

[00:00:02.12]

I am absolutely, frankly, a bit overwhelmed to be here today. To me, this is an exceptionally human day. You see, I come from the building trades. I see many of my colleagues. I'm proud to see them here.

[00:00:19.03]

I'm happy you're all here. And I know many of my colleagues have been exposed to asbestos and they're here. Because this matters, because this is human. This is about us.

[00:00:33.18]

I'm overwhelmed when I look at this beautiful artwork and all I can think about is my best friend, a guy by the name of Jim McEvoy. My kids called him Big Jim. Let me tell you just for a moment about Jim. Let's talk about a person. He led an extraordinary life.

[00:00:54.02]

Before he was 21 years old, he circumnavigated the globe in the Navy. He came back to Victoria and became the maintenance electrician at a place called VMD by the Bay Street Bridge. It was a shipyard, Victoria Machine Depot. There, Jim, for many, many, many years, was exposed to asbestos, among other hazardous things. He used to tell me stories in his retirement of the small BC Ferries they had in that yard,

[00:01:20.16]

and if you picture the Queen of Capilano that goes to Bowen Island, the same kind of superstructure over an open car deck. And he would recall in the summer when they would blow asbestos insulation on the bottom of the beams, you couldn't see the sun through the car deck. There were no masks.

[00:01:41.12]

Jimmy was an amazing man. He was a physical specimen. He stood about a little under six-feet tall. He was over 300 pounds. If you ever saw a Popeye cartoon after he ate the spinach, that was Jimmy's arms.

[00:01:53.17]

They were like Sunday hams for forearms. He was an immensely powerful man, but he was even smarter. He sat at the Labour Board as a vice chair. He was a 30-year business manager of IBEW Local 230. He put language in the collective agreement that's still there today that benefits workers.

[00:02:15.14]

After 30 years, Jimmy retired. He was my best friend.

[00:02:22.17]

He used to talk to me and I'd go to his house all the time. We lived a kilometre apart in Nanaimo and he would tell me about the types of exposures that he had, and the thing that I remember the most is he told me that he knew something was coming for him, but he didn't know when. You see, he had a good pension. He had his health when he retired.

[00:02:45.17]

He had his grandkids and his loved ones. But he knew something was coming. Jimmy made it almost 20 years into retirement and I watched my best friend suffocate. I watched the asbestos in his lungs stop his ability to bring oxygen into his blood.

[00:03:02.15]

And at the end, there were more machines in that townhouse that made the weirdest pumping sounds and air sounds. It wasn't about the oxygen. He simply couldn't use it anymore and he suffocated while he was alive. Nobody should go through that. When I look here today, I worry about Jimmy because he was a, he was a man that had these habits, like he had to be at the same restaurant at the same time every day and the same way to work and—and I worried if he was lost.

[00:03:34.01]

He's been gone 10 years. Is Jimmy out there somewhere? You know, he's lost. Where's his restaurant? Where's his friends?

[00:03:41.18]

And for the first time in 10 years, Doug, Jimmy's got a place to go. That's incredible to me.

[00:03:51.13]

I got to tell you something. And this is— this is self-reflective. Fully admittedly, I was thinking about Jimmy last night, about 3:30 in the morning until this moment and I thought of the parallels in our lives. You see, I'm an electrician.

[00:04:05.15]

I worked industrially and I've been exposed to asbestos many, many times, particularly in pulp mills, a little bit in the shipyard.

[00:04:13.22]

And I started as a union agent about the same age Jimmy did. He was 30 years older than me. I just recently announced my retirement. He retired at 57, 58 after 30 years. I'm retiring in 63 days, not that I'm counting.

[00:04:29.10]

And I'll be 57.

[00:04:33.17]

Here's the thing about asbestos when it gets in your lungs: the clock starts ticking and you don't know until you do. Will it come for me? I have a pension, I have my health, and I have my grandkids and my loved ones around me. Will I walk the same path as Jimmy? Here's the good news: I sure hope it doesn't take me.

[00:04:54.05]

But if it does, I know where to find my buddy. This sculpture is a powerful thing for us.

[00:05:01.16]

As the president of the Federation of Labour, I want to say one more thing. It's in three parts. It's short.

[00:05:09.13]

The first thing I want to say is on behalf of every worker who has ever been exposed and even workers who don't know they've been exposed, thank you for this and the awareness it will bring

to stop it in the future. So there's no more stories like the thousands of stories of Jimmy, Big Jim. Secondly, I just— it's incredibly important for those who have lost their lives to this. They don't have a voice here today. Let me lend them my voice.

[00:05:45.12]

Thank you for giving us somewhere for their spirit to go. They have a home now. And finally, maybe most importantly, for those who this has touched— family, friends, colleagues who have lost somebody, or you're struggling with somebody who's sick or wondering if they will be— thank you for the hope. Thank you for the healing. Thank you for today.

[00:06:14.22]

Thank you for this amazing place. For all of us to come and reflect on our loved ones. Stay safe, my friends. Thank you so much for being here.