

Jeff Rose James Nevin interview with NPR

James Mastromarino: [00:00:00] California regulators meet today to consider a ban on the installing and cutting of certain countertops. At issue are artificial quartz countertops. Many workers who cut the big slabs into pieces have fallen ill with the deadly lung disease silicosis, and the industry argues its product is not to blame.

Let's talk now to Jeff Rose. He's a stone cutter and fabricator based in Nicholasville, Kentucky. He was diagnosed with silicosis. Jeff, welcome to the program.

Jeff Rose: Thank you.

James Mastromarino: We're also joined by James Nevin, a lawyer at Brayton Purcell representing Jeff in his suit against manufacturers of the engineered stone.

James, hello to you.

James Nevin: Good morning. Thanks for having us.

James Mastromarino: Yeah. So Jeff, tell me about your silicosis. When did you first notice something was wrong with your breathing?

Jeff Rose: Let me first start out with, I'm gonna try to not get overemotional, but this is pretty extremely hard for me to talk about.

Two years back, I had a pretty bad cough and extremely difficulty breathing. The family doctor had sent me to a few other doctors before we- ... got to [00:01:00] the bottom of the illness- ... and what was behind it all. Yeah.

James Mastromarino: And daily life, what can you do and not do?

Jeff Rose: There's almost no running, of course.

I can't really walk up to the top of the stairs and have a conversation with you. Just that little bit of of s- stress on my lungs, m- I literally have to take a few minutes to catch my breath.

James Mastromarino: Understand. Understand. James, if I can bring you in. As California regulators meet today on a potential ban on the cutting and installing of manufactured quartz. You represent many workers like Jeff. Would that get at the heart of the problem?

James Nevin: Absolutely. So in the many decades when natural stone was fabricated into countertops in these same fabrication shops, there's not a, a single published case of a natural stone countertop fabrication worker getting silicosis anywhere in the world.

And then everything changed when artificial stone came along and that's because it's uniquely toxic. And [00:02:00] so Australia already determined that two years ago, and Cal OSHA has now made that same determination after reviewing a couple decades of medical science. Everywhere where artificial stone becomes popular replaces natural stone you see a massive epidemic in artificial stone silicosis, which is fatal.

James Mastromarino: Yeah. And Cal OSHA being the workplace safety regulator in the state. Jeff, as some of the largest engineered stone manufacturers in this country say the problem is not the product. To them, the, problem is the process.

They're blaming the methods, the way the stone is being cut. In your view, can this engineered quartz be cut safely at all?

Jeff Rose: All of this is continually under investigation. I am now part owner of the shop that I've worked in for 18-plus years. We are doing everything to abide by all of the state regulations, and thus far, the answer is no.

Every test is coming back above what [00:03:00] it should be.

James Mastromarino: Sorry, just to understand, when you say no, that is you've followed all of the regulations required and the danger is still there, yeah?

Jeff Rose: Yes.

James Mastromarino: And Jeff, can you just talk briefly about the specific safety measures you take in your shop?

Jeff Rose: Yes. All of our machines are all completely wet.

James Mastromarino: That is to reduce the dust from kicking up, yeah?

Jeff Rose: Yes. And in addition to that, when the fabricators are working in any type of a dust atmosphere, they're wearing masks. We are being so overly cautious right now because we don't want anyone getting sick.

James Mastromarino: Despite all these safety measures, you still got sick, yeah?

Jeff Rose: Yes. My son, who runs the fabrication shop, is sick also.

James Mastromarino: And Jeff, can I ask, what is the prognosis going forward for you and for your son?

Jeff Rose: My son is a lot less of a case than what I have. I have pretty severe spots in my lungs. I'm probably, within 10 years, going to have a [00:04:00] lung transplant.

James Mastromarino: And James anything consumers should know here? Some of these products are quite popular in kitchens, yeah?

James Nevin: All of the major manufacturers and suppliers, with the exception of Cambria, already make and sell a safe recycled glass version. They're otherwise identical. They look the same. They cost the same.

But they all keep selling the uniquely toxic, deadly one because they don't want to lose market share to each other. And so make the choice to choose the recycled glass one instead of the crystalline silica one, because one is going to kill the worker and one isn't.

James Mastromarino: Speaking of industry, Jeff, Congress, is considering a measure to shield the makers, the engineered quartz makers, from legal liability. Again, the industry says the problem is not their product, it is how it's being cut. As a worker, what is your reaction to what is being discussed in Washington?

Jeff Rose: I feel if any of those people would have worked their [00:05:00] life in the industry and gotten sick this way, they would feel quite differently about it.

It needs to be taken care of immediately, or there's gonna be a whole lot more people getting sick.

James Mastromarino: We've been talking to Jeff Rose, a countertop fabricator in Nicholasville, Kentucky, who has been diagnosed with silicosis. Jeff, thank you very much.

Jeff Rose: You're very welcome.

James Mastromarino: And we've been speaking to his attorney representing him in his case against multiple companies in the space, James Nevin.

James, thank you to you.

James Nevin: Thanks for having us.