

## Preferred Worker Program makes new safety career possible

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The kids at Grants Pass Middle School call Michael White's accident "the orange peel deal." Even White admits it began with some potential for humor. "At least it wasn't a banana peel," he says.

Ultimately, there was nothing funny about the three-year ordeal White endured after slipping on an orange segment while moving a table. What began as comedy cliché quickly took a tragic turn.

To repair the damage to his knee, White needed one simple surgery. Then he needed a second surgery to "clean it up a little." Then his knee began to swell. He had a staph infection, more accurately an MRSA (pronounced "mersa") — methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus — infection, a potentially lethal strain of staph resistant to broad-spectrum antibiotics.



"I was very sick," says White, who ended up having 18 surgeries and losing 70 pounds.

At the time of his injury, White was head custodian at the school, a physical job that might be beyond his ability once his knee healed. Nevertheless, White wasn't worried about going back to work. "I didn't think I was going to live," he says.

At Oregon Health and Science University in Portland, White was put on intravenous antibiotics and had more surgery. The infection went into the bone, and in one two-week period, he had six surgeries. He was away from home more than a month. "It was hard on the family," he says. "A lot fell on my wife, Patty."

White had the choice to continue treatment or have his leg removed, and he decided to fight for his leg. Sometimes he wonders if that was the right decision. The infection did so much damage that doctors had to fuse his knee, and now he can't do many of the things he used to do.

"I used to jump out of helicopters and play hockey, and now I can't even push in a clutch. I think I could do more now with a prosthetic leg."

"When Mike was initially released to light duty, I had him do some safety-related projects for me," said Sherry Ely, business manager for the Grants Pass School District. However, his condition worsened, and it became apparent that White couldn't continue working until the issues with his knee were resolved. When he finally returned to work, Ely knew it would have to be in a different capacity.

"He couldn't go back to being a custodian," says Stan Potocki, vocational counselor. "Total disability was an option, but not a good one. Sherry, Michael, and I brainstormed options and developed a new job for him as safety coordinator/warehouse assistant through the Preferred Worker Program."

Today White has been in the new position a little more than a year. He inspects facilities, assists with purchasing, handles accident reports, and conducts safety meetings at each site in the district. He is a certified asbestos inspector, as well as a locksmith, training he received through the Preferred Worker Program.

Because he can't bend his knee, White needed custom-made furniture for his office. The Preferred Worker Program paid for a new office and worksite modification, and for a desk that moves up and down so he can sit or stand while working. The program also provided funds for a laptop computer and printer and modifications to his vehicle.

"Without the funding from the Preferred Worker Program, the district would not have been able to afford the equipment necessary for Mike to do the job," says Ely.

When White was first injured and facing one simple surgery, he imagined a very different happy ending to his story. Although it hasn't turned out as he expected, he's grateful to be alive, at home with his family, and back at a job he enjoys.

"I work with great people," he says. "I appreciate everything Sherry did for me, for giving me this job. I just miss the kids."

"He is excelling in this position," says Ely. "I truly don't know how I would manage without him."



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