



Teaching young workers about the right to refuse work

By Jesse Marchand

When Jack Thomas took a summer job at the age of 17, the last thing he expected was to receive a life-changing injury. Now, he and other injured workers are speaking to youth about their rights.

Today, Jack Thomas is studying music at Vancouver's Nimbus School of Recording and Media, where he's about to complete his fourth diploma. His hardcore band just released an EP, and he released a full album last October. Like many young people, he's juggling the balance of time with friends and family with studying and planning for his future. But his dreams of becoming a professional musician were almost derailed in 2015, when he took a summer job at a recycling facility in Port Coquitlam and, two months in, his sleeve became caught in an exposed roller.

He was cleaning out the sorting conveyer when the belt suddenly started up and caught his sleeve. There was no one else there to see what happened, so there was no one to stop the machine before it was too late.

"When I woke up, I made an effort not to look down so as not to panic," he says. "I ran outside and yelled for help, and asked someone to grab my hand. I had my eyes shut and couldn't feel my arm, so I asked the man if [it] was there." Jack Thomas lost his right arm from the elbow down that day.

Warning signs

When he thinks back to that day in 2015, what he remembers most are the warning signs.

"There were so many things telling me I shouldn't be at work that day," he says. A case of bronchitis should have been enough to keep him at home, but he'd only been working there for two months and felt like calling in sick would be letting his workplace down. "All I wanted to do was maintain this job and impress my co-workers and my boss," he says.

When he started the job three months earlier, he remembers thinking to himself that the process for operating the conveyor was "ridiculously unsafe." But he didn't think much of it. "I didn't think about it

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—Jack Thomas, injured worker

because I was 17 and had only been working there for three months. Everybody else had been working there for years,” he says.

“At the time, I didn’t listen to my gut instinct and I didn’t think about my right to refuse work if it didn’t feel right to me.” Even though his boss had encouraged him to stay home and another employee had offered to take his shift, he still didn’t feel comfortable calling in sick.

“I didn’t think at all about making my own safety a priority. Now I understand that it’s the employer’s responsibility to make sure the workplace is safe, to explain any potential workplace hazards, and to mandate proper supervision on the job.”

He’s right, comments Robin Schooley, a WorkSafeBC industry specialist for new and young workers.

“Employers are responsible for creating and managing healthy and safe workplaces,” she says. “Enhancing health and safety culture by keeping open lines of communication and encouraging workers to ask questions when they’re not sure how to do tasks safely is paramount to reducing workplace injuries.”

The bottom line says Thomas, is that “there’s no reason that we should be putting lives at risk to make a living.”

Not giving up his dreams

Jack Thomas is still an avid drummer, though he’s had to make some adjustments. His drum kit, donated by the instrument manufacturer Roland, has been specially outfitted with programmable kick-drum pedals that allow him to achieve exactly the sound he wants. He’s also in good company; one of his musical heroes, Def Leppard drummer Rick Allen, suffered a similar loss and managed to keep playing.

“When it comes to drumming, you have to get to a point where you can control each of your limbs separately,” says Thomas. “Funnily enough, now that I only have to focus on one hand, my timing has improved so much and I am able to figure out much more complex things much faster.”

But the act of drumming can be strenuous: the pain

is almost constant, and the fact that he was formerly right-handed means he’s had to relearn everything. “It’s still quite a bit of brainpower being used to focus on my non-dominant hand,” he says. “Also, the pain is sharp, and it’s not going to go away,” he adds.

Despite the progress he’s made as a drummer, “If I could trade it all to get my arm back, I’d do it in a heartbeat,” he says. “I have to live with this for the rest of my life.” While he’s proud of all his accomplishments, “What would make me happier is if I was able to get here with two arms.”

Taking the message across B.C.

Thomas takes the time to share his story with others through speaking engagements throughout B.C. He recently spoke at the Vancouver Day of Mourning ceremony on April 28, 2018, to remember those who have lost their lives to work-related incidents or occupational disease. He’s also part of the WorkSafeBC young worker speaker series, which features injured workers who each regularly take time out of their day to speak with students in schools across B.C.

Since December, he’s already spoken with five schools about workers’ rights. “I speak at any event I get the chance to,” says Jack. “The students are quite invested in what I have to say, especially the middle schoolers. It helps me to know that they understand. It’s always an uplifting experience for everyone involved.”

He hopes that young workers and employers get the message that safety is a right and a moral responsibility. “We can put an end to workplace injuries. We can spread love. We can save lives; and we can get to the point where there’s no death in the workplace, he says.”

He’s also not alone in sharing the safety message. Fellow presenters Mike Shaw, Mark Johnson, and Michael Lovett also spoke at various Day of Mourning ceremonies in the province, and regularly speak at schools across B.C. You can read their stories at dayofmourning.bc.ca/speakers.

More information on booking a young worker speaker can be found at worksafebc.com. 🗣️