

# They Don't Tell You Anything!

by Meryl Becker

An original play produced by SCALE (Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experience),  
MassCOSH (Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health) and  
the Welcome Project.

## Characters:

José	Luiza
Carlos	Tony
Pat	Marcos
Maria	Paulo
Rosa/Michael	Narrators
Sandra	Other workers or children

(Before beginning the play, someone should interact with the audience, preparing them for the play. He/she could ask things like: What kinds of jobs do you have? Do you have any safety problems on your job? Do you use any protection on your job, like gloves or masks?)

## Scene 1

Narrator: This is a play about working safely. In this part, see if you notice things that are not safe.

(José and Carlos are on a construction site. José is wearing a dust mask. He is scraping a wall with a hand scraper. Carlos is breaking down a wall with a hammer. Pat comes in with an open paint can and a brush. There can be a table with a drop cloth on the end away from the entrance, and a window painted on the wall near the entrance.)

Pat: How's it going?

Carlos: This wall is almost down.

José: (taking off the mask to talk) There's more paint to scrape off over here. It's going to take a while.

Pat: (using brush) Well, keep going. The chemical will take the paint off this part.

José: (stopping and wiping his forehead) Wow, it's hot.

Carlos: You wouldn't be so hot if you took off that silly mask.

Pat: Yeah, maybe then you could work a little faster.

José: Oh, you know I'm a good worker.

Pat: Less talk and more work. (Wipes his hands on his pants) This part is done. I'm going to wash the brush. (He goes out, leaving the open paint can)

José: The mask helps with the dust. This is a really old house. When was it built – the 1920s?

Carlos: I think so. Come on. Don't be such a baby. A little dust never hurt anybody. Look at me. I've been hammering this wall for an hour and I'm not even tired. (He stops and makes muscles with both arms.) Look at those muscles!

José: (laughing and waving his hand at him) Oh, you are tough all right.

Carlos: (more muscle making, looking at himself) I lift weights, you know.

José: That's only the hundredth time you told me that. (taking a candy bar out of his pocket) Well, I'm not Superman. I'm hungry. (He opens it and takes a bite) Want some?

(Carlos breaks off a piece and puts it in his mouth. They work silently for a while)

Carlos: Are you still hungry? I have some candy, too.

José: No, no more. I'm saving my appetite for Maria's chicken. Want to come home with me for dinner? Maria always makes a lot of food.

Pat: (putting his head in) Quitting time! See you tomorrow.

Carlos: Chicken sounds great. (They put their tools down and he wipes his hands on his pants) Don't we have to wash up?

José: We can wash up at my house. Come on, I have my car today.

(They start to walk out and the lights go out)

## **Scene 2**

(There is a table with 6 chairs. The table is set for dinner. Maria is at the sink. She has a dish towel over her shoulder or at her waist. Rosa/Michael is chopping vegetables. Sandra is playing with a doll or a toy. Tony is sitting at the table. Carlos and José come in)

Jose: Mi amor, I'm home!

Sandra: Papa! (Sandra hugs him. He kisses Maria on the cheek, putting his arm around her.)

José: I brought Carlos home for dinner.

Maria: Welcome.

Jose: You know my wife Maria, and my daughter, little Sandra.

Carlos: Of course. Thanks for letting me stay for dinner

Maria: It's our pleasure.

José: We can wash up in the kitchen sink. (They go to the "sink" to wash. Maria goes to the table with her back to us. As she hands Jose her dishtowel they freeze in place.)

Narrator: Let's stop here for a minute. Did you see anything in the play that is not safe? (People in the audience speak) Let's continue the play and see what happens.

José: (handing the towel to Carlos) This is my brother Michael and his friend, Tony. My friend Carlos.

(Carlos, Rosa and Tony say hi)

José: Take a seat, Carlos. (Carlos sits and Maria and Michael bring the food and sit. Sandra sits next to José and he puts his arm around her.)

Carlos: This is great, thanks.

Tony: Hey, José. Are you guys coming straight from work?

José: Yeah, why?

Tony: Your clothes are full of dust.

Carlos: (laughing) You sound like José with all his talk about dust.

José: I'm too hungry. I can change after dinner. Please pass the rice. (To Maria, who is standing next to him) Did you talk to the doctor again about little Sandra?

Maria: I don't understand it. She has a high lead level, but they inspected the house. There is no lead paint here or at her daycare center.

Sandra: What's lead, Mommy?

Maria: It's a dangerous chemical they used to use in paint. They stopped putting it in paint a long time ago – in the 1970s I think - but it's still in a lot of old houses.

José: I'm worried. The doctor said kids with high lead levels sometimes have learning problems.

Maria: Where is the lead coming from?

Tony: I hate to tell you this. But it's probably coming from the lead dust José brings home on his clothes.

Carlos: What? That's crazy.

Tony: How old was the house you worked on today?

Carlos: 1920s.

Tony: Did you scrape paint?

José: Yes.

Tony: Did you break down walls?

Carlos: Yeah.

Tony: Then that dust on your clothes and boots is full of lead. When you come home and hug your kids that dust gets all over them. Then you wash your hands in the kitchen sink and use the dishtowel. (He stands and picks it up)

Michael: Oh, no!

Tony: Driving home from work gets lead dust in the car, too. Then you drive your kids and the rest of the family around in that car. All of you should be tested for lead!

Maria: (taking Jose's arm off Sandra's shoulder and moving her) Go sit over there, honey. (Sandra changes seats with her mother and Maria sits between Jose and Carlos. Rosa is next to Carlos)

José: (upset) How do you know all this? How do I know it's true?

Tony: I work in painting and construction too, but we have a union. The union trains us.

Sandra: What's a union, Mommy?

Maria: An organization of workers. The union helps people get better pay and working conditions.

José: But what can I do? I can't take a shower and change my clothes BEFORE I come home.

Tony: Actually, you can, if your boss did what he's supposed to do. He's supposed to give you a place to shower and change your clothes. What you can do is change your clothes and wash your hands and face before you come home. Then at home take a shower and wash your clothes separately.

José: I'm her father! It can't be me!

Tony: (putting his hand on José's shoulder) It's not your fault. It's the boss's fault. The law says he has to give you gloves and a paper suit to cover your clothes. That way you don't get so much lead dust on your clothes.

Maria: (sympathetically) Oh, José. (She goes to hug him – then stops and pulls away, closer to Carlos, who grins at her. She moves away from him too, as Michael on the other side moves away from Carlos. Then they both get up) Come on, Michael, let's clear the table. (They start to clear the table)

Michael: Anyone for dessert? We have ice cream.

Sandra: (looking at Carlos's arms) Mommy, look at these muscles!

Carlos: (smiling and making a muscle) I lift weights, you know.

José: (tiredly) Yeah, yeah.

Maria: (touching José gently) You know, you have to do something about this.

José: (tiredly) I know. I'll have to think of something. Maybe I could talk to the boss.

Carlos: Him!

Tony: The union will help you.

José: (surprised) But we don't have a union.

Tony: It will still help you.

José: (stands and stretches) I can't eat any more. My stomach hurts again. It's a lot to think about. And I'm so tired. Lately, I'm tired all the time.

Tony: That could be from the lead, too. It's not just Sandra. It's you that's breathing in that lead all day. (To Carlos) And you.

José: But I use a mask. (He shows the mask)

Tony: That mask is no good – not for lead. You need a special mask – a respirator.

Carlos: (jumping up) Every bad thing can't be from lead, you know. You're scaring everybody to death!

Tony: But it's true!

Carlos: Kids I can understand. They're little. But look at me! (He makes a muscle) I'm 6 foot 2! I lift weights! I feel fine! (Carlos and Tony stand opposite each other.)

Tony: So? You're human. You don't always feel what the lead is doing in your body. You should both have regular tests for lead.

Carlos: There are chemicals all around us. It's no big deal. You can't always be complaining! We have to do our jobs. What are we going to do?

Tony: I told you lead can make you tired. It can also give you headaches, stomach aches, muscle pain, high blood pressure and kidney damage. It can stop women painters and the wives of men painters from getting pregnant. It can cause birth defects.

Carlos: (sitting ) You mean that could be the reason my brother's wife can't get pregnant?

Tony: It could be.

Carlos: At work they don't tell you anything!

Tony: They are supposed to train you. And if you don't speak English they have to train you in your own language.

Michael: Boy, I'm glad I don't work in a dangerous job like that. Cleaning offices isn't easy, but it's safe. (He picks up a spray bottle and sponge, walks to the side near the entrance and begins to clean)

Maria: Oh, yeah? What about the time you got dizzy from the smell of that cleaner you were using? (Michael shows himself getting dizzy.)

Michael: I forgot about that. And Ana got a rash on her hands and arms. (Michael makes scratching motions.)

Tony: People who clean have a lot of asthma, too. (Michael breathes in a loud way, maybe as if he has an inhaler.)

Michael: Since Ana got that rash, I always use gloves. (He takes gloves out of his pocket, puts them on) But what about the smell of the chemicals?

Maria: I had that problem when I worked in the restaurant. The cleaning company should give you information on the chemicals you use. (Michael looks at the label on the spray bottle) And you should open a window or have other good ventilation. (Michael makes motions to open the window painted on the back wall)

Tony: But the best thing is to change to natural cleaners that don't have toxic chemicals.

Maria: In the restaurant I finally got the boss to buy better cleaners. But in the nursing home where I work now, the cleaners and disinfectants are even worse. And you have to be careful of needles in the trash.

Michael: You have all that lifting, too, helping the patients in and out of bed. (He walks to the table and with straight legs motions lifting one of the adults out of the chair.)

Maria: In the restaurant I learned to bend my knees and lift the right way when I picked up heavy pots and sacks of potatoes. (Michael motions bending his knees and lifting one of the adults out of the chair) And to ask for help! The nursing home is pretty good about having special machines to help us lift. But the cleaners – forget it! The cleaning people have a hard time.

José: It seems almost every job has something!

Tony: But on every job the workers have the right to be safe!

Sandra: What about the man next door?

Maria: What man, honey?

Sandra: (she points) The man. The man on the ladder taking paint off his house.

Maria: I think she's talking about our neighbor. See? What about him? (They all look)

Tony: If you have an old house with lead paint you can get lead poisoned the same as you can on the job.

Rosa: So people should wear all that protection when fixing up their own houses, too? I never see people doing that.

Tony: I know. People don't do it. But they're putting themselves in danger. And their kids can get lead poisoned too if they don't close off the area and don't clean up very well afterward.

José: So, what is all this protection? Paper suits?

Tony: You need a paper suit, gloves, and a respirator.

(A person walks out wearing a paper suit, gloves, and a respirator, or he or she could be putting it on. The person is holding a covered can, brush, and a scraper. He or she models first in a funny way. Then the person puts down the pail and brush and starts scraping an imaginary wall, facing the audience.)

Carlos: Wow! A spaceman!

Tony: You throw the paper suit away at the end of the day. You use the respirator again. You just have to change the filter.

Carlos: So then you don't have to change clothes after work?

Tony: Even with the paper suit, it's still a good idea to change clothes, wash your hands and face, and take a shower at home.

José: Isn't all that equipment expensive?

Tony: It's not that expensive. But it's the boss's responsibility to give it to you. He pays for it – not you. (The person in the paper suit puts down the scraper, opens the can, and begins to use the chemical.)

You need the same protection for the chemical that removes the paint. The smell can make you really sick. It's so strong you can burn your skin just by wiping your hands on your pants. (The person in the paper suit puts down the can, closes it, puts the brush on top of it and takes out a candy bar, but Tony walks over and removes it.)

Tony: Uh-uh! No eating on the job! The lead and the chemicals go right into your mouth. When you want to eat or smoke or break for lunch you have to clean up first.

(Carlos and José look at each other)

Carlos: You mean that candy bar we ate today. . ?!.

José: That we ate with our fingers full of lead. . .?!

Carlos and Jose: Ay yie yay!!!

### **Scene 3**

(The table is at the rear opposite the entrance and is now a “bench.” Marcos and Paolo and maybe some others are waiting at the pickup spot. José comes in first, walking quickly and calling to Carlos, who is walking slowly. José is carrying a bag and Carlos is carrying a backpack.)

Sandra, as narrator: (holding her doll) It’s early in the morning and time to be picked up for work. Carlos and my daddy Jose are walking to the pickup place.

José: Hurry! We’re late! Mike always picks us up on time!

Carlos: We have lots of time

José: Look! Guys for other jobs are already there. (They stand with the others)

Carlos: See? We’re fine.

José: (angry) I don’t want to lose my job!

Carlos: What’s the matter with you?

José: Sorry. I couldn’t sleep all night. I’m so worried about my kid, and I don’t want to get myself so sick I can’t work! I have to do something, but I don’t want to lose my job.

Carlos: (making motions like he’s lifting weights) I lifted extra weights today because of this. What I need is more muscles. Maybe you should lift weights, too.

José: Muscles won’t help you if you’re lead poisoned.

Marcos: Who’s getting lead poisoned?

José: Oh, hi, Marcos. Hi, Paulo. (They shake hands or give a high 5)

My daughter is, and we probably are, too. It’s from the lead paint on the job, and now I don’t know what to do.

Carlos: If we can’t do anything about it, maybe it was better when we didn’t know.

Marcos: But you do know. And you can do something about it. The same thing happened to me.

Paolo: And me..

José: What did you do?

Marcos: I talked to my boss. He didn't know a lot of this either. He works along with us, and it was hurting him and his family, too! He didn't change everything all at once, but we have respirators now. (He shows the respirator) The paper suits are coming next week.

Paolo: (angrily) At my job it wasn't so easy. They don't know and they don't want to know. They just try to take advantage of us, especially because we're immigrants and some of us don't have papers. One guy was even fired for asking questions. So a couple of us called MASSCOSH.

Carlos: What is MASSCOSH?

(A person in a hard hat comes out with a sign that says MASSCOSH and they all look )

Marcos: The Massachusetts Coalition for Occupational Safety and Health. They help workers like us. They're helping the guy who got fired.

Paolo: You can call the Massachusetts Department of Labor or OSHA, too – that's a federal agency. (The first sign drops down to show an OSHA sign below it, and all look) Dangerous conditions like this are illegal!

José: But we could get fired if we report our boss.

Marcos It's illegal for him to fire you for that. But MASSCOSH and the other agencies won't tell him who reported him. He won't know it was you.

Paolo: MASSCOSH can help you figure out what to do and then help you do it. They can help you decide whether to call OSHA or the Massachusetts Department of Labor. (A Mass Department of Labor sign drops down, and all look. All signs are showing.)

Carlos: Tony said the union would help us, too. (The person holds up a union sign, and all look)

José: Could MASSCOSH help my sister with the chemical cleaner that's making her dizzy? And my wife at the nursing home?

Marcos: Sure they could. (A car horn beeps)

Paolo: Well, here's my ride. See you later. Good luck. (He goes out)

José: I feel a little better now. At least we can get some help with this. (Another car horn beeps)

Carlos: And here's our ride. (José picks up his bag and Carlos points to it) What's that?

José: A bag to put my dusty clothes in and clean clothes to change into before I go home.

Carlos: (picking up his backpack) I have some, too. I even have clean shoes. (They smile)

Marcos: And I'll take you to MASSCOSH today after work.

Carlos and José: It's a start!