

National Youth Safety Essay Scholarship Contest Winner

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"Does the department have a safety program or protocol?" It is important to ask questions during interviews, they say.

"Well," the administration looked at the Department Head, and then back at me. "We do, or, we'd like to." I was sitting on my first interview for my first teaching position. After finishing my last final at the university at seven the night before, I drove three hours to my interview. At that point, I felt the interview was going well. This was the only school I had applied to.

I took an OSHA course in my early college years. I was aware of OSHA and the importance of safety in my working environment. We had done case studies on protocols – as there usually is a reason for every law or rule. We knew the importance of margin of safety and of potential electrocution hazards. But what did I really know?

Now, about ten years later, I would, hopefully, be stepping into my first teaching position. I had no OSHA textbook to refer to. In my portfolio that I shared with the interview committee, was a very detailed safety plan -one that I created for my Teaching Methods course. The committee, comprised of administration and the department head -the welding teacher, really liked what they saw. Before I left the central office, they offered me the position.

The woodworking program needed a fresh face, and I hoped that I could turn the program into one that was similar to my high school. Over half of my small high school was enrolled in the program and had a facility that showed up my college!

At first, I accomplished quite a bit -but then the reality of being a first-year teacher and Graduate student settled in. OSHA was not my priority. My department chair encouraged me to complete the OSHA 10 General Industry. Students would often joke in class, "I can do that because I'm OSHA certified!", or "You can't do that, OSHA wouldn't approve." While this was a snide joke, there was a lot of truth to it. Students could see everyday value in what they had learned. These jokes would often lead to stories of things they saw or heard outside the classroom, and it would turn into a discussion. Even at this young age, they learned that industry may not have an employees' best interest in mind, and as employees, they have the right to a safe and healthy work environment.

We are helping students to develop a positive attitude about safety awareness. While I could have implemented my own safety program, the detail in which CareerSafe facilitates their program helps me help my students grow. An employer could follow every protocol to a "T", but with a poor attitude about safety, it would be unlikely that they would not get hurt.

This year I completed the Construction 10-hour course with a new attitude before my students stepped into my classroom. Looking back, had I completed my General Industry 10-Hour course in a timely manner, my attitude would have been different then as it is now.

Through co-teaching with my department chair, we were able to offer the opportunity for my students to complete their OSHA Construction program. I had a student return rate of almost 50%. Just as I grew, my student's attitudes about OSHA and general safety also matured. While they were excited to get their certificates, I made a point to make a big deal out of presenting their OSHA cards. I have students who aren't in my program anymore still show me that they carry it in their wallets.

I am proud of the environment that I offer my students, and they are proud to have their OSHA 10 wallet card credentials at hand. Before you walk through the door of my class, you see "Start Safe", and before leave, a poster reads "Stay Safe." Current and past students are excited to share with me the benefit of earning their OSHA credentials.

While my college education adequately prepared me for my position as an Industrial Arts Instructor, the opportunities that CareerSafe provided for me will never cease. I approach safety with a different mindset. It is no longer about manipulating a machine to make it do what I want, it is now about completing the task at hand in the safest manner possible. From high-risk situations of electrocution hazards to just simply walking into the shop every morning - I think differently; I think safer.

Safety starts with education but is maintained with education and attitude. If I facilitate my classes in a manner that we hold safety to the utmost importance, students will grow and learn in a safe environment -and their attitude about safety might just be what one day saves their lives.