



Canadian Centre for  
Policy Alternatives  
Manitoba Office

# work *life*

## Honouring Ellen Olfert, founder of SAFE Workers of Tomorrow

**I**n 1995, 19 year old Stephen Nicholson was on the job site working in a paint booth. He was working on the exhaust system and had been lowered into the vent when suddenly paint residue ignited and engulfed Stephen in flames. There was no rescue plan in place and it took several minutes before Stephen was pulled from the vent. He suffered third degree burns to most of his body.

In 1999, Michael Skanderberg was electrocuted by a 347-volt power line while working with a lighting crew in Beausejour. He was only 19 when he died.

In 2010, 21 year old Brittany Lynn Murray was killed on the job. She was struck by a vehicle on the highway where she was working as a flag person. Brittany was an architect student, working for the summer, when she was killed.

All of these tragedies could have been prevented.

Stephen's employer was fined \$10,000 for failing to provide proper workplace training and safety equipment.

Michael's employer was fined \$27,500 under The Workplace Safety and Health Act. Michael should have been trained as an apprentice and been under the proper supervision from a Journeyman.

It was stories like these that inspired Ellen Olfert to start SAFE Workers of Tomorrow in 1997. She knew that too many young workers were being injured, even killed on the job; in fact over 15 per cent of work-

place injuries happen to young people. Many accidents occur in the first year of a youth's employment.

As a mother and labour activist, Ellen was driven to improve working conditions for Manitoba's youth. Through her work with the Winnipeg Labour Council, she was able to step up the labour movement's concerns with workplace injuries and deaths so it could take a more focused look at youth and figure out how to get information into Manitoba's high schools, particularly in rural and Northern Manitoba where so many injuries happen.

Ellen's efforts were supported by the Workers Compensation Board (WCB) who funded her work and as her sessions became better known, more and more unions and employers saw the value in what she was building. SAFE Workers of Tomorrow (SWOT) has grown into a respected organization that is educating young workers and employers how to work safe.

SWOT provides workplace health and safety information to students at no cost to schools anywhere in Manitoba. Presentations can be as short as one hour, covering general health and safety presentation, to a full day health and safety practicum. A full range of topics is offered, including include worker rights and employer responsibilities, hazard recognition and control, health and safety legislation and the Work-

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IN LABOUR ISSUES

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place Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS), injury reporting and the role of the Workers Compensation Board.

There are nine SWOT employees and dedicated volunteers who carry out SAFE employ a variety of techniques to engage participants and foster student led discussions, and students receive a workplace safety and health resource book and other useful take away items to help them after the presentation is done.

Organizations like SWOT are becoming ever more important as precarious work grows and fewer young workers can land decent work. According to the Toronto Star, Canada’s finance minister Bill Morneau recently warned Canada’s youth that “high employee turnover and short-term contract work will continue in young people’s lives, and the government has to focus on preparing for it”. If he is right, one of the things government should be doing is shoring up employment standards and health and safety regulations to make sure that all workers are protected from dangerous work.

But having regulations on the books and enforcing them are two different things, and that’s why SWOT is so important. It does an excellent job of educating youth, who can be more easily intimidated than more experienced workers, to know what their rights are and how to refuse unsafe work.

Safe Work Manitoba put up advertisements on social media for bogus jobs just to see how willing youth were to accept dangerous work. One of the jobs was for a construction helper, and it warned that

the employer might not have protective equipment and that the employee might need to teach themselves some tasks on the job. Another job was for a convenience store clerk, and it warned applicants that they might need to work the night shift alone.

In just two weeks they received 2,500 responses from young workers who were willing to take on dangerous work for higher pay.

This experiment demonstrates just how far young workers are willing to push themselves to prove themselves on the job site. But there is also no doubt that many young workers are now working safe and that their employers are more engaged with keeping them so because of SWOT. It provides us with an excellent example of how precarious work is not inevitable. Mr. Morneau should take a page from SWOT’s book and quit telling Canada’s youth that they “just have to get used to it.”

*Lynne Fernandez holds the Errol Black Chair in Labour Issues.*

**work** *References available upon request.*  
**life**