

# When a Good Worker is Poor

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At 6:30 one spring morning, my four-year-old son Michael proudly marched out to the front lawn to retrieve the morning paper. It was his new job and he did it flawlessly. Walk to the end of the path, pick up the paper, bring it back. No problem, right? Well, this particular morning he decided to insert another step. Through the window I watched him pick up the paper and then look to the sky. He stared upward and remained motionless for about 60 seconds.

Seldom had anything other than Barney the Dinosaur held his attention that long, so I went out to see it for myself. There in the sky, slightly south of our home, were three news helicopters, hovering over the railroad tracks. They were documenting a tragedy—a tragedy that happened only 500 yards from my house, but made headlines around the world.

Four hours earlier, a terrified conductor of an Amtrak train hit the horn and pulled the emergency brake. I didn't hear it but the 30-second screech woke one of my neighbors whose property was closer to the tracks than was mine. She would later tell the local newspaper: "At night, you don't hear train whistles unless there's something on the track." Something was—or more correctly, someone. Julia Toledo was a 47-year-old Ecuadorian immigrant and a single mother of four sons. All of them stood in the pathway of the train and all of them were struck at 71 miles per hour.

The train engineer would later say that as he approached, three of the boys and

their mother were on the south side of the tracks and the smallest son was on the north. Julia ran to save her baby and all of her other sons followed in a panic.

Firefighters reported that the accident scene was horrific. Julia and three of the boys, ages 3, 6, and 11, were killed instantly. The ten-year-old boy, Jose, arrived at Bridgeport Hospital in a coma, only to succumb two days later. Lying amid the shattered bodies were school backpacks, a small tennis shoe and a Sesame Street figurine.

The tragedy shook our Connecticut community to its core. It made no sense at all. What in the world was this family doing on the tracks at that hour? Where could they possibly be going? To this day people can only speculate. Some things about Julia we did learn, though.

Julia spent a lot of time at Caroline House, an education center for immigrant women run by Catholic nuns. Her youngest son Pedro would play in the day-care area while his mother learned English. According to Sister Brenda Lynch, Julia was much more than just a student. Brenda recalled for the media the recent Caroline House Christmas party where Julia promised to bring a turkey, even though she had no money to do so. When she missed two classes in a row before the party, many assumed that Julia wouldn't be coming, so they began the party without her. Then one woman, peering through a window, spotted Julia on the street, walking toward Caroline House with a large turkey balanced on a platter. She wore a triumphant smile and her sons marched in step behind her.

This was typical of Julia. When Valentine's Day rolled around, the nuns were perplexed when Julia inquired about how to order flowers. Still, they gave her the information. To their surprise, the nuns later received a bouquet of carnations with a note

expressing Julia's love and gratitude.

To support her family, Julia worked as a custodian at Fairfield University—my employer at the time. She covered the 4 p.m. to midnight shift, requiring her to coordinate a lot of child care. Sister Maureen Fleming recalled that the child care eventually became a hopeless problem. In fact, for a full week before the accident, Julia simply did not show up for work because she had no one to babysit her children. She also was having problems paying her landlord and was forced into a transitional YMCA housing shelter.

But why the train tracks? The best explanation I heard was from Sister Bernadette who told me that in the mountain towns of Ecuador, where Julia had lived almost her life, it's common for travelers to walk along train tracks since the tracks are typically the flattest and most direct route from A to B.

I also talked with Julia's co-workers. They were my co-workers, too. Those who knew her well seemed as stunned by the tragedy as I was. Some saw hints that Julia was having difficulties, but no one seemed to grasp the magnitude of those problems until it was too late. A few of the custodians lamented in broken English that Julia and her kids would still be alive if Julia earned enough money to pay for rent and child care. If her company, a subcontractor hired by the university, had just paid her more, everything would have been different, they said.

I sat with all of these people at the funeral. It was a foreign venue for me—a Mormon church, a Spanish service, flanked by janitors and nuns. I couldn't understand a word that was spoken from the pulpit, but the facial expressions, the uncontrollable sobs, the prolonged hugs required no translator. At the front of the room were three caskets. It

was a poignant reminder of the family's poverty. They couldn't afford individual caskets, so Julia was buried with her three-year-old, the two middle sons lay together, and the oldest lay alone. On the exterior of the caskets were personal messages written at the wake in indelible marker. That, too, seemed fitting. Friends, family, classmates, and even strangers wrote of the indelible impression the victims had made on their own lives. They wrote about love. They wrote about laughter. They wrote about God. They said their good-byes.

Most moving, perhaps, were the large photos of five bright, smiling faces near the caskets. Midway through the service, a young boy cried loudly and his father carried him out. Everyone seemed to be thinking the same thing: A week ago the Toledo boys were just as boisterous. Dozens of heads turned toward those photos.

I left that place shaken, thinking about the power each one of us has to affect the lives of our co-workers. I didn't know Julia, but I now wished I had. I also couldn't help but think about what some of Julia's co-workers had said: *If her company had only paid her more...* I wondered, from a Christian perspective, whether this custodial services company had a moral responsibility to pay Julia more than they did.