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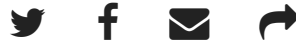
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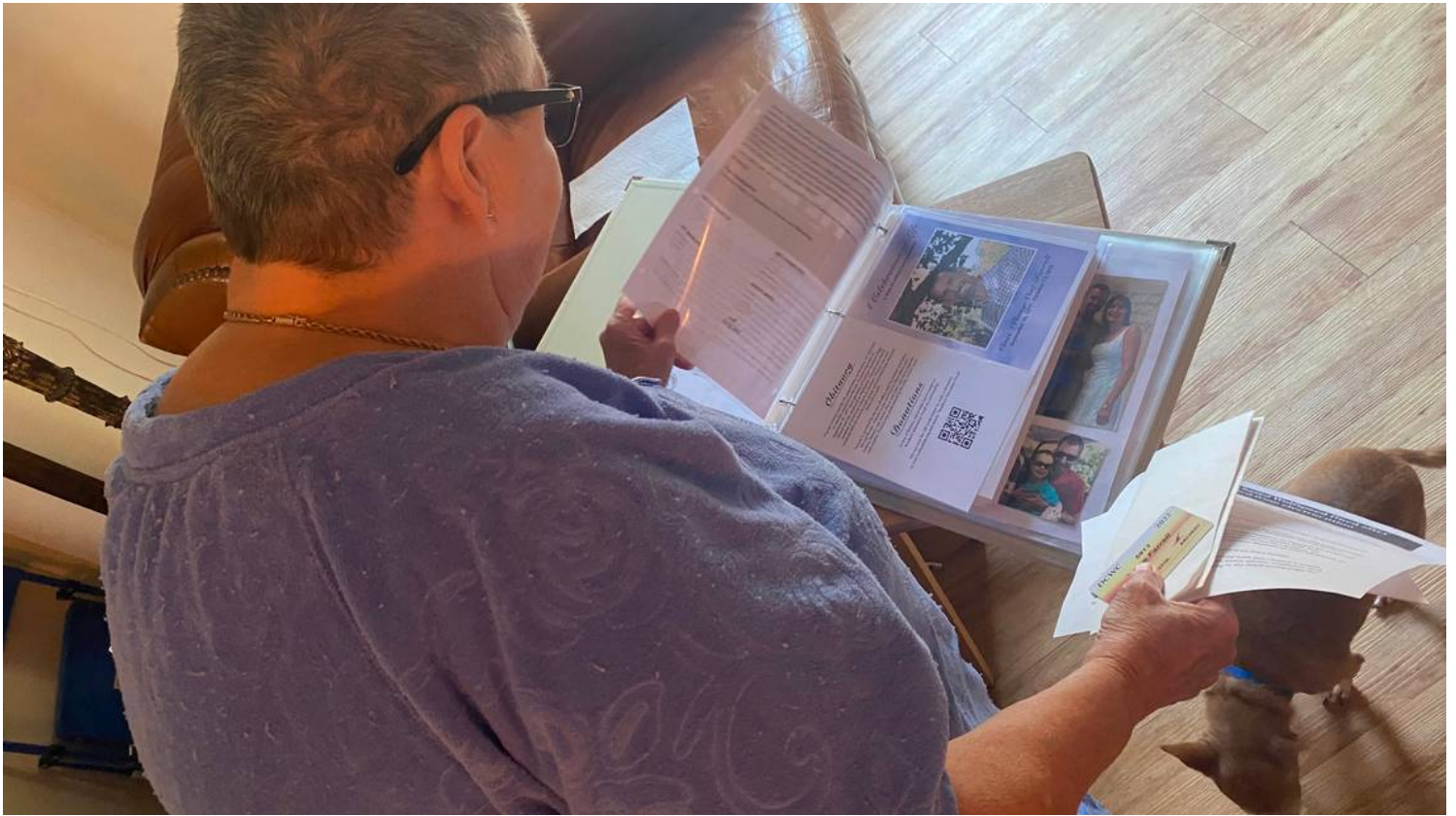
BUSINESS

After Wolfspeed worker died on the job, company tells his parents of safety changes

BY BRIAN GORDON

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Pat Bryant flips through a binder memorializing her son Vincent who was killed during a workplace accident at Wolfspeed on Oct. 13, 2022. BRIAN GORDON

In a letter to the North Carolina Department of Labor last month, executives at [the growing Durham semiconductor firm](#) Wolfspeed detailed how their company has amended its safety protocols in recent months “to mitigate historical issues” after a workplace accident in October killed a 45-year-old electrician named Vincent Farrell.

A few weeks ago, Wolfspeed shared this letter — along with a personalized message — with Patricia and Bryant Farrell, Vincent’s parents.

“I talked to him every day,” Patricia said of her only child. “First thing in the morning and last thing at night.”

Around 12:30 p.m. on Oct. 13, Vincent Farrell was fatally electrocuted after his ungloved right hand touched a high voltage wire at Wolfspeed’s headquarters in

Research Triangle Park. He was discovered alone and was pronounced dead. A South Durham native and widower, Vincent is survived by his teenage son.

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Following a months-long investigation, the state Department of Labor in April [cited Wolfspeed](#) for two “serious” occupational safety violations:

- The state found the company “did not select and require employee(s) to use appropriate hand protection when employees’ hands were exposed to hazards.”
- The state found employees “working in areas where there were potential electrical hazards were not using electrical protective equipment that was appropriate for the specific parts of the body to be protected and for the work to be performed.”

The combined penalty for these violations was \$27,554. Under state law, the maximum penalty for a serious violation is \$14,502. Since the violations were announced, Wolfspeed reached an informal settlement with the state in which the company agreed to waive its rights to contest the findings.

Wolfspeed manufactures a specific type of semiconductor, the class of materials used to make the chips that power a wide range of everyday appliances. While traditional semiconductor chips are made from silicon, Wolfspeed produces silicon carbide, a combination of silicon and carbon, which the company says delivers higher performance. As global demand for silicon carbide chips has increased, Wolfspeed has sought rapid expansion — including [a planned \\$5 billion wafer-producing plant](#) near Siler City.

In response to the state citations, Wolfspeed's chief human resources officer, Margaret Chadwick, wrote a letter to the Labor Department on May 1, describing the changes the company has made, or plans to make, to its safety procedures.

WOLFSPEED SPLITS SAFETY FROM OPERATIONS

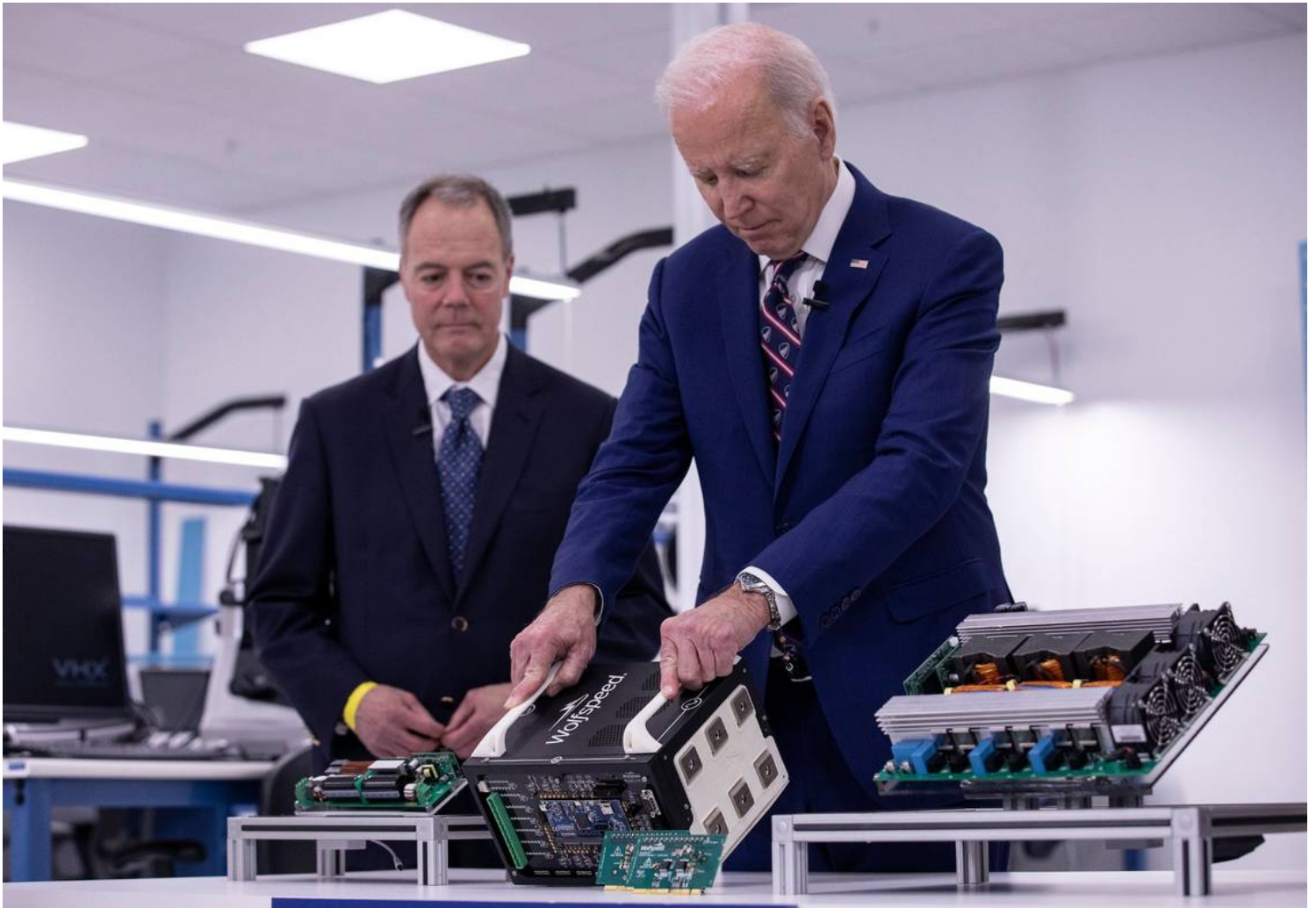
One of the steps, Chadwick wrote, was for Wolfspeed to remove its Environment, Health and Safety division from the purview of its Global Operations team to avoid any conflicts of interest.

Wolfspeed's safety division is now part of the human resources and emergency response unit. This move, Wolfspeed said, will “ensure that EHS has a stronger voice at the table and supports the appropriate level of autonomy for the EHS function.”

Splitting safety from operations is a positive adjustment, said Jon Wallace, a workplace safety consultant who teaches at UNC's Occupational Safety and Health Education and Research Center.

“In operations, the goal is how many widgets are produced,” Wallace said. “And there's constant stress. So, if safety is under operations, quite often, they may take a second seat, second priority, to safety. When safety is outside that (operations) department, you have a lot more objectivity.”

Wolfspeed also created a task force to focus on decreasing, or even eliminating, “the need for energized work at substations.” Farrell was working at a substation when he contacted the exposed coil.



President Joe Biden stands with Wolfspeed CEO Gregg Lowe while touring a power applications lab at Wolfspeed on Tuesday, March 28, 2023, in Durham, N.C. Kaitlin McKeown kmckeown@newsobserver.com

And in October, shortly after the incident, Wolfspeed instituted a Safety Buddy Program that identifies high-risk tasks that require two employees. Having pairs work on high-risk electrical jobs, Wallace said, provides greater safety “checks and balances.”

“If you’re driving down the interstate with somebody, for example, and you make a wrong turn, somebody in the car is more likely to tell you need to get off at the turn,” he said.

Other actions Wolfspeed has taken since the October accident include:

- Starting a new communications platform called Protect the Pack, which amplifies best safety practices.

- Engaging a third-party electrical firm to help conduct a “wall-to-wall review” of the Research Triangle Park facility’s electrical systems. The review has been conducted, and the company says it is implementing the recommendations.
- Hiring a full-time safety training professional.
- Promising to build a safety training classroom at its Durham campus with room for 30 seats and hands-on training.
- Placing padlocks on Substation No. 6, where Farrell was electrocuted.

‘I REALLY DON’T FEEL ANY ANGER TOWARD THEM’

Wolfspeed shared these steps with the Farrells in a letter dated May 2.

“Wolfspeed and its employees continue to mourn the loss of Vinny, and our profound and heartfelt sympathies remain with his family and friends,” Chadwick wrote. Patricia Farrell, who goes by Pat, recalled receiving the letter a few weeks ago.

“I was glad that they that have made the changes, so that this doesn’t happen to anyone else again,” she said.

In Wolfspeed’s response to the Department of Labor, Chadwick called the Oct. 13 accident “the worst moment in our company’s 35-year history.”

Pictures of Vince hang throughout the Farrells’ South Durham home, alongside photos of their grandson Bradley and Bradley’s mother Jennifer, who died two years before her husband was killed at work. Bradley, 13, now lives with his godparents in Cary but visits his grandparents often.



Patricia Farrell of Durham holds up memorial plaque of her late son, Vincent, who died while at work at Wolfspeed. Brian Gordon bgordon@newsobserver.com

Pat and Bryant Farrell say they've seen grief counselors since the accident. Father's Day, they said, was particularly difficult.

"I really don't feel any anger toward (Wolfspeed)," Pat Farrell said. "I'm more angry with God than them. I mean I love God and everything, but I just hate that he was by himself."

Pat Farrell remembers her son often telling her that he "felt rushed" at work, as the demands for an electrician at the facility piled up. The thought of suing Wolfspeed in a wrongful death case has come up, though the Farrells ultimately sided against doing so.

“The only thing I want to make sure is that Wolfspeed does something so this never happens again,” Pat Farrell said.

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