

No Code, No Confidence

In today's America, people are able to live in a state of confidence in the structures carrying us high over a precipitous gorge in the form of a bridge, working thousands of feet in the air as in the case of a skyscraper, and feeling safe each time that they use an elevator, escalator, footbridge, building or any of the other structures that we take for granted. In fact, they can be confident to the point of ignorance, not knowing that they are really putting their faith in the system of standardized building codes, including updates to the codes over time. Until four years ago, I would have counted my family among the ignorant.

In 2015, my family rented a beach house in the Outer Banks to celebrate Easter. In the house there was an elevator, which made accessing all three floors much more convenient when moving in for a week. My cousins were playing a game of Hide and Seek on the third floor when my cousin Lexi, two at the time, hid between the outside door and the accordion door of the elevator. The elevator would not operate if either of the doors was open, but her small body allowed the doors to close and the elevator to operate with her between the doors. The elevator was called to the first floor of the house and started to descend leaving her standing on a small ledge between the outer door and the now-open elevator shaft. She began screaming to be let out, but the safety lock on the door would not allow the door to open if the two doors weren't aligned. We had to call the elevator up to the third floor to align the doors, during which time she fell off the ledge onto the top of the elevator. With the elevator at the third floor, we were able to open the door to see the horrific sight of her hanging limply by the neck, her body dangling at the top of the open doorway with her head on top of the elevator. At this point we had no idea if she was ok or if she had come to some sort of terrible injury, even decapitation. She began screaming, letting us know that she was at least alive, and we called 911. She continued to hang there screaming for an extended amount of time with my aunt and my mother taking turns holding the weight of her body to prevent further damage to her neck until

the rescue squad came, and after forty-five more minutes, they managed to get her free with the Jaws of Life. She emerged with patches of hair missing but was otherwise unharmed. Post-incident investigation revealed that the elevator had been met all requirements as set forth in the local code when installed, but that it had been grandfathered in as the code had been updated to include a blocking system between the two doors to prevent the doors being closed with anything between them.

Before this event we never really saw or noticed anything of this sort, but afterwards, we began noticing that these incidents happen quite often-it seemed like it was every other night my mother would find some new news story about a similarly terrifying event that had happened that day. For the first two years after it happened, we were not allowed to use elevators or escalators whatsoever. It has now been four years and we are still very careful around them. My cousin Lexi would not set foot on an elevator until recently and she is still scared of them. You never see or hear of things like this until it touches you or people you care about and after it does you end up living with that doubt and worry for a long time afterward. They can fade after time, but you will never forget them.

Fortunately, we have in place sets of safety measures and precautions so that people don't have to constantly wonder if or when something that was not constructed properly will harm them. As was learned in such horrific accidents as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, or the Hyatt Regency Kansas City walkway collapse in 1981, decisions made on-site and possibly under undue influence can be faulty if not safeguarded by a standard set of design rules made without those influences. These design rules, or codes, form a safety network of standard operating procedures, are written over time and largely in response to errors made in the past. In some professions, it is said that the standard operating procedures are "written in blood", as could have been the case of the legally operable elevator which nearly killed my cousin. Because of the codes, over time people will hopefully not have to experience the same distress with newer elevators, because as grandfathered devices are replaced with devices built to the current codes, the risk goes down. People can and should be able to have confidence in the structures around them, because of the codes. We use them for protection from all that nature throws against us, and building codes help them to fulfill their purpose.