



Episode 1 Transcript

An Epic River Journey Proves Too Painful

Jill Brown:

The weather's getting worse. I'm just getting exhausted at that point. I needed to get from the island to the far side of the Mississippi River. But these storms kept coming.

Torah Kachur:

Jill Brown is alone. She's attempting to paddle across the continental United States.

But right now she's stranded on a small island in the middle of the most dangerous part of the Mississippi River.

She's lost her navigation equipment... Her legs are a mess of open sores... And she's broken a bone in her foot. The sky flashes with lightning and roars with thunder. The rain's coming down so hard it's difficult to see.

Jill Brown:

And finally, there was a little gap and I pushed off, paddled to the other side. I could see this wall of rain coming, and just as I get to the other side, the rain starts again and a bolt of lightning hits the island where I had just been camping.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur - and this is "Tell Me What Happened" - True stories of people helping people - an original podcast by OnStar. Because we all have moments when we need help from a stranger.

It's the 23rd of March, and Jillian Brown is sitting at her parent's kitchen table.

Her mother hands her the phone and says... it's for you. On the other end is a guy named Martin. He's an adventurer and long-distance canoeist... He has an idea... a surprising... tempting... exciting idea. A trans-continental canoe trip.

Jill Brown:

Martin, called me up a month before the trip and asked if I would be interested and available.

Torah Kachur:

He wasn't calling people at random - I mean, Jill is a talented wilderness photographer so she can document the trip... She also has decades of paddling experience.

Jill Brown:

I've been paddling for the majority of my life. I grew up on a small island in northwestern Ontario on Lake of the Woods. But also being on an island, you could basically swim before you could walk, drive a boat before you could run. So I always had a love for water, and being on the water and being surrounded by the water.

Torah Kachur:

The proposed voyage starts in the Northwest, on the Pacific Coast. It follows rivers and lakes and requires portages where there is no water route. It goes all the way across the United States, over the continental divide, ending in the Florida Keys. They would be the first people ever to do it; 16 states, 4,740 miles, seven months.

Now when I heard this I thought two things: One, wow what an amazing trip... I would love to do something like that. I mean I'm no superstar, but I have paddled a canoe or two in my time...

But then my second thought was "Who can drop everything in their life and go on this crazy adventure for half a year with just 4 weeks notice"! Well apparently... someone like Jill.

Jill Brown:

I'm not going to turn down something like that. Even if it's short notice, I'll figure out a way to make it work.

Jill Brown:

I happened to be visiting my parents at the time. And I just basically hung up the phone, looked at them and asked, "Hey, how do you feel about having my dog for up to seven months?" So it was kind of an instant no-brainer when they said yes to that. The hardest challenge for me was sorting out my dog.

Torah Kachur:

April 28th, Astoria, Oregon, where the Columbia River meets the Pacific Ocean. With little fanfare, Jill and Martin put their 18-foot canoe into the water. Even from the start nothing is easy.

Jill Brown:

Because we were starting in the spring, the dams were wide open due to the snowmelt. And most of the rivers were flooded. They had had like 170%

more snowfall than regular within the mountains there. So the rivers were really really high and we were going against the current.

Torah Kachur:

They paddle upstream for weeks. Fighting floodwaters, going against the current. Making massive portages.

Portages are when you pick up the canoe and carry it around a section of the river that isn't navigable. Carrying your boat and all your equipment, even just a few hundred yards, is back-breaking work.

Jill Brown:

At that point we had already portaged eight dams, four on the Columbia River and four on the Snake River. So normal portages is around these dams would maybe be a kilometer long, but some were quadruple that, if not more, because we couldn't get very close paddling against the current with the dams wide open.

Torah Kachur:

They cover 25 miles on a good day. But most were barely 20. It was scenic for sure... They were seeing parts of America very few people do. Abandoned boats, half sunk into the riverbed. Owls and eagles soaring overhead. And when they portaged around dams and rapids, they saw rattlesnakes slithering through the grass.

After 500 grueling miles they reached Lewiston, Idaho. They called this the end of the first leg of their trip. They took two-days to rest their arms, legs, and backs... because coming up next was what they assumed would be the hardest part of their journey.

Jill Brown:

That's where we began the portage over the Continental Divide.

Torah Kachur:

For those that don't remember their ninth grade geography - the Continental Divide is a line that splits America in two... east and west... all the rivers on the west flow into the Pacific Ocean, all the rivers on the east flow into the Atlantic or the Gulf of Mexico. Separating them is the Rocky Mountains.

And for Jill and Martin... that means 420 miles of hiking. That's the challenge they've set for themselves - to cross the whole country... only using their paddles and their boots.

Jill Brown:

What we would do is put one of these barrels on our back with backpack

straps, and then one around our front with the backpack strap, so we would have two barrels of between 75 and 50 pounds each so we had to have most of our gear on our backs, on our bodies, and then just kind of pull the canoe.

On the second day was when I broke my foot, the foot was a stress fracture, which is a really common injury when you're bearing a lot of weight. It's the most common injury in the military because you're carrying so much weight on your back.

Torah Kachur:

The only thing that will heal a stress fracture is rest. But that wasn't really an option.

Jill Brown:

Kept going 16 more days until my boots no longer fit. And that was mainly because of overcompensating with one foot for the pain in the other and they both swelled. And I had massive blisters that were infected and wide open.

Torah Kachur:

It was now June and summer had arrived.

Jill Brown:

It was so hot. It was really hot. Those first few days actually a lot of the portage over the continental divide was quite warm. And there was a huge thunderstorm when we camped at the highest point of elevation there, which was incredible. Near the end we were in a blizzard, which was crazy. We literally had every sort of weather you could possibly imagine and experience.

Torah Kachur:

Going down the backside of the mountains is a little easier. Jill is still suffering with her foot injury, but she keeps going.

Jill Brown:

It was just me being stubborn and wanting to kind of prove to myself that I had put in this work and this time and effort to train, to be able to accomplish this, um, that I wasn't about to let a little bit of pain stop me.

Torah Kachur:

On the east side of the divide, the canoe they've been carrying, and sometimes dragging for weeks, finally gets put to use again.

They put in on the Missouri River, and for the first time in the trip they are going with the current. They head east and south until it meets the

Mississippi.

Just above St. Louis, they take a much-needed break. But it's an unscheduled one. This isn't a leg of the journey that's ending. And it isn't just that Jill's body is exhausted.

It's something very different. You see, despite all the physical training, there was an emotional element to the trip that she hadn't prepared for.

Her relationship with Martin had run its course.

Jill Brown:

Essentially some choice words were said to, to me that, um, that I just couldn't, I couldn't support, um, that anymore. Yeah. I don't, I don't want to say, um, negative things, so...

Torah Kachur:

They traded the canoe for a pair of solo kayaks. And for a brief while they tried to do separate but parallel trips... but that idea was short lived.

Jill Brown:

I woke up to a text message saying to, to not join back up. And if I wanted to keep going, just go alone.

Torah Kachur:

Martin, had abandoned her.

Jill Brown:

Definite hurt. Not really anger but, um, that feeling of who does that to somebody. Who basically abandoned somebody where they know that they don't know anyone, they don't know the area.

Torah Kachur:

And while she knew she wouldn't miss him... he also took most of the gear.

Jill Brown:

I didn't have any of the safety gear, solar panels, batteries, anything. I basically had a couple of days of food and my, my camera equipment and my kayak gear.

Torah Kachur:

That, and her spirit. I mean that's really all she had... a stubborn streak and kayak. But she kept going.

Jill Brown:

Uh, I was doing at least 50 miles a day when I was by myself in the kayak. I

was trying to do 50 miles. I wasn't paddling once it was dark, just was not safe and I was trying to camp on islands as best as possible. Again, out of safety reasons, um, being a solo female too.

Torah Kachur:

So there she is... alone... in the wilds of the deep south. Lying in her tent ... her muscles aching... but her mind racing. Suddenly... outside... she hears something.

Jill Brown:

Digging around in the sand and the grass right there. And I just reached over and I grabbed my knife I don't know what I thought I was going to do with that.

Torah Kachur:

Then she hears a snort. The unmistakable sound of a wild boar.

This isn't some roly-polly pig from Old MacDonald's Farm... Wild Boars are aggressive... they have long pointed tusks and can top 200 pounds

Jill Brown:

Wild boars are completely unpredictable. One may run away in complete fear when it sees you a 100 meters away. Yet, the next one will charge you and try to kill you. So I just held my breath and lay there.

Torah Kachur:

Jill is lying there... nothing between her and the boar but a thin layer of waterproof nylon. It's one of the longest nights of her life.

Jill Brown:

That morning I woke up to a spectacular sunrise and an alligator. Sitting in the water, just off the, the end of my kayak. Um, and I ended up going out and watching him and went in the water and went for a little swim with this alligator, which was just the best way to start a day.

Torah Kachur:

For the next few weeks, Jill's days are spent paddling down the river... It's getting wider now, and the terrain is flattening out... but still, climbing up the riverbank, and lugging her boat and her gear around rapids or dams is a near daily event.

On one portage she walks through poison ivy and her shins and calves erupt in red welts. On another, a swarm of mosquitos makes lunch out of her neck and shoulders.

And there is nowhere to hide when it rains.

Jill Brown:

I am just outside of St. Francisville, in Louisiana area. And I camped on another island and got up that morning and I needed to get from the island to the far side of the Mississippi river. Um but these storms kept coming so just wasn't safe to be paddling and doing this big crossing when there was a rain storm.

Torah Kachur:

The river is almost a mile across at this point... and there's ships: cargo boats that aren't really keeping a sharp lookout for a lone paddler in a tiny kayak.

Jill Brown:

So I had to keep waiting and waiting and waiting. And finally there was a little gap and I pushed ... basically halfway across this wall of rain, I could see it coming, I couldn't see anything past it. And I just paddled as hard as I could to get to the other side. And as soon as I got to the other side, it hit me along with a lightning bolt hitting the island that I had just left.

Torah Kachur:

She reaches the far side of the river. But she still isn't safe.

Jill Brown:

I sat there holding onto the branches of a tree being that the river was so flooded. I was basically in the limbs of trees, um, in the water. I sat there for quite a while. Um, just kind of waiting out the storm because it, I couldn't even see now the island, it was raining so heavy mentally I was pretty, pretty exhausted and my body was, was starting to deteriorate.

Torah Kachur:

The rain was heavy... the lighting frightening... but this was more about the accumulation of the last four months. The broken foot, the abandonment, the wild boar. It was all piling on top of each other now. Jill opened her waterproof bag and powered on her phone.

Jill Brown:

I was able at that point to connect to a cell service, and put the word out of where I was and asked if anybody in the vicinity could in some way help me.

Torah Kachur:

This show is called "Tell Me What Happened" an original podcast by 'OnStar,' real people that provide added peace of mind for all kinds of adventurers.

It's a chance for people like Jill to tell stories about pivotal moments in their

lives.

And in all the stories... there comes a moment when they need help. Help from someone they don't know.

In this story... it's Marylee Orr.

Marylee Orr:

I love people. I try to come from a place of love particularly during a time in the world that I feel people are so divided. I care deeply about people. and I try to make things a little bit better every day.

Torah Kachur:

"Make things a little bit better every day" - I love that. And it's exactly what Jill Brown needed.

Jill is still in her kayak, she's pulled it into the high weeds lining the river. The overhanging trees offer a bit of protection from the rain, but not much.

She's holding her phone inside a clear plastic bag ... just staring at the screen.

It's a message from a stranger - It's a message from Marylee.

Jill Brown:

And, I then received the, the word that, um, her son was going to come and find me. My kayak was almost sunk because of all the rain, but I was so excited because I knew there was somebody that I was going to go and meet and I would be able to get dry.

I knew in my heart that we were meant to go help Jill. And so we went out there and we got her off the river. We just wanted to give her a safe haven for the night. Just a place to rest before she continued down the river right? We didn't know anything else, I didn't know anything else about her story, other than she was a young woman who needed to be quote, "rescued from the river".

Torah Kachur:

Jill steps out of a storm...and into an oasis.

Jill Brown:

It looked like you're entering a house, normal house, a big dining room table, maps all over the place. The whole dining room table was covered in, um, the lower Mississippi river maps.

Torah Kachur:

To Jill, the room already feels like home.
And standing in the middle of it is Marylee.

Jill Brown:

Very small woman, dark, salt and pepper hair, glasses, a beautiful smile, and just so motherly. Immediately just big hugs, grab your shoulders, hug you like she hasn't seen you in forever like a mom would.

Marylee Orr:

A beautiful young woman, outdoorsy woman, but seemed to me a bit broken. If you want me to be honest. I was concerned.

Torah Kachur:

Marylee was born and raised in the south - after a hug and a few comforting words... She got to fixin' something to eat.

Marylee Orr:

Well, it was good food, good southern food. And food is such a part of our culture here, more so than in other places. It's an extension of your caring for her. So we made sure that she had things that would be nourishing something warm and something that would help her get healed from that experience

Torah Kachur:

For the first time in what seems like forever. Jill eats a hot meal... off a real plate, sitting in a chair, at a table... simple luxuries she hadn't even realized she had missed.

And she is dry. Sleeping in a soft bed. Her exhausted body, her exhausted mind, can finally just shut down. She falls into a deep contented sleep.

Shortly after, Marylee and her son's, also call it a night. For them, it's just another day of helping people.

The next morning Jill wakes up refreshed. Her first thoughts are of getting back on the river. That's all she's known for months now.

She's made it to Louisiana... but there is still a long way to go.

Jill Brown:

Going down through Baton Rouge and then through New Orleans. And then doing this intercoastal waterway in the Gulf of Mexico.

Torah Kachur:

She goes downstairs for breakfast and says she's feeling great.

But Marylee isn't buying it.

Marylee Orr:

Not that she wasn't friendly, not that she wasn't warm or anything like that... I just sensed in my heart, there was something more going on with Jill

Jill Brown:

That following morning, um, was really when I, when I felt that that motherly, um, that motherly figure, um, or that role come into play was just that, that honesty in the words that she spoke.

Torah Kachur:

Marylee, gently, starts asking questions.

Jill Brown:

She talked to me like she wanted to know about me and not so much necessarily about the trip, which was really a big thing. Um, and was just so open and honest.

Marylee Orr:

I just felt that there was something within her that needed a little help. And I have to say, I think, maybe some people might not have crossed that boundary. In other words, we could have met and I wouldn't have asked questions that would've led us to have that really important conversations. But in my heart, I just felt it was the right thing to do. And she actually, I felt was very receptive. She was like Phew.

Torah Kachur:

Marylee is a complete stranger. But in that one conversation, she helps Jill face one of her greatest fears. And it isn't continuing her transcontinental paddling trip. What Jill is afraid of... is stopping.

Jill Brown:

A big part of the weight that I was feeling was that I was letting down family knowing all these, these people had put so much trust in you to accomplish this. That really weighs on you and to have somebody just listen to you, talk about that and to be there and still say if, if you feel you need to stop, then you stop.

Marylee Orr:

Stopping is not failure, stopping is wisdom, I didn't want her to continue the way she was. It would've been not a good thing for anybody.

Jill Brown:

She's like, it's, it's like, it's okay to call it quits. It's not quitting. Look at what you've achieved already. Um, And that she was proud of me. And she had

just met me.

Torah Kachur:

Right there...sitting in a simple wooden chair at an oversized kitchen table... Marylee helped Jill to see herself and her journey more clearly.

The 4,000 miles. The hundreds of portages. The loneliness, the wild animals, and the bug bites that cover almost every inch of her skin... Those were all tough. But the biggest threat to her safety...was herself.

Marylee Orr:

I think she had that feeling that she was going to fail if she didn't keep going at that moment, and the momentum, which is what drives a lot of people and makes them successful. But you also have to be wise enough to know when you need to stop. I wanted to just really be frank with her and I was a little tough love thing. Going forward is not really smart, it's not really brave, stopping is the brave thing.

Jill Brown:

I didn't feel comfortable to carry on, not having the proper safety equipment, um, or maps or GPS or anything, or radios to communicate with vessels. I just thought it was just not right for me to keep going. It's not quitting. Um, it's making a smart decision.

Torah Kachur:

And that is how Jill's continent crossing odyssey ended. Not with a triumphant arrival in the Florida Keys... Not with a catastrophic accident and daring rescue. But with a hot meal, a soft bed, and an honest conversation over breakfast. And after a few days, a tearful goodbye.

Jill Brown:

Yeah. Yeah, there was, um, some big hugs. Just like a mom would do that big hug. If you need anything, you call me, you take care of yourself and I'm proud of you.

Torah Kachur:

One final note about Jill and the timing of her decision. She didn't know it at the time... but just a week after she ended her trip, Hurricane Michael hit the gulf coast.

Jill Brown:

I likely would've been on the bank of the river, pretty close if in New Orleans, probably, at that time, if not already in the Gulf of Mexico. And who knows what would've happened.

Torah Kachur:

That's the power of a human connection. It can save someone - even from a threat neither person knows about.

This is Tell Me What Happened - an original podcast by OnStar — and on every episode I try to do two things.

One - share a story about people helping people... and Two - Talk to an expert about what we can do to help make our own corner of the world a little safer. — because that's what OnStar does everyday.

In this episode I want to talk to Cratissa Sleigh. She's a clinical psychologist and the owner of "Deeply Rooted Psychological Services." She even hosts her own series — "The Wash Day Podcast." All that makes her the perfect person to ask "Why do people help strangers?"

Cratissa Schley:

Extreme empathy. Empathy is the thing that carries us so far, but there are different types of empathy. So you can have like cognitive empathy where you're like, I can understand where you're coming from. You can have emotional empathy and like, let's say someone stubs their toe and you can almost feel it for yourself. The other is compassionate empathy. One where you are legit, compelled to move. It's more of understanding where someone is in their personal experience and seeing that you have something that you can share with them that might get them through that, and only in those moments, when you feel that compassionate empathy are you compelled to move, like you can feel your body almost pushing you to, to move on this and to help someone.

Torah Kachur:

It felt like Marylee demonstrated all of those types of empathy.

Cratissa Schley:

Yes. Yeah, she sounded, so she seemed like such a motherly figure. Someone who just was like, I'm just going to take this girl in my arms and give her a hug.

Torah Kachur:

How much of that is chalked up to a maternal instinct.

Cratissa Schley:

We're not all born with empathy, it's not something that comes easily. We have to practice at it. And so mothers get such a good opportunity to practice empathy throughout their life. Um, throughout the care of someone. So any kind of caregiver, really, they have really good opportunities to practice the empathy.

Torah Kachur:

Well, I want to switch gears a bit. How do you prepare for a kind of adventure kind of trip that pushes them out of their typical day to day?

Cratissa Schley:

So I would encourage you to find other like-minded people, who have similar interests, similar experiences. Sometimes we don't always think of the circumstances that we're going to be in. So it would be good to find like-minded people who are interested in the same areas. Do your research on it, um, have fun with your research, again, find fun things, but also find areas that you're going to need to watch out for, um, risk factors.

I think the most important thing is to make sure that you check in with yourself emotionally to see where you are. Why am I doing this thing? Why, what are my interests levels for this thing? What is my why for this thing? Why do I want to do this? Why is it important?

So for Jill, it wasn't just kayaking to a specific location, but it had something meaningful in the process. And so ask yourself, why are you doing this? Ask yourself, are you afraid? Is that going to impact your decision-making while you're on this trip? And if so, How do you normally behave when you're scared? Like, what are the things that you worry about? How do you normally react to certain situations when you're scared? Do you avoid? Because if you're in a situation like Jill, you might completely shut down and feel like I just need time to kind of close ranks and just be quiet and not move and not do anything. So I always encourage people, never engage in decision-making when you are stressed out or when you're upset, depressed, or anxious in any way, because it impacts the way that you think about yourself, the world around you and the way that you're going to get through something.

Torah Kachur:

Do you think Jill would have made some bad decisions, I mean given the weather conditions and what she had already been through, if she hadn't met Marylee?

Cratissa Schley:

Yes. I think that she met Marylee at the perfect time. She was in the midst of emotionally breaking down. Her body was breaking down. She didn't have the, the. Tools that she needed to get to destination. Um, and it's best to take inventory and realize what your limitations are then to realize them in the midst of something that you can't get yourself out of.

And so I think that that almost was like all of the anxiety building for Jill that morning of, was - I don't have any of this stuff that I need, things that I knew

that I needed when I started this trip and I don't have them now. And so what else do I have, um, and for her to take that inventory and be realistic about it at a time when she was so emotional speaks to just how strong Jill is.

Torah Kachur:

So a lot of us, if we want to face a new experience and get out into the world and see something new. We know that we're going to face adversity. And that turns a lot of people off of those kinds of adventures. How do we, what, what are some practical advice to face that adversity and challenges that we know is going to come? Whether it's a language barrier or anything like that that comes with experiencing new cultures.

Carissa Schley:

I always encourage people. If they can bring a partner to bring someone on a trip like that, that has a really good high emotional IQ. So that's someone who can look at someone so that someone like Marylee honestly, someone who can look at another person and feel the emotion.

I see the emotion based on their words. They don't necessarily need to understand the actual language, but they can understand the emotion. And even when we're speaking the exact same language, even when we're both speaking English, having someone who can bypass the words and see beyond that to the emotion is super important.

Um, and that's also how we manage in difficult situations. So. If you have someone who has maybe a difficult personality, what we all can understand is how it feels to experience a specific emotion. So you might not agree with the way that someone is handling their emotions.

Validate the emotion be with the emotion, have two human beings, just on the same level, checking for each other's emotions. That is the best way to bypass any issues, any differences, and really just connect human to human, which is exactly why it worked so well for Marilee and Jill.

Torah Kachur:

Well, Cratissa, I think we can decide that we all want a Marylee in our lives. Let me tell you, I wouldn't mind going on a road trip with you. I think you'd be able to manage it just fine. Even my difficult personality.

Cratissa Scheley

Oh, thank you, Torah. You definitely don't have a difficult personality. You are a gem.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur — That's it for this episode of Tell Me What Happened -

brought to you by OnStar.

This series is all about people helping people, just like how OnStar empowers people to get out there, safely.

And... since they've been doing it for 25 years now... they've got hundreds of incredible stories to share ... you can read about and watch some of those at onstar.com

While you're there, tell us your best "good samaritan" story! You can also check out the show notes to find a link to photos and a map of Jill's incredible trip...as well as preparedness articles from OnStar"

Please tell your friends about us so we can spread these stories about how wonderful people really are. And always.... "Be safe out there."

Find more episodes of *Tell Me What Happened* at OnStar.com/podcast