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Safety Watch: Risky moves rise as farmers work fast, solo

By Stephanie Leonard

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Juanita and Rick Friday said Rick was replacing a bulb on this ladder when he fell from the top step.

Photo courtesy Stephanie Leonard

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It's confession time. How often do you take a safety risk working alone that you wouldn't take if someone was working alongside you?

A risk that you'd warn someone else about if you saw them try the same thing?

After all, it's "only me," you're not setting an example and you know you won't be caught? Besides ... you're in a hurry, and you haven't got hurt yet!

Probably most of us have to admit to this, if we're honest.

Maybe it's using a hand grinder or a torch without eye protection. Not wearing the helmet or seatbelt "this time." Troubleshooting equipment without turning it off or locking out moving parts. A quick check in a bin with the unloader running. Hoisting equipment without a jack stand or cribbing. Texting and driving.

We push our luck — and reinforce a bad habit — every time we "get away with" taking a shortcut around safety. Not getting caught or hurt makes the bad habit seem not so risky.

In manufacturing, there are a lot of reminders to work safely and to hold people accountable, said Rick Friday, comparing his work at a local Winnebago plant with operating the family's Iowa Century Farm.

"But there's no safety committee on the farm, no safety meetings, no discipline if you don't follow a safety rule, especially when you're working alone," he said.

That's not to say there aren't consequences.

Friday, and his wife, Juanita, farm 460 acres in Union County, Iowa. He's a life-long farmer and part-time cartoonist, passionate about their 100-head herd of "Angus mommas," two with bloodlines descended from his family's purebred Herefords in the 1890s.

Four years ago, Friday took one of those "working-alone risks" that drove a lesson home.

"I was getting the barn ready for calving and was going to replace a light bulb over the pens. I got the 10-foot wooden stepladder out and climbed onto the top step to reach. It got to wobbling, and then I got to wobbling to counter it," he explained, waving his arms to illustrate the balancing act.

The ladder side rail broke, and he fell 15 feet to the concrete.

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"I laid there for a while in pain, couldn't move. I figured my arm was broke. That night, my wrist swelled up huge."

As it turned out, he'd broken ribs but not his arm. It was over a month before he was getting around well.

"Lying there, I could just see that sign on the top step. I'd even moved my feet apart on the top step so I could read it," he said.

"It was stupid, and it happened so quick. I knew better, but I did it anyway. If Juan or anybody was in there with me, they would have said 'No, no, no!' about getting on the top step. Somebody would have been holding the ladder."

When we went to see where the fall happened, Juanita spotted a cracked rail on a different stepladder and told him to get rid of it.

"I am fortunate I'm one of those farmers in the neighborhood that still has all my fingers and thumbs," he said, "but I know I go too fast, I'm always in a hurry. I'm always thinking of everything I have to get done."

Juanita nodded about him getting in a hurry, but she pointed out how vigilant he is about ensuring their grandkids' safety on the farm.

Friday says he's lucky to not have been injured more severely.

"I know if someone was watching me, I would not have taken that risk of getting on the top step. Now I think about that every time I grab a ladder. Why does it take getting hurt to learn the lesson?"

In the coming busy weeks, take the precautions when working alone that you expect your family, coworkers or neighbors to take when you work together — not the short cuts.

As Friday concluded, "Many eyes make less fools."

Work as if someone's watching you.

*Steph Leonard is an industrial hygienist at The University of Iowa. Contact her at 319-335-4432 or **stephanie-leonard@uiowa.edu** for more information or if you have a safety story to share.*