

## **This is Rhett's story**

Rhett Brown was the guest speaker at our Z's Safety Day conference this year. From his wheelchair, Rhett tells the story of the instant that changed his life.



“It was July 2004. I was standing on two planks on an unframed deck. Somehow I turned to walk across them but I fell ... I fell 2.2 metres. I landed on my head. The initial impact broke my neck.”

In the moments following the accident, as he lay on the ground, Rhett said it was impossible to take in the enormity of instantly being paralysed, of instantly realising that he was going to live the rest of his life like this. How was he going to cope? Who was going to look after him? What was he going to do? Where was he going to live?

It would take two years to rationalise all those things out and to find answers, he says.

In many ways, Rhett's view was that the accident was inevitable. If it hadn't of happened to him, there was a very high chance it would have happened to someone around him. “At the time of my accident I was working in an industry which was totally and utterly unregulated for safety concerns. We had no toolbox meetings. We had no hazard registers. We had no safety instructors on site. We never had lectures about hazards. We had no learning of tools or how to use them. We had nothing. We were simply expected to turn up and work.

“We worked without safety equipment like standing platforms or handrails, full restraints and so on ... There was none of that. And the higher you worked, the more dangerous the situation, the bigger man you were. If you complained to your mates about the dangerous working environment, you got a reputation as a wuss. It was terrible. You had no-one to complain to. The bosses weren't interested. Your mates weren't interested. That was the culture.”

He looks straight at the audience. “So my appeal to you administrators and supervisors who are in charge of staff is to ask you to recognise that you have an obligation – I'll go further and say, you have a moral obligation – to ensure that your staff adhere to your rules, regulations and protocols.”

At the end of the day, Rhett says, all of those things are there for one reason, and that is to see that staff go home the same way they came to work - not by ambulance, helicopter or even in a hearse.

“These rules and regulations [are more than just] bits of paper or verbal instructions. They are real. They save lives. And they prevent injuries. So please, put them in place and see that they're followed.”

He looks at us again. “Thank you,” he says quietly.

