

UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, April 2013

Careless Chris Takes a Deep Breath

By: Kitty

“Luke,” the deep voice intoned portentously between harsh, slow breaths, “I am your father.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “That just never gets old, does it.”

Careless Chris grinned as he pulled the respirator off his face. “It’s as classic as saying ‘What?’ every time they announce the hearing protection stuff, only with a more upscale though increasingly dated pop culture reference.”

“He’s got you there,” Ian agreed complacently from his desk. Switching seamlessly from umpire to supervisor, he added, “Whenever you two feel like closing the discussion on the hermeneutics of safety and doing some building maintenance work, you just let me know and I’ll be sure to log my approval on your timecards.”

It didn’t take long for the shop group to come to order, collect their assignments for the morning, and spread out after that, tool caddies in hand. Chris hummed the Imperial March to himself as he walked across the college grounds and climbed the stairs to the attic where his first job was located. It wasn’t a space he’d been to before and the little half-height access door surprised him, but he shrugged, unlocked it, and took a cautious sniff. The reek of sewer gas greeted him and he wrinkled his nose in disgust, trying to breathe shallowly. This was definitely the right place.

Giving himself a minute to acclimatize to the smell, he found that it wasn’t getting any easier to take so he gritted his teeth and crawled in, pushing his tool bucket ahead of him. “Figures they wouldn’t have installed a light in here,” he grouched to himself as he fished around in his kit for a flashlight after not being able to find a switch by the door. “It’s not like they put all the stuff that needs fixing in these ridiculously dark, inaccessible holes every single time.”

The smell got worse and worse as he moved further inward. Reaching the back of the cramped space, he scanned the stack of vents, conduit, and pipes clustered in the corner. It didn’t take long to find the broken joint on the plumbing vent he was there to repair. It looked like a combination of the building settling and a rat’s chewing had completely breached the pipe, but he had a full can of glue and a lot of motivation to stop up that hole.

Perched on top of his tools was the can of ABS glue and the MSDS that Ian had insisted he bring along. Scanning it by flashlight, he noted the high points, trying to take as little time as possible. “Blah blah toxic vapors, well ventilated, blah blah, dispose of in accordance with state and federal regulations. That’s all pretty standard boilerplate.” The next item out of the bucket was his trusty respirator. Though he’d never really liked its pale pinkish-purple cartridges, they were the same ones everybody else had so he’d known better than to complain about the color not going with his manly maintenance guy image. He’d never been so glad to put it on, but it didn’t eliminate the sewer stink entirely no matter how much he wiggled it around on his face.

Giving up on trying for a better seal in favor of spending less time exposed to the smell, he opened the can and got to work slathering glue around the cracked and separated joint. He didn’t have any spare pieces of the black plastic with him to fill in the chewed areas, but they looked small enough that he figured some expert adhesive application could coat the remaining parts well enough to form an effective barrier. Doing more with less was the department motto and Chris was proud to be one of the campus MacGyvers who could fix just about anything with not much more than twine and spit.

On the bright side, he thought to himself, at least the smell from the glue was better than the sewer gas. The darkness and his awkward position reaching into the corner threw strange shadows from the propped up flashlight, creating a disorienting chiaroscuro effect on the sloped attic rafters. The motion in his peripheral vision made him a little woozy and he paused for a moment, trying to uncross his eyes to make his sense of perspective settle down, but the odd effect was so strong it was even giving him a headache. “Whoa, dude,” he muttered to himself, and rolled over onto his back hoping to stop the sensation of the whole building wallowing back and forth like a ship on rough seas.

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Events were somewhat unclear to him for a while after that. There were people in uniforms and an oxygen mask over his face and a lot of bright flashy lights, and some time later there was a lot of paperwork. Once he realized how lucky he was to still be alive, it was a pleasure to spend time in respirator training along with Ian and Jim and all the rest of the crews, learning why a magenta particulate cartridge was not always the perfect choice. They all participated in confined space training where they were taught how certain conditions or tasks can change a normally harmless space into a permit-required entry that could involve everything from air monitoring to rescue gear. The entire department reviewed its Injury and Illness Prevention Program and began an extensive Job Hazard Analysis project designed to result in Standard Operating Procedures for most of their work.

At the forefront, Chris made himself the spokesman for thinking ahead before starting any job. Whenever he put on his respirator, his new line was, "We have foreseen this. It is your destiny. Join me, and together we can do the job safely!"