Globetrotter Darina Valentik died in the path of a slow-moving railcar.

Teenager Joel Balfour was killed when a backhoe bucket struck him in the head.

Baker Donna Noonan died after tripping while carrying doughnuts at a crowded Tim Hortons.

All had recently started new jobs.

All toiled on busy work sites and received little training.

All three wanted to make a living in Alberta's unprecedented economic boom, and died in its wake.

“They come from Newfoundland and Ontario and Quebec and China . . . big promises," says Valentik's mother Danielle, from her home in Belleville, Ont.

“It's quite often a one-way trip alive, and in a box returning home.”

As Alberta's economy shifted into overdrive during the past decade, thousands of Canadians flooded
into the province to find work.

Others journeyed from abroad, leaving countries such as the Philippines, Mexico and Somalia, to cash in. Many had no experience or training, but that didn’t matter.

A job awaited.

At its zenith in 2006, Statistics Canada declared: “Alberta is in the midst of the strongest period of economic growth ever recorded by any province in Canada’s history.”

“The boom has brought unbridled prosperity to Alberta.”

Yet, the dark side of the boom soon surfaced.

The number of deaths on the job soared as businesses got busy, with 1,285 workers killed in the past decade.

In 1999, work fatalities — excluding people who died from longer-term occupational diseases — hit 72.

By 2007, the number of lives lost jumped to 91.

The following year, before an overheated economy began cooling off, 102 people perished because of a job.

Work was killing us.

Northern Alberta, with the massive Athabasca oilsands near Fort McMurray, was hit particularly hard as investment ramped up.

In the space of one year, the temporary population living in construction work camps and on the streets of Fort McMurray nearly doubled to 20,000 in 2007.

As crude prices surged and oilsands plants sprouted from the boreal forest, five workers in the region stretching from Wood Buffalo to Cold Lake were buried in 2008, according to provincial data analyzed by the Herald.

In contrast, no workers died there in 2004.

As the decade progressed, employees bustled on manic sites to get the job finished on time and on target.

“When things are busy, it’s hurry, hurry, rush, rush, get the job done,” says Mike Joyce, a member on the province’s Occupational Health and Safety Council.

“Let’s take all the work we can possibly get,” he says, describing attitudes during the period.

“I don’t really care how you get it done, just get it done.”
In the past 18 months, Alberta’s economy has geared down.

Fewer people are dying at work.

But as the economy shows some signs of recovering, many are worried the lessons of the last boom haven’t been learned — and deaths on the job could rise again.

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Darina Valentik was a small woman — just 115 pounds and a shade over five feet tall. She wasn’t built for hard labour.

In June 2007, the 34-year-old sparkplug had recently returned to Canada after teaching English in Thailand.

A free-spirited traveller trained in homeopathy, she hoped to become a pilot and work in Canada’s North.

First, she needed money. In bustling Fort McMurray, she quickly found a job as a labourer.

“She didn’t want to be a heavy equipment operator,” recalls her mother. “She said, ‘Oh mom, it’s just a part-time job. It’s just for a few days.’”

Darina worked at a yard at Athabasca Northern Railway, a busy transportation link shipping materials for major oilsands players.

Earning $20 an hour at Chief Hauling Contractors Inc., Darina’s responsibilities included ensuring railcars moving petroleum coke were properly connected.

Less than three weeks into the job, on the morning of June 30, she faced trouble.

The knuckles of some railcars weren’t lining up and Darina struggled to fix the problem with a crowbar.

With one misstep, her size 4 right foot got stuck in a small gap between two rail tracks.

No one was at the controls to stop the slow-moving train.

In the first hour of her first day working alone, Darina was trapped.

The car moved toward her at a pace less than walking speed. A nearby truck driver, there to deliver coke, scrambled to pull her free, but failed.

The hopper-style car rolled over her leg, then crushed her slender body.

A federal work site investigator’s report found Darina died from “multiple traumatic injuries.”
The report, obtained by the Herald, states it didn’t appear she was told during training to stop the cars before trying to fix the rail coupling problem.

Darina was following the “inadequate” instructions she had been given, it concluded.

After Darina’s death, her employers said they didn’t know she was working alone that day.

Chief Hauling Contractors was charged under the Canada Labour Code for failing to ensure Darina was made aware of every known or foreseeable health or safety hazard on site.

The company pleaded guilty and was fined $225,000.

“When I close my eyes, I see her blood on the tracks,” her mother says.

“When I open my eyes, I still see her blood on the tracks.”

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The summer Darina Valentik was killed, the province couldn’t get enough workers.

Unemployment neared record lows and by mid-2006, Alberta had gained 57,000 people from other parts of Canada during a one-year period, smashing previous migration records.

Faced with a chronic shortage of people in almost every field, the provincial government predicted it would need 400,000 new labourers by 2015.

The picture soon changed as inflationary pressures pushed some people and companies out of Alberta. Then, the world spun deep into a recession.

In 2009, Alberta’s exports slumped about 40 per cent as demand for oil, natural gas and other commodities plunged.

At the same time, work-related fatalities (excluding occupational diseases) fell 42 per cent to 61 deaths.

Employment Minister Thomas Lukaszuk says the economic slowdown played a part in the drop, noting the boom brought many inexperienced staff to the province.

But he credits government education programs and employer action for improving work site safety and the steep decline in deaths.

“We were focusing heavily on education and I think it’s paying dividends,” Lukaszuk says.

Businesses, he adds, have learned “cutting corners on safety doesn’t actually make you more efficient or more competitive.”

After Darina was killed, Chief Hauling was purchased by another company, Gibson Energy, which says it learned hard lessons from her death.
It ramped up training programs, for example.

At one point in 2008, Gibson Energy turned down contracts because it didn’t have the capacity to train more inexperienced workers.

“There’s a certain point where you have to say that taking on that work is not worth the risk associated with it,” says Rod Bantle, a Gibson Energy senior vice-president.

As the economy shows new signs of life, training and employment could become a worry for employers.

“You’re going to go (from) zero to 100 again, with a very short period of time to try to ramp up,” Bantle says.

“There are still only so many people that you can take on.”

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Kevin Balfour remembers the morning in January 2006, when he drove his 19-year-old son Joel around the Edmonton area to drop off job applications to a handful of employers.

Joel, a motocross racer, wanted to attend business school and design a clothing line for extreme sports enthusiasts.

He left the family home in Vernon, B.C., to seek work in Alberta.

It didn’t take long.

A Nisku-based oilpatch driller, the Crossing Company, asked Joel to come back that same day.

By 4 p.m., the teenager was climbing onto a work truck headed for Grande Cache.

“It was the last time I saw him,” says his father.

Three weeks into the job, Joel began an overnight shift at a remote site on the province’s western edge, 70 kilometres north of Grande Cache.

The Crossing Company had been contracted by petroleum producer Talisman Energy to drill underneath several creeks to minimize the environmental impact of a pipeline.

Just after midnight on Jan. 24, Joel and backhoe operator Shawn McNally were working to dig a small trench.

“It was snowing. And there wasn’t much light — one light tower,” recalls McNally.

As McNally operated the backhoe, Joel toiled on foot and headed into the digging area.

The operator didn’t see the teenager move to retrieve a pry bar until a flash of light flickered off Joel's
reflective coveralls.

McNally desperately tried to stop the machine’s bucket but it continued downward, striking the young man in the head.

Joel was knocked unconscious, bleeding badly. It took more than two hours to rush him to Grande Cache’s hospital from the remote site.

At 3:30 a.m., a doctor pronounced the teenager dead.

A provincial investigation later found no one on site had up-to-date first aid training and an emergency response plan had not been reviewed with workers.

McNally, it noted, had been operating the machine for a month, without seeing the operator’s manual.

Both men were “new to the oil industry and would not be considered fully competent under the Alberta Occupational Health and Safety legislation.

“This was due to lack of training and experience for both workers,” the investigators concluded.

No safety charges were laid in the case.

Although he had only a few weeks of experience operating the backhoe, McNally now believes he should had been "more of a role model" to the younger man.

“I’d like to go back and change that day," says McNally, 27.

“It’s happened to many others just like me.”

Joel’s father says the Crossing Company handled the death as well as it could, helping fund a $1,000 memorial scholarship in his son’s name at his former high school. The company also established a safety award in his honour.

Balfour remains concerned about the type of work his son was doing, but the Vernon man also believes “it’s a very unfortunate accident.”

Crossing Company president Ryan MacLean doesn’t know the details of Joel’s death four years ago, as he wasn’t in the top job at the time.

“It was a tragic event. That’s all I can really say,” he offers.

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Boom or bust, workers can die at any time.

Some companies say the state of the economy isn’t the key factor when it comes to promoting safety.

Instead, protecting workers is about changing the mindset of everyone on the job.
“It’s a cultural thing,” says Duane Mather, chief executive of Nabors Canada, one of the country’s largest oilpatch drillers.

“Safety is not like a light switch. You can’t just turn it on and off.”

Just a few years ago, Nabors Canada had its “fair share” of safety issues, Mather says.

The company saw two employees killed in 2004, including 25-year-old Matthew Schwartz, who perished in a fiery service rig blaze near Sundre.

Nabors Drilling also faces safety charges related to the February 2007 death of Patrick McFadden, who was crushed at a Calgary site while working for another firm.

Nabors has changed its ways when it comes to safety, adopting a goal of zero injuries and fatalities at the workplace, Mather says.

In the wake of Schwartz’s death, Nabors improved the way it snubs wells. It also has focused on getting workers to use seatbelts while driving on the job. The chief executive often lectures employees about strapping in.

“You gotta remember the bottom end of our labour workforce — between the semi-skilled and the unskilled guys we’ve got — this is the Broncs. This is the 18- to 22-year-old, tougher than nails, ‘I’m bulletproof. I don’t need a seatbelt. I can drink and drive.’ All of that mentality and that attitude,” Mather says.

“That’s the toughest thing to get out of them.”

As for the economy, the oilpatch executive maintains companies must keep people’s attention fixed on safety at all times, especially when they might be distracted by “whether they have a job or not.”

But Gil McGowan of the Alberta Federation of Labour doesn’t believe businesses or the provincial government are doing enough.

He says the government’s approach to inspection and enforcement is weak, and the province’s economy is dominated by potentially dangerous industries.

McGowan is also worried another economic upswing will lead to more deaths.

A Conference Board of Canada report predicts Alberta’s economic recovery will solidify next year with 72,000 new jobs. RBC Economics forecasts the provincial economy will surge 4.2 per cent in 2011, trailing only Saskatchewan.

“I have no doubt that the number of workplace accidents and fatalities will increase as the economy starts to heat up,” says McGowan.

“We’ll be right back where we were during the boom in terms of health and safety.”
For its part, the provincial government has placed particular emphasis on educating young workers who lack experience and training, which makes them more vulnerable to injuries.

For example, 16-year-old Mitchell Tanner was killed in June 2008 at a St. Albert Rona store. The forklift he was hanging on the side of tipped over and crushed him.

Both Lukaszuk’s department and the Workers’ Compensation Board aggressively promote safety campaigns targeting young employees. Now, the minister says, he needs to add more substance to the province’s workplace safety strategy for all types of workers.

“We are almost at a point where we have maximized on education,” Lukaszuk acknowledges.

“The next step is stepping up enforcement.”

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Alberta workers are not only being killed in rugged industries. Death can occur in the most unexpected of places.

During the boom years, Tim Hortons became the poster child for companies desperately chasing staff, sometimes offering more than $15 an hour for untrained labour.

In this period, 54-year-old Donna Noonan took a baking job at a busy Tim Hortons in a blue-collar neighbourhood in north Edmonton.

Donna and her adult daughter, Adele Card, were best friends.

Even after Card married and was in her 30s, they lived in the same house, often staying up late into the evening in conversation.

A native Albertan, Noonan and her husband Larry retired from their trucking business in 2006. Larry was battling respiratory tract cancer and the couple wanted to stick closer to home.

On Jan. 10, 2007, less than a month after starting work at Tim Hortons, Donna was hauling trays of frozen Timbits out of the store’s cooler.

She tripped over a heavy milk crate protruding into the aisle, breaking her hip in the fall.

Donna sat in a chair at work until her daughter was able to pick her up, waiting an hour to go the hospital.

Card says her mother didn’t want to make a big deal of the injury, insisting she didn’t need an ambulance.

The new baker eventually wound up in the Royal Alexandra Hospital, remaining there for more than a month.
On Feb. 18, she died from painful complications related to the fracture, including a surgical wound infection and a ruptured bladder.

A provincial investigation discovered Donna wasn’t trained about workplace hazards, nor were other new employees.

The busy restaurant didn’t have enough room to store Timbits, coffee and other materials for the amount of business going on, causing a “tripping and product securement hazards to workers,” the investigation said.

The fatality report uncovered a number of other safety issues, including that there was no manager or supervisor present, and no one insisted on calling an ambulance or getting first aid for Donna.

“The medical examiner said to me, ‘Had your mother never fallen and broken her hip, she would not have died,’ ” Card says.

“That just about put me in the loony bin.”

The night her mother was injured, the angry daughter left the hospital and returned to the Tim Hortons to tell staff Donna had broken her hip.

“I said, ‘Who is the supervisor?’ ”

Two teenagers behind the counter began arguing about who was in charge, she recalls.

“None of them were in their 20s. They all looked like high school students,” Card says.

The investigation said the company did not report the injury to the government as it was supposed to under provincial law.

In fact, the incident wasn’t reported until eight days after Donna died.

No charges were laid.

The owners of the Tim Hortons franchise, North-Ed (1994) Ltd., did not respond to an interview request.

Tim Hortons spokesman David Morelli says the families that own the Edmonton Tim Hortons reviewed their workplace safety procedures immediately after Donna’s death.

Provincially certified auditors were brought in and the store was the first “quick service restaurant” to be awarded a safety certification from the Alberta Hotel Safety Association, he says.

“In the three years since Ms. Noonan’s tragic death, Tim Hortons staff are more educated, better trained and better equipped to prevent or treat workplace safety issues.”

That’s of little comfort to the family of Donna Noonan.
Spurred by the circumstances of her mother’s death, Card is now taking University of Alberta courses to become a safety professional.

She won’t forget how her mother often talked about the overcrowded conditions she faced working at the Tim Hortons.

“She said, ‘You know one day somebody’s going to get hurt,’ ” says her daughter.

“Just think how ironic it is. She was the one who was saying it. Nothing was happening and she’s the one who got hurt.”

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Darina Valentik was offered a teaching position at the Faengyaopittayakon School in Thailand.

Photograph by: Courtesy, Valentik family