

Speaking out about workplace safety

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ab technologist and union activist Gottfrid JanzÅ© could be used as living proof of the old saying "the apple never falls far from the tree ... or, just as easily, as an example of how wrong it is. It just depends on what aspect of his working life you look at.

Gottfrid JanzÅ© Medical Laboratory Technologist GR Baker Memorial Hospital
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"There's been a health care theme in my family for quite a number of generations," he says. Many relatives are nurses ... including his mother ... and for many years, his father was chair of the Kitimat-Stikine Regional District Hospital board. "I also have a brother who is a prosthetist, and a former HSA steward at Shaughnessy Hospital." JanzÅ© wanted to stay in the "family business" but was leery of spending so many years in medical school. After some deliberation he chose to study at the BC Institute of Technology to become a lab technologist. He graduated in 1987, sufficiently satisfying his parents' desire that he become a doctor ... and bringing him into a profession that he is passionately dedicated to.

He's also ardently dedicated to union activism, and it is here that he has strayed from family tradition: "I grew up in an anti-union household; my uncle was a vice president of the Social Credit Party, and my dad's belief was that if you work hard and diligently, you'll do well, so why would anyone want a union?" But by the time he was a teenager, JanzÅ© was beginning to think differently.

"I spoke out in my family; there were some spirited discussions at that time," says JanzÅ©, with a smile. "But what really turned me into a unionist was another strong anti-unionist, who fired me from a job when I was young. I was convinced it was not fair, but there was nothing I could do."

His first three lab tech jobs were at non-union facilities. Then, in 1989, he started working at GR Baker Memorial Hospital in Quesnel. It didn't take him long to get involved in the Health Sciences Association.

"It was a typical scenario: I was a union newbie, full of enthusiasm, and when people said, hey, why don't you run for union steward, I said sure," he explains with a chuckle. It's clear he has no regrets about that decision, impromptu as it may have been.

He spent three years as steward, and then took a break from union work, channeling his political energy (enhanced with skills he'd learned as union steward) into other community activism. But he couldn't keep away from union work, and found himself voted in as steward again in the early 2000s. At a certain point ... specifically, when there began to be layoffs in his department ... he realized that his time as steward was over.

-It became too painful for me when the discussion began to be not about if or when but about who was going to be laid off. It was an important discussion, of course, but I couldn't do it," he says. But his union activism is far from over. After stepping down as steward, he served as Member-at-Large on the Resolutions Committee, and is currently HSA's delegate to the Quesnel and District Labour Council.

Recently, he has found a new focus working on the Occupational Health and Safety / Workers Compensation Fightback campaign. This initiative of HSA and the BC Federation of Labour works to increase awareness of the provincial Liberals' cuts to workers' compensation benefits and services, as well as the WCB's cuts to BC's workplace safety system, in response to government pressure. The fightback campaign is working to bring back a fair compensation system with adequate rehabilitation services for workers injured on the job, as well as to reverse the cuts that have been made to the prevention system.

Janz's passion for this cause is evident as he explains how he began his involvement with it.

-I was at a workshop where we watched a film called *Workplace Injuries: Lost Youth*. There were four real teenagers in their own voices describing things that had happened to them. It turned something on inside my brain and my heart.

-I have a 15-year-old son and I'd been telling him, "Go out and get a job, without realizing the ramifications of this, given recent changes to Workers Compensation. The number of people dying workplace deaths has gone up significantly in recent years," he says, "and the 15- to 24-year-olds have a 70 per cent higher injury rate than others."

The Liberal government has kept its promise to slash red tape, he says, which has made the Workers Compensation Board less responsive to real needs. Janz believes employers are wrong to think that getting a lower rate for WCB payments is good for them.

-We need to look past monthly payroll costs to the greater costs to the community. The fees are relatively small compared to the real costs of what happens when people get injured," he says. "It's easy to look at the bottom line, but there are people attached to that. Why should we be willing to take chances with people's lives and livelihoods for that extra buck?"

-This is more than just a union issue, it's a community issue. There are social implications when people are injured," he says.

Janz praises HSA for taking a leadership role in Workers Compensation Board campaign. "We're lucky to have a union that's willing to put resources towards this. I think one reason we've taken this on is that we have such a wide range of professions. From acute care to rehab, we see people from the beginning to the end of workplace injuries," he says. He says he finds his participation in the union deeply rewarding, and foresees continued involvement in the future.

-My role is to be someone who's willing to keep saying, "Hey, folks, we need to deal with this. I'm the one who'll keep being that broken record."

-I feel good about my work as steward. I won some grievance cases; in fact, I never lost one! The training was wonderful ... I learned to speak in public and organize my thoughts. HSA is a good group of people to work with. When we've had difficulties in the past, we've resolved them," he says.

-My wife and four children are extremely supportive of my work," he adds. "I couldn't do it without their support. In fact, as a result of my participation, my children are becoming very socially aware, and also aware of their ability to make a difference in their community."

The most rewarding aspect of his union involvement has been experiencing the power his own activism can have. "I realized that one person can make a difference, and I thought, what a wonderful opportunity this is to do that," he says. 

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