



PHOTOS BY JOHN D. SIMMONS - jsimmons@charlotteobserver.com

The House of Raeford poultry plant in Greenville, S.C., also known as Columbia Farms, employs about 700 workers.

Workers say they felt pressure to return

Streak from 16XX

walk had inadequate safety railings. They also noted that the auger was missing its protective guard.

Shortly after Sullivan's death, plant managers ordered repairs on equipment throughout the plant, former workers and supervisors told the Observer.

"Stuff started getting fixed left and right," Villegas said. "There were safety committee meetings constantly."

Safety milestones were marked by parties, where managers handed out T-shirts and sweatshirts imprinted with the plant's safety mascot, a rooster named Strut McClucker. Managers also awarded \$10 and \$25 gift certificates to employees in a free drawing. At a party in November 2006, managers cooked and served free hot dogs for employees on their lunch breaks.

None of the seven former supervisors who spoke with the Observer was told to lie about accidents, they said. But in the aftermath of Sullivan's death, some said, plant managers became more focused on eliminating lost-time accidents.

Villegas said her boss, human resources director Elaine Crump, told her lost-time accidents would increase workers' compensation costs.

Crump declined to comment for this article.

The plant fired Villegas in spring 2005, alleging she was "accepting money to provide employment favors to potential employees." Villegas denies those claims. She said she was forced out after speaking up for injured workers, including Vicente.

About six months after Sullivan's death, the Greenville plant had begun its safety streak, which by last summer had topped 7 million safe hours.

Former line worker Alberto Sosa still has a T-shirt he received at one of the parties. It reads: "4,000,000 hours without a lost-time accident."

"It's a lie," said Sosa, who said he suffered from wrist and hand pains when he worked on the line de-boning chickens. "It's a party for no accidents, but there are accidents."

Injuries affect costs

Few things affect a company's workers' compensation costs more than lost-time injuries. Workers' compensation, a form of insurance that most employers are required to carry, pays medical expenses for workers hurt on the job, as well as a portion of wages when they're unable to work.

When companies record injuries and illnesses on their logs, they must include how many days injured employees spend away from work or on



light duty. It's an honor system, and companies aren't required to share the information with regulators unless asked.

According to those logs, the Greenville plant averaged 30 injuries a year between 2002 and 2006. All were serious enough to require medical treatment beyond first aid or a transfer to light duty. But only two resulted in time away from work, records show, and those occurred before the company's safety streak began in mid-2002.

Petrona Agustin suffered the kind of injury that can drive up a company's cost for workers' compensation.

On June 11, 2003, the tip of her left little finger was severed when it got caught in a machine used to clean chicken gizzards. She said a company employee drove her to a hospital, where she had surgery.

Immediately after, Agustin was driven back to the plant to fill out paperwork so she could be moved to the day shift, she recalled. The next morning, she was back at work.

She spent more than a month passing out supplies and wiping down tables in the break room, becoming depressed and crying often at the thought of her lost finger, she told the Observer.

She said she would have gladly taken time off but said a company supervisor told her no. "I didn't want to work," said Agustin. "I was worried it would happen again."

House of Raeford wouldn't comment specifically about Agustin, citing medical confidentiality, but said her account "does not represent the full story."

"Any and all accidents are regrettable," the company said. "House of Raeford Farms, Inc. depends upon the advice of local doctors to let us know when an employee is eligible to work, and we abide by these doctors' orders."

Company logs show Agustin spent 47 days on light duty. As of September, she still worked at the plant.



Jaime Hernandez, who worked at House of Raeford's Greenville, S.C., plant, said he had surgery to remove a ganglion cyst from his right hand. He said the company did not give him time off following the procedure and he spent the rest of his shift sitting in an office, at times putting his head on a desk to sleep.

She sometimes wears a prosthesis – a fake fingertip – colored to match her skin tone. She said she wears it to parties so she doesn't have to explain what happened.

"I was very sad. I couldn't look at my hands," she said. "I was embarrassed. I could never get my finger back."

Unhealthy practice?

Consultants who advise employers on ways to save money on workers' compensation costs say they sometimes recommend injured workers return to the workplace quickly. The sooner they are brought back, the consultants say, the sooner they are likely to resume their regular jobs.

A quick return can boost morale and speed recovery, they say. It also can help maintain their income, because workers receive partial pay when out on disability.

But several doctors who spoke to the Observer were skeptical of returning workers too quickly.

Dr. Blake Moore, who lives in Columbia, and has treated dozens of poultry workers, said bringing seriously injured workers back immediately "borders on reckless disregard."

Dr. Franco Godoy said it's inappropriate to bring employees back immediately following surgeries for fractures or amputations.

"The surgery has to heal first," said Godoy, who has treated roughly 100 poultry workers since joining the Emanuel Family Clinic in Newberry, S.C., two years ago.

Neither Moore nor Godoy treated any of the workers named in this article.

In April 2004, paramedics were called to the Greenville plant after a man fainted. He'd had surgery the previous day to repair an elbow he broke in a fall at work, EMS records show.

The injured man had returned to work and was sitting in the plant's medical office reading magazines, according to the EMS report. He became sick after being given a dose of Oxy-Contin, a powerful painkiller, which his doctor had prescribed, the report said.

Paramedics said the worker was "very upset." He and the plant's staff disagreed about whether his doctor had cleared him to return.

"Patient kept saying that he just wanted to go home," the paramedics wrote in their report after taking the man to a hospital.

Reluctant to return

Some injured workers returned to the plant voluntarily; one cited financial pressure, another said he feared being fired.

Roman Tronco says he returned voluntarily after his fingertip was severed in August 2002 while cutting chicken wings with a saw.

He showed up for his next shift, company records show. He spent the day wiping tables and sweeping, his arm in a sling, he said.

Company documents show he was on light duty for 85 days.

Tronco said he was thankful for his

job, which paid almost \$9 an hour, a dollar more than he made at a company making bed comforters. He left the plant a year and a half after the accident.

Jimmy Cortez, a maintenance supervisor, said he returned for his next shift after slicing open the tip of his thumb with a saw in 2006.

The company didn't force him back, he said, but he feared being fired if he took a day off.

"If you get hurt, you got to work the next day," he said. "I wanted a day to recuperate, but I didn't have any other choice."

Worker's version disputed

Jaime Hernandez said a supervisor drove him back to work directly from surgery to remove a cyst from his hand. He said he was dizzy from pain medication and asked to go home.

"They told me I could not have a day to recoup," Hernandez said. "Not hours or even the rest of the day."

Hernandez, who worked under the name "Pablo," said he started at the plant in 2002, working on the de-boning line. He later moved to folding cardboard boxes, as many as 700 a day. Hernandez said he believes his cyst was caused by repetitive motion at work.

He complained to a plant nurse in 2003 after a ball formed on his right wrist. Hernandez said he visited first-aid attendants several times at the plant, only to be told he was fine and to return to work. The company later sent him to a doctor, who drained the cyst. Hernandez said the cyst returned and a doctor removed it.

A human resources employee drove Hernandez to his 10 a.m. surgery, he said, and afterward back to the plant.

"I asked, 'Am I going to go home? I'm totally dizzy. I can't work,'" Hernandez recalled. "She said, 'No, I have to take you to work.'"

Hernandez said he spent the rest of the shift sitting in an office chair, at times putting his head on the desk to sleep.

Asked about Hernandez, Cronic, the plant manager, said the Observer's account was inaccurate but didn't elaborate. "The company had specific reasons for its actions," he said. Because personnel records are confidential, he said, "This is all the company can say at this point."

House of Raeford fired Hernandez after he applied for workers' compensation benefits and disclosed that he is an illegal immigrant.

Cronic said that when the company learns of a worker's illegal status through a workers' compensation case, it is required by law to fire him.

— STAFF RESEARCHERS MARIA WYGAND AND SARA KLEMMER CONTRIBUTED.

“Employees are returned to light duty and to full duty on doctor's orders.”

BARRY CRONIC, GREENVILLE, S.C., COMPLEX MANAGER