Death By Chocolate Becomes Reality

By Carrie Ellis, Editor, Chem.Info

Death by chocolate dessert became morbidly realistic last Wednesday when a fall resulted in the death of one Camden, NJ employee. A tragic event, but nonetheless, an event that should serve as an example of what to avoid, especially in light of the other misfortunes that have been dotting the process industry recently:

- Wisconsin Meatpacking Plant Fire Out, Damage Could Top $50 Million [1]
- Oil Tank Explodes At Chemical Factory In Urumqi [2]
- FDA Says Nestle E. Coli Strain Different From Outbreak [3]
- Knife Blades Found In Dietary Supplements [4]
- NC Plant Workers To 911: ‘ConAgra Just Blew Up’ [5]

When you endure any kind of disaster at a processing plant, you can expect to fall under the microscope.

According to the Associated Press (AP) story [6], 29-year-old Vincent Smith II, working as a temporary employee, fell into a vat of melting chocolate after being hit by an agitator at Cocoa Services, a chocolate processing plant managed by the owner of Lyons & Sons. More disturbing still is that the company may not have a business license, thereby rendering the entire operation illegal.

The AP quotes Cocoa Services spokesman Kevin Feeley as saying that it’s a “misunderstanding,” and that officials were aware that the firm was operating in the former Campbell Soup plant. The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration is also investigating.

Working in a plant atmosphere can be a frightening prospect, and I respect those in the field who cope with the associated potential risks. I simply tour your facilities to get a grasp of what it’s like to work in your shoes. Yet I have the folly of my own clumsiness to deal with and that’s quite enough responsibility to shoulder. Typically, the safety risk of my day includes a paper cut at most.

It’s difficult to ignore the statistics, and it’s admittedly harder to confront them head-on. This overwhelming realization bore down on me on a recent tour of the now-recovered, fully functioning Columbus Chemical Industries (Columbus Chemical Plant Explosion To Be Investigated [7]), located in Columbus, WI, that rocked neighbors by a series of explosions in May. I live so close, I’m surprised that I didn’t feel it.

But I did — not the tremors or any trace of toxic chemical wafting through the air, but rather the prospect that it could’ve been worse. Or it

could’ve been closer … and maybe even affect people I know. Thankfully, however, executive vice president Steve Quandt was as prepared for disaster as possible, which automatically ironed out all of the wrinkles that could have been expected in the aftermath. (Look for more details in an upcoming issue of Chem.Info.)

For an inherently precarious situation, Quandt’s meticulous Disaster Recovery Plan helped the company slog through the hazard technicalities, one of which is to get the community and officials involved to trust the company again. To accomplish that, Quandt had to prove the company’s commitment to safety, bending over backwards to show that everything that could be done was being done.

Quandt admits coming to the industry without a glimmer of how the chemical processing market works. Rather than let it stymie him, though, he used it as a springboard to motivate himself to gather as much knowledge as possible. He didn’t want to have to second-guess anything or make assumptions, especially when lives could be on the line in a potentially dangerous, ultra-high purity chemical environment.

To his credit, Quandt made sure to take care of his colleagues and community first. The company went so far as to reserve hotel rooms for those who were temporarily evacuated from their homes. This decision was already set in motion as part of his detailed plan, so there was no superior to convince, no phone numbers to look up and less hassle.

Could some of these other recent tragedies have been prevented with a more concrete safety plan in place? If not, what might it take to curtail industrial accidents? What role would legislation like the recently proposed Chemical Facility Anti-Terrorism Act [8] play? Would it be a boon for worker safety or just a red-tape hindrance on business? What is your company’s prevention and recovery plan? Is it as detailed as it should be to be effective?

Coming from what you could call an accident-prone person, I offer you this: You can never be too careful, and prevention is key. Learn from the alleged mistake of Cocoa Services and take it from those who know firsthand, like Columbus Chemical Industries. Establish a disaster prevention and recovery plan for every conceivable catastrophe, and should an emergency occur, follow it.

What’s your experience? Sound off by e-mailing me at carrie.ellis@advantagemedia.com [9].

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