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Speech & Presentation by Rais Bhuiyan

Earlier this month, heading back to my hotel in Atlanta, I stopped to pick up a sandwich. I pulled into the one spot whose neon “Open” sign still illuminated, but as I stepped out of the car, I was suddenly struck by the quiet, small, empty, and dark location of this popular food chain. After entering the store, a couple of things further drew my attention. A young man came out from the back, working alone, and a sign stating, “This register NEVER has more than \$50 CASH” greeted me as I approached the counter. I struck up a conversation with the friendly young employee and he told me he had just moved from a dying small town in OH, and despite his discomfort working in this situation, he didn’t have many other options. This entire scenario reminded me of my own series of painful and traumatic memories working at a gas station, one of the most highly risk prone workplaces in the US.

After graduating as a pilot officer from the Bangladesh Air Force Academy, I didn’t feel my destiny was there. When I got a chance to come to the United States for additional higher education, I took it. I left my home, my family and my career to fulfill my academic pursuits, while also hoping to experience the American dream. In the spring of 2001, I relocated to Dallas from New York to help a friend open his newest business, planning to attend classes at night. Almost immediately after starting the job, my safety, security, and even my life, were threatened.

One day, a customer asked me to open the pump with a promise to pay later. I politely refused, explaining he had to pay first. Right away he grew angry, threatening to destroy property, and even asked how much my own life was worth. I didn’t say anything to him, but took the threat seriously; noting his license plate number I contacted the police. I could not sleep that night, worrying about my safety and my life. I was afraid to go back to work and began thinking more about the fact that the gas station was in a high crime area, and while all the businesses around us closed by 8pm, we stayed open until 10pm. Every night, I was the one left to close the store alone, always in fear of being attacked and robbed, as I also carried the total cash sales of that day to the owner. As I think back on those days, there were so many more risk factors of potential workplace related violence I was susceptible to, including:

- unrestricted public movement throughout the workplace
- dealing with dangerous or unstable people sometime

- working without proper security and safety measurements
- working alone
- working alone in remote areas
- working during off hours
- working without proper training

Within a couple of weeks after that first incident, I was robbed at gun point. It was the middle of August, around 2:30pm, when a customer came to the register with a soft drink and dollar bill. As soon as I opened the cash register, he pulled the gun from his pocket. It was typical for people to come to the store hoping to sell a TV, computer, or jewelry, and I thought this customer wanted to sell his gun to make some quick cash. Though I had no intention to buy his gun, I was curious about how much he was selling it for. I asked him how much he was asking for it. He said, give me all the money. I responded, confused, "but you're not telling me how much." We repeated this exchange a few more times, until he cocked the gun and pointed it at my forehead. I realized, I was being robbed. My fear became true. I felt terrible, I didn't want to work there anymore, but didn't quit because the owner was my friend and I knew he would've been in a difficult position trying to replace me with a reliable and trustworthy person, while also having to pay the person on time. I stayed despite my discomfort, for the sake of my friendship, and advocated for enhanced safety and security measures. The owner did nothing. Rather, he told me to just hand over money during a robbery without any resistance.

Instead of enhancing security and safety for his business, for me, he decided to return the disconnected, dummy CCTV cameras he had to save \$60 a month. It was this decision that invited and then facilitated what would ultimately become the most devastating, traumatic and life altering experience of my entire life.

Shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a white supremacist from Dallas went on a shooting rampage, killing Muslims. On September 21st, 10 days after the attacks, as I was working, a man wearing a bandana, sunglasses, and a baseball cap, holding a sawed off, double barrel shot gun, burst into the store. He pointed the gun straight at my face. I immediately opened the register and offered him the money. Instead of taking it though, his gaze remained fixed, and he asked, "Where are you from?" Before I could say anything more than, "Excuse me?" he pulled the trigger from point blank range. At first, it felt like a million bees were stinging my face -- and then I heard it -- the explosion. I looked down and saw blood pouring like an open faucet from the right side of my head. Frantically and instinctively, I placed both hands on my face, thinking I had to keep my brain from spilling out. I heard myself screaming, then noticed the gunman still standing there. I thought, if I didn't appear to be dying, he'd shoot me again. I fell to the floor. He finally left. I grabbed the phone, but couldn't dial 911. I ran to the barbershop next door, three men inside looked at me in horror, and assuming the shooter was right behind me, scrambled to escape out back. I screamed, grabbing one of them, begging him to call 911. As he did, I caught myself in the mirror. The image reflected back was gruesome, like something straight out of a horror movie. In an instant, I had become disfigured, was losing blood and strength rapidly; fighting to stay awake.....fighting to stay alive. Five hours after I was shot, I finally lost consciousness and was put on life support.

The next thing I remember, I was asking, “where am I?” Thinking I had died, I anxiously waited. When I heard, “Good morning Mr. Bhuiyan, you are in the hospital,” it was one of the most beautiful moments of my life. But that joy didn’t last long. Within a few hours, the hospital which was private and expensive, discharged me and expected that I would arrange follow up treatments on my own. It seems to go without saying that I received no health or workmen’s compensation benefits of any kind from the owner of the gas station.

As a result of the shooting, I underwent several eye surgeries, unfortunately though, I ended up losing sight in one eye. The right side of my face and skull was, and remains, peppered with more than 3 dozen bullet fragments. I lost my job, my home, my sense of security, and my fiancé, but gained more than \$60,000 in medical bills. I reached out to the Red Cross, but they informed me I was only qualified for one week’s worth of groceries. When my father heard what happened, he suffered a stroke, but thankfully survived.

I was incredibly fortunate. My shooter, Mark Stroman, killed two other South Asian men during his 9/11 retaliation shooting spree. Stroman claimed he was hunting “A-rabs,” but not one of his three victims was Middle Eastern. After his arrest, he told the news media he had done what most Americans wanted to do; they just didn’t have the guts. He claimed he was the True American, a patriot. He blamed ME and “my kind” for 9/11. He said America was no place for Muslims... until I started my campaign to try to save him from death row. Though Mark was ultimately executed by the state of Texas, I harnessed the momentum created during my international campaign and created the non-profit, *World Without Hate*. Through speaking engagements and programming, we educate people about the transformative power of empathy, compassion, mercy and forgiveness; and advocate for human rights in all ways. It is not only my own story that brings me here today, but my conviction and hope that by utilizing empathy and compassion, we can indeed combat the issues of inequity, safety, security and violence in the workplace.

The effects of workplace violence vary dramatically; ranging from intimidation, or feelings of fear, to serious physical wounds and even death. And physical injuries are just part of the equation. Many workers experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, making it more difficult to return to work after an incident. In my own case, I never could’ve imagined going back to work at that...or any other... gas station. Undocumented immigrant and low-income workers are especially vulnerable to unsafe workplaces, and face higher rates of casualty and injury. Unfortunately, workplace violence is growing, mostly for women workers in service jobs and health care. According to the US occupational Health & Safety Administration, violence is the leading cause of death for women in the workplace and second leading cause of death for men. In 2015, more than 4,800 workers were killed on the job. Each year, 50,000 to 60,000 workers die from occupational diseases caused by exposures to toxic chemicals and other health hazards, which means a total of 150 workers dying each and every day.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately two million workers are injured every year, and more than 800 die as a result of violence in the workplace. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health estimates the cost of workplace violence to employers is \$121 billion annually. And none of those statistics include the intimidation, harassment, threats or acts of physical violence that go unreported.

This is extremely worse in poor countries, where workers struggle every day for basic human rights and safety at the workplace. April 24th was the fourth anniversary of the deadliest garment-factory accident in history, which took place in the city I grew up, Dhaka, Bangladesh. On that day, an eight-story commercial building, the Rana Plaza, collapsed, killing 1,129 workers and injuring 2,500.

The building's owners ruthlessly ignored warnings not to use the building after cracks had appeared during an inspection the day before. Instead, garment workers were ordered to return the next day, the building collapsing during morning rush-hour. Negligence combined with greed, starting from western buyers to the local factory owners, disrespect for human lives, and the presence of modern day slavery, were all contributing factors in this tragic accident.

Tragedies like this could and should have been prevented. These workers and 79 of our brothers and sisters who lost their lives last year, in the state of Washington, did not have to die. We must fight against these inexcusable violations of workers' human rights. We simply cannot and will not let politicians and corporations put workers in danger, while driving down wages and destroying our communities. We must educate workers and union members about these threats, mobilize and organize to preserve everyone's basic and inherent human rights and dignity. While electing candidates who support workers' rights, imposing new laws or improving existing laws, we must also focus on healthy human development, replacing greed, anger, intolerance, and hate with empathy, compassion and forgiveness. What we wouldn't tolerate or allow at our own place of employment, means we must not expect or push others to endure anything less.

Let's not only remember and pay tribute to those who have lost their lives, been injured or made sick on the job, but let's come together to call for an end to the needless tragedies of our brothers and sisters, and demand change for job hazards that injure, maim, and traumatize. And on this day, let's pledge to fight for safe jobs, economic security, opportunity, and a better life for all around the world.

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