

Product Residue- Living the Aftermath of Offshore Manufacturing

By Christine Ruddy

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Carlos Castro (L) and Rosa Moreno (R) stand in front of a television set similar to the ones they were assembling when they lost their limbs in an offshore factory. Photo©2015VictoriaRuddy

Reynosa Mexico- Rosa Moreno and Carlos Castro had never met each other before June of 2015. But they shared a very distinct experience in common. Both had lost limbs in the HD Electronics factory in Reynosa Mexico assembling big screen television sets. Castro lost his entire right arm and four fingers on his left hand in 2008. Moreno lost both of her hands in 2011. Both Moreno and Castro worked on large machines used to assemble television sets in an offshore factory. And both of them indicate that, in their opinion, they were improperly trained to work on the machines to which they were assigned. After their injuries, both felt that they were essentially discarded by their employer. They were quickly fired after their accidents with little compensation for their debilitating life-changing injuries.

Castro was injured on his second day on the job. He was hired on a Monday and lost his arm and part of his hand on Tuesday afternoon. He had not even finished his new employee paperwork at the time of his accident. It happened just three days before his 19th birthday. Castro indicates he received only a few hours of training on the complicated machine that he was assigned to operate.

Castro says of the day when his arm was instantly severed and his hand was crushed by the machine, "When I saw that my arm was gone, all I could do was scream. Most of my co-workers ran away in confusion, except for two men who came to help me. One of them ran to get the HR Director and the nurse. The other stayed with me and started to pray. I told him that prayer was not what I needed right now and to take off his belt and wrap it around the stump to stop the bleeding. They wanted me to wait for the ambulance but I thought that would take too long. So one of my co-workers drove me to the Red Cross in the back of his truck. They couldn't help me there because I had insurance, so they bandaged me up and sent me on to the Social Security hospital." That was where his amputations were done.

After the accident, Castro's supervisors at HD Electronics told him that he didn't work for them. He actually worked for an employee leasing company in Reynosa who essentially employed him and then sent him to the job. They did not give him any settlement for the loss of his arm and hand. He was able to apply for a government social security disability pension. He receives about \$200.00 (USD) a month from that pension.

Rosa Moreno was injured in February of 2011. She was working the night shift in the same factory that Carlos had worked in. That night she was moved to a machine that she usually didn't work on. The machine began making a funny noise that Rosa felt was not right. She called her Supervisor over and told him about the noise. Moreno says that he told her to keep working, she had to make production, and that the machine was fine. Shortly after that exchange the giant press slammed down on her hands, crushing them. As Moreno tells the story "After the machine came down on my hands, some of my female co-workers fainted. Several people came over to try to help get the press off my hands but they couldn't lift it. They took a piece of metal and made a jack that they inserted and began to lift it little by little. Eventually I could pull my hands out. They were melted onto the back of the television screen. I had to take it with me to the hospital. When I woke up at the hospital the next morning, I asked my daughter- Brenda do I have my hands? And she told me no, you do not have them. I had hoped that it was a dream, that I would wake up and my hands would be there."

Moreno received a small settlement for the loss of her hands. It was a combination of money from the Mexican Social Security Administration, an insurance company and the company she worked for. She also receives a small pension from the government. It comes to about \$185.00 (USD) per month. Moreno had 6 children still at home at the time of her accident.

Today Castro and Moreno live with the aftermath of their injuries. Rosa Moreno recounts the first time she tried to take a city bus by herself after her accident. The driver asked for her money for the fare, but she couldn't get it out of her purse. She says "I thought, what has happened to me? I can't be alone anymore." After that incident she says she handed the bus driver her money with her mouth. She says that when all of her children were gone from the house, she couldn't eat because she couldn't light the stove or cut food or manage pans. She had to wait until one of her kids returned to help her cook and to feed her.

In 2015, after four years without a usable prosthesis, a charitable organization in the US finally raised the money to buy her one hook type prosthetic that now helps her to do some things more independently. Today Moreno works as a Promotora (outreach worker) in Reynosa, helping other factory workers learn about their rights under the Mexican Federal Labor Law. She also travels occasionally to the US to talk about her experiences to Universities and other groups interested in learning about the realities of offshore manufacturing. In 2015 she was awarded the Illuminating Injustice Award by Public Justice. The award is meant to shine a light on cases where people have suffered a serious injury and been unfairly compensated.



Rosa Moreno (left rear), and four of her children Daisy (center rear), Brenda (r), Florencio (front left), Rossy (front right) participate in an event to support factory workers in Reynosa in 2015. Photo ©2015VictoriaRuddy



Rosa Moreno speaks about the realities of offshore manufacturing at Santa Monica College in Santa Monica California in March 2016.

Carlos Castro has adjusted to his life with one arm and one partial hand. He had a silicone hand prosthesis for his left hand that, until 2015, was the original one given to him by the Social Security Hospital in 2008. The fingers of the hand were falling off and were held on with common household electrical tape. A charity raised the money to buy him a new silicone hand in 2015. He is married now with two small children and helps his wife operate a small pet store that she owns. He continues to live on his Social Security pension in a small one bedroom concrete house with his family.



Carlos Castro helping out in his wife's pet store in Reynosa, Mexico. Photo ©2015VictoriaRuddy



Carlos Castro with his children, Reynosa Mexico. Photo ©2015VictoriaRuddy

Last year both Moreno and Castro traveled to Washington D.C. to participate in a demonstration outside the White House to help create awareness about the realities of offshore manufacturing. When asked about why he participated in the event, Castro said “People should understand that behind the products they use, there is a real person who makes that product. I don’t want what happened to me to happen to other people.” Rosa Moreno echoes that sentiment.



Carlos Castro (behind cameraman) and Rosa Moreno in Washington D.C. in July 2015 at a Worker’s Voice Demonstration. Photo ©2015ChristineRuddy

Both Moreno and Castro still live in Reynosa today, just a few miles from the factory where their accidents happened. In the past year, Rosa Moreno’s two oldest daughters both went to work for a time in factories in Reynosa, just like the one where Moreno lost her hands. They wanted to help support the family. One daughter made 87 cents an hour, the other 89 cents an hour. Rosa stayed home and hoped for their safety.

Bio

Christine Ruddy and Victoria Ruddy are freelance journalists and photographers who have spent the last two years researching issues in the maquiladora industry in Reynosa and Rio Bravo Mexico. Christine Ruddy is a member of the National Press Photographers Association. All information contained in the above article was obtained via in-person interviews with Rosa Moreno and Carlos Castro. Photo releases are on file.

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