

Lessons learned from Willow Island?

May 5, 2013

Parkersburg News and Sentinel

Thirty-five years ago , West Virginia suffered the largest construction accident in American history when 51 lives were lost in a scaffolding collapse at the Willow Island power plant north of Parkersburg.

The loss of these fathers, sons and brothers is compounded by the fact it was a totally preventable tragedy caused by unsafe working conditions. These men should still be celebrating anniversaries with their wives and birthdays with their families. Instead their families gather to mourn 35 years passing without them.

"Workers' Memorial Day" in West Virginia took place on April 28. This year the ceremony was held in the shadows of the Willow Island memorial to commemorate the tragedy. A bell tolled 51 times for the Willow Island workers, then rang out 22 more times to remember the West Virginians who lost their lives on the job last year.

Sadly, "Workers' Memorial Day" is an annual event due to all the work-related deaths that occur every single year in our state. In the past five years 254 workplace fatalities have occurred in West Virginia, and the majority of those deaths were preventable.

While that astounding figure is totally unacceptable, even one death is too many. It's time West Virginia starts taking effective measures to prevent the tragic and needless loss of workers' lives.

Real action, in the form of workplace safety legislation, needs to be taken before another Workers' Memorial Day comes to pass. Just this past month, a handful of legislators were able to vote down a simple bill intended to require a 10-hour safety training program for construction workers on certain public works projects. Delegate Tom Azinger and Delegate Anna Border, both R-Wood, were two of those politicians.

Politicians need to be held accountable for their actions to block meaningful safety measures. You can do your part to make safety a priority by making sure you only vote for elected officials who act rather than talk.

We don't want to listen to the mournful bells tolling for yet more workers' lives needlessly lost.

Steve White

Charleston

EDITOR'S NOTE: Steve White is director of the Affiliated Construction Trades