

Union linemen

Hazardous work motivates commitment to Burn Center

By **DON McINTOSH**
Associate Editor

Journeyman electric lineman Jim Penfold grabbed the wrong wire July 20, 1998. Then 55, Penfold had a 10-year history working on Portland General Electric power lines for contractor Henkels & McCoy. But his career ended on a high-voltage line near LaGrande.

He remembers a loud explosion, and a flash "like a nuclear blast." In an instant, his clothes caught fire, and he found himself hanging upside down until fellow union linemen, utilizing their safety training, brought him down from the 20-foot pole. Local paramedics took him to Grande Ronde Hospital, which Life Flighted him to the Oregon Burn Center at Legacy Emanuel Hospital.

Today, Penfold is a living example of the Oregon Burn Center's importance to members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). The only facility of its kind between Sacramento and Seattle, the Oregon Burn Center treats patients with all kinds of burns. Besides doctors and nurses who specialize in burn treatment, it has special beds to reduce pressure on the body, hydrotherapy tables used to safely bathe burn patients, and a lift, hoist and rail system that allows patients to be safely moved and repositioned.

Of the 300-plus cases Burn Center doctors see each year, electrical burns can be some of the worst, said Kirsten Balding, the Center's long-time education and outreach director. While a residential wire carrying 220 volts can deliver a nasty shock, a high voltage contact is another creature altogether. "Skin provides a huge amount of resistance," Balding said. In electrical terms, resistance means the skin heats up, rapidly. "Usually we see a substantial amount of damage at the first contact site, or entry point."

Hidden tissue damage is what makes electrical burns different from other kinds of burns. After contact, electric current travels along bone or tendons and can damage internal organs, as well as the eardrum and the cornea. A patient with burns on 2 to 3 percent of the skin surface can have



IBEW Local 125 Treasurer Doug Shaffer contemplates a plaque to apprentice lineman Brent Lee Larwick in the Oregon Burn Center healing garden. The plaque reads, "Live life to the fullest," a favorite saying of Larwick's. Larwick was fatally electrocuted in Bremerton, Washington in April 2007.

burn damage on 50 percent of inside tissues, Balding said.

Penfold said the thing he remembers most was the heat. Contact with a 13,000 volt line — the kind of power line outside most homes — can produce temperatures of 8,000 degrees Fahrenheit in half a second. Skin burns. Blood turns to steam.

"He's lucky to be alive," says Penfold's partner Caroline.

When he arrived at the Burn Center, Penfold was comatose, connected to four IV drips, and full of morphine. Doctors determined that his injuries would require amputation — his right leg below the knee, and his right arm. It was four months before he regained consciousness. Then came six weeks of rehabilitation. Finally, he was released to his home in Salem.

Now Penfold faced a new challenge: What to do with his time. Boredom set in. When he was asked on a visit to the Burn Center if he'd be interested in volunteering, he leapt into it. He soon became one of the center's most active volunteers — helping other patients overcome demoralization, and educating fellow linemen

about the importance of safety.

One of the things that distinguishes the Oregon Burn Center from others of its kind is a strong emphasis on public education and prevention. The center employs a full-time education specialist who travels around the region giving talks to occupational and other groups that are at the highest risk.

Doug Shaffer, treasurer of Port-

land-based IBEW Local 125, thinks the Burn Center's program for electric linemen has been a tremendous success. Before the outreach program began in 2000, the center treated about five linemen a year. Since then, Balding says, that's dropped to about one a year.

"That's an ugly beast," Shaffer said, pointing to a nearby power line, "and it can reach out and grab you and take your life. Our goal is to go to work in the morning and come home at night, and if you can't do that, this is where you come to get put back together."

That, Shaffer said, is the reason for Local 125's commitment to the Burn Center. The Burn Center is the beneficiary of almost all the local's charitable efforts.

The union's annual benefit golf classic has raised close to \$750,000 over 13 years. An annual softball tournament in Bend has brought in over \$75,000, while the annual Pacific Northwest Linemans Rodeo netted another \$25,000 in 2007 and 2008. The Burn Center is a featured agency for PGE's Employee Giving Campaign; PGE matches employee contributions 50 percent. And Shaffer and fellow Local 125 member Bill Quimby, a line foreman at Pacificorp, serve on the board of trustees of the Emanuel Foundation, along with Penfold. In recognition of their record of charitable giving, PGE and IBEW Lo-

cal 125 are honored with a plaque that dedicates the center's intensive care wing to Blaine Degerness, a PGE lineman and burn survivor.

But the crown jewel of the linemen's commitment to the Burn Center is its healing garden.

The plot was a concrete wasteland until Shaffer asked Burn Center lead surgeon Nathan Kemalyan what more they needed. "A garden," was the answer. PGE and employees raised \$200,000, recruited volunteer labor and built a garden that won a 2008 Landscape Architecture Magazine award.

Open only to patients of the center, the Healing Garden provides sensory experience and a lift to patients' spirits — and an alternative to the more clinical environment inside. There are flowers, sage, blueberries and strawberries. Patients can be wheeled out in their beds to breath fresh air and take their physical therapy outside. One corner of the garden is intended for children. There, a plaque with the motto, "Live Life to the Fullest" sits in memory of IBEW Local 125 member Brent Lee Larwick, an apprentice lineman who was fatally electrocuted April 2007 in Bremerton, Washington.

"If something happens to one of our guys up on a pole," Shaffer said, "this is where they come. Our goal is to make sure members have a state-of-the-art facility to come to, so they can get the best treatment available."

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