

# Death of Menards worker in Minnesota draws protests

Jessica Goldstein  
26 July 2021

James Stanback, a 19-year-old Menards worker, was killed at the Golden Valley Menards store in the morning of July 22 when a pallet of lumber in the store's outdoor lumber area fell on the forklift he was driving. According to the Hennepin County Medical Examiner's office, Stanback's death was due to "mechanical asphyxia," meaning that he suffocated after being crushed under the weight of the pallet.

Stanback had worked at the Menards store in St. Louis Park, a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota, for less than two months before he was killed in the forklift accident. The family is demanding answers about the circumstances under which he died, including what training he had before operating the forklift.

"He was the most kind-hearted young man that you would ever meet," his sister, Mystaya Stanback, told CBS4 Minnesota. "I can't believe I'm talking about him in the past tense. What happened at Menards was a tragedy. [There's] a lot of questions."

James Stanback's death has left his family in a precarious financial position. As a short bio reported by CBS4 explained, Stanback's father died in 2016, which left their working-class family without a significant source of income. After he graduated from Patrick Henry High School in north Minneapolis, Stanback was determined to help support the family financially and eventually go to college.

Thus far, there are no reports that Menards has offered any financial help to the grieving family. Mastaya Stanback has organized a GoFundMe page to assist with funeral costs. His mother, Meghan Klein, writes on the page, "July 22, 2021 at 12 p.m., I got the worst news any mother can receive! My son left for work this morning, his shift started at 8 a.m. He got up everyday gracefully to go to work. My son had a tragic accident at work working the forklift at 10 a.m. I didn't get no call from Menards regarding my [son's] accident. Isn't that what [an]

emergency contact [is] for? My son was dead for two hours before I got the news of his death. My son was 19-years-old, he was an exceptional young man, he prided his self on being great and wanted to live life the right way."

His sister explained to CBS4 why her brother took the job at Menards. "That's what he chose to do, to help support my mom, to establish good credit, so that he can be in a position to eventually buy my mom a house. That was his goal in life. Go to college and take care of my mom and my little brother... James was a hard worker, a compassionate young man, who only wanted better for his family."

A video posted to Facebook by Rob G. of Watchdog Vizual, an independent photojournalist, captured a memorial and protest for Stanback held outside of the Menards where he was killed just one day earlier. Store management kept the store open even after he had died, as if nothing had happened.

A diverse group of working-class people, friends, family and coworkers of James, gathered to raise awareness about the unsafe conditions under which he and his coworkers worked every day and to try to persuade workers to come out of the store to join in solidarity.

At the protest, family members gave moving testimony about the conditions under which James Stanback was killed, pointing to a deliberate cover-up of the truth by the company. Mystaya Stanback explained the carelessness with which Menards reacted to the death of her brother. "He started his shift at eight [o'clock a.m.], he died at ten. My mom didn't get informed until two [hours later]..."

"If [Menards] was trying to save him for... hours, where was the medical help? Why wasn't he in the hospital? ... [They] still had the store open, just closed the back of the lumberyard. What sense does that make?"

According to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, the

Minnesota Occupational Health and Safety Administration [OSHA] began investigating the death on Friday, one day after Stanback was killed. There is no set timeframe for the investigation, according to OSHA spokesman James Honerman. Investigating the deaths of workers and holding corporations responsible are not the priority of the agency, but the protection of businesses from liability. It is likely that the investigation will result in no more than minimal fines, if any, against Menards, which the company can then challenge and quite possibly reverse.

The company is a repeat offender in Minnesota. In 2017, a similar death occurred at the Burnsville Menards in which a worker was pinned to the road by a pallet of lumber pieces that fell when he turned a forklift he was driving, according to OSHA. Menards was fined only \$25,000 by OSHA for the life of that worker, the minimum fine for citations connected to the death of a worker.

James' brother explained at the protest that improper training could have played a role in his death. "You have to understand that he might have been a certified forklift driver, but that doesn't mean that he was properly trained. Not only was he not properly trained, but the machine that he was using could not properly support the weight of the object that he was lifting on his stand. He was crushed.

"The forklift should have something overhead so that when something fell it should have been able to protect my brother. Not only was Menards in the wrong, but whoever [made] that machine was in the wrong too because that machine should have saved my brother's life when that [pallet] came crashing down and crushed my brother. OSHA hasn't been here in five years, people have died before [from] this, and we shouldn't be having this happening."

Menards sent uniformed security officers to the parking lot where the protest was taking place to prevent the protest from growing. The security detail reportedly kept customers from coming near the protest and locked the family out of the store.

A video clip of the interview with the family on Facebook drew almost 100 comments, overwhelmingly in support of the protest. Several of those commenting were appalled that the store was still open after a worker died. One wrote: "People over profit—this store should be boycotted."

Though small in number, the protest that took place outside the store is highly significant. It is part of a growing wave of working-class protests and strikes across

the US and the world that has come amid a deepening chasm of social inequality accelerated by the global pandemic. While a handful of billionaires have seen their wealth reach incredible heights, workers face falling wages, rising prices and increasing dangers on the job.

These conditions have been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed countless workers in the name of keeping profits flowing to Wall Street during a deadly pandemic. The crisis, intensified by the pandemic, has left millions of workers unemployed or forced to take pay cuts and more precarious jobs in order to make ends meet. An increasing number of young workers are left to take on the responsibility of providing for their families in dangerous, low-paying work after their parents have lost jobs or their lives over the past one-and-a-half years.

The comments made by James Stanback's brother reflect the growing class consciousness of broad sections of the working class, particularly the youth, of these conditions.

"At the end of the day, it [should be] people over profit. Just because you go in there every day and work for them, doesn't mean that they respect you... they should have at least shut it down, called [his] parents and let them know what's going on."

The truth about the conditions surrounding the death of Stanback must be made known in order to protect other workers from a similar fate. The conditions of speedup and increasing workloads, the result of the corporations' deliberate policy to cut staffing levels and demand more and more production to feed their hunger for profits, affects all workers in all industries across the globe. An independent investigation into the death of James Stanback must be demanded by Menards workers, organized independently of OSHA and the trade unions. Such independent action has the potential to gain broad support from wide sections of the working class, which are coming into struggle against similar conditions.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**