

The Safety Journey of an Arc Flash Survivor

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Introduction

The Walk Safely Training Group's mission is to see our workforce realize accidents can be mitigated and to assist them in taking steps on the journey to an injury-free work place. Our vision is to educate, encourage and empower the workforce on the importance of creating a strong safety culture. We feel the safety testimony Rodney Walker shares and the interactive hazard recognition exercise together afford his audience the ability to take the necessary steps on the journey to a strong safety culture.

Walk Safely Training Group

Walk Safely on Safety: About Walk Safely

A workman's rendition of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man is at the center of the Walk Safely Training Group logo because of what it is believed to depict. It speaks to the complexity of the human body. It's believed to blend Science and Art. And finally, it contrasts the practical and spiritual sides of human existence.

The Vitruvian Man speaks to the contrast of safety. There is a science to safety, but equally important to science is the art. Knowing exactly when to use what approach and who should deliver the message, there is a little art to that. However we decide to approach safety, the science and/or art, we must know at the core of our existence, we can stop accidents from occurring. Rodney Walker and the Walk Safely Training Group provide the ignition or rekindling of that inner core's desire to stay safe.

Safety can be a complex journey. Safety takes a strong focused work force. Periodically that same work force requires a jump-start or a little outside encouragement to stay on track. If we stay on course, the goal of an injury-free work place can be achieved. We take one step at a time and we can reach our desired destination.

About Rodney Walker

Rodney Walker is a 24-year employee of one of the largest utilities in the US. Over his extensive career he has gained experiences on various levels of the utility industry. His background includes trade experience as an Aerial Linemen and a First Class Transmission & Substation Operator. He later began his professional career as an Electric Facilities Clearance Writer, an Environmental and Training Coordinator, a Safety Professional, a Behavioral Based Safety Consultant, First Line Supervisor, a Sr. Electric Methods Specialist and presently is an Instructor.

In the mid 90's, Rodney was severely injured in an electric arc flash. He received 1st, 2nd and 3rd degree burns to his head, face, neck, left arm and also sustained internal injuries. After several surgical procedures and countless rehabilitation sessions, Rodney returned to work with an even greater passion for safety and an overwhelming desire to keep others from injury.

Safety Presentation Outline

The Objectives:

The participants will...

- Understand the impact of an Accident and Injuries
- Understand the importance of PPE
- Identify Hazard

The Arc Flash Accident

- Detailed testimony of the High Voltage Arc Flash.
- In-depth description of the burn injuries, treatments and recover.
- Psychological impact and the hidden pains.

The Ripple Effect

- Emotional Impact and unseen scars.
- How many people are affected by an accident; a thought provoking introspective view.

Hazard Recognition

- Interactive group exercise: The group participates in an activity led by Rodney Walker as it pertains to the arc flash accident.
- The objective of the interactive exercise is to first have the participants identify the pre-cursors and causal factors that potentially led to the accident. Secondly, to encourage the participants to remain vigilant against complacency and maintain a watchful eye for themselves and their co-workers.

Synopsis – “The Safety Journey of an Arc Flash Survivor”

“The Safety Journey of an Arc Flash Survivor”

The Rodney Walker Story:

“I remember thinking that my 4-year old daughter won’t have anyone to play with because her daddy looks like a monster.” This was Rodney’s first thought just moments after the flash that would change his life. Rodney though, has no recollection of his thought process just before the incident. “What was I thinking?” Rodney shakes his head as he tries to recall the moments leading up to the accident, “I just don’t know,” he admits. But what Rodney can tell you, is that it wasn’t just one thing.

April 10, 1996

“I woke up, gave my pregnant wife a kiss and went off to work.” That part of Rodney Walker’s day was pretty routine, but the rest of his day proved to be anything but and would in fact change his life forever.

For Rodney, a substation operator for a Northeast utility, it was his first time at this particular substation. A recent company reorganization had changed his work location and co-workers. But he was a competent and confident employee. He had been in substations and handled switching hundreds of times before. That’s why he is still so haunted by how and why this thing could have happened to him. And why he says he shares his story, “The Safety Journey of an Arc Flash Survivor” with anyone who will listen. Recently, about 400 National Grid Power Plant Operation employees and guests had that opportunity.

The Lead Up

His job was to perform electrical switching to isolate an area so that work could be done safely and customers would not have an outage. Create a parallel circuit; pick up the load and open the normal feed. He performed his task for the first circuit and then he did the same for the second circuit. There was one more to go.

The Last Circuit

To this day, he doesn’t know why his new partner went looking for a flashlight for this last circuit. Even though he was by himself, Rodney proceeded to open the no-load switch on the last circuit. The last thing he remembers is hearing a boom, seeing an intense light and feeling extreme heat. Rodney had skipped a few critical steps in the process and went directly to opening a live, 4,000 volt circuit. It created what’s known as an arc flash. Investigators later found the relay cover on the electrical enclosure across from where the incident happened had turned into a glob of metal. This could only have happened at a metal-melting temperature of at least 3,100 degrees.

The Journey Begins

Rodney suffered first, second, and third degree burns over his face, neck, arms and upper body. He also suffered internal injuries and had to be on a ventilator for much of his recovery. As if his own injuries weren't enough to bear, he also bore the pain of knowing that his family and friends suffered along with him.

Rodney spent 21 days in the burn unit. His injuries left him with physical scars but he says it's the ones beneath the surface that now give him the most trouble.

Not One Thing

Rodney has had a lot of time to unravel the events of the day and he knows that several things contributed to his accident and his injuries.

Like a video in his mind, he has played it over and over again putting the pieces together; his thoughts of his wife as he left home, his new surroundings, the feeling of confidence, his conversation with the Distribution System Control Operator, what he did or didn't do at lunch break, his co-workers, the task at hand and even his involuntary reaction.

He changes a thought, a word, an action or in-action and rights all the wrongs but the scars still remain. Rodney knows he can never undo this thing so he does what he can do...tell others about it in the hopes that he can spare someone else the same grief. "I share this story because I want folks to go home just like they came in."

Sharing His Story

Rodney still works for the same utility and has held various positions in his 24 year career there. His passion for safety permeates everything he does, both on the job and off. Through the Walk Safely Training Group www.walksafely.org, he shares his safety journey with people in corporations, organizations, religious groups and schools throughout the country.

During Rodney's gripping presentation, he brings his audience through the long tunnel of that fateful day. When they come out, they too are left with scars but the kind Rodney hopes will keep them safe. "If I can change the way people are used to thinking and working, then I feel I've done my job."

Bibliography

Bentivegna, Lois. "The Journey of an Arc Flash Survivor – The Rodney Walker Story," Abstract for the National Grid Intranet. Long Island, NY, March 2013 (reprinted with permission).