

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

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Investigation of: *

EXPLOSION AT THE R.M. PALMER CANDY *

FACTORY IN WEST READING, *

PENNSYLVANIA, ON MARCH 24, 2023 *

Accident No.: PLD23LR002

* * * * *

Interview of: AMANDA SANTANA, Packer
R.M. Palmer Company

Wyomissing, Pennsylvania

Friday,
April 21, 2023

APPEARANCES:

KIM WEST, Investigator-in-Charge
National Transportation Safety Board

LOGAN SMITH, VP of Operations
R.M. Palmer Company

AIDAN CARICKHOFF, Esq.
Saltz, Mongeluzzi & Bendesky
Attorney for Amanda Santana

MARIANO CEPEDA, Spanish Translator
Saltz, Mongeluzzi & Bendesky

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I N T E R V I E W

(11:03 a.m.)

1
2
3 MS. WEST: So good morning. Today is April 21st, 2023. It
4 is now 11:03 a.m. My name is Kim West. I am the National
5 Transportation Safety Board. I'm sorry. I am with the National
6 Transportation Safety Board. I'm the investigator-in-charge with
7 the Pipeline Accident Investigation Group for this accident. So,
8 we are at the Marriott Residence Inn Hotel in Wyomissing,
9 Pennsylvania.

10 This interview is being conducted as part of an investigation
11 into the explosion that occurred on March 24th, 2023, in West
12 Reading, Pennsylvania. The NTSB case number for this accident is
13 PLD23LR002.

14 So the purpose of the investigation is to increase safety,
15 not to assign blame or fault or liability.

16 This interview is being recorded and may be transcribed at a
17 later date. A copy of the transcript will be provided to you for
18 your review prior to being entered into the public docket. So if
19 you could, please provide the spelling of your name and who you
20 work for and your job title.

21 MS. SANTANA: My name is Amanda Santana. I am a packer and I
22 work for R.M. Palmer.

23 MS. WEST: So you're permitted to have one other person
24 present during the interview. This person is of your choice, a
25 supervisor, a friend, a family member or nobody at all. So please

1 state for the record who you have selected or not selected.

2 MS. SANTANA: So I'm here with Aden (ph.). He is my attorney
3 and Mariano who is also part of our presentation today.

4 MS. WEST: Okay. So you're the translator.

5 MR. CEPEDA: I'm the translator.

6 MS. WEST: And you are her representative.

7 MR. CARICKHOFF: Yes.

8 MS. WEST: Okay. Thank you. So I'm going to through this.
9 Can you please state for the record the spelling of your name and
10 the company you work for? I think we just did that. I'm sorry.

11 MR. CARICKHOFF: We did.

12 MS. WEST: So I'd like to go around the room and have each
13 person state their name, spelling, title and the agency or
14 organization you represent. I'll start with myself. So I'm Kim
15 West. That's K-i-m, W-e-s-t. I'm the investigator-in-charge for
16 the National Transportation Safety Board or the NTSB.

17 MR. CEPEDA: Good morning. My name is Mariano Cepeda. I
18 work at Saltz, Mongeluzzi and Bendesky, along with Aidan
19 Carickhoff, and I speak Spanish. And that's why I'm here, to help
20 translate for our client.

21 MR. SMITH: My name is Logan Smith. I am with R.M. Palmer
22 Company and I am the party coordinator, L-o-g-a-n, S-m-i-t-h.

23 MR. CARICKHOFF: My name is Aidan Carickhoff. I'm an
24 attorney at the law firm of Saltz Mongeluzzi and Bendesky. I
25 represent Amanda Santana. My name is spelled A-i-d-a-n. Last

1 name is Carickhoff, C-a-r-i-c-k-h-o-f-f.

2 MS. WEST: Thank you.

3 INTERVIEW OF AMANDA SANTANA

4 BY MS. WEST:

5 Q. Now, just to get started, can you talk a little bit about
6 your years of experience and what you do with Palmer?

7 A. I'm a packer at Palmer. I pack chocolates, and I have 1
8 years of experience at Palmer.

9 Q. Okay. So I'm just going to take this in pieces. On the day
10 of the accident, can you walk us through, starting from when you
11 first signed in, what you did in as much as detail as you can
12 provide to us?

13 A. I arrived at 3 p.m. I went to my locker. I dropped off my
14 belongings. I spoke with my coworker, Xiorky. She was one of the
15 decedents in the explosion.

16 MS. WEST: Could you spell her name?

17 MR. CARICKHOFF: Yeah. X-i-o-r-k-y.

18 BY MS. WEST:

19 Q. Okay.

20 A. I spoke with her. She gave me a tea, and then after that, I
21 walked over to my workstation at line 21.

22 Q. And then?

23 A. I began working. After a while, I took a break. We went up
24 to the fourth floor. Donna covered for us. Donna, D-o-n-a [sic],
25 covered for us. I went up to the fourth floor for a break. There

1 I met with Scarlett.

2 MR. CEPEDA: Scarlett's spell C-a-r-r-e-l-e-a-t [sic] --

3 MR. CARICKHOFF: S-c-a-r-l-e-t-t, last name Mercedes, like
4 the car.

5 MS. SANTANA: After our break, we walked down at about 4:58,
6 and I stopped to speak with Jose. After I stopped to speak with
7 Jose, I told them that I smelled gas. Jose had on two masks
8 because days prior he was sick. He told me he could not smell it
9 because of that. When I told him to pull his mask down, I started
10 to walk away, and then that's when the explosion occurred. The
11 wall behind the ball machine, we call it the ball machine. It
12 makes chocolate balls this machine.

13 BY MS. WEST:

14 Q. Okay.

15 A. The wall behind the ball machine exploded. After the
16 explosion, the floor started to crack and break. So I grabbed
17 Scarlett, and we started to run toward the exit. She fell at one
18 point. I picked her back up, and she was in shock. And then once
19 I picked her up, we continued to run, and we made it outside.
20 After that, I remember the alarms were not going off yet. The
21 alarms only went off after an explosion, and we all went out into
22 the parking lot area.

23 Q. Just a quick question on Jose, who is Jose?

24 A. Jose Abdul Har (ph.). He's a mechanic.

25 Q. Do you know why he was wearing a mask?

1 A. He had been sick. He had been wearing the mask for a few
2 weeks now but we know that he had been sick. So that's why he was
3 wearing masks.

4 Q. Okay. And that was a double mask you said?

5 A. Yes.

6 Q. Okay. I know this might be difficult, but where were you
7 standing at the time?

8 MR. CEPEDA: I'm sorry. At the time of what?

9 MS. WEST: The explosion.

10 MS. SANTANA: So after the break, we went down to the locker
11 room area. We dropped off a few of things that we had on us, and
12 then we walked back toward line 21 where we were working, and we
13 were standing near the wall that exploded, which is also right
14 next to the ball machine.

15 BY MS. WEST:

16 Q. Okay. And prior to the wall, what did you see?

17 A. So prior to the explosion, I remember seeing Jose, the
18 mechanic, and another mechanic whose name I don't know, they were
19 working in that area, and I remember smelling the gas. But I
20 didn't see anything else.

21 Q. So were you facing them or facing the wall?

22 A. So I was looking at them, at Jose. I told him I smelled gas.
23 I started to walk away, and then when I looked back, that's when
24 the explosion happened.

25 Q. I see. So you looked behind you?

1 A. Yes. Okay. So Jose was off to a corner.

2 Q. Okay.

3 MR. CEPEDA: And the wall, as being described right now, she
4 seems to be describing as off to her left side.

5 MS. WEST: Okay.

6 MR. CEPEDA: Jose was to -- near a corner. So she was kind
7 of diagonally faced, being able to see Jose and being able to see
8 the wall.

9 MS. WEST: I see.

10 BY MS. WEST:

11 Q. So your shoulder was to wall?

12 A. Yes.

13 Q. Did you observe anything about the wall as it started to
14 explode?

15 A. I saw the, I saw the wall explode.

16 Q. And what did you see? What did you observe?

17 A. So as soon as the wall exploded, I saw all the debris just
18 start coming toward us where we were standing.

19 Q. Okay. And who were you standing next to?

20 A. Scarlett Mercedes was standing next to me.

21 Q. Okay. And how far away was she from you?

22 A. We were right next to each other. We were together.

23 Q. Okay. So how soon did you start to smell gas? Or, when was
24 it that you smelled gas?

25 A. Around 4:57.

1 Q. Do you know the smell of natural gas?

2 A. Yes.

3 Q. And how do you know?

4 A. So in the past, I live in a row home. My neighbor had a gas
5 leak. That day I thought it was coming from my own house. So I
6 called, as she says, UG, but it's UGI, to report the gas, and
7 that's the first time I smelled it, and that's how I know what the
8 gas smells like.

9 Q. Okay. Thank you. Did anybody else smell gas?

10 A. Yes.

11 Q. And who else?

12 A. Joe Costanni (ph.).

13 MR. CEPEDA: Do we know the spelling of that? Do --

14 MR. CARICKHOFF: Yes. My office represents her and Scarlett.
15 So I can give you both the information.

16 MS. WEST: Okay.

17 MS. SANTANA: Alalis (ph.).

18 MR. CEPEDA: Do we know who that is?

19 MR. CARICKHOFF: We may also represent her. I've got to
20 look.

21 MS. SANTANA: Ilianie (ph.).

22 MR. CARICKHOFF: We also represent her.

23 BY MS. WEST:

24 Q. They were all on the floor with you?

25 A. Not together. We work in different areas but, yes, we were

1 all on the same floor.

2 Q. Okay. So going back to when you first smelled gas, were you
3 on the floor? Were you in your locker? Were you in transition?
4 Where were you when you started smelling the gas?

5 A. So after my break, I went to the locker area, dropped off my
6 things, and then when I was going -- walking back to my line in
7 transition back to line, that's when I started to smell the gas,
8 and that's when I stopped and told Jose about the gas.

9 Q. Jose Abdul Har.

10 MR. CEPEDA: What's that?

11 BY MS. WEST:

12 Q. Jose Abdul Har.

13 A. Yes.

14 Q. Where was that about in the room that you started to smell
15 the gas?

16 A. On the third floor exiting the locker room.

17 Q. So just coming out of the locker room, that's when you
18 started first smelling it?

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. Okay. Where's the locker room located on that floor?

21 A. On the third floor, the lockers are near Donna's office.

22 Q. Okay. Donna Newman?

23 A. Yes.

24 MR. CEPEDA: Sorry.

25 MS. WEST: Got it.

1 BY MS. WEST:

2 Q. Okay. Prior to this day, and even earlier in the day, did
3 you smell gas?

4 A. No.

5 Q. Thinking back weeks or months earlier, was there any
6 indication that you smelled gas?

7 A. No.

8 Q. Okay. So once the explosion occurred, then what happened?

9 A. Everybody started to run. There was a lot of people
10 screaming. I remember people screaming, and the alarms started to
11 go off then. And everyone started to run.

12 Q. So tell me about the alarms. How do they work? Have you
13 heard them before?

14 A. I had never heard the alarms in the past. And it only
15 started -- the alarms began after the explosion, and there is a
16 flash and then obviously an alarm noise -- that follows.

17 Q. What is the sound that the alarm makes? Is it a voice? Is
18 it a piercing sound? Or, what type of alarm?

19 A. It's a very loud noise.

20 Q. Okay. Did you know or have you been trained to know what to
21 do when the alarm goes off?

22 A. No.

23 Q. Has anyone ever talked about the alarm?

24 A. No.

25 Q. All right. Let me go back to what you were saying earlier.

1 So once the explosion occurred, you could see it off to your side.
2 You started to run. What happened then?

3 A. That's really all I remember. The explosion happened, and
4 then we began to run. Scarlett was with me, and we fell, and then
5 I grabbed her arm and picked her up, and I told her to run, and we
6 headed for the exit. And, everyone else was running as well.

7 Q. So when Scarlett was injured -- I'm sorry, she fell, was she
8 injured and you helped her? How was she injured?

9 A. She fell. She was not injured as far as I know, but she did
10 fall. She tripped.

11 Q. Okay. Was she closer to the blast than you were?

12 MR. CEPEDA: I'm going to translate it, but I don't think she
13 understood the question.

14 MS. WEST: You can ask again.

15 MR. CEPEDA: Okay. But I'll tell you what she said first --

16 MS. WEST: Okay.

17 MR. CEPEDA: -- if you want. She said that --

18 MS. SANTANA: No, we were standing together, and it was the
19 explosion which probably led her to fall down.

20 MS. WEST:

21 MR. CEPEDA: And now I'll reask your question.

22 MS. SANTANA: We were both together. So she was not closer
23 than I was or vice versa. We were both standing next to each
24 other.

25 BY MS. WEST:

1 Q. Okay. And how far from the wall were you?

2 A. I could show you if would allow me.

3 Q. Yes.

4 A. So I was standing about here, and that's the wall where the
5 ball machine is. That would be the wall.

6 Q. The wall that exploded?

7 A. Yes, that's correct. That would be the wall.

8 Q. We'll put it in the transcript. So would you estimate the
9 distance that you were from the wall about -- how long would you
10 say that is?

11 A. Yeah, so I would estimate about here.

12 MR. CEPEDA: Seven feet. I don't want to make up numbers for
13 her.

14 MS. WEST: I don't want to put words in her mouth.

15 MR. CEPEDA: Yeah.

16 MS. SANTANA: I would say 4, 5 feet from where I was
17 standing.

18 BY MS. WEST:

19 Q. Okay. Now, I'm going to switch subjects and talk a little
20 bit about your training. Did you have any training on natural
21 disasters or any other emergency?

22 A. No.

23 Q. Or fire or any type of emergency that could happen in the
24 building?

25 A. I remember now that you ask. We did do a drill once. The

1 alarm went off, and they told us that we had to exit when the
2 alarm went off. That was one situation, and I don't -- they never
3 really explained to us why they were doing it.

4 Q. And then what were you supposed to do once the alarm went off
5 during this drill?

6 A. They just told us that when the alarm goes off, exit.

7 Q. Okay. Did they tell you where to exit to?

8 A. No.

9 Q. Okay. All right. So when the -- when you smelled gas, did
10 you report that to anyone?

11 A. Yes, I told Jose Abdul Har.

12 Q. Okay. What are you supposed to do when you have an emergency
13 like natural gas?

14 A. You're supposed to evacuate.

15 Q. Okay.

16 A. Or you should evacuate.

17 Q. Okay. Is there anyone you need to report to?

18 A. Yes.

19 Q. And who would that be?

20 A. So probably either to Donna or Amuli (ph.) --

21 Q. No, lead.

22 A. Lead.

23 MR. CEPEDA: Oh, yeah, okay. Okay. I understand. I see.

24 MS. WEST: I can translate, too.

25 MR. CEPEDA: That works.

1 BY MS. WEST:

2 Q. Okay. Can you report to anyone in your management or do you
3 have to go through your lead or through Donna?

4 A. I could report to any lead or Donna.

5 Q. Okay. Thank you. So have you reported problems in the past
6 to either your lead or to Donna? And, Donna is -- what is her
7 role?

8 A. Donna is everyone's boss. Everyone reports to her and, no, I
9 had never reported anything.

10 Q. Okay. But what I hear is that when you do have a problem,
11 you report to your lead or to Donna?

12 A. Yes, that's correct.

13 Q. Okay. All right. So, once you evacuated, where did you go
14 and what did you do?

15 A. Well, we didn't evacuate.

16 Q. When you --

17 MR. CEPEDA: Go ahead. I think she's probably confused you
18 said --

19 MS. WEST: Because I asked --

20 MR. CEPEDA: Yeah, because you asked about evacuation, and
21 there wasn't technically an evacuation. It was kind of everyone
22 run for your life situation.

23 BY MS. WEST:

24 Q. Okay. So when you -- when the explosion occurred, where did
25 you go then?

1 A. To the parking lot.

2 Q. Okay. Which one?

3 A. It belongs to Palmer. It's in the front, in front of Palmer.

4 Q. Did you know to go there or is that where everyone was going?

5 How did you know to go there?

6 A. So we all just ran to the parking lot. We heard everyone
7 screaming and yelling, and Jose was telling everyone, get out, get
8 out, get out. And everyone just kind of ran that way. It was
9 very disorganized.

10 Q. So when you were running, was there lights on? Was there
11 smoke? What did you see?

12 A. Well, when I was inside running, I saw the flash from the
13 alarm. Once I was outside, we saw the smoke and the fire from the
14 other building.

15 Q. And then what did you do? Did you stay there or what did you
16 do?

17 A. So we just stood there and waited. There was two people that
18 left, but everyone else for the majority stayed there and waited.

19 Q. Okay. Did you report to anybody at that point?

20 A. No.

21 Q. Okay. And who was your lead?

22 A. Joanna. I don't remember at this moment what her last name
23 is.

24 Q. Okay. So do the leads change with each shift or do you see
25 the same lead?

1 A. So you don't always have the same lead. That day it was
2 Joanna, but on let's say the fourth floor, you may have one lead.
3 The third floor, you may have a different lead, and then on a
4 different floor, depending on an area, you will have a different
5 lead. They vary.

6 Q. Did you typically work in this area?

7 A. So you were never in one area alone. You would only be there
8 about 3 or 4 weeks, and then you would be rotated to a separate
9 area.

10 Q. So when you went out in the parking lot, did you see Joanna?

11 A. Yes.

12 Q. Okay. Did you talk to her or her talk to you?

13 A. She spoke to all of us as a group, and she told us to pay
14 attention because she was going to start calling out names from a
15 list.

16 Q. Okay. So let me go back and talk about your training. Have
17 you ever -- I know you said you didn't have training on gas. Did
18 you ever drill on other types of emergencies?

19 A. Not that I'm aware of. The only one that I know of is the
20 one that I mentioned earlier where the alarm went off and they
21 told us that we had to exit. That's the only one that I can think
22 of.

23 Q. Okay. Is there any information that's in your breakroom or
24 where you might find information about natural gas or fires? Is
25 that posted in your breakroom?

1 A. I don't remember seeing anything like that.

2 Q. Did you see Donna that day?

3 A. Yes.

4 Q. Okay. Where did you see her?

5 A. During our break, Donna was the one that covered for Scarlett
6 and I.

7 Q. And where is her office?

8 A. In the third floor next to the locker room area.

9 Q. Okay. So you can see her office when you come out of the
10 breakroom?

11 A. Yes.

12 MS. WEST: Okay. All right. So I'm going to go through the
13 first round of questions. Actually you're the only one.

14 BY MR. SMITH:

15 Q. When we -- when she had the last fire drill, where did they
16 all meet at, the one before they had this one?

17 A. In the parking lot.

18 Q. The same place?

19 A. Yes.

20 Q. Did Donna or anyone have a walkie talkie?

21 A. On that day?

22 Q. Yes.

23 A. I believe I saw Donna with a walkie talkie.

24 Q. Did Amanda or anyone that you know have training on the
25 fourth floor in a room there with like four or five people

1 sometimes?

2 MR. CEPEDA: Can you repeat that? Sorry.

3 MR. SMITH: On the fourth floor -- I'll say it again.

4 MR. CEPEDA: Sure.

5 MR. SMITH: On the fourth floor, there's a room there that
6 five or six people would gather --

7 MR. CEPEDA: Okay.

8 MR. SMITH: -- to go over like slides for training and things
9 like that, for GM and some other -- GMPs and some other things.

10 MR. CEPEDA: Okay.

11 MS. SANTANA: Yes, I remember that room. I remember there
12 is.

13 MR. SMITH: Okay. That's all I have.

14 BY MS. WEST:

15 Q. I just want to clarify, going back to the explosion and prior
16 to the explosion, did you see or observe anything that was
17 happening with the wall? I don't know if you noticed while you
18 were working.

19 A. I did not.

20 MS. WEST: Okay. All right. Actually that was my last
21 question, unless you have another one.

22 MR. SMITH: No, I'm good.

23 MS. WEST: Okay. Well, I have one last question I guess.

24 BY MS. WEST:

25 Q. Is there anything that you want us to know that would help us

1 with this investigation and understand what had happened out
2 there?

3 A. No, that's all.

4 Q. Okay. Thank you.

5 MS. WEST: I'll go ahead and get off record, and I have a
6 time of 11:44.

7 (Whereupon, at 11:44 a.m., the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

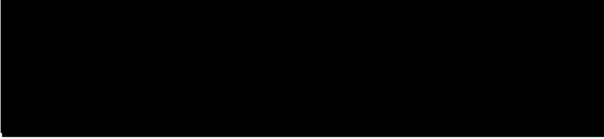
IN THE MATTER OF: EXPLOSION AT THE R.M. PALMER CANDY
 PLANT IN WEST READING,
 PENNSYLVANIA, ON MARCH 24, 2023
 Interview of Amanda Santana

ACCIDENT NO.: PLD23LR002

PLACE: Wyomissing, Pennsylvania

DATE: April 21, 2023

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.


Kathryn A. Mirfin
Transcriber