

Episode 54:

Remembering Bot Gutierrez: A story of Workplace Tragedy

Host: Ken Rayner

Guest: Eugene Gutierrez



Ken Rayner:

Welcome to this special edition of the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm your host, Ken Rayner. Recently, at a small business event in London, Ontario, I had the opportunity to hear the story of Eulogio Gutierrez, who was known best by his friends and colleagues as Bot. The story of Bot Gutierrez was shared by his son, Eugene Gutierrez, who joins us on the podcast today. For our listeners, please be aware that the story Eugene is going to share may contain information that may be difficult for some of our listeners, as the story touches on pain, sorrow, anger, frustration, and many other challenging emotions. Eugene, sincere welcome to the IHSA Podcast. Thank you so much for being here.

Eugene Gutierrez:

Great. Thanks for having me, Ken.

Ken Rayner:

Eugene, hearing about your dad, and we obviously had an opportunity after the event in London to talk a bit and compare stories about our parents and compare stories about our dads, so I feel like had a chance to know your dad a bit, which I think makes your story even more compelling for me and more important. If you would, just tell the audience about this great, great father you had named Bot Gutierrez.

Eugene Gutierrez:

Great. Yeah, no, I would love to. Thank you. Well, where do I start? I mean, my dad was a pretty laid-back guy, very down-to-earth. He was the type of guy who really enjoyed his personal time at home, so he'd be often found either tending to his garden where... He had a really incredible green thumb, grew many vegetables in his backyard. I mean, the guy built three greenhouses. I mean, he probably could have filled the whole backyard with greenhouses if he could, but that's how much he loved it. If he wasn't gardening, he could be found baking or experimenting with new recipes, he really enjoyed being in the kitchen. Yeah, I mean, if not doing those things, he loved playing video games. That's something him and I really bonded over, or also tinkering on the computer. One of the things that I tell people, he was ahead of his time.

You'd hear about social media memes and funny pictures. Well, he had this thing of Photoshopping people's faces or their bodies in really comical scenes. Unfortunately, most of that was to my expense, but everyone else on my social media feeds, they seem to enjoy it and they would laugh it up. He lived for that stuff. What's funny is that what he really should have been doing, instead of messing around the computer was... The whole point was really to archive family photos and digitizing old family videos off VHS tapes, if anyone still remembers what that is. Yeah, he was a reserved guy and he was very much the guy to, that if you ran into him at the grocery store or at work, he would greet you with a smile and crack jokes and break out in laughter that, I mean, honestly, was very contagious. He was very much known for that.

He was very much a person who loved making people feel happy. He had a big heart and he liked to keep things lighthearted and simple. Even though he was my dad, in my adult years, and I'm sure you could probably appreciate as well too, him and I really got to a place where we treated and saw each other as best friends. Him and I really looked forward to spending more time together during his retirement years. Yeah, that's my dad in a nutshell. He's a piece of work.

Ken Rayner:

Eugene, from what you've shared with me before, and even right now, what comes to mind having never met your father, is just someone that brightens up a room when he comes in, just has that positive energy that lifts everyone's spirits and puts a smile on their face, and the type of person that you want to be around, right?

Eugene Gutierrez:

For sure.

Ken Rayner:

As I understand, on Monday, November the 27, 2017, for you and your family, all that changed.

Eugene Gutierrez:

Yeah, it really did. Yeah. Yeah, on the Monday of November 27, 2017. My father, he was a seasoned mining surveyor of 30 years, and it was the start of a work week, just a regular routine shift underground. His task at hand was to survey a newly developing area of the mine where there was lots of drilling taking place. There's water pumps, there's loud ventilation fans going on. It was made for quite the noisy environment, but nevertheless, his job was to do surveying work. For those who aren't familiar with that type of work, it really does demand a lot of attention and focus as you're ensuring that the calculations and the measurements that you're taking are precise and done properly. One does their very best to try and filter out all those distractions in order to get the job done. That said, within the same space that my dad was working in, a mining scoop tram, think of this low-profile tractor underground. It was coming in and out of the same space to remove muck and debris from recent blasting that had occurred. Sadly, through a combination of assumptions on the whereabouts of personnel, communication breakdown, makeshift barriers being removed, as well as key personnel leaving the space momentarily that, otherwise, those individuals would've acted as a second pair of eyes, tragedy struck that morning. About a couple hours into the shift, the operator of the mining scoop tram had turned a sharp corner to collect another load of muck, unaware that my father had returned to the space to take additional readings and falling within the blind spot of this scoop tram, which many miners know. This vehicle is notorious for having a wide array of blind spots. The operator didn't see my father, and my father, who was also, at the time, so intently focused on the work that he was doing, capturing measurements from his surveying equipment, he didn't know what was approaching behind him.

Unfortunately, the operator had tragically struck my father from behind, and the front of the bucket severing my father at the legs and scooped him into the bucket along with the muck and debris that he was there to collect. It wasn't until he unloaded the debris onto another level of the mine that the

operator discovered my father's body. Despite having first responders dispatched and immediately rushing to the aid of my father, it was too late, he was already dead. I remember getting that phone call from my mom like it was yesterday. I can still remember taking that call and remembering how shaky her voice was and hearing the words, "Euge, there was an accident and Daddy's dead. Daddy's dead." Hearing that repeated over and over as if... It's just shock of like, "Did this actually happen?" I didn't want to believe it, because the reality is I had just spoke with the guy over the weekend right before that shift.

It was like a bad dream that I so desperately wanted to wake up from, but sadly, I knew that there was no waking up from this and that, at the time, I was away on business when I took the phone call and I was about to enter a client presentation when I took the call out in the hallway. I just remember, at the time, just falling to the floor in the hallway, just screaming and crying. Suffice to say, it was the most painful moment in my life. The awful part about it, too, is that the guy was just... He was about six months away from retiring. Yeah, not exactly how we envisioned him leaving the mine.

Ken Rayner:

Well, Eugene, there's been a lot of healing that's gone on since that point in time. Maybe in the weeks and months following your father's tragic passing, what was your healing process and how did you and your family reconstruct your life?

Eugene Gutierrez:

Yeah. I mean, to be honest, in the beginning, it took some time. At the beginning, there really wasn't a healing process at the beginning, at least for me, and that was the problem. I struggled with figuring out, "How do I pull myself together to start any healing process?" I didn't know how to deal with the grief of losing my dad in such a horrific manner. I remember, a few weeks after the funeral, everyone goes away and reality sets in, and you're really just left to your own devices. I just remember sitting alone in the basement, I'd surround myself with old photographs and just looking at pictures of my dad, and I just remember just sitting there and just crying until nothing else would come out.

Not exactly, at least when I reflect on that time, it wasn't... I don't know, for me, it didn't feel productive. In hindsight, I don't even know if it did much for me. I think about my mom, God bless her, she was such a strong woman of faith, still is today, so for her, I looked at her during that moment, and her healing process, she really leaned on religion and her spirituality as her north star to give her the strength to move forward and help mend the broken pieces of her life, of our life, without my father. My sister, who really takes more after my dad, she kept herself, her grief, she kept that mostly private. When I looked at my sister, when I looked at my mom, and I'm seeing how they're coping, I was trying to figure out, "Well, okay, how do I navigate?" Because for me, when I compared myself to them, I was the type of person that I wanted and needed to take action, but I didn't know where to begin to heal.

While I was very blessed to have wonderful close friends, and they were always there to lend an ear, to stop by the house, to bring the family anything we needed, for me, I really needed someone who knew exactly what this thing was, what this thing I was going through. I tried counseling through my company's EAP [Employee Assistance Program] at the time, but even that didn't seem to help, because I'd be telling the counselor all these things, and unfortunately, they were quite transparent too, they just couldn't relate to the same level. Truth be told, it wasn't until I contacted my WSIB caseworker and I was

really pleading to her. I said, "Hey, I'm at my wits end here and I need additional resources, because the stuff that I'm trying is just not helping." She had put me in touch with an organization called Threads of Life, and it wasn't until that moment that I started learning about this organization and the services that they provided to families that I started to realize, "Hey, there could be something here," because they really specialized in helping families deal with the aftermath of a workplace tragedy.

Really, I'd say that, yeah, it wasn't until I met Threads of Life that that's when things started to click and the quote, unquote "healing process" really started to take flight.

Ken Rayner:

Right. You and I met at an event where you were speaking on behalf of Threads of Life. IHSA has been a partner of Threads of Life for many, many years, and we as well just admire the services that they provide, and they have our full support. It's incredible what they provide out to the families. Maybe share, if you would, Eugene, what are some of those support services that you found from Threads to be so helpful to you and your family?

Eugene Gutierrez:

Yeah, for sure. I mean, God, where do I begin? I mean, first and foremost, Threads of Life, so I mentioned I really needed to find someone that could relate to what I was going through, and Threads of Life really provided me with a community of people that knew exactly what I was feeling, I was going through, what I could expect on my journey of healing, on my journey to obtain answers regarding the investigation of my father's death. In the beginning, what they helped me with was they paired me with another family member who experienced similar trauma from a workplace tragedy, and from there, I received peer support. This was someone whom I could talk to as often as I needed to help me process my grief, to help me navigate the road ahead, to answer any questions that I had about this very unique experience that was going through.

Truth be told, that ability to relate to how it was feeling really was so instrumental to my healing process. The ability to relate. Even now, I struggle with the words to fully articulate what that meant, it really made a big difference. Really, from there, I attended these family forums that were organized by Threads of Life, where I had the opportunity to meet in person other family members, and have the opportunity to also attend workshops to help with things like grief management, to learn tools and skills that I can employ to help manage my emotions and help navigate that quote-unquote "New normal." I can't overemphasize enough that the healing power or Threads of Life's community really was so powerful and inspiring that it moved me, as you know, having met at a speaking engagement that I was thankful to participate, that it really moved me to become a volunteer myself, to pay it forward and to help other family members, and as well help raise awareness on the importance of workplace health and safety.

My transformation into being a strong advocate for safety not only aided my own healing, but it gave me a new identity, it also gave me an opportunity to fundamentally ensure that my father's death was not in vain, and to really help keep his memory alive while ensuring that, "Hey, I don't want any family or anyone to experience what I went through firsthand."

Ken Rayner:

Yeah. Eugene, I can't thank you enough for being on this podcast. I know you've shared with us an incredibly personal story. Could I ask maybe just in terms of... What would be that message for all those Ontarians that are going to listen to this podcast, and if they're listening to it maybe at night and they're thinking about that next day going off to work? They're kissing their loved ones goodbye in the same way that your dad would kiss your mom every day before he went to work. What's that message to those Ontarians that are going off to work from you today?

Eugene Gutierrez:

Yeah. For those who are heading off to work, I would say to all of you we are never promised tomorrow. We don't know what the future will bring, but what we do know, what we can control is what we do in the present, in the here and now. Our actions matter, no matter how big or small. Safety in the workplace is not the job of one person, but it's a shared responsibility amongst everyone, so we all need to do our part to not only look out for ourselves, but to look out for one another, because at the end of the day, we all matter. A workplace tragedy doesn't just impact a single person, it causes ripple effects that impacts family members, it impacts friends, it impacts coworkers, it impacts communities for a lifetime. Control what you can control, work safely, and remember that you matter and that you also matter to someone else. That's what I would leave with everyone.

Ken Rayner:

Yep. Thank you very much for that, Eugene, and thank you very much for the listeners for joining us on this very special podcast. Thank you, Eugene.

Eugene Gutierrez:

Thank you for having me.