

THE CRUELEST CUTS *Fifth of Six Parts*

THE HUMAN COST OF BRINGING POULTRY TO YOUR TABLE

PAIN BEHIND SAFETY STREAK

Injured workers say they aren't given time off to heal



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Petrona Agustin holds a prosthesis she places over the tip of her little finger, which was severed in 2003 at House of Raeford in Greenville, S.C. Agustin said her request to have time off to recuperate was denied.

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GREENVILLE, S.C. — Cornelia Vicente was packing chicken tenders at House of Raeford Farms' plant in 2003 when a conveyor belt snagged her hand, snapped her right arm and ripped off the tip of her index finger.

Maintenance workers struggled to free her, and paramedics rushed her to a hospital.

Hours after surgery, Vicente recalled, a House of Raeford nurse who had come to the hospital gave her some news: She was expected back at the plant early the next day.

The following morning, managers put Vicente to work wiping down tables and handing out supplies, she said.

When she asked for time off, she said, the nurse said no.

"So, of course, I stayed so I didn't lose my job or my salary," Vicente said.

The nurse declined to be interviewed for this series. House of Raeford boasts that its Greenville plant has gone

more than 7 million hours without a "lost-time accident," meaning no worker has been injured badly enough to miss an entire shift. But according to the company's own safety logs, Vicente was among at least nine workers at the plant who suffered amputated fingers or broken bones – all during the time the plant claimed to have millions of safe working hours dating back to 2002.

Managers have kept the streak alive by requiring injured workers to return to the plant – in some cases hours after medical procedures.

The Observer located four of the nine workers; three said supervisors denied them time off to recuperate. Because none missed a complete shift, the company kept its streak intact.

A plant the size of Greenville's, which employs roughly 700 workers, can save hundreds of thousands of dollars in workers' compensation costs by returning injured workers to their jobs quickly, insurance experts say. By reporting fewer lost-time accidents, a company also can reduce the likelihood of workplace safety inspections.

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View a slideshow of House of Raeford workers in Greenville, S.C. at www.charlotte.com/poultry