

The Life and Death of an Amazon Warehouse Temp

What the future of low-wage work really looks like.

BY DAVE JAMIESON ART BY DAVIDE BONAZZI



On Jan. 18, 2013, as the sun went down, Jeff Lockhart Jr. got ready for work. He slipped a T-shirt over his burly frame and hung his white work badge over his broad chest. His wife, Di-Key, was in the bathroom fixing her hair in micro-braids and preparing for another evening alone with her three sons. Jeff had been putting in long hours lately, and so the couple planned a breakfast date at Shoney's for when his shift ended around dawn. "You better have your hair done by then," he teased her.

As he headed out the door, Jeff, who was 29, said goodbye to the boys. He told Jeffrey, the most rambunctious, not to give his mom a hard time; Kelton, the oldest, handed his father his iPod for the ride. Then Jeff climbed into his Chevy Suburban, cranked the bass on the stereo system he'd customized himself, and headed for the Amazon fulfillment center in nearby Chester, Virginia, just south of Richmond.

When the warehouse opened its doors in 2012, there were about **37,000 unemployed people** living within a 30-minute drive; in nearby Richmond, more than a quarter of residents were living in poverty. The warehouse only provided positions for a fraction of the local jobless: It currently has around 3,000 full-time workers. But it also enlists hundreds, possibly thousands, of temporary workers to fill orders during the holiday shopping frenzy, known in Amazon parlance as “peak.” Since full-timers and temps perform the same duties, the only way to tell them apart is their badges. Full-time workers wear blue. Temps wear white.

That meant Jeff wore white. He'd started working at the warehouse in November 2012, not long after it opened. It was the first job he'd been able to find in months, ever since he'd been laid off from his last steady gig at a building supply store. By January, peak season had come and gone, and hundreds of Jeff's fellow temps had been let go. But he was still there, two months after he'd started, wearing his white badge. What he wanted was to earn a blue one.



Jeff and Di-Key with their children, Jervontay, Jeffrey and Kelton (left to right). Family photos courtesy of Di-Key Lockhart.

At the warehouse, Jeff was a picker, fetching orders to be shipped to Amazon customers. A handheld scanner gun told him what he needed to pull and the exact aisle and shelf where he would find it. Since the Chester facility covers **1.1 million square feet**, the equivalent of roughly 18 football fields, the right shelf might be just around the corner, or it might be 100 yards away. Once he pulled the item, his scanner would give him his next assignment, and off he'd go, wherever the gun took him next. He got a kick out of this peculiar window into the desires of the American consumer. Once, he stumbled on a small soccer set and made a note to buy it for Jeffrey when spring arrived. Another time, he filled an order for a mysterious item that turned out to be a butt plug kit. "I'm telling you," he later told Di-Key, laughing as he showed her the listing online, "this thing was as big as my fist."

Being a picker was a demanding job for a man of Jeff's size. He was built like an offensive lineman—6-foot-3 and 300 pounds, with a flowing, dirty-blond beard, wire-rimmed glasses and a head shaved almost completely bald. Since workers at the Chester facility were typically expected to pull 100 items or more per hour, a picker could expect to walk more than 12 miles over the course of a shift. The handheld scanners allowed managers to track precisely how long it takes workers to fulfill an order, and those who failed to "make rate" could lose their jobs. Jeff moved quickly up and down the aisles alongside men and women half his size, earning the nickname "Tornado." "If I gave him a directive, he took care of it," said Tim Taylor, a supervisor at the warehouse. "You didn't have to explain it—he just knocked it out."

"He liked it, and it exhausted him," says Jeff's father, Jeff Lockhart Sr. "He'd come over here on the weekends when he could. He wouldn't sit there long and he'd fall asleep." As a big guy, Jeff was mindful of his weight—he didn't want to develop diabetes later in life. He'd taken up jogging and was eating better at home. After he started working at the warehouse, his family noticed that he was shedding pounds. "He dropped two, almost three pant sizes," Di-Key says.

Sometime around 2 a.m. that January morning, Jeff took his 30-minute "lunch break." Most days, he would clock out and go out to his Suburban in the parking lot. He would pull his lunch from his cooler and grab his phone, which, under warehouse policy, wasn't allowed on the floor. He always at least texted Di-Key, who found it hard to sleep while her husband was away at work. On this particular morning, he called her. He asked how her braids had come along, told her that he loved her and that she should get some sleep. Then he said he needed to get back to work.

Less than an hour later, a worker found Jeff on the third floor. He had collapsed and was lying unconscious in aisle A-215, beneath shelves stocked with Tupperware and heating pads.



In the years since Amazon became the symbol of the online retail economy, horror stories have periodically emerged about the conditions at its warehouses—workers faced with near-impossible targets, people dropping on the job from heat or extreme fatigue. This isn't one of those stories. Jobs at Amazon are physically demanding and the expectations can be high, but the company's fulfillment centers are not sweatshops. In late September, I visited the Chester warehouse for an hour-long guided tour. Employees were working at a speed that seemed brisk yet reasonable. There were no idle moments, but no signs of exhaustion, either.

At the same time, we are living in an era of maximum productivity. It has never been easier for employers to track the performance of workers and discard those who don't meet their needs. This applies to employees at every level, from warehouse grunts to white-collar workers like those at Amazon headquarters who were recently the subject of a much-discussed **New York Times** piece about the company's brutally competitive corporate culture. The difference is that people like Jeff don't have the option of moving to Google, Microsoft or a tech startup eager to poach managers and engineers with Amazon on their resume.

When it comes to low-wage positions, companies like Amazon are now able to precisely calibrate the size of its workforce to meet consumer demand, week by week or even day by day. Amazon, for instance, says it has 90,000 full-time U.S. employees at its fulfillment and sorting centers—but it **plans to bring on** an estimated 100,000 seasonal workers to help handle this year's peak. Many of these seasonal hires come through Integrity Staffing Solutions, a Delaware-based temp firm. The company's website recently listed 22 corporate offices throughout the country, 15 of which were recruiting offices **for Amazon fulfillment centers**, including the one in Chester.

This system isn't unique to Amazon—it pervades the U.S. retail supply chain. Many companies choose to outsource shipping work

"It was sort of like a class warfare kind of thing," says

to so-called third-party logistics providers, which in turn contract the work to staffing companies. At some of Walmart's critical logistics hubs, multiple temp agencies may be **providing workers under the same roof**. The

Lisa Vacula, who worked at an Amazon warehouse in Pennsylvania.



temp model also extends far beyond retail. The housekeeper who cleans your room at a Hyatt hotel **may not work for Hyatt**, but for a temp firm you've never heard of, for less money and fewer benefits than a direct hire. "It's the standard operating model," said Nelson Lichtenstein, a labor historian at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "The entire service economy is based on this kind of hyper-flexibility. If you don't have it, it sends costs way up."

For employers, the appeal of this system is obvious. It allows companies to meet demand while keeping their permanent workforce at a minimum, along with all the costs that go with it—payroll taxes, benefits, workers' compensation costs and certain legal liabilities. ^① (When Amazon warehouse workers around the country claimed they were victims of wage theft in a Supreme Court case last year, Integrity, not Amazon, was **named as the defendant**.) For employees, though, it means showing up to work every day with the knowledge that you are always disposable. You are at least one entity removed from the company where you work, and you are only as good as your last recorded input in a computerized performance monitoring system. In the event that something goes wrong in your life—illness, injury, a family crisis—you have few, if any, protections. And yet for Americans like Jeff, this precarious existence now represents one of the only remaining potential paths to a middle-class life.

Jeff Lockhart took a warehouse temp job because it was the best opportunity he could find. He had graduated from high school in nearby Petersburg, where he met Di-Key while working at a local Wendy's. The two dated for a while—Jeff even gave her a promise ring—but later drifted apart. After high school, Jeff hoped to make a career in electronics, and left for Ohio to get a degree at DeVry, the for-profit college. He wound up returning to Virginia with student debt and few job prospects.

Unemployment in Petersburg is high—the jobless rate is still over 9 percent. First, Jeff loaded pastries onto trucks for a vending company. Later, he landed a job at a building supply store where his father worked.

He and Di-Key reconnected in their early 20s. The two made a striking couple—a tall, imposing white guy and his petite African-American girlfriend. “I had a really tough childhood,” says Di-Key. “I didn’t think anyone could love me, but he showed me differently.” She had left school at 17 and had two sons from previous relationships—the oldest, Kelton, is legally blind. “I had a hard time finding a job, and ended up going on assistance,” she says. But after she and Jeff got together, they slowly started to build a more secure life. Jeff pushed Di-Key to get her GED. They had a child together and got married, and Jeff adopted Di-Key’s sons. “He always treated those boys just like they were his own,” says Jeff’s sister, Laura Lockhart. Di-Key worked a series of jobs in retail and office cleaning, and Jeff stayed on at the building supply store. Eventually, they even managed to buy a house—a three-bedroom starter in Hopewell for \$86,000. Then, not long after the housing crash, the building supply store closed down, and both Jeff and his father lost their jobs.

Jeff went on unemployment and started hunting for work with his usual dedication. “He was putting in application after application,” Di-Key says—for everything from building supply to TV cable installation to mall retail. But callbacks were hard to come by. Jeff helped his father run a kettle corn concession stand, while Di-Key baked and sold cakes for birthdays and weddings, finding customers through word-of-mouth and Facebook. Being unemployed shook Jeff’s sense of himself. He had always taken a lot of pride in providing for his family, and after months of fruitless searching, he became anxious and depressed. He got up later and spent more time hanging around the house. “Me being the breadwinner hurt him. He wanted me staying with the boys, going to football and soccer practice,” says Di-Key. “When he got Amazon—OK, this is something he can retire from. Something he can work his way up.”

The arrival of an Amazon warehouse in Chester felt a bit like the opening of a Ford plant might have **a century earlier**. At the time, Amazon was **aggressively expanding**

its logistics network **to speed up delivery to customers**. Bob McDonnell, Virginia's Republican governor at the time, called it “a tremendous win for the greater Richmond region.” Word quickly spread that there was a major new employer in the vicinity. “That was the only place around here that was really hiring,” says Jeff’s best friend, Johnathan Evans, who has also struggled to find a steady job in recent years. “In this area there's like two factories, and that's it.”

Jeff interviewed at Integrity's local office, which is sandwiched between a Papa John's and a nail salon. Amazon isn't especially picky when peak rolls around. Job seekers had to pass a background check and be willing to work overtime. Jeff was offered a temporary job on the overnight shift for roughly \$12 per hour. He wasn't sure he would enjoy warehouse work. But it was the only place that had called him back so far, and he liked the idea of being around during the day for Kelton's doctor's appointments.

By all accounts, Jeff viewed the job as an audition for a permanent position with Amazon. He was angling for what warehouse workers call “conversion”: the moment when you graduate from being an Integrity temp to a full-time “Amazonian.” “He knew that once they're done with the season, they let the stragglers go and keep the best men,” says Di-Key. “He was determined not to be let go like everybody else.”

Over the past year and a half, I interviewed more than 50 current and former temporary and full-time Amazon warehouse workers from around the country. Most of the temp workers I spoke with said they were told that if they performed well, there was a decent chance Amazon would hire them full-time. (Of the roughly 80,000 seasonal employees brought on last year, Amazon says “tens of thousands” secured full-time spots.) For temps hired outside of peak, the probability of converting was reasonably high, many workers said. But many of the temps hired for the busy season told me they lost their jobs with little or no notice.

Within the warehouse, a quiet caste system separated the Integrity temps from the full-timers. Integrity workers technically answer to Integrity managers and receive Integrity paychecks. Amazon employees receive **basic benefits**, but the temps

typically said they did not. (Integrity says it offers health care coverage in line with the Affordable Care Act, as well as other supplemental insurance plans, though for many temps the cost of participating would likely have represented a sizeable portion of their wages.)

There were other differences, too. “Integrity is a lot harder on you,” says Tiffany Hios, who worked for both companies in Virginia and said she generally enjoyed her time at the warehouse. “Amazon will give you chances. Integrity will not. Amazon will give you time to work up to your rate. Integrity will ride you until you get to your rate. It is a lot easier to lose your job with Integrity.” “It was sort of like a class warfare kind of thing,” says Lisa Vacula, who worked for more than three years at an Amazon warehouse in Pennsylvania before she was recently let go, she said, for productivity reasons. Vacula added that she thought her Amazon experience had made her a tougher worker: “When I got the blue badge, I felt proud that I earned that bitch.”

After surviving most of the cutbacks, Jeff told friends and family that he would soon be wearing a blue badge. He hadn't gotten an official offer, but he was confident it was coming soon. Around Christmas, he put a deposit down on a customized cane for Kelton. The handle of the cane would be carved to look like the head of Kelton's favorite comic-book character, Spiderman. It was the kind of small indulgence that seemed newly within reach.

Whoever found Jeff on the third floor apparently alerted Amcare, Amazon's in-house medical team, which is staffed with EMTs and other medical personnel. In the event of a health issue, Amazon instructs workers to notify security before calling emergency services. An **employee brochure** from a facility in Tennessee, obtained through a public records request, reads: "In the event of a medical emergency, contact Security. Do Not call 911! Tell Security the nature of the medical emergency and location. Security and/or Amcare will provide emergency response."

The Amcare employee found that Jeff had "a rapid heartbeat but limited respirations," according to a **confidential Amazon report obtained** through a public records request. He began performing CPR and put Jeff on an electronic defibrillator, a device that can save a life during cardiac events when deployed quickly. Someone called 911, and county EMTs rushed Jeff to John Randolph Medical Center. Di-Key got a call from Integrity telling her Jeff had been taken to the hospital, where she was met by a manager. At 4:06 a.m., Jeff was **pronounced dead**.

“They came in four or five doctors deep and told me that he's gone and there's nothing they can do,” says Di-Key. Aside from a **brief obituary**, Jeff's death never made the local papers. I learned about it through public records requests for safety investigations of Amazon facilities.

It isn't clear from any of the official reports on Jeff's death—Amazon's, the county's or the state's—how quickly Jeff was found and treated. The Amazon report says that he was discovered at “approximately 2:30 a.m., which is within **one minute of his last reported pick.**” Yet according to a county EMS report, the 911 call came in at 2:39 a.m., suggesting he may have been down for several minutes before he was found. ^② Amazon said CPR and the defibrillator were “quickly provided” by its in-house team. However, the ambulance didn't get there until 2:49 a.m.—nearly 20 minutes after his last apparent pick, a significant amount of time in a cardiac emergency.



The aisle where Jeff collapsed. Photo from the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry.

The state's medical examiner pinned the death on “**cardiac dysrhythmia**,” commonly known as an irregular heartbeat. Di-Key and Jeff's father say they were not aware that Jeff had a potential heart problem, and don't know whether he knew of any, either. The examiner found no prior documentation of an irregular heartbeat, although there was a "verbal report" of one during a physical Jeff received at a previous job, according to the autopsy.

I asked Theodore Abraham, a cardiologist who directs the Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy Center of Excellence at Johns Hopkins, to review Jeff's autopsy. Abraham said that the report doesn't contain enough information to conclusively explain Jeff's death. There is no evidence his size was a factor (though the examination shows that he had an unusually large heart). But it's also impossible to know for sure whether the fast-paced nature of Jeff's work contributed to his collapse. However, Abraham observed, the autopsy doesn't suggest that Jeff died of an ordinary heart attack. If he was exerting himself when he collapsed, Abraham added, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy would be “high on the list” of possible causes. This condition, known to sometimes **kill young athletes in the middle of competition**, causes the heart to beat out of rhythm, frequently during strenuous activity. The disease is often genetic and is the leading cause of sudden cardiac death in people under 30. Still, even if Jeff did suffer from the condition, he could have died from it at any time.

Mike Roth, vice president of North American operations for Amazon, said the company ensures employees are working at a safe pace. “We do have goals for employees in regards to performance metrics,” he says. “We have a team that regularly looks at the metrics to ensure they are safe, fair and attainable.” Like many warehouse staffing companies, Integrity doesn't require workers to take a physical to work in an Amazon facility. ³ However, the company said it provides prospective employees with extensive information, including a video, so they understand the physically taxing nature of the work. “IT'S GOING TO BE HARD,” one brochure

warns. “You will be on your FEET the entire shift and walking upwards of 12 MILES per shift. (yeah, that's really far!) ... YOU WILL HAVE TO: LIFT, BEND, SQUAT, REACH & MOVE (there are no sit-down positions.) DON'T BE AFRAID; YOU CAN DO IT.” Applicants are also quizzed on their ability to perform basic requirements. If an employee has a medical condition, Integrity says it will allow for more frequent breaks or lifting restrictions.

A former supervisor at Jeff's warehouse described the safety culture as “very, very methodical,” with “exceptionally high standards.” Amazon, she said, required Amcare to call 911 in certain situations even when there was no obvious emergency – say, if a worker's blood pressure reached a certain level. Still, she said, some workers were clearly unprepared for the pace. “We had people who were bookkeepers or laid-off accountants or other desk-type jobs,” the supervisor said. “We tried to be very, very upfront. ... I said, ‘You are going to hurt after the first week. ... You are going to crawl into bed and pray you can get out in the morning.’”

In 2011, the Morning Call, a Pennsylvania newspaper, published an **extensive report** on the physical pressures inside an Amazon warehouse in Lehigh Valley. The paper revealed that Amazon's private medical teams regularly tended to Integrity temps sick with heat and exhaustion. One worker told officials from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration that **15 people had collapsed** in a single day.

At the time of Jeff's death, the Chester warehouse had been open for four months. The local fire and EMS department had dispatched personnel to its address at least 34 times during that period, according to data obtained through a public records request. In its first two and a half years of operation, **more than 180 calls** were placed to 911, many of them for patients in their 20s and 30s. The most common issues cited were difficulty breathing, chest pains, cardiac problems, spells of unconsciousness or other undefined illnesses. The frequency of calls tended to climb during peak season.

Amazon and Integrity say the vast majority of emergency calls are prompted by existing health issues. Integrity said in a statement that “less than 5 percent of ambulance visits over the past [two] years for Integrity Associates have been related

to work events.” (Integrity's complete response to a detailed list of questions can be **read here**.) Amazon’s Roth told me that “the safety and security of employees is our top priority and we are proud of our safety record.” He pointed out that the illness and injury rate among the Chester facility’s thousands of employees, who have worked 12.5 million hours since it opened, is 42 percent lower than that for general warehousing. It’s worth noting that these rates, however, are based on numbers that companies self-report to OSHA. ⁴

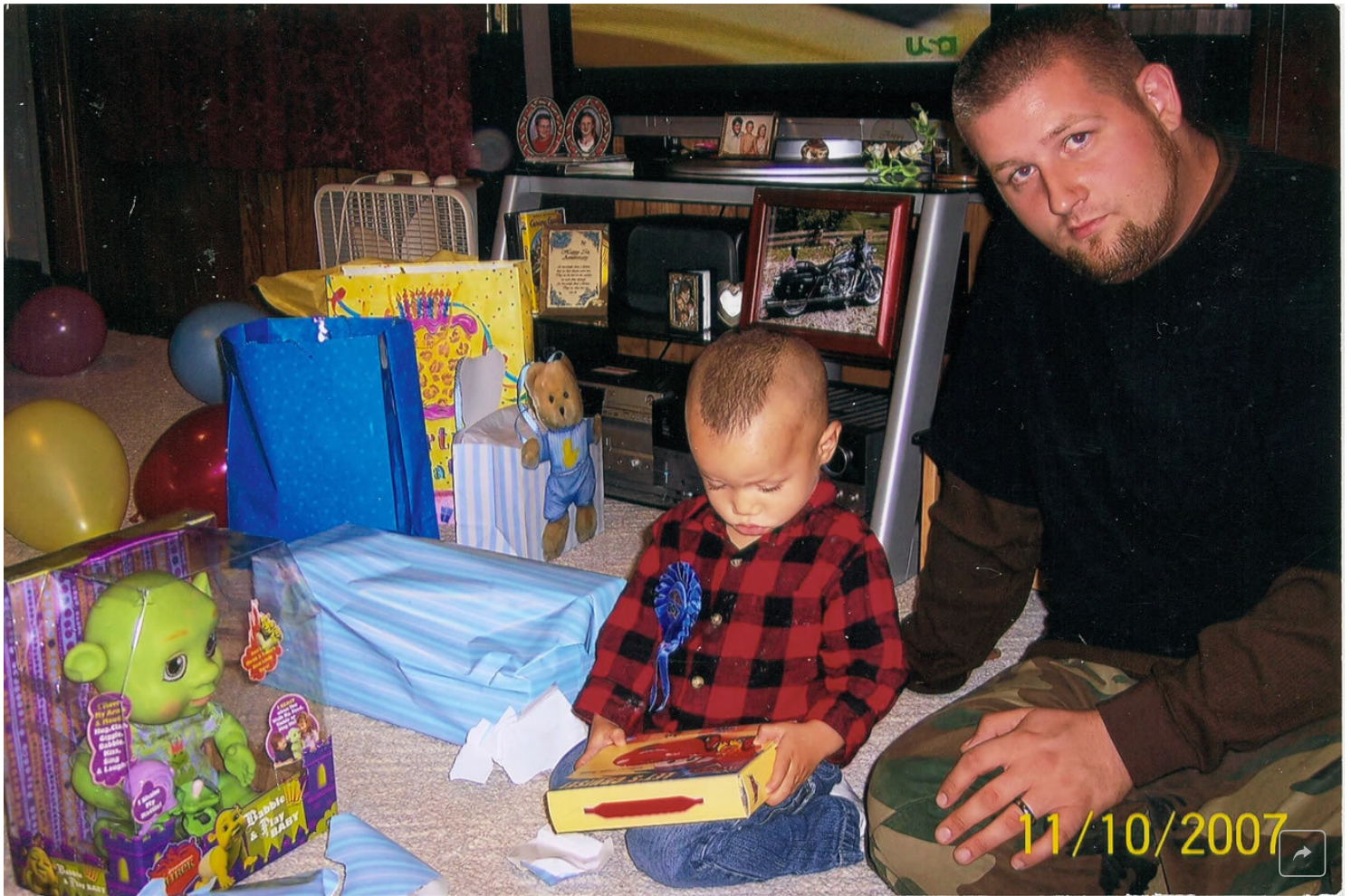
The EMS dispatch reports do suggest that some people may have been trying to work while ill. During the peak season of 2012, a 26-year-old woman was experiencing stomach pains and vomiting. “Been going on for the last 48 hrs,” **the report reads**. About a year later, a 24-year-old woman was reported to be suffering an asthma attack at the warehouse, even though she’d been diagnosed with bronchitis at the hospital earlier that morning. In another case, the Amcare clinic appeared to be understaffed. Amcare was tending to a 21-year-old woman who was between 24 and 36 weeks pregnant with twins. She'd been in labor pain for 20 minutes, and the 911 dispatcher apparently asked Amcare to take her to the front entrance. The Amcare paramedic was “unable to facilitate” that **request**: “There is another patient in the clinic and [the paramedic] is the only one working.”

Tim Taylor, a staff trainer at the warehouse, was working on the first floor when Jeff collapsed. He said he saw warehouse personnel take Jeff off the freight lift on a cart. Taylor was a true believer in the company—he'd worked his way up from a warehouse grunt—and he and Jeff had become friends. They worked the same hours and both liked to detail cars in their spare time. Sometimes, they got breakfast after work and discussed what Jeff needed to do to earn a full-time position. When we talked, Taylor was on temporary leave after having back surgery, although he said his problems had nothing to do with his warehouse work.

The day Jeff died, Taylor said that he couldn't find a supervisor to ask permission to go to the hospital, so he worked the rest of his hours. A staffer from human resources called and asked him if he was all right, and workers on his shift were told to alert a manager if they didn't feel well. A grief counselor was made available. Amazon and Integrity say they notified employees immediately, though at least one employee told me he never heard a formal announcement. Stephen Hicks, another worker, said a manager informed his department about Jeff's death about a week after it happened and told employees to drink plenty of water. Hicks found this advice impractical. "If

you hydrate, eventually you've got to use the bathroom,” he says, explaining that he didn't like to do that outside official breaks, for fear that it would hurt his rate.

Otherwise, Taylor said, everyone seemed to quickly move on. “Word didn't get around. It was really odd,” he said. “This was a situation that happened, and then all of the sudden it just disappeared.” A few weeks after I spoke to him, in June 2014, Taylor also died unexpectedly, of complications stemming from his back surgery. Like Jeff, he left behind a family—a fiancé and a 7-month-old baby daughter. But unlike Jeff, his status as a full-time Amazon employee gave him certain benefits. He had a life insurance policy through his job, with his fiancé and daughter listed as beneficiaries. It was enough to cover the cost of his funeral, as well as some of the lost income due to his death.



While working at the warehouse, Jeff sometimes got ideas for presents for his kids.

Jeff's death left his family in a shaky financial state. When he'd been unemployed, Jeff had paid for a life insurance policy out of pocket for a while. But he and Di-Key had cancelled it not long before he'd started at the warehouse and used the extra money to get through the holidays. Jeff didn't get life insurance or health insurance through Integrity, his family said. (Integrity wouldn't comment on Jeff's benefits, citing privacy concerns.)

Jeff's hope, of course, was that he would soon become a fully fledged Amazonian, bringing real benefits within reach. It's not clear why he believed his conversion was imminent, although Amazon's internal report described him as "a consistently high performer." But even if Jeff had been told he was going to be made a full-time employee, that was hardly a guarantee that it would actually happen, according to numerous temps who have cycled through the Chester warehouse.

Phyllis Branch 55, says she worked at the facility in late 2013 and early 2014. She'd recently resigned from her job at a college bookstore where she didn't get along with her manager. "I was led to believe I would be [at the warehouse] permanently," she told me. She said she was even given her "conversion papers." "No sooner had I gotten online to do the conversion, Integrity leaves me a message on my phone that my job has ended," she said. Amazon told her to speak with Integrity about it; Integrity told her to speak with Amazon. What Branch believed to be her long-awaited promotion turned out to be her layoff, she said.

Antonio Miller was a temp at the Chester facility in 2013, after graduating from Radford University with a bachelor's degree in political science. He, too, said he was given the impression he would be made permanent after a few months. It never happened, due to production penalties he said he disputed. After the high season, he was let go via voicemail message. "It was basically a weeding process," said Miller. "Whoever thought of it is genius. The way it runs, you get all the work you can out of people, and you don't have to manage them. It's brilliant."

Both Integrity and Amazon say they tell prospective employees that peak work is short-term. "[W]e make every effort to clearly communicate the nature of the

employment,” Integrity said. Roth, of Amazon, says, “[W]e clearly advertise that positions for seasonal employees are temporary roles, although there is a possibility to stay on in long-term positions.”

Yet some temps have shown up to the Chester warehouse for scheduled shifts only to discover that their badges no longer grant them access to the building, according to former workers and an Integrity manager who helped staff Amazon warehouses. Integrity said that this is “not a common practice,” and that it is “highly unlikely that an associate would not be contacted.” Vacula, the former employee from Pennsylvania, said she witnessed this situation at her facility. “They just shut the badge off,” she says. “They make you waste your bus fare. It could be the last three dollars you have ... just to show up there and learn you don't work there anymore.”

After Jeff died, his father went to the warehouse and asked managers what the companies were going to do for his son's family. “They were getting ready to make him full-time anyway. Could they kick in some benefits now?” The response, Lockhart Sr. recalled, was, “We'll see what we can do.”

Integrity says that in the days following Jeff's death, its local office reached out to Di-Key to see how the company could help. “Our plan was to provide additional assistance to Mrs. Lockhart and her children. We had various supportive services to offer the family,” the company said, adding that it has helped pay for the funerals of other employees who have died, and even those of their family members. (Di-Key said she recalls the company's condolences but not the offers of assistance.) Amazon said it “closely partnered with Integrity Staffing who supported Mr. Lockhart's family.” The general manager of the warehouse, Sean Loso, says, “We were deeply saddened by the passing of Mr. Lockhart. The loss of a life at such a young age is a tragedy.”

After Jeff died, his father went to the warehouse and asked managers what the companies were going to do for his son's family.



In its official investigation, the Virginia Department of Labor and Industry did not fault Amazon or Integrity, and no fines or citations were issued. The state's medical examiner deemed Jeff's death the result of natural causes. Jeff's family never seriously considered a lawsuit, not knowing whom, if anyone, was to blame. And the ambiguous nature of his death meant that his family was unable to obtain other forms of assistance, such as workers' compensation benefits. If a worker dies on the job, the burden tends to lie on the employee's estate to prove the death was work-related—and the bar is high for deaths that involve cardiac events.

Jeff's wake and funeral were held at a chapel in Hopewell, not far from the house he'd bought. Di-Key fixed her hair in the same micro-braids she'd worn the night that Jeff died. After the funeral, his body was taken three hours north to the family plot in Maryland, where he was given a working-man's burial. He was laid to rest in a Dickie's button-down shirt, his favorite shorts and a new pair of Adidas sneakers. Inside the casket were the promise rings he and Di-Key had given each other years earlier, plus a set of high-quality speakers thrown in by his friends. Evans led the procession out of the cemetery, driving Jeff's Suburban with the windows down and the stereo blaring Young Jeezy's "Put On," which Jeff considered his personal anthem.

Not long after the funeral, Di-Key received a condolence card in the mail. It was signed by people she assumed worked at the warehouse, and included a prepaid gift card with a few hundred dollars on it, as well as a small personal check from a stranger. She figures the workers pooled it among themselves.

This May, Jeff's friends gathered at a racetrack near Petersburg for their annual celebration of his life, the **Jeff Lockhart Memorial Bass Competition**. The two-day show draws hundreds of car audio enthusiasts from up and down the East Coast, giving them the opportunity to show off their stereo setups. In some cars, the bass is forceful enough to move hair.

Jeff served as vice president of Team Deadly Hertz, the audio club that hosts the event. Many of the tricked-out cars in the parking lot have Jeff Lockhart stickers in their rear windows, and there are T-shirts for sale bearing his name. "If you wanted to work on your stereo in the middle of the night, he would wake up and come do it," said Brandon Hockenberry, one of his friends. Adam Carter, who got to know Jeff through their audio club, told me, "No matter what came out of his mouth, whether

you liked it or not, it was fact. He was a leader. He demanded respect without asking for it."

Di-Key and her sons hung around Jeff's Suburban throughout the show, chatting with well-wishers. Di-Key has kept the SUV just as Jeff left it. "It feels like my husband," she said. "Especially when the bass drops, and everything vibrates. I look at it as his heartbeat."

At the moment, Jeff's family is getting by mostly on Social Security survivor benefits. Last year, the bank foreclosed on Jeff and Di-Key's home, and these days the kids split time between Di-Key's rental and Jeff's parents' home nearby. Di-Key told me that she doesn't blame Amazon or Integrity for Jeff's death. What bothers her most is how expendable her husband seemed to be inside the warehouse system. She believes that had he not died as a second-class temp worker, his family might have been in a better position to sustain the loss. "Just feeling like he wasn't human, like he was just a piece of paper," she said. "You know, [they] can dispose of you. It kind of hurt."



Jeff at the hospital with Di-Key when his youngest son, Jeffrey, was born.

Johnathan Evans was also at the competition, wandering around the cars. He told me that he had spoken with his friend the day before he collapsed. The two had talked about getting together to put a new alternator in Evans' car, so he didn't have to take it into the shop. "Things ain't been the same since he passed," Evans said. "At first it was really, really hard for me. The only way that I could really deal with it was alcohol. Then it got to a point where [it was like], 'Let's not think about the sad memories. Let's remember the things that make you smile.'"

Evans took comfort in knowing his friend died in an honorable way, doing his best to support his family. But he's still troubled by unanswered questions about Jeff's death. "I think that the way that he passed, it was messed up," he said.

That makes what Evans did last year all the more surprising. He was still unemployed, with child support to pay. He needed work badly. So he headed down to the Integrity office in Chester. He was given a white badge with his name on it, and soon he was hustling through the warehouse, scanner in hand. On most shifts, he wore a T-shirt with photo of his best friend's face and the years of his birth and death: 1983 to 2013. But not long after he started, Evans began to feel pain in his knee. He left the warehouse after a few weeks. He's currently looking for work.

CREDITS

Story - **Dave Jamieson**

Dave is The Huffington Post's labor reporter.



Art - **Davide Bonazzi**

Davide is an award-winning illustrator based in Italy. His work has appeared in The Wall Street Journal, The Boston Globe, Scientific American and many others.



Development - **Dan McCarey**



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