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2020 Annual Report



If Only

It started like every other winter morning in the Midwest with the family routine of getting up and readying for the day: school and daycare for the kids, work for Mom and Dad. At the time, my husband, Bill Lambert, worked at a local grain elevator 18 miles from our Casselton, North Dakota, home. Before Bill left for work, we all took our turns telling him good-bye. Sara, our oldest and at-the-time 10-year-old, bubbly brown-haired girl, said, “See ya later alligator.” Alex William, our middle child and only boy at 8 years of age, stated, “See you tonight, Dad!” Then, little Anna, the baby of the family, not even a year old yet, got a gentle toss in the air for a sure giggle and laugh for her daddy. Then, Momma bear gave a quick kiss on the cheek and said, “See you around supper. Have a good day. I love you.”

Everyone made it to their morning destinations, like every other day. Again, the daily routines continued. One of our routines was to call



Dawn travels the region to share Bill's story with producers, business professionals and others in the hope that safety will become top of mind.

each other in the afternoon on my way home from my job, just to check in with each other. I initiated the phone call on February 7, 2002, at 3 p.m. I called his cell phone. There was no answer. I called the elevator's land line. The voice on the other end was not Bill's; it was the general manager (GM) of the facility. This occurrence was odd. Once the GM realized it was me on the line, he requested that I pull over immediately. As I pulled over, questions shot from my lips, asking what was going on and if Bill was okay. The GM said, “A terrible incident has happened. Bill is trapped in a grain bin.” Quickly, he continued, stating, “We are working on getting him out.” In shock, I drove 40 miles to the bin location where Bill had been engulfed for over an hour and a half. During my drive, I remember praying, pleading and bargaining with God to not take Bill. Arriving at the scene, I saw, the Sanford Life Flight helicopter, many Casselton Fire Trucks and bright lights, exposing the bin and an ambulance, along with several emergency workers, who were our friends, volunteering their time and talents to help those in crisis mode. It was crisis mode!

Emotions ran wild while I was being led past the bin to wait for Bill's rescue. It seemed like hours, but only minutes passed, as I was soon told that the rescue was turning into the recovery of his body.

Once pulled from the bin, Bill, my husband, the father to our three children, was placed on a gurney, which was then loaded inside the awaiting ambulance where I was allowed to see him, hold him, and kiss him one more time. Covering the lower half of his body was a tan fleece blanket with brown edging. (Details remain so vivid in my mind to this day.) This blanket concealed his leg and foot from my view. You see, Bill's foot became entangled in the running, unguarded auger that was inside the bin of corn.

My understanding of what happened that fatal February day is as follows: Bill and his



Guest Column by Dawn Chisholm

supervisor were filling grain cars with stored corn. The corn stopped coming from the bin. After they confirmed that the corn had crusted to the sides due to wet conditions, Bill decided to enter the bin without a spotter, without a harness and lead, without checking the air quality, and without locking out and/or tagging out the unguarded running auger. With all those unsafe scenarios, he still chooses to enter the bin. Why? I can only imagine.

Just like all of us, we think that we are invincible. We have done these types of things before, probably many, many times. Nothing will happen. It hasn't in the past, and it won't now. RIGHT? WRONG! Within seconds after Bill thrust a grain shovel into the resting corn, the crusted corn that was not flowing toward the auger began to flow. This now-flowing corn came down with such a force that it knocked the feet right out from under my husband. This 240-pound, 6'2" man's foot was jammed into the auger, pulling him down into a seated position. The corn just kept on flowing, covering Bill completely. With every breath he inhaled, the corn would fill the void around his chest. Bill was being crushed and suffocated all the while his foot remained in the running auger. I cannot allow myself to continue these thoughts because I cannot fathom the fear and pain Bill had to be experiencing.

With each presentation, I relive this part of



Bill Lambert is pictured with his family at Christmas 2001, just months before being killed in a grain bin accident.

the incident with greater detail and, usually, some tears. Why do this to yourself, some people may ask. The day after Bill's death, I knew that I was going to be doing something to help others. I just did not know what, when or how. For 15 years, God helped me grieve, heal, gain strength, increase confidence and grow in my faith. In 2017, the North Dakota Safety Council (ndsc.org) approached me, asking if I would be willing to tell our story at one of the breakout sessions during the Annual Safety Conference in 2018. Since then, I have spoken or presented to over 30 companies or organizations, including American Crystal Sugar, Integrity/Marvin Windows, Trail King, Gavilon Group, North Dakota Annual Fire School Convention, various fire departments, the North Dakota Grain Dealers Association, Future Farmers of America (FFA) conventions, churches, women's groups, and local elevators.

"If Only" derived from "If Only" I'll wear the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) provided to me. "If Only" I'll consider how my actions will affect my family (What would my

family do without me?), my friends, co-workers and communities. "If Only" I will do it this one time. "If Only" I will text and drive, or drink and drive. "If Only" you fill in the blank!

I have to say that I would not be the person I am today without being embraced and loved by our small community of Casselton, North Dakota; our parish family at Westminster Presbyterian Church; our family and friends; and, of course, our God who helped me breathe. At times, I could not breathe on my own, and at times, I felt immense sorrow and desperation; HE carried me.

Bill was 40 years old when he died, leaving behind our marriage of 17 years, three young children, his sisters and many more people who loved him. Bill was soft spoken, hardworking, strong, humorous, kind and loving; above all, he loved his family like nothing else. I have the blessing to see him in each of our children: Sara with her kind heart; Alex with his humorous one-liners; and, lastly, the baby of the family, Anna, who was 11 months old at the time of his death. She inherited his bright blue eyes. During my presentations, I introduce the audience members to our children and tell them about the life events that the kids and Bill missed due to his "If Only" decision, such as teaching the kids how to hunt or fish; attending Daddy and Daughter Dances, or Boy Scout events; and a big one: walking our daughters down the aisle at their weddings.

Because of Bill's death and his void in our daily lives, our children had no choice but to become resilient, to understand what empathy is, to trust that there is a heaven where Daddy is waiting for us, to learn to forgive quickly and to love sincerely because we never know what tomorrow will bring.

I believe that there are several reasons why so many accidents continue in the agricultural world. Here are just a few:

- Farmers work by themselves on many daily tasks.

- They have routinely completed these tasks in the past, and nothing has happened thus far.
- Farms have larger storage facilities and equipment.
- Past wet conditions and Midwest freezing/warm temperatures: causing bridging, crusting, etc.
- Farmers are often in a hurry, are under stress or have their minds preoccupied on other things.
- There may be a lack of experience and training for the younger generations.

Some comments that I have received from audience members after they listened to my presentation include:

"I have never thought what my 5-year-old daughter would do if something happened to me."

"Thank you for sharing your story. It has helped me process some of my grief of losing my daughter in a car accident three years ago."

"I was buried in a bin of sand for two hours. It was terrifying. I was one of the lucky ones. I got out."

"I just lost my home and everything I owned in a fire two weeks ago. You have given me hope. Thank you."

If only one life can be saved by me getting up and telling our story, then I feel successful. Whether I'm asked to speak to a few people or if there will be hundreds in the audience, I will go. I knew passionately the day after Bill's death that I was being called to do something to help others. Here I am. Send me, Lord.

Editor's note: Chisholm now lives in Hawley, Minnesota, and started "If Only" to connect with people on workplace and personal safety.