

Noose Incident Dampens The Spirits Of Black Carpenter

June 29, 2022



James Myers, an aspiring Black carpenter, says that he found this speed square pictured above hanging from the end of a noose at his workstation at a construction site in Redmond.

By Aaron Allen, The Seattle Medium

Coming into work just days before the Juneteenth Holiday weekend, James Myers, a union carpenter in Seattle, had no idea what was in store for him as he entered his workstation at a construction site in Redmond.

When Myers arrived at his workstation that morning, he saw a speed square – a measuring tool used by carpenters – that had his name on it hanging at the end of a noose.

In response, Myers documented the noose, contacted the Redmond Police department, and reported the incident.

According to Myers, this was not the first time that he has been subjected to racially offensive incidents while working at the site, but this latest incident was one that he could not ignore. Myers claims that he has worked in a racially hostile environment since starting his new position with BNBuilders. From being called “Black boy” to derogatory statements involving “picking cotton” that culminated into someone hanging a noose at his workstation, Myers believes that his presence was not wanted at the job site.

“[The other employees would make] racial jokes all day long,” says Myers. “There were a lot of Black jokes like, ‘hey, Black boy do this...’ and I’d reply ‘I’m not your Black boy’ and they are doing this trying to be funny, sarcastic, but for me it wasn’t funny at all.”

Jim Charpentier, a spokesperson for BNBuilders, says that the company just recently learned of the alleged incident and have started their own internal investigation, and that these alleged actions do not reflect the value system of the company.

"We just learned of this, so we have alerted authorities because this goes against every fiber of who we are and what we represent," says Charpentier, who said he couldn't go into much more detail because the investigation is ongoing. "We are conducting an internal investigation right now to learn everything we can about what happened here, this is a horrible incident."

Pastor Ricky Willis, a retired carpenter who manages a carpentry apprenticeship program in Seattle, was devastated when he heard about the incident. Myers had been through his program and was one of his best students and has used the program to help turn his life around.

After stints of dealing with the criminal justice system, Myers made the life-changing decision to re-educate himself in the field of carpentry, provide for his family and was on the verge of becoming a journeyman in his chosen profession when the alleged incident occurred.

"James was one of my ace students," said Willis. "Coming straight out of prison, signed up for the program and caught on really easy. He would stay after school to learn and come to class early to hone in on the craft of being a carpenter."

"As he continued to grow, I followed him and mentored him," continued Willis. "He wanted to make a good living and journey out, so this was during the week of Juneteenth, he was graduating, he began reporting and sharing with his family how they [his co-workers] were harassing him, but he wanted to stick it out because he needed just a few more hours to become a journeyman and so he stuck it out. But he gave his two weeks' notice and when he came to work to finish his paperwork that is when he discovered the noose hanging."

Myers has experienced a lot of things in life, but says that he didn't expect for things like this to happen when he was doing what he believed were the right things in life to get ahead.

"This was an opportunity to change my life and give me a career," says Myers. "I could put my troubled past behind me, so I worked really hard, stayed dedicated and my hard work prevailed."

"I have faced a lot of adversity like people do in general," continued Myers. "I made my choices in life and now I am making and changing my life around for my children and my family. I worked really hard to get into a union and at first, I didn't want to get into [the union] because I had already heard the rumors. I know that men like me, and minorities in general, have to work harder and so I put in 110 percent. But I was not expecting it to go in this direction."

Willis says that he experienced similar issues when he was working as a carpenter, but it was his hope that the people he was training today didn't have to deal with the issues that he had to deal with.

"I have been doing this work because I was a union carpenter myself," says Willis. "What I experienced I did not want other young Black men to experience so I started a pre-apprenticeship preparation program for them going into this trade."

"I teach those that I mentor and in particular James, if this or that happens on the job this is how you need to carry yourself, this is how you need to report it," says Willis. "But once you get out there it's different, once you see how they do it you can be hesitant, you are kind of scared because you want to make a good living and you stay in so you can journey out."

"And so, when he came up against certain scenarios, he brushed a lot of it off because he wanted to get his hours in, become a journeyman and continue making a good living for his family," Willis added.

Although his spirits may have been dampened, Myers says that he will not let this incident deter him from bettering himself and providing for his family.

"This experience may have been hurtful but I am going to stand strong," says Myers. "For my family, my children, my community, things like this have to stop and I am going to fight it till the end."

DIVE BRIEF

Noose found at another Meta construction site

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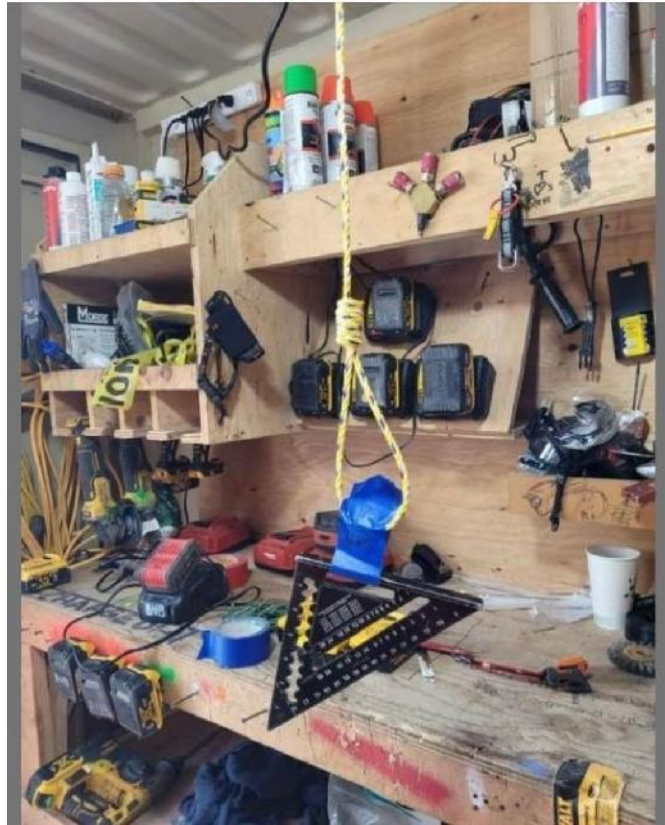
Editor's note: This story includes imagery and references to racist incidents that could be disturbing to readers.

Dive Brief:

- Redmond, Washington, police are investigating the discovery of a noose with a Black worker's tool and name attached to it at a Meta (formerly Facebook) construction site as a hate crime, authorities confirmed.
- Jill Green, public information officer for the Redmond Police Department, told Construction Dive a 33-year-old Black carpenter who had been working at Meta's Building X construction site came to the department on June 25. He reported finding the noose, along with one of his tools taped to the rope with his name written on it. He provided police with a photo of the display (below).
- In Washington state, hate crimes, including the display of a noose, carry a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a \$100,000 fine.

Dive Insight:

A source familiar with the matter, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal at work, said the carpenter had already submitted his two weeks' notice on the job after another worker previously gave him a handful of cotton, and said, "We picked this for you."



*A Black worker told police he found his missing carpenter's square hanging from this noose.
Permission granted by Redmond, Washington, Police
Department*

Then, in the days after submitting his notice, the carpenter could no longer find his carpenter's square, the source said. When the carpenter went to retrieve his tools on his last day, he found the noose, with his carpenter's square attached, hanging in the equipment trailer and his name scrawled on the tape.

Seattle-based BNBuilders, the general contractor on the project, said in a statement sent to Construction Dive that it is investigating

the incident, and that it had placed several employees on immediate administrative leave.

The firm said it had interviewed nearly a dozen people who may have seen or been aware of the incident, with more interviews ongoing, and informed the carpenters' union of the incident. BNBuilders also performed two project stand-down meetings to discuss the incident with workers and emphasize its zero-tolerance policy for biased action on its jobsite.

“There is no place at BNBuilders for violent, racist threats. We are fully committed to working with law enforcement, and we are working diligently to provide investigators with all the information we have to bring any perpetrators to justice,” the company said. “We offer to the employee targeted by this vile act both our unreserved solidarity and our commitment to getting him justice. No person should feel mistreated, threatened or harassed at their workplace, and certainly never at our workplace.”

It did not comment on whether it was offering a reward in the case. Last month, following a similar incident at the Y-12 Uranium Processing Facility construction site near Oak Ridge, Tennessee, the North America's Building Trades Unions offered a reward of \$200,000 in the case.

Last year, Amazon and general contractor RC Andersen offered a \$100,000 reward for information about several nooses placed on an Amazon fulfillment center construction site in Connecticut. But no arrests were ever made in the case, local police confirmed, and the reward was never collected, according to an Amazon spokesperson.

A representative from the United Brotherhood of Carpenters did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Fourth bias event for Meta

The incident marks at least the fourth alleged bias-related event at a Meta or Facebook construction site in the last two years.

Nooses were found at the firm's data center projects in Altoona, Iowa, and Eagle Mountain, Utah, (where a worker was eventually fired), while racially charged graffiti was reported at its \$1.7 billion New Albany, Ohio, data center project.

Reached for comment, the firm said the incidents were not unique to its jobsites.

"Unfortunately, incidents like these are occurring at construction sites across the country, not just Meta," spokesperson Tracy Clayton said in an email.

In fact, a similar case of alleged bias at a tech firm's jobsite was brought to light last week when the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington issued summons for Microsoft to respond to a discrimination and whistleblower suit. The complaint, which also involved contractors Skanska and Balfour Beatty, alleges an African-American laborer was harassed based on his skin color and ultimately fired from the software company's multibillion-dollar Redmond campus renovation project.

Both tech giants have said that they have zero tolerance for acts motivated by racial bias.

"We are working with all involved parties to investigate and help ensure those responsible are held accountable," Clayton said. "We are also working closely with our general contractor to ensure appropriate measures are in place to help prevent incidents like this from happening again."

Nooses on construction sites gained attention in the industry after the murder of George Floyd two years ago. Construction Dive

documented over 20 incidents of nooses and other racist incidents on jobsites in 2020.

The number and prevalence of racist events seemed to abate somewhat in 2021 and the first half of this year, according to media reports, tracking of incidents by Turner Construction and data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

The industry has taken steps to fight hate on jobsites. The Associated General Contractors' Culture of Care campaign has contractors pledge to make jobsites free from harassment, hazing and bullying. And last year, six major contractors, including Turner, Mortenson and Gilbane, launched the inaugural Construction Inclusion Week to combat hate in the industry.

Still, during a recent hearing on the prevalence of discrimination in construction in light of \$1.2 trillion in federal infrastructure funding, EEOC Chair Charlotte Burrows said nooses on construction jobsites had become "chillingly common."

DIVE BRIEF

BNBuilders fires 3 workers connected to noose incident at Meta site

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Sebastian Obando
Reporter

Dive Brief:

- Seattle-based general contractor BNBuilders has fired three workers for their alleged involvement in placing a noose with a Black carpenter's name at a Meta construction site in Redmond, Washington, according to local news outlet Kiro 7.
- Police have not said whether criminal charges will be filed in the case, but they are investigating the incident as a hate crime, which carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a \$100,000 fine.
- A 33-year-old Black carpenter who had been working at Meta's Building X construction site reported finding the noose last month, along with one of his tools taped to the rope with his name written on it.

Dive Insight:

The termination of the three workers involved in placing the noose differs from how the majority of racist incidents on jobsites are resolved.

For example, Amazon and R.C. Anderesen offered a \$100,000 reward for information about the perpetrator of several nooses placed on a fulfillment center construction site in Connecticut last year. No one stepped forward and the reward was never collected, according to an Amazon spokesperson. No arrests were ever made in the case.

But there are cases where workers are caught, and subsequently terminated immediately.

Earlier this month, the consortium running the \$6.5 billion Uranium Processing Facility construction site at the federal Y-12 facility in Tennessee identified and fired a worker after tips from a \$200,000 reward hotline connected the person to a noose discovered on site in June.

After spiking in 2020, the number of nooses reported on U.S. construction sites fell by about half to seven, according to data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. But that remains the same number of reported incidents as in 2018 and 2019.

The incident marks at least the fourth alleged bias-related event at a Meta or Facebook construction site in the last two years.

BNBuilders did not respond to Construction Dive's request for comment about the firings.