

What's your courage level?

Standfirst: Jeff Strampel, a Site Safe Safety Advisor talks candidly about a two week safety seminar tour with Rhett Brown, who is among other things, an ex-builder and tetraplegic and now professional motivational speaker on the benefits of safety in the workplace.

Site Safe New Zealand, ACC and the Department of Labour brought the height safety tour to eight New Zealand regional cities where Rhett was able to tell his story to over 800 people from the construction industry in total. Without exception while Rhett is speaking you can hear a pin drop. On two occasions people were so affected they had to step away for a respite, and on many occasions I witnessed tough construction workers fighting to hold tears back. At every seminar many people came up to Rhett afterwards to thank him and express their commitment to changing their attitude on safety for the benefit of themselves and their families.

Listening to Rhett day after day telling his local construction industry audiences of his accident and subsequent life, I couldn't help but develop a growing admiration for his courage and determination. I thought I understood the limitations of being confined to a wheelchair, but the confinement is the least of it. It's a total change of lifestyle. There is no more spontaneity; even minor activities have to be meticulously planned well in advance. He is constantly attended by a caregiver who handles the many things he can't manage himself; and there are a raft of on-going health issues.

Yes, it takes courage to live Rhett Browns life; I question myself as to whether I would have that level of courage. So it is with frustration I still encounter a culture of resistance to doing the job safely. Often individuals rationalise a failure to raise safety issues with their employers with statements such as "I'll be picked on if I

make a fuss” or “my boss will tell me off or even send me home” or “I don’t want to be the one who dobs our crew in” or “we won’t win any jobs if we do it the safe way”. All of these and similar statements amount to the same thing – a lack of courage to do what is right. So consider this; if you don’t have the courage to stand up for rights to be safe at work; do you have the courage to live Rhett Browns life?

This series of seminars in regional cities followed a tour run back in 2009 in Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch. Rhett was the key-note speaker and each of the organisations provided supporting safety information with an opportunity for a Q&A session. The initiative specifically targeted work at height, however the seminar was designed to be a wake up call for anyone who hasn’t given some serious consideration as to what the personal consequences will be if they fail to take reasonable precautions against being involved in an accident; and by “consequences” I don’t mean the immediate injuries that may be sustained from an accident, but the long term affect for the rest of your life.

For most of us being involved in a workplace accident is a hypothetical concept; there are now another 800 people who now view it as a clear reality and some of them are going to do something about it, even if it is just changing their personal habits.

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Site Safe New Zealand is the not-for-profit health and safety body for the New Zealand construction industry. For more information, see www.sitesafe.org.nz