and their level of maturity and decision-making skills," says Nancy Staniland, Leader of the Calgary Health Region Injury Prevention and Control Services team. "In many instances where young people have been seriously injured or killed, a review of the event shows that they lacked the skills and experience to accurately assess the environments they were in and to identify and manage the risks."

The Region provides information about health promotion and injury prevention for the general public and also targets groups at high risk for injury, such as children and youth. One initiative, the Smart Risk Program, is delivered through



Julie Hamilton travels North America to talk about workplace safety. Her son Tim (photo in background) was killed while working for a local company.

"Why do I give this talk? To make you mad. I want you mad at anyone who does not take safety seriously."

public health nurses in the schools and provides information and support to teachers, students and parents. Smart Risk messages are short and to the point: Buckle Up, Drive Sober, Wear the Gear, Get Trained, Look First, Seek Help. These messages help to frame skill development opportunities for youth which are applicable to sporting activities, driving, on the job and basically in every area of life. "The main goals of the Smart Risk Program are to help young people think about the risks and to learn how to manage them through practice in a safe environment," Staniland says.

Like other learned skills, young people often need adult guidance on how to ask questions about safety, especially if they are in a new or unfamiliar environment, maybe even in a new country. "It's important to help young people to understand that it's a human right to work in a safe environment and that it's okay to speak up if

theres something about that environment or the behaviour of someone in the workplace, even the supervisor, that's not safe," she adds.

A key resource for parents is what they themselves can teach their children about manoeuvring through the world. Experts suggest parents talk about safety while they engage in safe behaviour, such as talking about how safety goggles keep things from scratching your eyes, as you put them on.

MacDonald uses the example of the bike helmet to illustrate her point. "What you don't want to do is have the bike helmet be the only way your kid is going to stop himself from being hurt on the road," MacDonald says. The bike helmet is your child's personal protective equipment (PPE) and last line of defence. Rather than relying on the helmet, you want to teach him good rules of the road, you want to teach him

how to manage traffic, you want to make sure he understands right and left signalling, and you want to make sure that his bike is working properly – brakes for instance. All these things are what you would consider as a parent to be safety controls: Here are the rules of how you're going to play.

"The same concepts extend to the workplace. You don't want to have your workers relying on PPE alone to keep them safe. There needs to be a safety plan in place that includes the assessment of worksite hazards, and a method of controlling those hazards that ideally eliminates the risk of injury altogether. Where engineering the hazards out of the work process isn't possible, administrative controls that put safety rules into practice to ensure that workers learn how to do the job safely and competently is key. Finally, you want to entrench these safe practices into your company culture by enforcing and reinforcing the rules."

Maintaining a safe work environment can be challenging in any circumstance, but even more so when the work place happens to be one of the largest construction projects in the world, says Brian Gautreau, Senior Safety Manager for heavy construction company JV Driver. He has 300 workers at the site of a massive oilsands expansion in northeastern Alberta, surrounded by thousands of other workers and millions of tonnes of equipment.

Yet the company received a safety award last year from the province for having the highest number of hours without lost-time claims. JV Driver's safety record also netted the industrial construction company a \$76,000 rebate in 2003 from the Alberta Workers Compensation Board, effectively reducing mandatory WCB contributions for all employees. The construction company's success at reducing workplace injuries is driven from the top down, Gautreau says. The challenge of having the hottest job market in the country is the influx of less-experienced workers, he says.

The company's philosophy is to start each new employee with a stringent orientation, and they aren't allowed on the job-site until their skills are evaluated through an observation program to uncover any shortcomings and correct them. They, and experienced employees, also get to hear a personal message from someone whose life will never be the same because of a preventable incident – Julie Hamilton.

Today, the petite "mom from the burbs" is a motivational speaker – not to grieving families like herself, husband Bob, and Tim's younger sister Maggie, but to construction and manufacturing workers, people in the oilpatch who are out on the

Workplace safety facts

Young workers at risk

Young workers between 15 and 24 have a high risk of on-the-job injuries.

Every year in Alberta an average of five workers aged 15 to 24 die in workplace incidents, and an additional five die in work-related motor vehicle incidents.

In 2005, young workers represented 17.5 per cent of those employed in Alberta and accounted for 20.4 per cent of the total lost-time claims.

Every year in Alberta approximately 7,600 workers aged 15 to 24 report on-the-job injuries. The next age category, 25 to 44, represents almost half of the workforce, at 46 per cent in 2005, and almost half the lost-time claims, 48 per cent. In contrast, older workers, aged 45 and older, represented 36 per cent of those employed and had 32 per cent of the total lost-time claims.

Watch your back

Sprains, strains and tears were the primary nature of injury, accounting for 41 per cent of lost-time claims among young workers. Injuries occur most often in the lower body, representing a third of WCB claims.

Who's the scariest?

From 2001 to 2005, the WCB recorded 45 fatalities involving workers aged 15 to 24.

The construction and construction trade services sector had the most, with 14 fatalities.

Mining and petroleum development followed with 13 fatalities.

The transportation, communication and utilities sector claimed nine fatalities.

Tips for young workers

If you're under 25, you're a third more likely to be injured on the job than people over 25. Don't settle for becoming a statistic.

- Know the rules
- Learn to spot a hazard
- Assess the risks and have a plan to deal with them
- Have proper training
- Use personal protective equipment and protective clothing
- Communicate with your team, co-workers and leaders
- Learn your rights
- Learn to speak up for yourself

For more information, check out X-Treme Safety at: www.alis.gov.ab.ca/pdf/cshop/xtremesafety.pdf. Or call the Workplace Health and Safety call centre toll-free at 1-866-415-8690 for a free copy to read and share with friends.

(Source: Alberta Workplace Health and Safety)

Smart risk messages

- Buckle Up
- Drive Sober
- Wear the Gear
- Get Trained
- Look First
- Seek Help

(Source: Calgary Health Region)



job-site, people who can help stem the rising tide of workplace injuries and fatalities. Hamilton's key message, given across North America, is personal and straightforward: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

"Why do I give this talk?" Hamilton asks a crowd of construction workers in Fort McMurray. "To make you mad. I want you mad at anyone who does not take safety seriously. Look around the room. Make eye contact with someone; next year your kid's summer job will be working for him. Do you feel comfortable with that? That also means that his kid will be working with you. Can you still look him in the eye? Look around you and ask, 'Do I want my kid doing that job in that way?' And if the answer is no, change it."

The talk has a definite impact on workers who have a tendency to become jaded with standard safety messages, Gautreau says. "Julie's message touches a lot of hearts because she brings a personal message with her presentation," he says. "It's not just a video. She touched them to the core and made it personal," he says.

Young people need to understand that being vigilant about safety is more than a responsibility and a right, MacDonald adds. "They have an obligation, and if they think that something is unsafe, they need to do something about it because they are equally responsible under the Occupational Health and Safety Act to look after the safety of themselves and of others around them," she says. "And if they aren't sure of what they are about to do they need to stop and say so. Because taking this step of stopping and asking may save a life – it might be their own."

Dina O'Meara is a Calgary writer.

FYI

You can read more about Tim Hamilton's story and Julie Hamilton's effort to promote workplace safety by visiting her website at www.missingtim.com

Other useful websites include:
Ten Questions to Ask Your Employer
www.hre.gov.ab.ca/cps/rde/xchg/hre/hs.xsl/3135.html

X-Treme Safety: A Survival Guide for New and Young Workers
www.employment.alberta.ca/cps/rde/xchg/hre/hs.xs/3313.html

Workers' Compensation Board:
www.wcb.ab.ca/workingsafely/