

Michigan steel worker crushed to death on the job

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A worker was killed on the job at Peerless Steel in Buena Vista Township, adjacent to the city of Saginaw, Michigan, early this week. Thirty-one-year-old Andrew Beckman was crushed by over 3,000 pounds of steel rods. He was working alone. According to the police, as many as five minutes passed before he was discovered by a coworker.

The incident occurred around 9:30 p.m. on Monday, June 2. Beckman was loading 12-foot steel rods into a flatbed trailer by himself, when the load apparently shifted, causing the rods to roll onto him, crushing him against a steel shelf, where he remained for several minutes. He suffered injuries to his face and torso. Buena Vista Township Fire Captain Craig Gotham said there was nothing that could be done for him by the time firefighters arrived on the scene at 9:45 pm. He was pronounced dead at a local hospital.

Police have declared his death an accident, and an investigation is underway by the Michigan Occupational Safety and Health Administration (MiOSHA). A written statement from the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA), which oversees MiOSHA, said no information could be provided until the investigation is completed, which “may take several weeks or months.”

Beckman resided in Saginaw, where he grew up. He was the father of two young sons. Friends remember him on his public Facebook page as “the friendliest guy I ever met.” He had worked at Peerless for about two years and was apparently also studying online at Full Sail University, a for-profit media and design school.

Peerless Steel was founded in 1947. The company, which distributes carbon, alloy, tool steel and cast iron, employs about 150 workers at three locations in Michigan. “Shift leaders” at Peerless Steel have reported to glassdoor.com that their wages are between

\$15 and \$16 per hour. Peerless is a privately held company, and no earnings reports or executive compensation figures are available.

According to statistics provided by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), 4,628 workers were killed on the job in the United States in 2012. That is 3.4 out of every 100,000 workers, an average of 89 deaths per week, and more than 12 deaths per day. Over 25 percent of all workplace fatalities for 2012 were workers in “transportation and material moving occupations” such as Beckman. Construction sites were the scene of 806 worker deaths, where “struck by object” is the second most common cause of death, accounting for 9.8 percent of those fatalities. OSHA employs about 2,200 inspectors who are responsible for the health and safety of 130 million workers nationwide, which is one inspector for every 59,000 workers.

Buena Vista is a shrinking community ravaged by decades of deindustrialization. The unincorporated community lost 16 percent of its population between 2000 and 2010, and now has less than 8,000 residents. Workers there are forced to accept dangerous, low-wage work like that offered at Peerless.

In 2010, Nexteer Automotive, an auto parts manufacturing plant also located in Buena Vista, was awarded a 100 percent tax abatement for 20 years as an incentive not to shut its doors and move operations to another town. Its 2,200 workers now make \$12 per hour thanks to a 2009 UAW concessions contract imposed under that threat of plant closure.

Last May, the Buena Vista School District was shut down in the middle of the school year when it ran out of money to pay teachers, and it is now closed permanently. More than 20 percent of the population, and more than a third of children in Buena Vista, live in

poverty. In 2010, the median family income was \$33,851, just 65 percent of the national average.

Beckman's home city of Saginaw currently has a population of about 50,000, down from 61,799 in 2000 and barely half of the 1960 figure of 98,000. It recently lost 600 jobs when TRW announced the closure of its automotive parts plant in February of this year. In July 2001, Saginaw Steering Gear plant 2 closed, eliminating 1,200 jobs. Saginaw has an official unemployment rate of 15 percent, compared to Michigan's overall unemployment rate of 9 percent.



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