



Season 4
Episode 2 Transcript
Under an Avalanche

Torah Kachur:

Bob Tillotson, his son, and a group of their friends are snowmobiling in American Fork Canyon in the Utah backcountry.

Bob Tillotson:

There's hills we climb that are 1,500, 2,000-foot climbs, and that's a little bit dangerous but exhilarating.

Torah Kachur:

They're off the main trail carving up a blanket of fresh powder. Then Bob's friend sees the snow on the mountainside directly above him start to slide.

Bob Tillotson:

And then he got on the radio and said, "Avalanche, avalanche."

Torah Kachur:

Bob is in the direct path of the avalanche. He has no time to react to the warning call.

Bob Tillotson:

So that's the only thing I heard literally right as it hit me.

Torah Kachur:

A wave of snow swallows Bob and carries him down the mountain.

Bob Tillotson:

When it stopped, I was buried. I could not move the slightest inch. I was absolutely helpless.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur and this is Tell Me What Happened: true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar.

Every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things every day.

Bob is in his 60s. He lives in Highland, Utah with his wife and their six kids.

Bob Tillotson:

I am in denial of my age. I'm just a pretty active guy, so when I look in the mirror and see all the gray hair, I don't recognize that guy. I think I'm still 20.

Torah Kachur:

Bob's been riding snowmobiles since he was five years old.

Bob Tillotson:

When there's three feet of new powder and you're blowing through it on the sled and you're carving and you're floating and you're... It's just an amazing feeling. Snow's coming up over your head. The snowmobiles completely disappeared. It's hard to describe that feeling, but it's amazing.

Torah Kachur:

Bob started racing snowmobiles in the early '90s. In 1999, he won the World Championship Snowmobile Hill Climb. Bob's ridden all over the US, but Utah's American Fork Canyon, which is literally his backyard, is his favorite place to ride. The canyon is in the Wasatch Mountains, which is home to granite and limestone peaks, turquoise alpine lakes, and steep rock walls. It also has a reputation.

Bob Tillotson:

Most people that ride snowmobiles, they are scared of American Fork Canyon because they consider it kind of extreme terrain.

Torah Kachur:

On January 13, 2024, Bob headed out to American Fork Canyon with a crew of eight riders, but before they hit the mountains, they checked the avalanche conditions.

Bob Tillotson:

You know, to see what the avalanche danger is, and it was high, it was extreme, so we knew that we had to be careful and be safe and stay off the big hills.

Torah Kachur:

They decided the safest destination would be a meadow below those big hills. Then they packed up their safety gear. Every person carries a two-way radio, a shovel, and an avalanche beacon. An avalanche beacon is a safety device that transmits a signal that rescuers use to find someone buried in the snow.

Bob Tillotson:

And then we have what we call an avalanche backpack. It looks like a normal backpack, but it's got a lever, and if you get in an avalanche, it deploys a bag on your back and keeps you afloat. It keeps you more towards the surface.

Torah Kachur:

The day started on a nicely groomed trail, but they were in search of fresh powder. So after three miles, they left the trail and started plotting their own path in the snow.

Bob Tillotson:

So the whole time we'd been riding, we didn't see any signs of slides. The snow will slough off and slide in a few places. We didn't see anything like that, so we felt like we were not in danger.

Torah Kachur:

Slopes with an incline of roughly 30 degrees or higher are at risk of avalanche. The slope Bob and his crew were on was significantly less steep, so they weren't disturbing snow that is likely to cause an avalanche, or so they thought.

Reassured by the absence of slides, Bob and a friend started racing in deep snow.

Bob Tillotson:

We wanted to test our sleds. We wanted to see how far each one could go side by side, you know?

Torah Kachur:

That's when they realized they'd pushed it too far.

Bob Tillotson:

I didn't realize how possible it was to do what's called a remote trigger. What happens is as you're carving through the snow, it sends waves, shock waves through in the area.

Torah Kachur:

Those shock waves were the remote trigger that set off the avalanche. One Of Bob's friends was about 300 yards to the east. He saw the slide first and radioed to the rest of the group as fast as he could, but for Bob, it was already too late.

Bob Tillotson:

The next thing I know, it kind of picked the back of my sled up and it was so violent, just being thrown end over end, just I was engulfed in the snow. I could not get my hand over to my shoulder to deploy my avalanche backpack.

Torah Kachur:

Bob tumbled over and over, carried down the mountain with the wave of snow.

Bob Tillotson:

It seemed like forever. That's what I remember at that moment.

Torah Kachur:

Finally, stillness. Bob tried to move.

Bob Tillotson:

When they say that snow sets up like concrete, that is so true. I could not move the slightest inch. I could not move anything. And then at that point, I realized how serious it was, and it was just very, very terrifying.

Torah Kachur:

This is Tell Me What Happened, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important human connection is when you need help, whether you're trapped in a flood, hurt in a car accident, or buried by an avalanche. Bob was hit by a wave of snow. He was tossed end over end and buried. Two other people in his group were also hit by the avalanche. One deployed his avalanche backpack and was able to dig himself out. The other didn't have time to deploy his and was buried. Luckily, this friend was found and rescued pretty quickly. During the 2022-2023 winter season, nearly 1,200 avalanches were reported in Utah. So for people in the snowmobiling community, it's not uncommon to have seen or experienced an avalanche, but that wasn't the case for Dustin Sweeten before January 13th.

Dustin Sweeten:

The interesting thing is, all the years I've been riding, I've been riding for 55 years, I have never been caught in an avalanche. I've never watched an avalanche happen, and I've never had to rescue anyone.

Torah Kachur:

Like Bob, Dustin has a long history with snowmobiling.

Dustin Sweeten:

My uncle actually was the first one to bring any snowmobiles into the state of Utah.

Torah Kachur:

Dustin sells and collects snowmobiles. His collection includes over 400 vintage machines, which he displays at his own family-run snowmobile museum in Utah. But Dustin's favorite thing to do is ride them.

Dustin Sweeten:

It's just liberating to go out and ride, especially on a beautiful day just after it snowed and the sun is shining and everything. There aren't a lot of limits of where

you can go, so there's a freedom to snowmobiling that there isn't in any other thing I've ever done.

Torah Kachur:

The morning of January 13th, Dustin checked the snow conditions and saw the avalanche was extreme in almost every part of the state, but Dustin's been riding his whole life and has all the essential safety equipment. So he felt comfortable going out for a ride nowhere near the slopes.

So Dustin, his three sons, and a few coworkers met early that morning and drove to American Fork Canyon with plans to stay away from the steep stuff.

Dustin Sweeten:

There'd been about four to five feet of new snow within the last 24 hours, and nobody had been over it, and so we were kind of breaking trail all the way up.

Torah Kachur:

By one o'clock, Dustin was getting tired, so he radioed his group and told them it was time to head home.

Dustin Sweeten:

As we came up over a hill, I looked at the steep slope that I'd instructed our guys not to ride earlier in the day because of the danger of avalanche, we knew it was dangerous, and I said, "Oh, it slid." I thought it was a natural slide because that happens.

Torah Kachur:

Dustin was about to go home, then his curiosity got the best of him.

Dustin Sweeten:

So I was first turning away from it. I said, "No, let's go check it out."

Torah Kachur:

Dustin, his son, Ammon, and another rider hopped back on their snowmobiles and ride over to the slide.

Dustin Sweeten:

I could see the avalanche, where it'd come down through the trees, and right then we saw two people standing there and we thought, "Uh-oh, somebody maybe was in this."

Torah Kachur:

Dustin's son Ammon usually films his snowmobile excursions. He thought he'd turned the camera off when they were heading home, but he didn't. It was still running. So when they pulled up to the slide, he had no idea it was recording.

Video:

Are you guys good?

Got him uphill.

Is anyone buried?

Dustin Sweeten:

If you see the video, you hear him yelling at him, "Are you okay?" And they said, "We're okay, but we've got somebody buried uphill."

Video:

Guys!

Adeline, get up here, now.

Dustin Sweeten:

I yelled over the radio immediately to our group, "Get back here now. There's an avalanche."

Torah Kachur:

Dustin, his son, and other members of the crew switched their beacons to search mode so they could locate the missing person.

Video:

Beacons on search, beacons on search!
[inaudible 00:10:37]!

Torah Kachur:

Dustin knew that time was running out.

Dustin Sweeten:

When you're in an avalanche, it's extremely, extremely unusual for a second party to rescue an avalanche victim alive. They show up and find bodies, but the only chance you normally have of surviving is the group that is with you.

Torah Kachur:

Their beacons picked up a reading right away, about 10 feet from where they'd stopped their snowmobiles. Then one of them saw movement in the snow.

Dustin Sweeten:

And so he started immediately digging where he saw that and he says, "I have a glove."

Video:

Oh my God.

Bob Tillotson:

As I was down there, I had one hand extended out. I didn't know whether that was up or down or sideways, and I was eventually able to move my fingers, just back and forth just a teeny bit.

Torah Kachur:

The movement they saw in the snow, that was Bob. By this point, Bob had been buried for nearly six minutes. He was quickly running out of oxygen.

Bob Tillotson:

I'm definitely deep because of how compact the snow was around me, and so I just had to wait. I had to mentally calm myself down, stop fighting, try to breathe, it's shallow, but I do remember feeling someone touch my hand.

Torah Kachur:

On the surface, everyone jumped into action.

Video:

Just one? Get the shovel!
Shovel! Shovel!

Dustin Sweeten:

Shovels came out, and we just started digging frantically as fast as we could.

Video:

We got him!
Someone call Emergency Services.
Go get him out, just get him out.
Get him out! Get him out!

Torah Kachur:

Underneath the snow, Bob's mind was racing.

Bob Tillotson:

I'm wondering, "Okay, who else was buried? Where's my son?" Because my son was up there. I'm thinking about my family, the situation I might leave them in if I don't make it. That was heavy on my heart and I just started praying for all I was worth. I just started praying.

And the craziest thing is, and I know I was about to the end of my oxygen, but in that terrifying scenario, gradually it just came into a feeling of peace, which is the oddest thing to say, but I was actually at peace.

Torah Kachur:

Above the snow, things are anything but peaceful. Members from both groups were frantically working to free Bob.

Video:

We got this. Hang on! Don't you dare fucking give up! Stay with us.
[inaudible 00:13:31].

Bob Tillotson:

I remember when they got to my helmet and I could feel them...

Video:

No, I know. I just felt his face right there.
Clear his face. Don't use a shovel.

Bob Tillotson:

Brushing the snow away.

Dustin Sweeten:

And so we're trying to clear out his face...

Video:

Dig around.
Dig around the helmet.
Dig around, dig around!
Keep his nose clear, keep his mouth clear. Guys, we're...

Dustin Sweeten:

At this point, he was non-responsive. We've got to get him out of here as soon as we can. At this point, I thought, "Okay, we're going to have to give CPR so we've got to clear his chest."

Torah Kachur:

Finally, they were able to remove Bob's helmet.

Video:

Bob's right here. Can you breathe?

Torah Kachur:

For the first time, Dustin and his crew could see his face.

Video:

Keep that airway clear.

Torah Kachur:

To their absolute shock, they recognized the man they were trying to save.

Video:

Hey, Bob! Stay with us, Bob. We got you, buddy.
Dustin, Dustin, it's Dustin.
Dustin!

Dustin. This is Bob Tillotson.
Tillotson?

Torah Kachur:

Until this point, Dustin and his group were rescuing a stranger. Now they're trying to save a dear friend. Bob and Dustin have been friends for more than 30 years. They've gone riding, raced snowmobiles, and taken family trips together.

Dustin Sweeten:

Once I realized I knew who this was, I'm thinking, "Okay, I can't be explaining to his wife that we almost saved your husband. We almost got him out of there alive. There's no way I can be going to his funeral this next week. There is no way we're losing him."

Torah Kachur:

Dustin held Bob's head and started talking to him.

Video:

Dustin.
We need to get everybody behind you.
You're okay. We got you. We're just going to lift your body up, okay? We got you, we got you.
You're good. Your chest is out. You can breathe, right?

Dustin Sweeten:

We were just getting his chest cleared away to start CPR, and he, all of a sudden, started breathing and came to.

Torah Kachur:

By the time they cleared Bob's face, he'd been buried for nearly 12 minutes.

Bob Tillotson:

At that point, I was in shock. I was shaken. I was extremely cold, and I was in pain, but I owe him my life. If Dustin hadn't have showed up, I don't think I'd have made it.

Torah Kachur:

They freed Bob from the snow, built a fire to warm him up, and eventually got him home. Bob was extremely sore, but escaped without any serious injuries. When Dustin and his son got home, they realized they accidentally captured the entire rescue on video. Dustin texted Bob to ask him if he wanted to watch it.

Dustin Sweeten:

And he said, "I want to see it tonight."

Bob Tillotson:

Watching it was extremely intense, highly emotional. We had to turn it off a couple of times, let me regain my composure. And it was quite interesting as I was watching it, I knew the outcome, I knew that I was rescued, but it was kind of like I was watching it in third person and I kept thinking, "You guys got to hurry. He is not going to make it."

Torah Kachur:

Watching the rescue was also an intense experience for Dustin. It brought back painful memories. In 2005, Dustin had to cancel plans with a good friend to go snowmobiling. His friend went without him. Dustin warned him that the avalanche danger was high and to stay off the hills.

Dustin Sweeten:

And that night I was coming back from where we were and I got a phone call that he'd been killed in an avalanche, and so I've been second-guessing myself since. What if I had gone? Because I feel if I had been there, I'd have gotten him out. And so yeah, I don't ever want to feel like that again. The feeling on this one is a lot better.

Torah Kachur:

The next day, Bob visited Dustin.

Dustin Sweeten:

And he walked around and hugged myself and my sons and just said, "Thank you, thank you, thank you." I think he might have, prior to this, thought he was invincible and we've joked with him and he says, "Well, you have nine lives and you've used up eight, so it's time to maybe slow down a little."

Bob Tillotson:

And that's kind of the challenge I have is things that maybe should scare me don't. Didn't. Now, I look at it in a whole different light. Dustin and I, we've known each other for a long time. Personally, it means a lot to me that it was Dustin and the men that rescued me. I just have so much to be thankful for.

Dustin Sweeten:

It's amazing. This turned out to be a friend, but it wouldn't matter if it was a friend or somebody I'd never met or I'd never known. I would've put just as much effort into getting them out of there as I would somebody I did know. It was just really a miracle that we were there and able to save somebody, and it's an even greater miracle that it was somebody that I knew and cared about. You know?

Torah Kachur:

After they watched the video, they posted it online.

Dustin Sweeten:

He says, "You know what? We need to get this out there. People need to learn from this."

Torah Kachur:

Later that week, the story was picked up by several media outlets and Bob went on national news to tell his story.

Bob Tillotson:

This thing's kind of gone viral. I've heard from friends I haven't talked to for 30, 40 years.

Dustin Sweeten:

But this isn't really about me. This isn't really about Bob. This isn't really about our whole group or his whole group or anything like that. This is about, okay, if one or two people from this become safer and they don't get killed in avalanche, wow, it was worth it.

Torah Kachur:

Avalanches kill about 150 people worldwide every year, and while getting that number down to zero might be wishful thinking, many of these deaths are preventable. Sandra Riches is the Executive Director for British Columbia AdventureSmart, an outdoor education program that teaches people about outdoor safety for all seasons. Sandra hasn't experienced an avalanche firsthand, but the threat of being

buried in snow is something she knows all too well.

Sandra Riches:

I remember the snow going in my mouth and in my nose and in my ears, and I know I wasn't that deep under the snow. I know for a fact because I remember where I was skiing, but man, did it scare you-know-what out of me. It was really a time that made me think, and I was able to wiggle, jiggle, and blow the snow out of my mouth and shake my head and raise up to the surface on my own, but instantly frightened, instantly scared.

We talk a lot about preparation for those what-ifs. It's hard to say, "How do we prepare for those feelings, those emotions, that anxiety, that fear that we would feel?"

Torah Kachur:

Wow. Yeah, that would be some deep emotional prep. Before we get there, what are the things we can do to reduce the chances that we end up in a winter rescue scenario?

Sandra Riches:

If you're heading into the backcountry terrain where it's unmanaged space, it's not on a groomed trail, it's not in a park where it's controlled with assessment or ski patrol or grooms, you're heading out there on your own, it's up to you to reach that destination safely and that destination is home, and that comes with all that training, the gear, and the trip planning.

What we phrase it as is the three Ts: trip planning, training, taking the essentials.

Bring out the guidebooks, look online and see where you're going to go, and plan it as a group. Plan it in relation to your skills and ability. Check in with everybody.

What are you capable of? The buddy system is a great little reminder to think about as well, so if we're heading out with four of us, we're each going to pair off with one other.

What we add for winter is don't forget those season and sport-specific pieces of gear. I'm going to add extra pieces of gear for winter travel if I'm snowmobiling, snowshoeing, tossing on some MICROspikes and going for an awesome snowy hike with my friends.

Torah Kachur:

In our story, our guests talked about avalanche safety gear. What should you be carrying if you're headed into an avalanche-prone area?

Sandra Riches:

The extra pieces for winter backcountry travel would be an avalanche pack, an avalanche transceiver, an avalanche probe, and an avalanche shovel. Those are key. Those are going with you if you're heading out into the backcountry, and really check those forecasts so that everybody knows what's happening in the snow pack, what the weather's doing, how that will all work with all of you. So it's one big recipe.

Torah Kachur:

When we think about avalanches, even if we have our beacon and we have our shovel, can we predict when an avalanche would hit?

Sandra Riches:

We can prepare, we can plan, and we can look up all of the hazards before we go out. So research at your local avalanche center. There's resources out there that are

reliable, all based on science, and then they provide, they serve that information to us on a regular basis based on the storm cycles that are coming through, and they'll provide you with everything that you need to do.

Torah Kachur:

What do you do if you're in an avalanche?

Sandra Riches:

Having the confidence in our abilities to prevent it from happening is key. So we know that we have all of our gear on us, we have an avalanche pack on us as well that can inflate and hopefully bring us to the surface if we're caught in an avalanche, and we've practiced that. We've practiced pulling that cord at home and expanding the pack in the house so we know we can do that confidently.

It's just going through the processes as many times prior to anything happening and creating scenarios so that what if and when if it does happen, it's almost habitual to pull that cord. Aside from pulling the cord, activating your avalanche pack, swimming to the surface, moving around as much as possible, if you can, create an air pocket in front of your face because everything's just going to suck around you and really pack in like cement.

And then what comes into fruition here are the friends that you went out with and what their opportunity now is to help you get out of that snow. That's where that card falls over to them at that point, and your life is in their hands.

Torah Kachur:

So what if you come across someone who's been buried in an avalanche? What should you do?

Sandra Riches:

In an avalanche situation, it's up to you and your party to take care of that rescue. That self-rescue is key because the time it would take to communicate with a tasking agency, search and rescue, they come and find you. If anyone's buried, that time is too long, so it's up to us as a group to help our friend who might've been caught in that avalanche.

Fingers crossed you've taken the training before you've gone out into the backcountry, so you've taken an avalanche skills training. There's introductory courses, and based on your training, you're looking for signs of where I went into the avalanche, the entry point. If there's any gear that ended up coming to the surface, if it was a backpack, a helmet, if I'm skiing, it might've been a ski or a ski pole, you can look for signs. And then they have to create a bit of a grid search, if you will, and then use those transceivers to really pinpoint the location where it's quick enough now to use the avalanche probe to probe into the snow to locate the subject buried. And once they identify that the subject's in that location between the transceivers and the probe, then they would use the avalanche shovels to shovel the snow away the way they were trained.

And those areas that are for backcountry adventures, we are those decision-makers and rescuers, if you will, and it's up to us to be rescue-ready, but really think about that prevention piece and how we need to prevent it from happening.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's Tell Me What Happened: true stories of people helping people.

If you want to share your own story about a stranger who showed up for you at just the right moment, look for a link at onstar.com, or if you're listening on Spotify, check out the Q&A feature. Let's share some love for people who help others in big ways and small. While you're at it, share some love for this podcast. It really helps if you review and rate us or share this with someone who would enjoy it. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please, be safe out there.

