

Bernie Inman addressed a crowd of workers from utilities in the southwest to recount his work-related injuries

Safety Day

an opportunity for learning

In southwestern Ontario, many of the local utilities joined together earlier this year for a unique two-day safety meeting. Through several presentations, the group was able to exchange safety information that was important for all the firms.

The event, which was held in Chatham, was organized by staff from Entegrus, Essex Powerlines, London Hydro, Erie Thames Powerlines, Ascent, Bluewater Power, and St. Thomas Energy Inc. The importance of safety meetings such as this one was underscored by Entegrus CEO Jim Hogan during his opening remarks.

“Though keeping the lights on is extremely important, health and safety is number one,” he said. “Events like this demonstrate the importance of health and safety.”

The speakers’ topics were varied, but there was one important similarity. All of them stressed the importance of communication and the sharing of information when it comes to health and safety for the good of all.

Bernie Inman — The danger of complacency

While he was working in the petroleum industry in 1994, Bernie Inman, then a 27-year-old family man, was critically injured. For the 19 years since his accident, Bernie and his wife Sheila have been speaking to groups about the danger of complacency in health and



safety and how failing to take a few minor precautions can have devastating consequences.

“I would give anything for the chance to go back 19 years in time so I could take a different approach to safety,” he said.

As a power engineer in the petroleum industry, Bernie travelled to various well sites in rural northern Alberta.

“I was encouraged to report incidents and near misses, but I can tell you that if I took a shortcut and a near miss happened, no one knew except me.”

The day of his injury was a cold and wintry one. He wanted to finish work quickly and get home to see his wife, who was six months pregnant.

“I was good at my job. I got promoted and moved around because of my ability,” said Bernie. “Obviously I wasn’t as good as they or I thought—otherwise I’d still be working in that field instead of doing what I do today. “

While working alone on one of these remote sites, he entered the small building quickly and bumped his head on the way in. He was not wearing a hard hat.

He became disoriented, and though he doesn’t remember, he thinks he stumbled and struck a bleed valve on a methanol injection pump near the entrance. That explanation is based on the incident investigation and Bernie’s log book, because he has no memory of what happened to him that day.

Methanol, which was used to keep the lines from freezing, can be deadly. Bernie had become unconscious and was beginning to be exposed to the methanol, which was now pooling in the building.





When Sheila got home, she was surprised to find the house dark. She started phoning Bernie's friends and co-workers asking where he was. Eventually she reached one who set out to retrace Bernie's path. He found Bernie's truck with the door open and Bernie lying where he had been for almost 12 hours.

Bernie was airlifted to Vancouver to begin a long recovery from what the authorities deemed to be an "unsurvivable incident." Because of the length of his chemical exposure, he had second- and third-degree chemical burns to 70 per cent of his body. He suffered from organ failure and required blood transfusions and skin grafts.

"But I had the easy job," he said. "I was comatose."

Meanwhile Sheila had gone into premature labour from the shock of Bernie's injuries. She spent most of her time in hospital between the nursery and Bernie's ward. The co-worker who found Bernie was so troubled by the experience that he too needed an extended leave of absence to recover.

Bernie is now a quadriplegic and requires a great deal of physical help.

"I feel like I've cheated my kids. I've never tied their shoes or skates, but they've helped me with mine."

Over the months that followed, the family began to recover and Bernie began piecing together his accident and spreading his message of safety by describing his experience.

His family, now with two more children, is his reason for living, and Bernie hopes that's also a motivator for others: "Everyone is a VIP, and I guarantee someone somewhere is waiting for you to come home."

Bernie and his wife Sheila (centre) were invited to speak by representatives of Entegrus, Essex Powerlines, London Hydro, Erie Thames Powerlines, Ascent, Bluewater Power, and St. Thomas Energy Inc.

Dale Moore, Ontario Fire Marshal's office

Dale Moore is a fire protection specialist with the Ontario Fire Marshal's (OFM) office. He gave an extensive presentation on some of the situations that the OFM has investigated and some of the many hazards often found at these sites such as

- poorly stored dangerous chemicals
- electrical supply that has been tampered with
- humidity and mould that can cause respiratory problems
- fire hazards
- booby traps (e.g., devices that fire shotgun shells and razor blades) that are intended to injure anyone who enters the building.

He explained that illegal drug labs and marijuana grow ops are becoming more and more common. What is not widely known is that they can cause serious injuries to utility workers, who are often called in by authorities to disconnect the power.

Moore said that for every pound of methamphetamine produced, four or five pounds of chemical waste are created. That waste can be a danger to anyone who has to enter these buildings when the operation is discovered.

"Grow ops and drug labs affect the work that you do," Moore told the group. "The drug world is big business, and health and safety isn't a part of it."

Fuse Group — Safety training videos

Closing the day was a presentation from Todd Ross of the Fuse Group. This group of utilities has been helping to create a series of trade-specific videos for use in safety and new worker training.

This safety event is the second of its kind for the utilities in this region. The organizers say collaborations such as this allow the companies involved to

- promote a common vision for safety
- share their resources when planning events and initiatives
- improve communication between staff of neighbouring utilities.

The group hopes to continue holding such safety meetings in the coming years.