

Workers' Ladder Injury Stories

Radio Novella (translated from Spanish)

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What happened my friend? Taking an early break?

Oh, my friend that would be good. The break that I took was with the ladder

Oh, yes, I see. I see that you broke the leg.

Hang on there; it's called foot, not a hoof.

No, no, I meant the ladder. Look, it looks like it bent and broke. Don't tell me that you also broke you leg.

The drama that we just listened to may make us laugh a little. But unfortunately these ladder accidents injure hundreds even thousands of persons each year in the state of Washington. We will listen to some real life stores that will show us how dangerous it is to not use a ladder correctly.

I'm Antonio and I'm from Michoacán and unfortunately I had an accident on a ladder, I was working picking apples and I was around on the 8th step and I just only needed to reach for some apples on a branch because I didn't want to leave them because they didn't want you to leave any apples behind. Well, it had rained a bit and the ground was a bit slippery and so my ladder went to a side and I went head first with the bag full of apples and I hurt my neck, my arm and my waist. It's real painful and it doesn't allow me to work anymore.

My name is Gregory and I'm from the state of Durango. I only had two apples bins so far and there they didn't want you to leave any apples behind, so I set the ladder and I tried to get an apple and that's when I went head first. I was on the 8th step of a 10 ft ladder, which is how I broke my neck. It was a surprise for me when I was taken to the recovery room, a wheel chair was there with my name on it and I said, no I am not going to be in that wheel chair because I had been working with that company for 20 years picking apples and I had never had an accident.

My name is Isabel and I come from Guerrero. I got to work and the ladder was a 12 ft and I went backwards because the foreman would always tell us not to leave anything. And I would tell them that the ladder was too tall and they would say that they only wanted the fruit. I hurt my neck, the back. You risk your life and afterwards you can't do anything.

My name is Eliseo and I'm from the Federal District, well, this happened to me and I got hurt and I am now disable and I can't work.

My name is Esmeralda and I'm from Colima Mexico. When they put us to work, the ladder that I got, I saw that it was a bit loose; I told the person who was in charge of the people and gave the ladders that the ladder was loose and he said that he would bring a better ladder in the next round. They also didn't want any cherry left behind the fruit on the trees. And I said that I had to go one higher to get the fruit but when I stretched I fell. I had two operations; they put seven screws, one platinum, one staple, and one screw more potent and thicker. Either way my leg didn't get better.

I had a 12 ft ladder, I stood on the top and I slipped and I fell on the tree, I had been pruning. The problem was the ice that was on the top and they wanted every branch on the tree pruned. I was disabled for more than seven years. And I broke my ribs, I hurt my foot. I can't turn half of my body very well. I had two operations on my hand. I have 14 screws and one platinum.

A medley of phrases from previous interviews

... and the ground was a bit slippery... and they would say that they only wanted the fruit... I tried to get an apple... I saw that the ladder was a bit loose... I stood on the top and I slipped...

We will now talk with Mr. Pedro Serrano, specialist in safety and health from the department of LNI

Mr. Serrano, how serious are the accidents in the orchard and in particular with the ladders?

First, I would like to say that a ladder accident is an accident and a claim that is very common. Just this past year there were almost one million cases filed of falls from ladders. The first mistake that people make is that it will never happen to them. You should always respect the ladder.

What accident is the most frequent and why?

The most common accident I see is on the second step, on the second step when you are coming down of the ladder sometimes you think that you are already on the ground, and they fall and that is when you break you leg.

What is required from the employers?

The employer is required by Washington State law to train them. To show them how pick fruit on a ladder.

What can or should a worker do when s/he feels they are in an unsafe or dangerous situation?

First, talk to the foreman, say, "hey, I can't reach the fruit, I think its unsafe, why don't you bring me a ladder that could reach". There are also laws that say that ladders should also be a certain height. And if the worker is forced to work, unsafe, that s/he get on the little table or try to reach, talk to the boss, talk to the second level of the ranch. If the owner is there or if you are doing unsafe things don't do it. When the accident happen, its way to late. You can also file a claim with the department, anonymously, where the name of the person filing the claim isn't used.

Let's now listen to a call on the radio about other dangers that we should consider

I think that it's a simple thing with ladders but at the same time not so simple. In other words, its very hard work because I have been using a ladder for 30 years and I still haven't learned. There are small animals that we call "tusas" and they go and dig in the dirt and then when you set the ladder and you are on it the ladder sinks and that is when we go. The worst is that you don't even get the "tusa"

What message do injured workers give to foremen and orchard owners?

To the foremen, first, check the ladders one by one. Talk with the people that already have the training, and either way explain to them how to use them and prepare the people.

What do you think you could have done to prevent the accident?

Easy, not to get on the ladder's little table top. It would have been better to leave the branch, I should've have cut it with a hook. But the foreman wasn't there and I wanted to get ahead. This happened to me due to lack of experience.

How has being injured affected you?

Yes, you return to the field but you do not have the same capabilities as when you were well. It's not the same.

Mr. Serrano, why should we worry when someone is injured?

When an accident occurs it costs us all. All of us, as employees and employers are paying for that industrial insurance. When an accident happens at work, it's called an industrial accident and you have the right when that accident happens, you go to the hospital, the doctor and they tell them that it happened while at your work. That employee has the right for all his medical costs to be paid.

What are the workers' rights to prevent accidents, regarding training?

People should be trained before working. They should be told not to get on the little table or the second step. They should be told how to inspect the ladder. They should be told not to try to reach the fruit they can't reach. How to get down of the ladder, be sure they are all the way down on the ground and how to position the third leg. And hopefully the bosses will start doing so. That is the law. It should be done that way

What should the agricultural worker do to avoid accidents?

The best and greatest advice that I can give is inspect the ladder before starting to work. If it's bad, tell the foreman or the boss, the owner with whom you are working.

Lastly, we will listen the advice and recommendations from those who have had accidents themselves from falling off ladders. Please pay close attention.

They never check to see if the ladders are loose or are not resistant. That they should be less strict with the people. That they also give instructions and that they have good ladders. Well, your health is what is important and you have to take care of it.

Well, I think that you should set the ladder and try to find a way to reach all the apples that you can reach. And if you see that you can't reach all the apples, move the ladder again to reach the apples. Because sometimes the foreman will tell you not to leave any apples and that more information be given to the workers.

First, if you are on the ladder, inspect your ladder well, another thing, in the way the terrain is, how the orchard is planted. If it is up on a hill, if you haven't learned how to use the ladder, first have them show you how. Because if you don't the ladder can go out on you. The ladders leg will open and it will take to you to the ground.

That the people who are in charge not be so demanding because if they put their part, say, "well, if you can't do it, well, don't get it down, don't try it because you can fall". That the foreman be more human. That they should help us out a little. That we also understand that they have a work to do, but they should also understand that we are people with feelings, human beings. That they should treat us a bit better.

They should think that they are going to fall in the second minute. Because I was real confident, real comfortable and that is not worth the risk. When you start working there, you should be responsible, and attentive.

If I had been a foreman, now I say, first, instead of this person being hurt, it affects all the family. More so how much their recovery is going to cost me, their re-training. All that will cost more. Its better to pay attention, listen to the people, and not after a while or later, tomorrow, and it will be over. But you think about it afterwards, after things happen.

o.k., what I recommend to everyone is that, first, if it is real windy don't get on the ladder. The more money you make the more you spend. I advise all my friends that first they learn on how to use the ladder and don't get on the little table because it's from there that you slip and fall and it will set you back forever. Even if the foreman says, you know we have to finish today". But if the people see that if they have an accident it will be for a long time and it will be worse than losing one day of work.

It was high where I was working and I fell and when I fell, I hurt myself real bad. I had to stop but I didn't say anything, some times you fall and you are embarrassed that someone saw you fall, you bear it. That is our error.

That they should give a little more attention to the workers. When I arrived from Mexico I didn't know and the man tells me, "If you can prune that branch the work is yours". And yes, I got there and I cut it and he gave me the job. They don't care about the people. All they want is for someone to do the work and they don't care about anything.

We hope that our tradition of storytelling and listening to these workers who were injured helps us understand the dangerous of agriculture. We should think twice about what to do when we can't reach the fruit or when we are ready to go up or down the ladder. We should make sure where we are at and to select our ladder. Make sure it's in good condition. Protect your well being, this way you protect your family.

Brought to you by the University of Washington and the Prevention of Ladder Accident



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