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State Coordinator's Message – The 2007 Operation Lifesaver Region 7 Workshop

The 2007 Operation Lifesaver Region 7 Workshop was held in Salt Lake City, Utah on August 1, 2, and 3, 2007. Region 7 consists of five states; Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, and Utah. Judging from the comments during and after the Workshop, Utah put on a very good Workshop. Even Helen Sramek, President of Operation Lifesaver, commented on how balanced the Workshop was by including education, engineering, and enforcement that proved beneficial to both our presenters and safety partners.

The Region 7 Workshop began with the Utah Air National Guard providing the Presentation of Colors and the Pledge of Allegiance, followed by an invocation by Bishop Dave Jackson of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Lehi 23rd Ward. The patriotic spirit and the deep feeling of service to humanity were present.

If that wasn't enough, our welcome to Utah speaker, John Njord of the Utah Department of Transportation gave a very sincere talk about safety and the events that occurred on August 1st in Minnesota where the bridge over the Mississippi River collapsed on Interstate 35 West. He gave a stirring talk about the tragedy which reminded us all about safety and why we were there.



Our next speaker was our guest speaker, Craig Bolerjack. Craig Bolerjack is a CBS Sports Analyst and was the sports anchor for KSL TV in Salt Lake City. He is well known for his booming baritone voice and his articulate play by play for many sports including college and professional football, college and professional basketball including the Utah Jazz, and women's college basketball and gymnastics.



It was very appropriate to have Craig Bolerjack speak to us as he told the story of how his life was changed when his grandmother was hit and killed by a train at a highway-rail grade crossing. The story he told was similar to a newspaper article that the Deseret Morning News did in November, 2005. After his talk, there was not a dry eye in the room, which was full of 75 people. His wife Sharon and his parents were there to provide support for the story that he so bravely shared with us. Craig Bolerjack reminded us why we volunteer to give presentations to anyone that will listen to our safety message.

The Deseret Morning News article tells the story. For years, an event in his past had kept him from committing to marriage and sent him to counseling and

medication. The journey began with a car accident in his youth. His grandmother, Velda May James, was struck by a train in her car at a Missouri railroad crossing and was killed. It rocked the Bolerjacks' world. "It was the biggest changer of my life," he says. "When I first came to Salt Lake I still couldn't talk about it without crying."

Craig was raised in the Kansas City area. His grandparents lived on a farm in a small Missouri town called Willis Springs. Bolerjack spent much of his early youth there. It was the place he came to associate with idyllic times — Christmas and Thanksgiving gatherings of extended family, riding horses, 100 acres of freedom, fishing ponds, a slower, simpler life. His grandparents, Cecil and Velda May, were the center of family life and all that was good about that. And then it was gone.

"Nobody talked about it," he says. "I remember seeing a picture in the newspaper that showed my grandmother face down with the car on top of her on the train tracks. That picture was frozen in my head. I never saw that picture again, but it stayed with me. After the funeral, the adults got together to mourn and the kids were pushed in a corner and told it was going to be OK. For me, it wasn't OK. Families didn't talk about those things in those days. It was something we couldn't touch. Instead of pulling the family together, it pulled us apart. All that we had that was so tight as a family just disappeared."

For decades he was traumatized by the event. It was a mix of many things — the sudden realization of life's fragility, the

loss of a loved one and family leader, the fear of being wounded like that again. He suffered from anxiety. He had a constant knot in his stomach and "I felt fear all the time." Bolerjack continued to have panic attacks as an adult, accompanied by tunnel vision, rapid heart rate and hot spells, which came for no particular reason. He also feared commitment and the pain that could bring. "It prevented me from getting married younger," he says. "I was engaged once. I couldn't handle it. At times, I was still 9 years old emotionally."

In 1987, he decided it was time to go on a "cleansing mission to find out why the impact of that day laid so heavy on my heart." Bolerjack left the air at KSL for a couple of weeks to fly to Missouri. He visited the site of the accident and the local newspaper office to read old stories about it. "I had to make sure what I saw when I was 9 was real," he says. When he saw that the old newspaper stories matched his memories, "it was incredible. Everything my mind had snap-shot was there in real life. I just broke down. It was a life changer. It allowed me to move on."

I felt sorry for Helen Sramek, President of Operation Lifesaver, who had to follow Craig Bolerjack. So we took a break before Helen gave her State of Operation Lifesaver talk. Each state then gave a State Coordinator's Report about the Operation Lifesaver program in their respective states.

The rest of the Workshop included great presentations by the following:

- Steve Meyer, Utah Transit Authority, FrontRunner Commuter Rail
- LeeAnn Dickson, Federal Railroad Administration, No Horn Rule
- Charlie Hagood, Federal Railroad Administration, Migrant Worker Issues
- Wende Corcoran, OLI, New Presenter Materials
- Rich Gent, Nevada OL, Working with the Military
- Marmie Edwards, OLI, Communications Update
- Enforcement Panel, Focus on Drivers Panel, Focus on Presenters, and Focus on Trespassers
- Melinda Lewis and Shandy Lam, Idaho Teen Speakers, Talking to Teens (pictured right)



One of the highlights of the Workshop was honoring Jerry Hardesty at our dinner program. Jerry retired from the Union Pacific Railroad earlier this year. He was honored by several organizations including: Operation Lifesaver, Union Pacific Railroad, Operation Lifesaver Region 7, and a slide show presentation by the LeeAnn Dickson of the Federal Railroad Administration. He is pictured left with his wife Pam.

An award lunch was held on Friday to honor several volunteer presenters from four states. Special thanks to Craig Bolerjack, John Njord, the coordinating committee, Operation Lifesaver Utah, and our safety partners (Amtrak, BNSF Railway, California Operation Lifesaver, Operation Lifesaver, Union Pacific Railroad, and the Utah Transit Authority) for making the Region 7 Workshop a success!