

# WE

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Transforming  
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Customized  
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Challenges

The Fire  
Within:  
Cliff Meidl's  
Campaign  
to Improve  
Workplace  
Safety

Fraud,  
Debarment  
and  
Other Dirty  
Words

## OPERATIONS ISSUE

**IDENTIFYING,  
LOCATING +  
REWARDING**  
SUCCESSFUL  
UTILITY FIELD  
COLLECTIONS  
PROFESSIONALS

Security Improvements  
at LADWP



# THE FIRE WITHIN: CLIFF MEIDL'S CAMPAIGN TO IMPROVE WORKPLACE SAFETY

By Deston Nokes, *Western Energy*

**Cliff Meidl never intended to be a crusader** for workplace safety. It was, rather, a calling that was foisted upon him through no fault of his own. As a featured speaker at this year's WEI Operations Conference this April in Seattle, Wash., Meidl has a safety message that is personal, absorbing and timeless.

At 47 years of age, Meidl can look back with immense pride at all that he's accomplished, including competing as a kayaker for the USA Olympic Team at both the 1996 Centennial Summer Games in Atlanta, and at the 2000 Summer Games in Sydney. In Sydney, Meidl was chosen by his fellow Olympians to carry the

U.S. flag in the Opening Ceremonies. He's also competed as a world-class paddler, racing dragon boats and outrigger canoes.

"Despite all I've been through and what I've accomplished, my life will always be defined by one moment, by one event," Meidl said.

## A FATEFUL DAY

On November 19, 1986, when Meidl was just 20 years old, he was working on a construction site as an apprentice and was instructed to jackhammer in a designated area. However, the safety officer for the site evidently did not do his job well because Meidl jackhammered into three, live, high-voltage power cables, shooting 30,000 volts of electricity into his body.

"It was such a huge amount of electricity, it blasted me out of the hole," Meidl said. "I ended up sliding back into the ditch, and into the jackhammer that was still vertically embedded into the power cables. My knees got sucked back into the energized jackhammer and I received a second round of electrical shocks."

The electricity traveled throughout his body, finding different weak points, such as the back of his head, his shoulder blades and, in the process, blowing off two toes. "The worst was that a third of the knee compartment was blown away on both legs," he said.

It almost cost him his life, as the shock also caused a series of heart attacks. Fortunately, the incident occurred close to a fire station and the first-responders transported him to a burn center. When his mother arrived, she could see smoke coming from his knees.

"Nobody thought I would walk again," Meidl said. "In the first months following the accident, the doctors wanted to do bilateral amputations of both legs. But fortunately, my mother found plastic surgeon Dr. Malcolm Lesavoy, who saved my legs."

It took 15 surgeries, but Dr. Lesavoy was able to rebuild his legs using an innovative transplant procedure using parts of Meidl's calf muscle to create new knee joints. But it would be three years of rehabilitation before he could walk again without crutches—something the doctors warned would not be possible. Following the surgeries, Meidl was fortunate enough to gain the help of orthopedic surgeon, Dr.

Bert Mandelbaum, from Santa Monica, Calif., who served as a huge motivator in Meidl's rehabilitation process and still helps today with continuing orthopedic oversight.

### FACING ADVERSITY

"One of the topics of my talk is overcoming adversity," Meidl explained. "We can either get through it or give up. No matter how tough an adversity might be, you have to use your tools of vision, recognize what your strengths are and use the skills you have to be the best you can be."

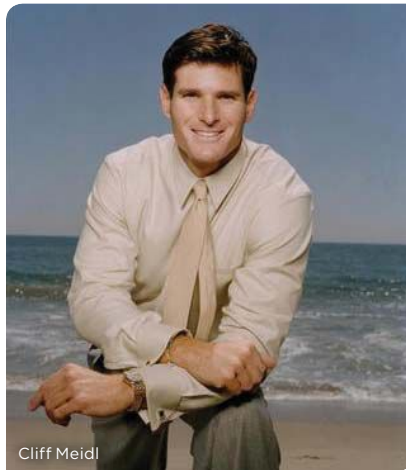
Meidl said he had to face the fact that he probably would never be able to run on the beach again. It took his brother, Norman, to help him find a new joy, team canoeing and paddling. He began a regimen of training that included weightlifting, riding stationary bicycles, swimming and paddling an outrigger canoe.

"I was ashamed of my scars and of the physical impairments on my body, and couldn't envision working with other guys and being a part of the club," he recalled. "However, they became an extension of my family and accepted me for who I was. I started as a guppy, was finally able to hold my own, and then reach the pinnacles of the sport."

His weight training built his upper body strength, which helped him to excel in a sport that did not require a lot of lower leg strength.

Soon, Meidl began competing in Sprint Kayaking, eventually qualifying for the U.S. Nationals in 1993, and he was named to the team that represented the USA at the 1996 Atlanta Centennial Olympic Games. Even more stunning is the fact that he qualified for a second Olympic games four years later, considering that only about 15 percent of all American Olympians qualify for more than one Olympic Games.

"I was inspired by kayaker Greg Barton, from Bellingham, Wash.," Meidl said. "He was a silent type of role model I respected. He was a perfectionist with



his technique, which helped him win medals in the Seoul Olympics.

"I also learned that Barton had a clubbed foot and another Olympic kayaker, Mike Herbert, had issues with legs from a motorcycle accident. These were athletes with incredible focus and determination, and I looked up to them."

### SPREADING AWARENESS ABOUT SAFETY

Since his Olympic glory, Meidl has used an equal amount of determination in achieving academic and professional goals. He received a bachelor's degree in finance from California State University at Long Beach, and a Master of Business Administration from the University of Southern California's Marshall School.

Now he has a new focus: spreading the gospel of "Call before you dig."

For the past 18 months, he's served as a compelling spokesperson for the One Calls of America, Inc., campaign. He also has worked as a featured national media spokesperson with the Construction Safety Council and the Electric Safety Foundation International.

"Increasing awareness about safety — that's my mission today," Meidl said. "I talk around the country, describe my accident and share what my family had to go through. And such a simple thing like calling 811 can make all the difference."

### STATISTICS TELL THE STORY

"The Call 811 message is so vital because there's a one-in-three chance of hitting

an underground utility," Meidl said. "With the free 811 locate service, we can reduce that to less than one percent."

The least of the problems is that you'll damage the underground line. Meidl stands as a stark reminder of that. It's very simple: call three business days before you dig, no matter what size of job or location. It can be a project from digging post holes to building a fence, or excavating a larger worksite: Calling 811 will contact all of the possible underground utilities and have their lines marked so work can begin. Plus, the law requires homeowners, contractors and others to call before digging, or they could be liable.

"When spring hits, people start home improvement projects and construction increases," Meidl said. "But nowadays, the underground infrastructure is like spaghetti. There's fiber-optic cable, electricity, water, natural gas and your neighbor's TV cable. Damage prevention is important, but saving lives is even more critical."

A simple call, a bit of paint and some flags marking underground utilities could have made all the difference in the world to Cliff Meidl.

"When it comes to the message of safety, we all have to be leaders," he said. "We spend an enormous part of our lives on the job with other people and we all have to look out for one another. Employees must be able to go to work and come home in the same condition."

### DESTON NOKES

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