

Safety's a passion, not just a seminar topic

Billy Robbins wants to hook you into a culture of safety

By Linda Hsieh, Associate Editor

"ANY ACCIDENT IS a wakeup call. But why not wake up now?"

It's a question that Billy Robbins implores during his "Hooked on Safety" seminar. The wakeup call – for both him and his then-employer – came too late.

It began as a December day like any other in Stillwater, Okla., in 1980. Mr Robbins went in to work, as a cable lineman for a local telephone company, like it was any other day. But it wasn't.

He came into contact with 7,200 volts of power while working on an aerial cable. There was no power on that pole, and the accident never should have happened. But someone took a shortcut, and it changed Mr Robbins' life forever. It was hours before he even received any help, dangling in mid-air with his fingers burned off.

He survived that terrible accident, though it cost him his two hands.

"When I came out of surgery, I looked at my hands and they weren't there. That's when it hit me," he said.

This was a 100-percent-preventable accident. It didn't have to happen. And nobody deserves to have it happen to them.

But it happened to Billy Robbins. And he hopes that if you attend his presentation at the 2006 IADC Health, Safety, Environment & Training Conference & Exhibition, it will never happen to you or your colleagues. The event, sponsored by **Noble Corporation**, will be held 7-8 February at the Omni Houston Hotel Westside in Houston.

FINDING HIS CALLING

After two years of painful rehabilitation, Mr Robbins eventually found his calling as a motivational speaker. His "Hooked on Safety" session has been presented to hundreds of companies worldwide and to thousands of employees and at all levels of management.

The drilling industry has been making great strides in safety programs, and

"Everyone believes somebody owes him or her something. What's worse, you think it's someone else's responsibility. It just doesn't happen that way. You've got to take responsibility for your own safety."

Billy Robbins, the Certified Speaking Professional behind the seminar "Hook on Safety"

Weatherford International, the sponsor behind Mr Robbins' presentation at the IADC conference, hopes to emphasize the message that attitudes such as "It can't happen to me" or "I can't make a difference" are neither correct nor acceptable.

"Mr Robbins, through his unique style and painful story, can communicate in a very short space of time what hundreds of hours of traditional safety training courses cannot," said **Keith R Morley**, Weatherford's Vice President of Enterprise Excellence & Chief Safety Officer.

And to Mr Robbins, workplace safety is easy, but it's not that easy.

"Most people think safety is something that starts when you get on the job site and your shift starts," he said "You believe you can push a magic button, take a pill and walk in and be safe for the next eight hours. ... No!"

First, you have to believe it's possible. Second, cut out those on-the-job shortcuts – just because you've been lucky until now doesn't mean your luck won't run out. Third, everyone must be involved, because one person can ruin it for everybody.

"It just takes one person with a bad attitude, taking one shortcut, doing something they know they shouldn't do, to instantly change your life or someone else's life forever," Mr Robbins warned.

To have an accident-free workplace, every single worker must stay motivated and committed. And everyone must share in a vision for safety.

Most people go through life with "tunnel vision," he said. "I've been working out there 10 years and I haven't hurt anybody. ... I'm doing fine!"

But that's not nearly enough. "You will not be able to get by on the minimum daily requirement. It just won't happen that way. An accident-free workplace, just like anything else in your life that is worthwhile, takes everything you have," he said.

Since the days of his accident, Mr Robbins said, he's seen amazing changes in attitudes towards workplace safety in the US and around the world.

"Oh, my, it's come a long, long way," he said. "Those were the days when it was just 'Get it done, no matter what.' And the first budget cut, when the times got tough, was the safety budget, if there was one. And now, most companies I deal with have gone to zero incidents as their goal – an accident-free workplace! It's just come a long way."

STILL MUCH LEFT TO DO

But it continues to be an uphill battle, he admitted, especially when dealing with veteran workers who have been doing things "their way" for decades and who continue to take risky shortcuts on the job.

"You're fighting a culture. Most places have what's called an aging work force," he said, "and they've been doing it that way forever, and getting them to change – getting them to actually believe that there is such a thing as an accident-free workplace – is really hard. It means changing their attitude and perhaps a complete cultural change."

Another big challenge Mr Robbins finds is overcoming deeply in-trenched myths concerning worker safety.

Myth No. 1, for example, would be that the company is ultimately responsible for your safety, not yourself.

"People have an attitude," Mr Robbins said. "Everyone believes somebody owes him or her something. What's worse, you

think it's someone else's responsibility. It just doesn't happen that way. You've got to take responsibility for your own safety. You've got to take responsibility for your own life."

Or take Myth No. 2: That an workplace injury will get you millions in worker's compensation. Wrong again.

Following his tragic accident, an accident that never should have happened but did, Mr Robbins sued for \$16 million. After all, the accident investigation showed that the power company was in violation of every safety code written since 1952. They were in gross negligence!

"What do you think I walked out of the courtroom with? Eight million? Four million? I walked out of court with \$60,000, and the attorney took half of that. That's reality."

WHAT IS SAFETY?

To Mr Robbins, who now lives with his wife, Harolronda, and their five children – Cody, 12; Caleb, 12; Carrissa, 9; Allyssa, 7; and Peyton, 6 – in Tulsa, Okla., safety is not about the company. It's not about the protective gear. And it's not about the rules and regulations.

"Safety is really about you, your family, your loved ones and your future," he said. "The best definition of safety I have ever heard is so simple. It says, 'Honey, I'll be home tonight, and I'll be in one piece. You don't have to worry.'"

Yes, it's appealing to the emotions that's part of what makes "Hooked on Safety" so unique and so successful, Mr Robbins said.

"We deal with the emotional side of an accident," he said. "They've heard all the logic, all the rules – so many times that most of them could teach it. What we've discovered over the years is that logic makes them think, but it won't make them act. When they hear an emotional side, it makes them act."

And Mr Robbins has been amazed by the reactions he gets after his presentations.

"I was in Canada all last week, and I had this lady come up to me," he said. "She was on the board of directors of the company, been there for years. She had just voted no on some new safety training, I guess because of a money issue, just the week before that. And she made the comment after the presentation that I had actually converted her thinking."

Mr Robbins said he loves to hear positive attitude changes like this: "It's really great. It's what's makes it worthwhile."

A motivational speaker now for nearly two decades, Mr Robbins urges everyone to attend his session at IADC's conference.

"I want safety professionals to come away with the fact of how important they really are, that what they do is not just a job, that every decision they make when it comes to safety is going to impact someone's life," he said.

"And I want them to come away with a whole new attitude, to come away refreshed. I want them to think, 'We do make a difference.' And they do, but they don't realize that," Mr Robbins said. "And I'm there to let them hear what happened to me and how they can impact people's families. I really believe it's going to change them. It's a passion with me!"

Everyone in the drilling industry needs a dose of that passion for safety. To get yours, be sure to attend Mr Robbins' presentation at the upcoming IADC conference. ■