

Rh'ena Oake Scholarship Essay June 2019

“What Unions Mean to Me”

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“Safety applies with equal force to the individual, to the family, to the employer, to the state, the nation and to international affairs. Safety, in its widest sense, concerns the happiness, contentment and freedom of mankind.”

– *William M. Jeffers, former President, Union Pacific Railroad Co. (1946)*

Imagine yourself in this scenario: you are eighteen years old, fresh out of high school, and have landed your dream job of working as a baker and decorator at a small specialty bakery in town. The work is tough, the hours early and long, and the starting wage low but you are optimistic, perhaps a little naïve, and excited to have a ‘real’ full-time job straight out of high school. You haven’t been safety briefed, no one seems to know if there are standard or timed breaks, and there is a lot of industrial mixing and baking equipment you’ve yet to learn about, but you’re quite certain all that information will come with time. Everything seems great until one day when, while you are extremely tired and on your seventh hour of panning baked items in and out of an industrial oven, you slip and burn both sides of your inner arms with a four-hundred-degree baking pan. You yell, and your coworkers do their best to come to your aid. However, no one has formal first aid training, including your manager, and upon opening the first aid kit (which hasn’t been used in quite a while), it is discovered that you don’t have large band aids, or proper antiseptic. You shake it off, tough it out, and decide to just run the burns under cold water, roll your t-shirt sleeves down a bit and disinfect it when you get home.

While this scenario may sound outlandish or exaggerated to some, this is an actual story. I did, in fact, work at a local specialty bakery right out of high school, for three years, and the above is true. I was not safety briefed very well, breaks getting taken were rare, our shifts regularly went over ten straight hours, and while my coworkers were lovely individuals, none of them were formally trained by a recognizable First Aid program. The description of injury above did happen, and I unfortunately have many more burn scars from working there. Overall, it was seen as desirable to be ‘tough’ and just ‘shake it off’ and keep working. At the time, I prided myself in being tough, even as the job itself took an extreme toll on my physical and mental

health and resulted in more than a few more minor to not-so-minor injuries. Looking at these conditions in hindsight, as part of the well run, safety oriented Local 1169 Union, however, I see the errors and neglectful points, as well as the instances where injury could have been much, much worse, and had long lasting effects. A safe working environment is vital to a successful business. As part of a Union, I know that my safety, as well as that of my coworkers, is not only considered preventative training; I am also taken care of should an accident occur while I am working.

To provide direct comparison between my previous job experience and my current job at Calgary Public Library, I am going to delve into some of the specific safety protocols within the Union that are extra important to me. Firstly, the exhaustion and understaffing issue. As previously mentioned, at my bakery job our shifts regularly started at 4-5 AM, sometimes even 2AM (during holidays). They were typically 8.5 hour shifts (with one half hour unpaid break), but overtime occurred regularly and unexpectedly; this means nearly half of the shifts were well over 10 hours during busy times. During most work days, we were unable to take our breaks until the last hour or so of our shifts. Doing this five days a week for the first year, and three to four days per week during the next two years while in school, took such an extreme toll on my body that I didn't realize how chronically exhausted I was until recent months (over a year after leaving). We were also working in bake teams of about four, sometimes five, bakers, and being given the workload more suited to a team of six to seven. This was a constant issue, and as a result, we had injuries, illness, and constant mental stress. If you needed to call in sick you pretty much had to be completely unable to move, or ill enough to require an emergency room, otherwise it was considered a huge inconvenience, unacceptable even. In comparison, with a union that prioritizes employee safety and well being, my hours are set, down to the day of the week. I no longer have to stress about unexpectedly long shifts, or working days I wasn't expecting to, because it is all laid out well in advance. Any extra hours are completely voluntary, and I am never pressured to accept them when I am unable to. Should I run into an instance of unexpected illness, I know that I can call in and I will not be threatened, reprimanded or treated harshly for being out ill for a single shift. If I need long term leave due to illness, there is a protocol in place that is created not as a punishment, but to help get me back to work. Furthermore, we are appropriately staffed and supported during operation. Finally, should any supervisor or member of my employer refuse to abide by these protocols, I know that I am not

out of options, or at risk of being fired for speaking up because, as part of a union, I have support, and people that will help fight for my wellbeing.

The second protocol is extremely important, especially to me, and involves Workers Compensation and measures to prevent workplace injury. As discussed earlier, I have been injured at a workplace before. While oven burns were the most common, due to our 8 rack 350 degree oven, I was also regularly lifting heavy bags of flour (up to 60 pounds each), mixing bowls from industrial mixers (30-60 pounds), walking on wet floors, working with cleaning chemicals, washing dishes with an industrial pull-down, high heat dishwasher and taking large bins of garbage and recycling outside to a heave into a shoulder high dumpster; minor to concerning injuries resulted frequently. This includes: back strains, pulling muscles in my legs and arms, small cuts to hands and arms, oven and pan burns, slipping on wet floors, a chemical burn at the result of a cleaning chemical, getting dust and food particles in my eyes, steam burns, and more. While our first aid kit did get re-stocked with Bactine and bandaids after the first incident I described earlier, it still was never professionally audited or checked regularly. Also, despite nearly every employee on the bakery team having these types of minor injuries, no one was ever sent to be formerly trained at First Aid. The words 'Workers Compensation' and 'Injury Report' were not even mentioned, other than once or twice, and forms of reporting injuries that could result in infection, or worsen later, were never introduced. In comparison, the Calgary Library, as it is unionized, is thankfully the opposite. Safety is always a priority. As a union member, I know and am constantly reassured that should something happen to me at work, I have help and support; I am informed of the direct reporting steps to follow should I have even a near miss, or minor injury. We also have an extensive safety board and area in each branch, and a company Safety and Wellness Officer that ensures those areas stay up to date. The focus is on not only helping the individual who was injured, but also on preventing further instances of that kind. As someone who never experienced this level of safety before, this is perhaps the most important protocol because not only does it encompass security if you are actually injured, it also includes education about injury preventative measures. A great example of simple injury prevention is that, as a Shelver, I am given work gloves to wear to prevent cuts to my hands, and keep them clean of any unpleasant substances that could be on a soiled book or library material. A second example is that on every shift of every day, there is at least one staff member that is trained in First Aid, and a list of every one of those First Aiders is posted clearly and visibly in

the staff workroom. Lastly, our Union representatives attend health and safety conferences, keep updated on the latest protocols and safety steps industry wide, and report back to the general meetings to ensure that as Union members we are all as well informed and prepared as we possibly can be.

In conclusion, Unions are important to me, essential even, because they are a supportive force that ensure that everyone not only has a safe work environment, but that they are covered should anything bad happen. Unions are important to me because I no longer have to go to a hazard filled work environment, with a fear that I will get injured and be unable to work. Lastly, Unions are important to me because they inform and support me, and ensure that I will never be stuck alone, forced to work unsafely, or caught unprepared or unsure in an incident. This security means the world to me, and the support of unionized safety and camaraderie means that I am always happy and healthy, and ready to work at my best.