

Case Study - Profile of a Tree Worker Accident

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Jim Whelan was employed by a well established, and respected, tree care company not far from his home in Richmond, VA. Jim, his employer, and his coworkers agreed that he was a well trained and capable Crew Leader and Climber. His 6 years of experience helped Jim feel comfortable performing any aspect of Tree Care.

On July 2, 2003 Jim arrived at work, reviewed his daily work assignment, and prepared his equipment just like he did every other day. After arriving at the work site Jim briefed the crew on the assignment and their individual roles. The work description consisted of pruning in order to provide standard clearance for the local utility company power lines. As a Qualified Line Clearance Arborist, Jim felt entirely comfortable, as he had done similar work many times in the recent past.

After reviewing the assignment and briefing his crew on their individual roles, Jim began climbing the appropriate trees, securing himself with a rope and saddle, and cutting back limbs in order to provide the proper clearance.

Jim finished his first tree without incident, and began with the second, a large hemlock. He climbed the tree and secured himself around the main stem at approximately the same height he would be working. This caused his climbing line to be horizontal rather than vertical. As he positioned himself to begin cutting, the branch he was standing on snapped. Jim fell backwards. His hard hat came off, and before his rope became taut the back of his head touched a primary wire. Electricity flowed thru Jim's body. He suffered catastrophic injuries including a two inch diameter hole in his skull where the electricity entered, his tongue so severely damaged that it had to be removed, and a large blow out hole in the bottom of his left foot, where the electricity exited Jim's body. Jim suffered many internal injuries and burns. Jim is fortunate to be alive today, but his life is forever changed. He can no longer do things he used to take for granted. He will never again climb trees, play softball, speak normally or walk without a limp.

Jim felt comfortable. He ignored the standard procedures and safe work practices. Jim took a shortcut.

Standard techniques that would have helped reduce the danger include:

- Establishing the tie in point high in the tree, well above the work area so that the climber will swing as little as possible in the event of a slip or fall.

If Jim had climbed higher and crotched his rope at a better angle relative to his work position, when the limb snapped Jim would have fallen down into the saddle rather than back into the electric line.

- Arborists should climb on the side of the tree that is away from the energized conductors
- The tie in point should be located in such a way that a slip or fall would swing the arborist away from the conductors

Although the name and place are changed, the details of this accident are true. Don't let it happen to you. Safe practices demand constant attention, even a momentary lapse of focus could result in tragic consequences. It is the responsibility of every Arborist to familiarize themselves with safe work practices and procedures, and to follow them.