



Announcer:

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Ken Rayner:

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm your host, Ken Rayner. According to statistics in IHSA's most recent Annual Report, which is posted at [IHSA.ca](https://www.ihsa.ca), workers in the sectors that we support—construction, transportation, and the electrical utilities—experienced 9,695 allowed lost-time injuries in 2023. This was an improvement over lost-time injuries in 2022, but it's still an awfully big number. Now, if we divide the 2023 number of 9,695 allowed lost-time injuries by 52 weeks, it equates to 186 workers each week in Ontario suffering a work-related injury or disease, which results in one of the following: being off work past the day of the incident, loss of wages or earnings, or a permanent disability or impairment. Now, what do these workers experience as a result of suffering a lost time injury? Well, to help us answer this question, I'm very pleased to welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*, Amber Hiuser. Hello, Amber. Welcome.

Amber Hiuser:

Good morning, Ken.

Ken Rayner:

Hey, great to have you here. Amber, we've had some previous conversations, and I really appreciate that you have an undeniable passion for workplace safety. Where does this passion come from?

Amber Hiuser:

The passion comes from the day my life changed. I was an 18-year-old and new on the job. I was working an integrated steel bit chop saw, and unfortunately my fingers became entangled with the blade. And the moment my life changed, it created a passion in me that I've just never been able to deny. Through public speaking, through conversations with peers, it's just a part of my day-to-day life. And it's the fuel that I have now in my profession, that gets me through every single day, knowing that I can make a change, a difference, an impact. And that's what keeps driving me.

Ken Rayner:

So what happened on that day when you were an 18-year-old at a new job?

Amber Hiuser:

I was working my way to get my apprenticeship. I was working as a tool and die apprentice. I was running a CNC [Computer Numerical Control] machine lathe. They had cycle times, and in between I was making stock cut for the upcoming shift. I had my hand on the aluminum stock. I was bringing it to the stopper when a machine beside me made a really loud, bad noise.

So, I took my eyes off my machine and I saw that the machine was fine. And in the same moment, my fingers came into contact with the blade. I was moving my hand to my side, and that's when I heard that bone-to-metal crushing noise of my fingers coming in contact with the blade, and realized I had been the one injured. And from that moment there, my fingers were dangling, people were running around. I was running to the first aid kit yelling, "Call 911," and things just rolled from there.

Ken Rayner:

Wow. But that wasn't the only lost-time injury that you've suffered on the job, is it?

Amber Hiuser:

No, sadly that's not. In the last two years, I was in a construction company, and I was trying to remove a stump that was stuck in between an excavator and a tree. When the tree let go and hit me in the face, I flew four feet backward and landed directly on my back. Luckily, I was wearing my hard hat and it protected my skull, but I was unconscious for 45 minutes with a concussion. I was spitting teeth out, apparently, when I came to. And that injury really drove home the message that I need to help in some way, more than what I already was doing in the safety field, and especially in the construction field, to shape a better future for other people—especially women, like myself, entering a male-dominated trade. But I truly enjoy construction and I truly enjoy safety, so pairing the two together has been a great expression of who I am.

Ken Rayner:

And I really appreciate you coming on to share your story, Amber. You're a speaker with Threads of Life, and as I mentioned to you earlier before the podcast started, you're our fourth speaker from Threads of Life. You're our fourth in total, but you're the first one that's come on that is describing the story of their own accounts. I really appreciate you sharing your personal story. Do you feel comfortable getting into the impact of these injuries on your personal life?

Amber Hiuser:

For sure. The moment that I entered Threads of Life and I went to the speaker training, I heard those impact statements from those families who were the voice for their loved ones. And it was all of them—there wasn't anyone like myself speaking out about the life-altering injury that I'm sustaining and having to deal with all that. And I know that I needed to be that voice for those workers who are suffering quietly behind closed doors, because that's what really happens after an injury. It doesn't just stop there. There are so many things that you have to do, that you're required to do, that you're forced to do after an injury. You have so many doctor's appointments and so many WSIB [Workplace Safety and Insurance Board] appointments. It just feels like it's an overwhelming amount of work that you're not

getting paid for; that you didn't ask for. And that, basically, was the result of something not being properly in place or some policy not being followed.

Ken Rayner:

The incidents themselves, as you've described to me, are really impactful. But, from what you shared with me, it was what happened after the incident and the actual treatment you had to go through on some of these injuries, which to me were staggering. And it's amazing that you're here to share the story, and you're still working, and you've dedicated yourself to ensuring that you're working within safe workplaces. Can you just describe a bit about what you went through? For people that haven't suffered a workplace injury before, and thankfully there's a lot, what was it that you had to go through? I mean, after your incident with the fingers, what happened after that when you got to the hospital?

Amber Hiuser:

I was actually sent home, because there were no hospital beds. So I literally had my fingers on ice in the emergency room, and was waiting to get back into triage for three hours. And when I finally got in and they finally saw my fingers, they're saying, "We're really sorry. We don't have any beds for you. Please come back tomorrow." So after that whole ordeal, I was able to finally get surgery, and the surgeon said, "Listen, I don't know what I'm going to be able to do for you. It's either going to be a full-thickness skin graft, where I sew your finger into your stomach, or I'm going to have to amputate it. And I can't give you an idea of which one it's going to be until I get in there." So as an injured worker at that point, I was sitting there wondering "what is going on?"

I woke up from the surgery, and my fingers were sewn into my stomach. They had attached my stomach onto my finger, and I was in the hospital for a week. I was on bed rest for two weeks. I had daily nursing visits, because I couldn't do anything. My hand was sewn into my stomach so fat would grow into the crevice. Instead of amputating it, they were trying anything they could to keep it, because I was 18 years old, I had a whole life ahead of me, where I'm going to need my hands. I'm going to be a mother. I'm going to be a worker. And so they tried really hard. But there was 35 stitches and two little fingers. They had removed tendons from my wrist to put it into my finger, just to hold it and stabilize it. I have screws holding those joints together.

After the whole being attached to yourself and comprehending what's going on in your life, all at once, it was pretty traumatic. There were agonizing hours of screaming torture as my Percocet would wear off, and you would have to time it right so you could take them and not feel this excruciating pain from your surgery, from this injury, from something that you didn't ask for or want for yourself. It's really hard to mentally deal with that when you have so many other things going on, like post-traumatic stress disorder, because that's something that I experienced. I full-heartedly thought that machine was going to come alive and come and eat me and attack me. Yet at the exact same moment, I knew that wasn't a real thing, but I couldn't shake that. I could not shake the fact that this machine was going to somehow still get me. So there's so many more aspects of a workplace injury or lost-time injury that come into play.

Now, with my second injury, which impacted my face, I had to get four root canals. I have five implants. I obtained an infection in that implant, so I had to get my jaw cracked open for them to reach the implant. And all these things have just come into play. And now, I feel I'm at a spot where I have the

opportunity to make sure those things don't happen to someone else. That companies that are COR[®] certified carry a different standard than the companies I've encountered, where my injuries occurred at. And I feel like this is a much better way for workers to know that there's something protecting them beyond just the regulation. There are companies that care.

And my companies didn't care, in both of those situations. The owner of the company where I injured my finger had lost the exact same fingers on the opposite hand, from the exact same situation, and still didn't have enough... I don't know what you want to call it...decency to not allow this to happen to someone else. Because it's not just a cut finger. This is a lifetime of mental anguish, of appointments, of consistent reminders daily. There's not a moment in the day where I don't think about my fingers or I don't feel the impact of my injury when I can't grip a steering wheel, when I can't pick up groceries, when I can't cut my grass anymore. There are so many moments when that comes into play, and that just creates the drive even more.

Ken Rayner:

Wow. Amber, you mentioned something interesting, and I understand you're currently employed as a health and safety coordinator with a company whose occupational health and safety management system has been COR[®] certified. What, to you, are the most significant differences that you've noticed between working for a company that's COR[®] certified compared to those other companies that you worked for that were not?

Amber Hiuser:

So far, I feel it's come down to a safety culture. A safety culture, either at a conversation level with our subcontractors. The safety culture that I am allowed to also bring into my workforce. So, the drive that I have within from my own personal experience, I am welcome to share that with others, and I'm welcome to spread that buzz of wanting to have safe work for everyone. And my company pushes leadership. They allow workers to bring their strengths into the workplace, whatever position they are, they give me that ability to be a leader in the safety field. To be someone who can create a better work culture and improve workplace safety. And they've done all the steps for me now. I just get to utilize all of their hard work and all of those COR[®] details and spread that into the workplace.

Ken Rayner:

Right on. Amber, we recently did a podcast on the impact of senior management on the performance of an occupational health and safety management system. Do you see that within your own company? Is that the impact of your senior management at the company that you're currently employed with, which is COR[®] certified? Do you see that difference in terms of the senior management support and the impact it has on the culture?

Amber Hiuser:

One hundred percent. At both companies that I worked for prior, I don't even know who the safety rep was. I don't even think anyone knew who the Safety Rep was. In fact, my second workplace didn't even have a safety rep. They didn't even have an up-to-date first aid kit. So, the level that I was exposed to, compared to where I am now, is a world of a difference. And I see that directly from my Health and

Safety Manager. It's a phone call away. It's a text message. It's whatever it needs to be. If I'm noticing a concern, that's a positive thing in a workplace, they're happy to know that there are people out there who are passionate about health and safety in a field where a lot of people brush it off, because maybe it hasn't affected them, or it's annoying, or because it's paperwork. That's okay. I'm okay with that, because I know that I've already experienced this and I just don't want that to happen to anyone else. I've heard the stories. I've met the moms, dads, brothers, sisters, husbands, and wives. I've met those families with a totally different stories than mine. And I'm just so happy that I'm here spreading my story and that I made it. I didn't have to let my family grieve because of someone else's mistakes and some other company's choice not to have some sort of great management system for their workers.

Ken Rayner:

And so those mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers and husbands and wives that you are talking about—those are the people that you've met through Threads of Life, is that right?

Amber Hiuser:

Absolutely, yes, at the Speakers Bureau that we hold every year and that we always have with open arms for anyone who's been affected. It's not just those people. It's co-workers. I can't even imagine what it must feel like to watch someone suffer a workplace tragedy or fatality. I mean, that's got to be profound. And that's where Threads of Life can help anyone who just experiences a workplace tragedy, fatality, or occupational disease. So many of the stories are from the most tragic losses, and it created a totally different empowerment for me, that I have heard these stories and I know all these situations in the workplace. They describe exactly what happened. Elevator shafts breaking and walls collapsing and things just happening. And that's all I see, all the time now at my workplace, and I want to avoid that. And having a COR[®]-certified company has all those tools in place for me to go out and make sure that we're all working safe and that we all go home. And that I don't have to be someone in a position and not have anything that can help workers. I have all the tools in my toolbox, and I have the opportunity to use them and to create a safe work culture in a new style, in a new way with happiness and with conversation flows and positivity.

Ken Rayner:

Amber, you've described your injuries, and you were talking about the peripheral of the other workers who sometimes witness those things. And I can only imagine, although you haven't described it—I appreciate you were unconscious at the time—but you said, "Unconscious for 45 minutes, literally spitting out teeth." I would have to believe that those workers that were on site with you that day and saw you unconscious for 45 minutes and called 911 and did all those type of things...that must have been an impact on them as well.

Amber Hiuser:

The person who actually created the incident is my partner to this day. So he was the one himself that witnessed me flying in the air with my arms flared to the side, like, "I was just smoked by Spider-Man," he said. And I'm just flying backwards four feet directly in the air and laying on the ground and getting up. And he's like, "I noticed something wasn't right, because you're walking, and then you sit down and

teeth are coming out. Blood's coming out." It was traumatic for them, because there were no policies in place, so what do you do when someone gets hurt? How do you address these scenarios? And it made a lasting effect for sure. And it wasn't the first, second, or third time that some of these workers have witnessed something like that. That's terrifying itself, and that's what I want to stop. I want to stop those moments where someone did watch it. And I want to make those into near instead of actually lost-time injuries.

Ken Rayner:

Yeah, absolutely. But even more so, that was your partner that witnessed it, right? Wow. To have to go through that as well. So talking about family, as you've shared with me, you're the mother of three children. And two of them, as I understand, are going to be eligible to legally work within Ontario as part-time or summer students very soon. So Amber, what guidance or wisdom are you going to be instilling in them as they begin contemplating that first job opportunity?

Amber Hiuser:

I came across a really great website from a mom who lost her son in the workplace, so that resonated with me. She had some tips and tricks for parents, and I feel those are the things I'm going to try to bring forth to my kids. And they were just something simple. She stated, "Pick your kid up from work so that you know what kind of workplace they're at, so you can see what kind of health and safety policies or procedures that company is doing. Then you know a little bit better of what your kid is walking into." She said, "Ask your kids, who are three people that you could go bring a concern to?" So, making sure your children know what are some options that they have if they notice something; if they don't feel safe. Because if you don't teach them some of these options like, "Hey, talk to a co-worker. Find out who your health and safety coordinator is. Go to anyone that's in your company, because someone should know an answer for you or direct you."

So just trying to engage them to understand that, if your gut is telling you something's wrong, there might be something wrong. So it's okay to ask questions, and it's okay to put your foot down, especially if you're 16, 26, 46, whatever it is. Put your foot down if it's really aggravating your gut, because your gut's usually never wrong. And I hope that my kids have a little bit of a gut going into the workforce, knowing what happened to their mom. They weren't alive when it happened, but they hear the impact it has on my life. They know what my injury was from. And I feel I've been able to engage them enough.

But hopefully, when the time comes for them to enter the workforce, they just have a little bit more of a safer eye. They are a little bit more aware, so that they can still be kids, and they can still have their fun having their first job, but they can just be a little bit safer. They can just do a little bit better than the last generation. They can just create some shift in a safety culture. And I want to be there to help guide them with that. Just to look out, "Hey, are there any power lines above you? Hey, do you know what a guard looks like?" If they're going into any kinds of hand tools, "Do you think you should wear safety glasses for this or not?" Trying to make it into a different question for them. Instead of telling them, "You have to wear this and you have to do that," quiz them, because kids like to feel that they know all the answers. So if you can give them questions that let them answer freely, I feel that's a learning opportunity.

Ken Rayner:

Those are great tips. I love it. Amber, thank you so much for being here today to share your story. As I said, this is really the first time we've had a guest on that shared an accounting of significant lost-time injuries and the impact of those and how it's impacted their personal life and their professional life. Thank you so much for sharing everything. I really appreciate it.

Amber Hiuser:

Oh, no problem. The whole thing is, instead of being that 18-year-old picking out the colleges I was going to or the roommates I would have, I was attending physiotherapy appointments, psych evaluations, WSIB claim appointments. I was calling pharmacists for refills for my medication, and I didn't even have children. I didn't have a car to have to make car payments for or house payments or hydro bills. So I can just only imagine what it's like for those older generations who have a lot more responsibilities. And that's why I feel I have a great driving force in the safety field, and I don't think it's going anywhere. I think it's just going to grow up from there.

Ken Rayner:

Good stuff. Well, we appreciate what you do for others in helping to keep everybody safe in the workplace. So thanks again, Amber. Pleasure to have you on the podcast.

Amber Hiuser:

No problem, anytime.

Ken Rayner:

All right. And thank you to the listeners for listening to the *IHSA Safety Podcast* and our episode on the impact of workplace injuries. Be sure to subscribe and like us on your podcast channel. And visit us at IHSA.ca for a wealth of health and safety resources and information.

Announcer:

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