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Workers die at alarming rate

King County building boom leads to accidents

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P-I REPORTER

Lucky is the wrong word for it. But things could have gone a lot worse for Tyler Scott when a tangle of hydraulic lines came crashing down on him.

Scott was part of a crew boring into Beacon Hill in Seattle, cutting rock to make way for a light rail station near the middle of a mile-long tunnel.

The falling lines destroyed his right knee and torqued his right ankle as they dragged him into the slurry-filled hole he'd helped dig. In the semi-liquid muck, he clung to consciousness; if he'd passed out, he'd have drowned in the minute it took to be rescued.

Scott survived that 2005 accident, but his career in construction was over. Another worker on the Sound Transit project, 49-year-old mechanic Bruce Merryman, wasn't so lucky.

In one of a string of high-profile workplace accidents in King County this year, Merryman was killed Feb. 7 when the service locomotive he was on went out of control in the Beacon Hill tunnel, and he was thrown or jumped from the engine.

Workers have been crushed to death at a South Seattle metal recycler and at the Port of Seattle. A contractor was electrocuted at a Federal Way amusement park. On Friday, firefighters rescued a worker at a Harrison Street construction site from a 40-foot-deep hole after the man suffered non-life-threatening injuries.

This year, already a lethal one for workers in King County, comes on the heels of the deadliest this decade.

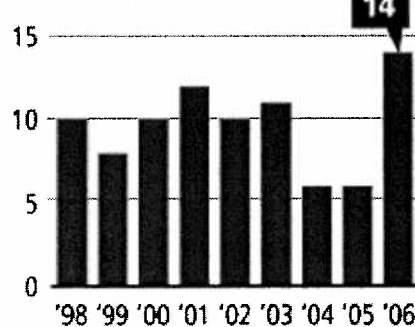
Not including workers in King County killed in homicides or car crashes, 14 people died in job-site accidents in 2006, according to a Seattle P-I analysis of statistics from the state Department of Labor and Industries. That's well above the county's five-year average of about nine workers killed a year in job-site accidents.

WORKPLACE DEATHS AND INJURIES

Last year was one of the deadliest in recent memory for workers in King County, in part because a boom in construction has drawn more people to risky jobs.

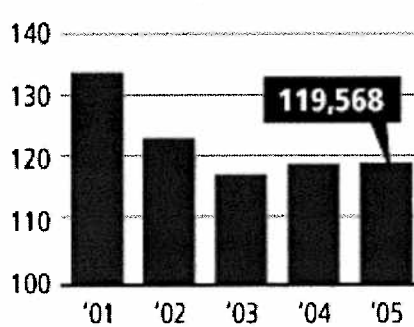
Workers killed on the job

In accidents, King County



Injury compensation claims

Washington state, in thousands



Note: These counts do not include workers killed or injured in on-the-job homicides or car crashes.

Source: Department of Labor and Industries

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On the whole, workplace accident rates are dropping in Washington and in the rest of the nation. But King County's construction boom has meant that more workers are active in the traditionally high-risk industry.

More work for construction companies has translated into more pressure on construction workers to produce, Scott said.

"These guys are being pushed," the former Des Moines resident said. "It's production, production, production."

Safety not always first

Injury rates remain high in the building trades, in natural resource extraction and in some manufacturing industries.

In part, that's because some employers aren't making safety a priority, said Leonard Smith, a spokesman for the Teamsters union local headquartered in Seattle.

"What we find is that there are generally two kinds of employers -- those who view safety as an asset and those who view it as an impediment to making money," Smith said.

The local has already lost one worker this year, Afrian Vega. State investigators are still looking into the Jan. 17 accident at Seattle Iron & Metals Corp. that killed Vega.

Smith said Washington's laws go a long way toward protecting workers. Still, the rules are only as strong as the state's ability to enforce them.

With just more than 100 inspectors, Washington's inspectors-per-worker ratio ranks among the top in the nation, said Rick Gleason, a safety trainer with the University of Washington and a former work-site inspector.

Idaho, for example, has just nine accident investigators covering the entire state. By comparison, Gleason said, the Washington Legislature this year directed Labor and Industries to hire 11 inspectors assigned solely to examine and certify cranes.

"We're getting safer," Gleason said. "But, if you're one of the 90 (Washington state) workers that's going to die this year, it doesn't really matter."

Because workplace deaths are rare, the number can vary widely from year to year, said Elaine Fischer, spokeswoman for Labor and Industries' safety program.

"Injury rates have been dropping for the last decade," Fischer said. But, she added, a few high-profile accidents "really brought the issue of workplace deaths to everyone's mind."

Some job-site disasters, such as the 2006 collapse of a tower crane in Bellevue, have garnered massive amounts of attention. Usually, though, workers who die on the job -- workers such as former Kirkland resident Cesar Umayam -- don't get much fanfare.

Umayam died after dropping through an uncovered, unguarded hole in the roof of a Clyde Hill home he was helping build.

The 15-foot fall didn't kill the spry, smiley Filipino American, not immediately. He clung to life at Harborview Medical Center for 25 agonizing days. Then, on Oct. 19, 2004, he was gone, only days before his 51st birthday.

"There aren't words for it," said Diane Umayam, his widow. "They go to work, and you expect them to come home at night."

After an investigation, Labor and Industries cited his employer, Elko Construction of Bellevue, for five violations and issued a \$6,500 fine. The roofer on the project, Bruce's Roofing LLC of Enumclaw, also was fined -- \$18,000 for two violations.

Diane Umayam said friends and family rallied around her after her husband of 21 years died. The couple's house of worship, Kirkland Seventh-day Adventist Church, created a memorial scholarship fund that has since helped send 18 children to summer camp or Seventh-day Adventist schools.

Diane Umayam said that each year on the anniversary of her husband's death, she brings 365 red roses to his grave to mark the year that passed. She sends six more roses -- five red, one white -- to each of his five siblings.

"My husband was a happy man who loved his life," Umayam said. "It honors him and serves God if I try to live a life that puts my family and friends at the forefront."

Risky construction work

As accidents go, the one that killed Cesar Umayam was a common one -- more of the roughly 1,200 American construction workers who die on the job each year are killed in falls than by any other cause.

While the industry employs only about 7 percent of the nation's work force, accidents on construction sites accounted for about 21 percent of workplace deaths, Gleason said, citing numbers from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Better safety equipment and stronger fall-protection rules have helped, Gleason said. But, he added, "construction as a whole has always been dangerous."

On Jan. 11, 2005, Scott, the Des Moines equipment operator, discovered just how dangerous the job site could get.

One moment Scott was walking under a crane near the pit's rim, working just as he had for three months. The next, he was being dragged by a mass of lines dropped from the crane into the pit.

"The injuries I sustained, they're going to affect me for the rest of my life," he said.

Scott got into construction after attending college for a few years. His Montana family, they're builders. Heavy equipment runs in his blood.

"My father's a retired operator, my grandfather was an operator for 65 years," he said. "It's pretty much what I've grown up with."

Being in construction, he'd heard the stories. Workers hurt, workers killed. Workers left with little to show for it afterward.

When he got hurt, a co-worker pointed him to Matt Knopp, a Seattle lawyer who's spent much of his 27-year career representing injured workers.

Scott, 34, sued Sound Transit and Obyashi Corp., the general contractor who hired Scott's employer, Soletanche Inc., to work on the project. He reached a settlement in May, though neither he nor Knopp will say for what amount.

Because building is booming in Puget Sound -- because there's more work to be done than companies to do it -- workers are being pushed too hard to work fast, Scott said.

"It may take a little more time to be safe ... but everybody is going to be able to go home and see their families at night," he said.

After his accident, Scott returned to Kalispell, Mont., to be near his family as he figures out how well his injuries will heal. He started a home-inspection business, a one-man operation. Three months ago, he and his wife had their first child, a boy.

Scott said he likes his new work. It gets him out of the house, lets him move at his own pace. Still, he said, he misses building.

Sometimes when he and his wife are out driving and they pass a construction site, she'll catch him staring at the workers and equipment.

"I'd love to go back, but I can't," he said. "She's just like, 'Quit looking at it.' And we keep going."

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