

Tomorrow Isn't Promised: Embracing Life's Fragility

Safety isn't just prevention and zero injury objectives; we must also have effective recovery systems.

By Shawn M. Galloway

On November 14, 2022, my wife, Misty, and I arrived in Bali, Indonesia. We were there to celebrate with one of my closest and longtime friends, Kevin Henderson, and his fiancée, Stephanie. We enjoyed pursuing adventurous vacations with them, with the previous year hiking to the top of an active volcano in Guatemala.

It quickly became apparent why Bali is such a desired tourist destination. For the first few days, we explored waterfalls and temples, experienced about a hundred near-misses as we were driven across the island, and enjoyed the local cuisine. We laughed and reminisced.

Thursday, November 17, was Kevin's 51st birthday. His wish was to be granted: a sunrise trek up Mount Agung, another active volcano and one of the most challenging climbs in the world. The day was spent shopping, packing and preparing for the adventure later that evening.

The climb is fairly organized. It begins around 10 p.m. and is led by a guide, which is compulsory. The summit is reached around 5 a.m., where you meet other hikers and their guides and prepare for the majestic sunrise. Afterward, you collectively descend, and the trek is over around noon when you reach base camp.

Kevin summited Mount Agung. He took in the breathtaking view he had chased. He saw the sun rise high above the Indonesian countryside. He accomplished his goal. He won the day.

During the descent, high above the clouds, around 1,000 feet below the summit, at 7:30 a.m. on his 51st birthday in a beautiful location, one of the holiest spots in Bali, my dear friend had an accident. He passed away, taking his last breaths, chasing his dreams below the mountain's peak he had just conquered.

I had to call Stephanie. Because of the understandably poor signal, it took three conversations to accomplish one of the most challenging tasks I've been responsible for: informing Stephanie that the love of her life had passed away. I then had to notify others back in Texas.

The following week was a blur. Misty and I stayed in the country with Stephanie to support her as she observed Kevin's wishes and had his remains cremated. My dear friend returned to Houston in an urn, and his celebration of life occurred days later.

Following the funeral, Misty and I grappled with our own grief while trying to be a source of strength for Stephanie and Kevin's family. We shared stories of Kevin, reminiscing about his incredible intellect, wit and humor, adventurous spirit, and



SHAWN M. GALLOWAY

From left to right: Kevin, Stephanie, Shawn and Misty

unwavering loyalty. Those memories became our solace, a way to keep his spirit alive in our hearts.

This tragedy brought home the need for deeper conversations about safety, preparedness and recovery plans. We often take for granted the risks that accompany our adventures. Kevin's death underscored for me the importance of approaching even vacation activities with a new sense of caution and readiness.

Despite our best efforts, tragedies occur more often off the job than on the job. This is why safety is not all prevention and zero injury objectives; we must have effective recovery systems to deal with the inevitability of mistakes that will be made and the possibility of injuries at work, in and around our homes, and on the side of mountains on the other side of the world.

The lessons learned from such a tragic event extend far beyond the immediate aftermath and serve as a stark reminder of the fragility of life and the importance of cherishing every moment we have with our loved ones.

Please take some time today to do three things:

1. Have a conversation with a colleague or employee. Let them know why you enjoy working with them and why they matter to you.
2. Call a friend and tell them you are thinking about them. Share why you value their friendship.
3. Hug your friends and family tightly. **EHS**



SHAWN M. GALLOWAY

Shawn M. Galloway is CEO of ProAct Safety; host of the podcast, "Safety Culture Excellence"; and a past keynote speaker at EHS Today's Safety Leadership Conference.