



# Widows battling workplace death

## Stories of loss warn of dangers

By ANDREW WEST

JUST after lunch on October 24, 2004, Andreia Viegas received the first of two frantic calls on her mobile phone.

"I got this horrible message to tell me my husband had been in an accident and that I should get to the Central Coast as quickly as possible," she recalls.

The second call was to report that her husband, Glen Viegas, had been taken to Gosford Hospital. But there was never any hope of his survival.

Mr Viegas, 28, had been electrocuted after cutting through a live power cable while working as a fitter on a Westfield construction site at Tuggerah.

He left behind his wife of seven years, a four-year-old son and a nine-month-old daughter.

"We were robbed of the man we all loved and I still haven't recovered," Ms Viegas said. "But my grief has been over-



**ANGRY:** Andreia Viegas does not want other workers on construction sites to die as her husband, Glen Viegas, did in Tuggerah in 2004.

taken by anger and I decided that I would do something to make sure that workplaces are cleaned up."

Ms Viegas, 31, is now a spokeswoman for a group of widows whose husbands have died on Australian building sites. Today, Federal Minister Penny Wong will officially launch the Workplace Tragedy Family Support Group.

The widows visit construction sites around the country, relating their stories of grief and loss and trying to shock workers, especially rookies, into understanding the dangers they face on the job.

"A lot of the guys think they are invincible," Ms Viegas said. "Many are also working for rogue builders who cut corners, so they put profits before the safety of employees."

Andrew Ferguson, state secretary of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, which has helped fund the group, says that, on average, one worker dies every week on a building site somewhere in Australia. The most common causes of death are falling several storeys, electrocution, or being hit by a vehicle.

"Non-union sites are the worst because workers do not

feel sufficiently confident about challenging their employers about unsafe conditions," Mr Ferguson said. "They simply go on and take risks to finish the job."

He said the widows were often more effective messengers than union organisers. "These personal experiences are a sobering influence," Mr Ferguson said.

Ms Viegas said the death of her husband has been financially tough. The union helped complete renovations to her house, but she now survives on a single mother's pension and did not receive compensation. SMH