

OTHER
VIEWS

MORE LETTERS ONLINE “Rep. Jim Lembke has it wrong in his plan to reinvent Missouri’s judicial system,” writes John P. Messmer of Lakeshire, “The problem is not that the current ‘Missouri Plan’ exists for our highest courts and for St. Louis and Kansas City circuits; the problem is that outstate Missouri still relies on the corruptible partisan judicial election system.” Read and talk about this letter and more letters online at STLtoday.com/letters.

Monday • Jonah Goldberg, Bob Herbert
Tuesday • David Brooks, Maureen Dowd
Wednesday • Paul Krugman, David Ignatius
Thursday • Kathleen Parker
Saturday • Ellen Goodman
Sunday • Charles Krauthammer, Leonard Pitts

THE JOSH HANCOCK TRAGEDY

Employers
can save
employees’
lives



A baseball cap in remembrance of Cardinals relief pitcher Josh Hancock, hangs from the front gates of Busch Stadium as a memorial wall grows. Robert Cohen | Post-Dispatch

By Howard Weissman

As a Cardinals fan, a father, an employer and a human being, I was deeply saddened by the tragic death of Josh Hancock. But as Cardinals manager Tony La Russa noted on Monday, “Doesn’t this happen to people every day all over? Everybody loses family and friends.”

Indeed they do. I assume that Josh Hancock did not want to die. I assume that Josh Hancock did not enjoy being sick or hung-over. And based on what already has been reported, I assume there were warning signs that Josh Hancock may have had a drinking problem.

The professional literature in the field of substance abuse suggests that the threatened loss of employment is a more powerful motivator for change than anything else, including the loss of family. Many employers understand this and, in an effort to save valued but troubled employees from tragedy, use their leverage to get them help at the earliest possible stages of identifying the problem.

The earlier the better; it’s a myth that an alcoholic must “hit bottom” before getting sober. Many drinkers realize that alcohol has become a problem in their lives before those lives spiral out of control. Or before they die.

One recent news story quoted La Russa recounting how he had cautioned his players about the media: “Be careful of the insincerity of some

media people . . . trying to befriend you,” La Russa was quoted as saying, “then trying to slam you with something that they want to turn this into, some kind of story that’s not all sweet. . . I’m just talking about people who really don’t care about us, who are out there trying to further their own agendas.”

Well, here’s my agenda. It’s not that sweet, but it’s important:

Josh Hancock may have had a drinking problem, and according to the latest news reports, team captains or other colleagues may have tried to help him. This is as it should be.

But what constitutes help? Expressing concern to a problem drinker is a start, but co-workers who become worried about the impact of drinking on a person’s job performance or health and well-being need to go further. That includes conveying their concerns to supervisors who take them seriously. What is not helpful — to the person or the organization — is covering up for or lying about a co-worker who

has problems.

It’s vitally important to understand that incidents such as these can be avoided if employers will step in and intervene. Lives can be saved when employers do not tolerate impaired performance, when they vigorously confront such warning signs such as

tardiness and the visible indications of hangover, when they offer help when a problem first appears and when the boss, the standard-bearer, does not have his own issues with alcohol.

Maybe people in the Cardinals organization had tried to intervene, and Josh wasn’t ready to change. But maybe they just missed it, thought that he was just a young, single guy who liked to have a good time and that what he did on his own time was none of their business. Or maybe they looked the other way and let it slide.

In my work with area companies, I know that when similar tragedies occur — particularly in the case of alcohol-related deaths — nearly all of the victims’ co-workers and supervi-

sors feel a certain amount of guilt: “I should have said or done something. I should have pushed him to get help. What could I have done differently?”

It’s not Tony La Russa’s or the Cardinals’ fault that Josh Hancock died. It’s not their fault that Josh Hancock may have had an alcohol problem. Even so, the manager, clubhouse leaders and team executives almost surely are lying awake asking themselves what they might do differently the next time they see a player showing signs of alcohol abuse.

There’s a good chance they will, along with every other area employer. Alcohol is the most abused drug in the country. It leads to more premature deaths and accidents than any other drug. One out of 10 people who drink are going to develop a problem with alcohol. Some of them will die.

If you’re a boss or a co-worker who is concerned about a fellow employee, act. Go up the chain of command, call your employee assistance program or confront the problem however else you can.

Alcoholism is a disease. It’s a chronic disease. Untreated, it can become a terminal disease.

Howard Weissman is a Diplomate in Clinical Social Work, the highest distinction available to clinical social workers from the National Association of Social Workers. He directs The Ease Program, an employee assistance program based in Belleville, and is president of the St. Louis area chapter of the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse.

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