Tammy Miser, USMWF: Transforming Tragedy into Human Rights for Workers and Family

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Tammy Miser is the Founder and Executive Director of the United Support and Memorial for Workplace Fatalities (USMWF). USMWF is a non-profit organization that provides support, guidance and resources to those affected by preventable work-related deaths or serious injuries.

Tell us how your personal experience with the tragedy of workplace death led you to become an activist and about the work of USMWF.

I lost my brother Shawn Boone to a combustible aluminum dust explosion at his workplace (Hayes Lemmerz International) that caused 90% of his body to be burned. His last words were ‘I am in a world of hurt’. As I grieved for my brother, I thought about what I could do for him. I realized that it wasn’t about what I could do for Shawn, but what I could do for others. I felt like I was so alone but eventually I recognized I wasn’t. There were 5,000 people a year killed at the workplace and like me, every one of their family members felt lost, alone, and confused about where to turn for answers. That’s really what brought about our organization, USMWF.

Our Work: At first we focused on helping families who lost loved ones to workplace fatalities. We supported them in navigating the system and in dealing with their grief and frustration. I soon realized though USMWF could not just be a support group- it had to be something geared towards change. We decided it also needed to be about prevention of workplace fatalities, injuries and illness. Many deaths that have torn apart families would have been preventable with basic health and safety protections for workers - so we began to become involved in health and safety advocacy. This aspect of our work helps families to feel that their loved one did not die in vain, and that they can use their stories to prevent this from happening to others.

We wanted to try to change the way people see workplace fatalities and that is why we have the Faces Campaign. We wanted to put a face on these deaths to humanize workplace fatalities. Initially we were using images that depicted how workers were killed, relying on the shock value to grab people’s attention. We realized that it had to more real than that to hit home. The most powerful way to do so was to involve families - because to them, their loved one is not just a number, there’s a whole story behind the person who was killed. So we ask family members to send in pictures of their lost loved ones and we post them with a short description of how the victim died and a personal message from the relation sending in the picture. When you see faces, you can always relate in some way to the sister, the son, the father or someone close to the person pictured. I think that it why the campaign has made such an impact. Because it’s not just about how our loved ones died but their lives before that. It gives the fatalities a very personal aspect, and for the family members it is a compelling way to keep their loved one alive.

We also work towards advancing the rights of families and protections for workers through legislation and policy. If we can help with legislation, we will, but the process is so stinking slow. For example we
have tried very hard to get the Protecting American Workers Act (PAWA) passed with no luck so far. We had previously pushed for a Family Bill of Rights, what we call our Golden Rules and PAWA contained a lot of that. These are just very basic rights for family members who lose their loved ones on the job. For instance, it is very hard to find any information about the workplace incident leading to the death of your loved one. No one even calls the family to tell them there will be an Office of Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) investigation of the incident. I didn’t find out that OSHA had cited the company where I lost Shawn until a newspaper called me. These things are important- so we decided if we can’t count on legislation, we’re going to try to change policy. So we got involved with OSHA and worked with them on the policy front. We want to see so much more happen especially in terms of OSHA holding companies properly accountable. But we still made gains. OSHA does have to call the families now and let them know about any investigations of workplace violations that may have led to a family member’s death. Also family members are allowed to call and give input now.

Finally, besides just being there for the family, we also provide them with resources, information, support and any contacts they need to deal with the system and also for advocacy efforts.

Managing Anger & Building Solidarity within the group: In terms of solidarity, I think that’s something that comes to us naturally - we are all dealing with similar symptoms of grief and PTSD. There can be a lot of anger when you lose a loved one to a workplace incident that could have been prevented. But you have to get past your anger. I’m not really angry now. I am more upset with the government process as are other family members. Family members who get involved in this work think that the health and safety problems they have uncovered will be fixed because it’s really a simple fix. The government will take care of it and then no one else will have to go through what they did. For example, take my case: Combustible dust explosions can be prevented through simple regulation. I assumed regulation would be passed but even though people continue to die from combustible dust related incidents, the government is not taking the action needed to save lives. I think that realization is one of the hardest things for families. But we keep on fighting and doing what we can.

We encourage people to feel comfortable saying what they need to in order to express their anger and try to offer a safe place where people can vent and figure out what coping mechanisms might work best for them. We’re there for each other to talk things through and to take action together in solidarity. People don’t just rally around safety regulations for whatever killed their loved one; all the families come together to write letters, knock on doors, make calls, and do whatever else needed when an issue arises that is important to any of our family members.

What have you planned this Workers’ Memorial Day? What is your message on this day?

We’re holding a Workers’ Memorial Day event in Kentucky this April 28th where we will be remembering those we have lost to workplace fatalities and those who have been injured or made ill on the job. [For more details, visit: http://www.workermemorialday.org/WMD2013.htm]

For us, Workers’ Memorial Day is really a time of reflection and acknowledgement of our injured, ill and lost workers. It should also be about creating awareness. It does not do any good to have a memorial, or to acknowledge a loved one without trying to make a difference. At the same time I think if you’re going to have family members involved you have to respect that this time of remembrance is a sacred time for them and tone down the activism. It is important to find the right balance.

What are next steps for USMWF and what can be done now moving forward on health and safety and workers’ comp?
For USMWF, I would like to see us have more of a voice, to be more out there than we are. I would also like us to be more sustainable and grow as an organization.

On health and safety, we have a lot of specific recommendations- for example, the Solicitor of Labor should have a plan to communicate with family members of workplace fatality victims; and no penalty reduction should ever be applied to any violation which has directly contributed to a fatality.

We also believe as a group in fighting for transparency and fairness in both government and business investigative processes relating to health and safety conditions.

We want to be proactive on the prevention side – we don’t want people on workers’ compensation. But if there is a workplace incident leading to injury or illness or death, we want to make sure there is a decent process in place for workers and their loved ones. There is no doubt that the current workers’ compensation system needs to be improved.

When somebody is killed, everyone feels like that’s it, it’s done - but it’s not done for the family members. To consider just one specific aspect: something I’ve never been able to come to terms with, on the workers’ compensation front, is just how small the death benefits payments are. I’ve seen families left in thousands of dollars in debt even after a simple funeral and that’s just the beginning -the payments in no way provide any real support for families. Companies need to be held responsible for providing adequate death benefits; this should not fall on our government or on individuals who are going through this tragedy.

More generally, I feel that the voices of those directly affected by workplace violations must be heard. It makes a big difference. When family members testify for instance, that’s really powerful. We have more of that now that we used to but we still have a long way to go. It takes time.

Lastly I feel we all need to band together on issues where we can make a difference. The opposition doesn’t want new regulations, new policies or transparency. And every single group on our side wants the opposite of that, so why not collectively move issues? We all have similar goals so let’s work together and get it all done.

To learn more about the work of Tammy Miser and the United Support and Memorial for Workplace Fatalities, please visit [http://www.usmwf.org/](http://www.usmwf.org/)