https://agupdate.com/iowafarmertoday/news/state-and-regional/think-twice-years-later-a-survivor-offers-plea-to-farmers/article_d7b03f42-b6b9-11e8-9e55-b7c2b9243df0.html

Iowa Farmer Today

‘Think twice': 30 years later, a survivor offers plea to farmers

By Stephanie Leonard Sep 18, 2018 **Updated** Sep 19, 2018

Jerry Nelson and his wife, Julie, talk about a hydrogen sulfide incident on the farm 30 years ago that almost killed him.

Photo courtesy South Dakota Public Broadcasting and Telling the Story Project

"My wife urged me to contact you," Jerry Nelson explained. "It might make one person stop and think 'maybe I shouldn't do this.'"

Nelson and his wife, Julie, recently marked a 30-year anniversary of a day he'll never forget. Yet because of what happened, there's a lot he doesn't remember.

"...because July 10, 1988, was the day that I was supposed to die," he said.

Jerry, Julie, Paul and Chris Nelson in 1987.

Photo courtesy Jerry Nelson

On that day, Nelson entered the manure pit at his family's farm near Volga, S.D.

Here is more of his story, in his own words:

A scorching Sunday morning. Rushing through chores on our dairy farm. Glancing into the pit and discovering that the manure pump had plugged. Crap!

But I know how to fix this. Just climb down and unplug the pump with a spud bar. I've done it dozens of times.

Bending over with the spud bar in my hand, the manure inches from my face. Suddenly feeling really weird. It's the gas! Get out NOW!

Beginning the climb up and out. I can see the sky, hear the tractor idling. Then everything abruptly fading to black. I cannot recall much of the next three weeks.

Hydrogen sulfide can cause nearly instant death at high concentrations. At lower levels, it can result in swift loss of consciousness, pulmonary edema and decreased oxygen supply to the brain.

The Nelsons now, Julie, Jerry, Chris, daughter-in-law Megan, and Paul.

Photo courtesy Jerry Nelson

Dad finding me unconscious, floating face-up in the manure. He and Mom placing the 911 call no parent wants to make.

First responders hauling me out of the pit. No respiration, can't find a pulse. Ambulance whisking me to a local hospital.

My wife, Julie, who was in town for groceries, a car suddenly pulling up alongside hers. Its driver, a first responder, shouting, "Get to the hospital! He's still breathing!"

At the ER, the attending physician telling my family that I've inhaled hydrogen sulfide. Zero chance for survival.

Julie absorbing that, at age 29, she's about to become a widow with two young sons. Keeping her wits about her and asking the doctor if I'm still alive. Yes. Barely.

'Then call the chopper. Get him to Sioux Falls.' Doctor replying, 'You don't understand. There's no hope.' My wife saying, 'I don't care. Call. The. Chopper.'

Nelson's diagnosis at Sioux Falls included a collapsed right lung, diffuse pulmonary infiltrates, manure aspiration and anoxic encephalopathy. His odds of survival, family was told, were perhaps 50/50 — if he made it through the first week.

ARDS — acute respiratory distress syndrome — becoming part of my family's lexicon. My wife, who never leaves my side, giving me a sponge bath and being assailed by the stench of rotten eggs. Hydrogen sulfide is sweating its way out.

On the seventh day, me indicating to Julie that I can't breathe despite being intubated and on a respirator. Doctors being summoned. Diagnosis: My swelling lungs are suffocating themselves. Nothing more can be done. Call the family. This is it.

My wife again refusing to give up, asking the doctor to consult with Mayo Clinic. He does and is advised to inspect my lungs with a bronchoscope. Discovering that blood clots are blocking major airways. The plugs are removed, and I can breathe again.

From my point of view: The first three weeks following the accident are a blur of fantastic hallucinations and painful realities. I don't know which is which.

Gradually being weaned off the narcotics as my pulmonary function improves. Clear thinking returning slowly.

I'm in a hospital bed. I am catheterized and am breathing through a tube protruding from the base of my throat. A forest of IV poles sitting at my bedside, and my right ribcage aching. Inspection reveals stitches where chest tubes had been.

I don't belong here! I have farming to do, cows to milk. Trying to exit the bed and the respirator emitting earsplitting whoops. A nurse sprinting into the room, reattaching the respirator to my tracheotomy tube. The nurse admonishing, 'You be good! You want me to tie you down again?'

Then, slow but steady improvement. It's a big deal being hoisted from the bed and placed in a recliner. Sitting upright for the first time in a month leaves me feeling woozy.

The urinary catheter and pulmonary artery catheter being removed. Relearning how to walk in Physical Therapy. My wife ordering in a Godfather's Classic Combo pizza. I can only manage one slice, but it's the best meal I've ever had.

Coming home to a huge 'Welcome Home' banner, family, cake and hugs. Just like a birthday party. Which, in a way, it was.

Nelson credits his long-shot survival to many people. His parents had the presence of mind to open a second hatch to the pit and use a window fan to blow in fresh air until responders arrived. Rescuers wearing air-supplying respirators retrieved him. A diverse team of Sioux Falls specialists managed his care and recovery over a five-week hospital stay.

And Julie, who refused to give up on him.

During Jerry's 25 days in ICU, she brought their sons to see him, not knowing which might be the last time. Paul busied himself by trying to explain the functions of all the machinery hooked up to his dad. Chris stood at the bedside and patted his hand.

Julie taped photos of the boys to the ceiling above his bed — so they'd be the first thing Jerry saw when he came to — and dozens of get-well cards to the wall, many from people they didn't know.

She remembers how strangers who shared ICU waiting rooms became like a second family. "You share your stories, pray for one another, and cry together when the news isn't good," she said.

That fall, neighbors and friends convened — in rural-community tradition — to help the Nelsons with harvest.

Jerry remembers encountering the pit upon resuming work:

"I recall pushing manure into the pit for the first time afterward and getting the feeling you get when you peer over the edge while standing atop of a tall skyscraper," he said. "But work needed to be done, so I set it aside and carried on."

Operationally, their major safety change was to never again enter the pit.

"When the pump plugged, we'd go through the rigmarole of pulling it out with our loader tractor to unplug it," he said. "We began to grind our hay and our bedding, which pretty much eliminated the plugging issue.

"Shortly after, I could look down into the pit with total dispassion — and a sense of wonder that I had survived."

Hindsight and wisdom often come as partners after a close call, with an urgency that doesn't diminish over time. Nelson brings all three to his shared message:

"If I can get someone out there to just think twice before they rush to do 'this thing' — whatever it may be — those few seconds of hesitation and thought might save you from something like I suffered," he said.

"Thirty years on, I'm grateful for every day above ground."

More on Jerry's story, including photos, videos and news accounts, are at www.tellingthestoryproject.org.

Jerry and Julie Nelson are retired from dairy farming and reside near Volga, S.D.

Stephanie Leonard is an occupational safety manager at the University of Iowa and a Telling the Story Project collaborator. She can be reached at stephanie-leonard@uiowa.edu or reachus@tellingthestoryproject.org.