UC Monthly Safety Spotlight, October 2013

Careless Chris Piles it On
By: Kitty

"Why do they always wait until the day before move-in to give us these work orders?" Careless Chris mused aloud as he set the last screw with his portable drill. It choked and stalled, the battery finally giving out after a full day's work. The campus carpentry shop had been running full steam all summer trying to catch up on repair requests but it seemed there was always an extra push in the fall.

"They're doing us a favor," Jim replied cheerfully. "It's still another whole week until classes start." His drill had already run out of power and he was most of the way through the charge on his spare battery. "Think how much more fun this would be next Friday with the students all wandering around trying to figure out where everything is."

Chris rocked back on his heels, a nostalgic smile on his face. "That's an important rite of passage. Hey, you know I still have dreams about trying to find a class I was supposed to be in all semester but forgot about until finals week." He shook his head and went back to collecting his tools. "At least those are better than the ones where I remembered to show up for class but forgot to put on any clothes."

"I could have gone all weekend without that mental image," Jim sighed. He dropped his drill on their rolling tool cart and surveyed the half-completed project. The plumbers had fixed the leak weeks ago but now all the damaged ceiling tiles and half the drywall had been removed and needed to be replaced before they could let the paint crew at it. Once they had gotten started removing the affected area, they had found that more needed to be done than they had time to complete in a single day. Mostly that was because it was an older building and there had been a lot of old leaks and dry-rot that had never been exposed over the years, just painted over.

"My little Friday afternoon present to you." Chris bowed slightly, smirking. "You can think about that instead of contemplating coming back here Monday morning to finish the rest of that wall."

"You make it sound so irresistible, how can I refuse?" Jim had fewer items scattered around the working area and finished clearing up first. With a wave, he left Chris to the last bit of work closing down their job for the weekend. Since they had a key to the office and could leave their stuff there, he didn't have to roll the cart of tools out to his truck and load it up but he did need to plug in the rechargers for all their batteries. Like most older buildings, the room they were in had too few electrical outlets, but Chris was always prepared for such a minor problem. He carried a power strip with the rest of his stuff, and not just any standard power strip. His special, personal one had been salvaged from an e-waste pile and he regarded it with personal affection. Sure, it was missing the grounding prong but that was part of its charm – it worked in every outlet on campus, old or new.

Deploying the power strip required finding an open outlet. In the crowded office, all the available wall taps were already taken by the usual occupant's things and Chris knew better than to unplug a professor's computer. Under the desk he was able to find the office owner's power strip which had one available outlet remaining, and he connected his strip to that. Then he got all the rechargers lined up on the lower shelf of the cart with both his and Jim's main and back-up batteries all plugged in.

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There were so many of them that the charging indicators blinked like a festive holiday display of lights through their tangle of snarled cords. The rest of the tools and materials fit on the top level and only a few minutes after Jim's departure Chris headed out too, carefree and happily anticipating his weekend activities.

In the quiet darkness of the office that night, the forces Chris had set in motion began tilting toward their inevitable result. His favorite power strip, recalled through by a Consumer Product Safety Commission notice and then discarded but not destroyed to make it unusable, was not only missing a grounding plug but had been manufactured cheaply with undersized wiring. In the warm nest of batteries, cables, and chargers, the draw on it higher than its low-grade off-spec internal parts could safely sustain, it began to overheat.

The beige plastic slowly softened, discoloring, deforming, and then darkening as it got hotter and hotter. Toward the middle of that night the wiring reached a high enough temperature to cause the now gooey and blackened plastic to begin smoldering. Thinning spots on the power strip's cord and the interiors of its outlets glowed a sullen volcanic shade of crimson, releasing a dense black and suffocatingly toxic smoke that was invisible in the unlit room. Rising quickly but not hot enough to activate the heat sensor in the room, it filled the office as first the adjacent cords and then the cart everything was sitting on warmed and the smoldering area spread like a creeping lava flow.

Traveling through air ducts serving the office, smoke filled the ventilation system and rapidly migrated throughout the building. Everywhere it went it deposited an oily coating of soot, bonding the stench of burnt plastic to every porous surface it encountered. Not just the textiles, paper, and wood found in the inhabited spaces, but the insulating foam in the ducts, the filters - even the refrigerator in the break room. By the time a smoke detector went off and summoned the fire department, most all of the building was thoroughly contaminated.

Extinguishing the small, still-smoldering original source area wasn't too difficult and caused the usual amount of localized water damage, but cleaning that up was small potatoes indeed compared to the cost of bringing in a disaster remediation company to decontaminate the rest of the affected areas. Instead of opening with the start of instruction, the building was kept closed for an additional two weeks and the impacts to faculty and programs were generally declared incalculable, though that was not technically true since an amount had to be determined to start the insurance claim.

It was certainly a lot more than it should have been, as Jim pointed out to Chris at every opportunity for the next five years, compared to the price of correctly using a decent, UL-rated power strip with solid grounding and overload protection.