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PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PERSONAL LOSS LEADS TO NEW SAFETY COALITION

After a grain engulfment incident resulted in the death of her young nephew, this Illinois woman spearheaded development of a safety coalition to help youth and their families access education and training related to working safely in agricultural jobs.

It's been six years since Catherine Rylatt lost her nephew, Alex Pacas, in a deadly grain bin incident in Mount Carroll, IL.

While nothing can make up for the loss she and her family experienced when Alex and his friend, Wyatt Whitebread, died after being engulfed in grain, Rylatt wants to do all she can to prevent a similar tragedy. Shortly after her nephew's death, Rylatt decided she could help keep the boys' memory alive by helping educate, train youth and adults working in the ag industry.

"At the time of his death, neither Alex, his friends, parents or any of us understood the dangers of working in and around grain bins," Rylatt says.

“Many people say what happened to Alex and the other boys was a tragic accident. But accidents can’t be prevented. After Alex died, I learned that this incident could have been avoided with some training and the use of safety equipment and best practices such as lockout/tag out and safe bin entry procedures.”

Nineteen-year-old Pacas and fourteen-year-old Whitebread died in July 2010 after becoming engulfed in a grain bin. Their job was to break up clumped corn and shove it toward the sumps to help it flow. None of the four boys in the bin was fitted with a work harness or lifeline and they had no training or understanding of the risk involved in their work that fateful day. Miraculously, two of the boys survived.

In her initial stages of grief, Rylatt’s search for some answers about how to respond to her nephew’s death led her to United Support and Memorial for Workplace Fatalities (USMWF), an organization dedicated to helping guide family members through the intense grief and sense of loss following a workplace death.

“I didn’t know what to do to cope with the intense grief,” Rylatt says. “It wasn’t just me and my family’s grief, it was Wyatt’s parents and family, the two boys who survived, their families and friends. The pain was so palpable. I have a background in public administration and that drove me to search for some answers and find a way to respond to the responsibility I felt to make sure something like this never happened again.”

Rylatt took advantage of the network of support USMWF provides through a group of empathetic families who have lost loved ones in the work place.

“We know and understand the devastation which takes place in the mind, body and soul and we strive to help family members from having to

through both the grieving process and investigative process alone,” Tonya Ford, USMWF Deputy Director, says. “It is so important for the families to know they are not alone.”

The death of Rylatt’s nephew and his friend was investigated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The families received a financial settlement for the boys’ wrongful deaths. Rylatt’s investigation revealed what she believes is a critical facet of the incident: lack of safety training in the grain industry overall.

In her research, Rylatt also realized that such tragic incidents raise awareness in communities – perhaps even across the nation – for a time. But once it’s over and other life activities crowd in, people tend to forget.

“When I recognized that inadequacy, I decided to contact Bob Aherin, Agricultural Safety and Health Program Leader at the University of Illinois,” Rylatt says. “He is an expert witness in ag safety. He agreed that this was a great need and has worked with me to help organize the Grain Handling Safety Coalition.

“There was a great outcry when the boys died,” Rylatt says. “It would have been easy to hope all that publicity would lead to positive changes in grain safety practices. But I knew it would fade. People give their attention to this type of tragedy at the time it occurs, but then we quickly move on.”

Rylatt’s determination to ensure that youth working in agriculture know how to work safely led her to work with Robert Aherin, Agricultural Safety and Health Program Leader at the University of Illinois, to develop the Grain Handling Safety Coalition (GHSC), which provides training related to grain handling and storage across the United States.

On their website - www.grainsafety.org - GHSC notes their mission is to “prevent and reduce accidents, injuries and fatalities across the grain industry spectrum through safety education, prevention and outreach.” The site posts training modules, resources and safety information for youth working in agriculture. Youth Rules, OSHA Young Workers resources, National Consumers League Lifesmarts and other links take readers to important safety information.

Both Young Workers training and teaching units for adults are available at no cost. Training modules include safe grain handling and storage, lockout/tag out training, entanglement hazards and guards, bin entry and lifeline processes, confined spaces and fall hazards. The Coalition offers free or reduced cost on-site training and will be adding on-line versions of the curriculum in coming months.

The Young Workers curriculum meets national teaching standards and is going through SAY accreditation. Free downloads are available to ag educators for use in classrooms. Adult curriculum follows adult education principles and can also be downloaded. Online tools include Toolbox Talks, templates, handouts, brochures, posters, videos and a picture library.

“One of the things I’ve learned through my work with the coalition is that many existing grain bins don’t feature lifeline anchor points, which makes the use of lifelines very difficult,” Rylatt says. “In recent years, manufacturers started installing anchor points, but it’s disappointing to know it’s taken so many years for that to happen.”

Rylatt notes that some farmers now have grain storage systems on their farm that rival small commercial operations. She wonders if the traditional way past generations grain storage systems that previous generations operated their grain storage in a certain way they want to continue

that tradition. The problem with that is our harvesting and transporting equipment and storage systems are much larger, faster and more complex now than they were even 25 years ago.”

Rylatt also points out the ongoing, lifelong cost the two surviving boys and their families continue to pay. Knowing the Coalition’s efforts could help many other families avoid such suffering helps fuel her passion for making grain storage education and training available.

“Alex had two friends who survived the incident,” Rylatt says. “But they have gone through tremendous challenges, dealing with survivor’s guilt, second guessing whether or not they did everything they could and continually asking themselves why it all happened. They have payed a terrible price and the effects will be with them all their lives. We need to do all we can to prevent that kind of tragedy from happening again.

“I believe there is a growing awareness of the need for more safety practices, training and education on farms and in the commercial ag industry,” Rylatt adds. “But grain handling is just one of many areas where we need to do a better job. We need our farmers and we want to see them succeed. We just hope they’ll do that safely.”