



Episode 5 Transcript With Floodwaters Rising, Help Swoops In

Debra Ashton:

I watched a house leave its foundation... another house comes rushing down the street and a man inside hollering, "Help, help, help." And there's nothing I can do because I didn't know how I was going to help myself.

Torah Kachur:

That's Debra Ashton. Less than five minutes after she saw that house being pushed down the road by the flood waters, she found herself in the middle of that same street being swept through town. Battered by debris and gasping for air.

Debra Ashton:

There's trees going by, there is pieces of lumber going by with nails sticking up and I'm dodging all of that, because it's all in this ocean with me.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur, and this is "Tell Me What Happened" - True stories of people helping people, and specifically 'strangers' helping people in difficult situations.

This series was created by OnStar to help spread the word about how important human connections really are.

It doesn't even take an hour to drive from Nashville to Waverly, Tennessee but to be honest, not a lot of people make that drive. Don't get me wrong, it's a pretty town nestled in the Trace Creek valley, and they have highly rated hospitals and schools.

In fact, Waverly Central High School's football team went 9-3 last season - good for second place in the district. I mean, it's a real nice town, four, maybe five thousand people. The kind of place where the people who live there appreciate it, but the outside world doesn't ever really take much notice. Debra Ashton has lived here her whole life

Debra Ashton:

The home where I lived has been in my family, all of my life. My aunt lived there prior to her death and... willed that property to me.

Torah Kachur:

Debra is a health care worker and devout Christian. Compassion is the focus of her life. Case in point, her family owns a second home in Waverly, which she

rents out, practically rent free, to an elderly woman in need.

Debra Ashton:

I lost money every month by letting her live there. But it was a good thing. Her daughter lives out of state... and I wanted to do something for her.

Torah Kachur:

On Saturday August 21, 2021 something happened in Waverly that did grab the outside world's attention.

It's early morning and Debra is in her kitchen making breakfast. Outside it's raining. In her mind she's running through all the stuff she wants to get done today - and wondering if the weather is going to let her.

Her phone rings. It's a friend with frightening news. Overnight the rain has flooded the river upstream, it's spilled over its banks, that water is now headed for the town of Waverly. Debra acts fast, packs a bag, and gets in her truck. She's five minutes down the road, when she remembers her elderly tenant.

Debra Ashton:

She's 76, 77 years old, walks with a cane and I felt responsible for her. I had to go make sure that she was out.

Torah Kachur:

She bangs on the door, but there's no answer. She has a key, so she lets herself in. Nothing. The house is empty. Debra's relieved - her tenant must have gotten word of the river swelling and gotten out of town. So she walks back outside to her truck.

She was only in the house for a few minutes, but outside - the entire world has changed. The water is above the floorboards of her truck. The street at the end of the driveway is a river.

Debra Ashton:

Water come up in seconds. Feet in seconds the water just continued to rise.

Torah Kachur:

In the next three hours, 9 inches of rain will fall on the town. Seventeen will fall in the next twenty hours. But it's the water that has already fallen upstream, to the east of town that is the real threat. Soon, parts of Waverley will be under six feet of water.

Debra Ashton:

So I ended up on the top of her porch and on top of a pillar and of course the water just continued to rise.

I watched across the road a house leave its foundation, just all in one piece which was remarkable to me, but also very haunting. It immediately caught on fire. Just immediately went in flames.

...Another house comes rushing down the street and a man inside hollering, "Help, help, help." And there's nothing I can do because I didn't know how I was going to help myself.

Torah Kachur:

The water keeps rising. Debra has nowhere to go, no means of escape.

Debra Kachur:

But while I was standing on that pillar, my truck was still in the driveway. I said, "God, you've got to get me to higher ground."

Torah Kachur:

Then, an incredible thing happened.

Debra Ashton:

My truck lifted up, floating and instead of floating down between the houses in this tsunami of water. It lifts up and then it comes at an angle right over to where I'm standing on the porch.

Torah Kachur:

Debra jumps from the porch into the bed of her truck. As soon as she lands, the force of the water carries the truck away, down the street bobbing and spinning. Looking backwards she sees what she just escaped from.

Debra Ashton:

The house where I was standing on the porch, it leaves its foundation and it goes into the street.

Torah Kachur:

She's better off in the truck than on the roof of a collapsing house, but still she's far from safe. The bed of the truck starts filling up with water, so she scampers up onto the roof.

Debra Ashton:

Now, my truck is totally underwater and I'm sitting on the cab.

Torah Kachur:

It's a precarious spot and she doesn't last long.

Debra Ashton:

I was cast off of the truck into the water.

Torah Kachur:

She loses track of the truck. She can't touch the bottom. And she's struggling to keep her head above the surface.

Debra Ashton:

All kinds of debris is going around me, there's toys. There's trees going by, there is pieces of lumber going by with nails sticking up. It's all in this ocean with me.

Torah Kachur:

She needs a raft, a boat, anything to hold onto.

Debra Ashton:

And just suddenly here comes a pole, perfect. It was my pole, it was made for me. So I grasped my arms over the pole and put the pole up against my chest.

Torah Kachur:

A wooden telephone pole is an unlikely savior but at the moment it's the best she has. Clutching her pole, Debra is carried by the floodwaters for more than 4 blocks. She can't climb on top of it, but for a while at least she's stable enough to survey the scene. She looks to either side, searching for a way out of the flood. But all she sees is more danger. The force and speed of the floodwater is so powerful it creates a whirlpool. Debra is sucked into it.

Debra Ashton:

I felt just like I was in a washing machine of water. The force of that water took my shoes off, it took my shorts off and the funny part of the story is, it's trying to take my undergarments off and here I am drowning and I'm trying to pull my panties up.

Torah Kachur:

The suction of the whirlpool drags her under, but she fights her way back to the surface. The second time she goes under she loses her grip on the pole. But her flailing arms and kicking feet are enough to propel her back up, just long enough to grab a breath of air before she is pulled down again.

Debra Ashton:

The last time I went under, I'm surrounded by light in all this dirty, mucky, muddy water. My last thought underwater was, "God, my daughter Anna, is only 35 years old. She's too young to lose her mother. You've got to let me live for her."

Torah Kachur:

This is 'Tell Me What Happened' a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help: Whether you're

on the other side of the country, or just a few blocks from home.

In the span of less than one hour Debra Ashton has gone from hard-boiling eggs in her kitchen, to fighting for her life in a whirlpool. She is twisted and spun around until she has no sense of direction, up, down, sideways. Everywhere is just water and debris.

Then, she hits something or something hits her. Maybe the bottom, maybe a floating car or a piece of furniture, it sends her sideways.

Debra Ashton:

It was like I was spit out of the mouth of the big fish. I felt just like Jonah, I never went underwater again.

Torah Kachur:

She's free of the whirlpool. But her arms and legs have little strength left. She scans the horizon searching for anything that isn't moving along with the flood.

Debra Ashton:

And I could see two guys on the Superior Farm Feed Store. One of them hollered, "If you make it over here, we'll help you get up on... the roof".

It's a big blue roof - an oasis amid the destruction, but it's 200 yards away. She starts swimming, arms pumping her legs kicking. She's moving across the flow, so for every bit of distance she makes towards the building she gets swept sideways twice that.

Debra Ashton:

Swimming was impossible in the current, it was just impossible. So I used my hands a while, my feet a while, my hands a while, my feet a while. And I had to go another about a half a block to get to this Feed Store.

As she makes her way to the edge of what once was East Commerce Street, the current begins to slacken and most of the large pieces of debris are being carried along the center of the flood.

With one hand she catches a corner of the building, there is a trailer wedged against the side of the building. She climbs on top of that, and the two men on the roof pull her to safety.

Debra Ashton:

I'm beyond exhaustion. I just lay flat on that roof. I had no energy left. My adrenaline was gone and I lay there and get my breath, just laying there, looking up at the sky.

Torah Kachur:

Eventually, she sits up and surveys the scene. And in the midst of all this

danger Debra starts worrying about other people.

Debra Ashton:

You know, there were people hanging onto trees. There were people in attics. There were people on roofs. There were people in all kinds of situations trying to save their life.

Torah Kachur:

That's when she realizes that her spot on the big blue roof is only a temporary sanctuary.

Debra Ashton:

We were freezing, the wind's blowing. It's raining, it's lightning and we're on a metal roof.

One of the guys said, "Debra, how are we going to get down from here?" I said, "Well, God's going to send us a helicopter." "A helicopter?" And I said, "Yes." And I know he looked at me like, you probably swallowed too much of that water while you were down there.

Torah Kachur:

What Debra doesn't know -- what she couldn't possibly know -- is that sixty miles away, Joel Boyer's phone is ringing. Joel looks at the screen, it's a call from Pennsylvania and he doesn't know anyone from Pennsylvania. But he answers.

Joel Boyers:

The woman was pretty frantic. She was crying... she had gotten a call from her brother saying that he and his two daughters were trapped on a rooftop in Waverly, Tennessee, and that the flood waters were rising.

Torah Kachur:

To Joel, she was a total stranger. She literally had googled "Waverly, Tennessee, helicopter" And Joel's company -- a flight school based in Nashville -- came up the top of the list. The woman on the phone is asking him, begging him to go find her brother and her nieces.

He looks out the window and even here in Nashville it isn't pretty. The rain is coming down hard. The clouds are so low they're touching the treetops. To put it plainly, It's not safe to go flying. But...

Joel Boyers:

I have a daughter too, and I just couldn't tell her no. I called my fiancée and told her that we were going to go back to the airport and called up one of my employees and had him pull out the helicopter, take the doors off, top it off with the fuel.

Torah Kachur:

In less than an hour, he's in the air.

Joel Boyers:

...Employees were all kind of standing there like, I can't believe you're going to take off in this.

Torah Kachur:

Joel is at the controls, his fiancée, Melody, is in the co-pilot seat providing a second set of eyes. But just getting to Waverly is a challenge. Visibility is almost zero.

Joel Boyers:

You have to go slow, so I was sometimes would have to turn the helicopter sideways and kind of look out the door.

Torah Kachur:

And when he does arrive, the town looks nothing like what he's used to.

Joel Boyers:

It was just churning, raging, tan flood waters surrounding every house in the neighborhood. Some houses were oddly moving. There was one on fire.... There's a tractor trailer in a tree, and just... It's almost surreal. I turned to my fiancée and I said, "Okay, let's get to work..."

I said start spotting people, call them out. I'm going to need you to communicate with them because my hands are on the controls.

Torah Kachur:

Joel hovers the helicopter as his fiancée helps survivors climb inside. They pluck people off the roofs of houses. Stuck in trees that used to be in the middle of residential front yards. There's even one woman they find clinging to a wooden door she's using as a raft.

Joel Boyers:

I had to hover just above water, and I dipped the skids down into the water a little bit, so they could get one foot on and kind of treat it like ladder. The only problem with this is it becomes heavily out of balance when somebody's trying to climb up on the side of an aircraft.

Torah Kachur:

There are some people Joel can't help.

Joel Boyers:

There was another woman that was on her front porch and I looked at her and I was like, those power lines are wrapped around the house. I can't get down there. I felt helpless at that situation.

Torah Kachur:

Joel and Melody pull thirteen people from the water and drop them off on a nearby hill high enough to be safe. The helicopter is running low on fuel, so he points it towards the nearest airstrip. And that course takes him directly over East Commerce Street, and there he spots a bright blue roof.

Joel Boyers:

I saw it out of the corner of my eye and started flying towards it and yep. There were people on top.

Debra Ashton:

One of the guys said, "Debra, I think I hear a helicopter."

Torah Kachur:

But the roof Debra and the others are on is small. It's close to power lines. And there is a taller building beside it, blocking access from that side.

Joel Boyers:

My fiancée said "We can't land on that," and I said, "Well, let's see."

Torah Kachur:

The margin for error is inches.

Joel Boyers:

I can't over correct because then my rotor blade would hit the top of the roof. I had to be pretty precise. As I got a little closer, it was hard to tell how much, but I knew that I could balance there. That's probably the toughest I've ever done.

Debra Ashton:

One side of that landing gear on just barely an inch or so of the roof the propellers were close to the roof behind, it was amazing.

Torah Kachur:

One by one, Debra and three others climb into the helicopter trying not to disrupt it's balance. Then slowly Joel lifts them up and away.

Debra Kachur:

He picked us up, Joel is my angel. I said, "You're my angel".

Joel Boyers:

I remember her putting her hand on my shoulder and saying God bless you.

Torah Kachur:

It's been hours of difficult flying, Joel is exhausted, and very low on fuel. He takes Debra and the others to some higher, dryer, ground and flies himself and

Melody back to Nashville.

All of our stories have a stranger that helps someone in need, and Joel definitely fits that role.

Debra Ashton:

I think he saved, I don't know, 17 people that day. We were four of the 17, amazing.

Torah Kachur:

But there were also the guys on the roof that pulled Debra out of the water. And there's Debra herself who started out trying to help her elderly tennet.

But Joel has one other person to say thanks to.

Joel Boyzers:

I still think a lot of the credit should go to, well, the woman in Pennsylvania who had the wherewithal to call a helicopter company.

Torah Kachur:

Oh, and that woman's brother and his two daughters – the people Joel originally headed out to help? He never found them. By the time he got there another good samaritan, someone with a boat had gotten them to safety.

Despite the efforts of Joel and others, and of course the local and state emergency response crews, the Waverly flood was still a horrible disaster: 270 homes were destroyed and 20 people lost their lives.

In all, five counties were impacted and the recovery, and rebuilding is still ongoing.

This is Tell Me What Happened - an original podcast by OnStar. We all need the help of a stranger from time to time, hopefully not because you are stranded on a rooftop in a flood. Maybe it's a flat tire, or you're lost and you need directions.

OnStar has been helping people for 25 years, and they've made this show to celebrate that spirit. So, with that in mind, I want to help you, by making another human connection.

I'm going to bring in Jennifer Pipa. She's Vice President, Disaster Programs with the American Red Cross. Her job is to help people be ready for whatever mother nature might throw at them, including floods. What she teaches people is that you shouldn't wait for it to start raining to plan your response.

Jennifer Pipa:

There's a lot of things you can do well in advance of ever thinking that you

might be impacted by some kind of flooding event. Things like taking pictures of all of your important documents. While we would want you to take them with you, if you could, if you're going to evacuate ahead of time, sometimes that's not always possible. Pictures of birth certificates, Social Security cards, homeowners insurance information, all of those things, that's something you can do right now when it is sunny and beautiful out and have that stored on the cloud or electronically somewhere. That way you can access those things. Those are critical when you're impacted by a disaster so that you can start to build your life back and start putting the pieces together.

Torah Kachur:

What about 'in the moment'? I get this evacuation notice... What do I do? Who do I call?

Jennifer Pipa:

A lot of times, if you're evacuating an area, sometimes the communication systems can be compromised, like you can't get a cell signal. If you have family spread all across the US and they see that you've got bad weather in your location, that family is frantic trying to connect and communicate with you. What we tell folks now is pick one person outside of your immediate family in that physical location that you call to. For us, it's my mom in Florida. If something happens in DC, all of my family and my friends know if they can't reach me, they call my mom. I only have to then call my mom one time to let her know that we're okay and she can communicate with everybody else.

Torah Kachur:

What's your advice to people in their vehicles when they're facing a flood?

Jennifer Pipa:

If you can get out of the area, we want you to do that, but we don't want you to drive through any standing water because there's really no way for you to estimate how deep the water is. There's no surefire way, and you don't know about the structure of the road underneath that water as well. There's a couple of things there that you just don't know about.

If the water is rising and you're in your car, that's when we recommend you get on the roof of your car, but only then. If the water's not filling up inside your car, we don't want you to get outside of the car because there's a chance you could get swept away. It's much more dangerous. But it seems so simple and you hear people say it all the time, is they say turn around, don't drown. Don't drive through the standing water.

Goodness, when they put up road barriers, they're there for a reason. They're up because somebody knows that there's already been an impact there and they're just trying to keep you safe. The last thing we want to do is have you stranded and then have to use additional rescue folks to come out and get you and help you out when you probably shouldn't have been there in the first

place.

Torah Kachur:

What if you find yourself in your home and the flood waters are coming in?

Jennifer:

We do see this. We've seen this, unfortunately, we're seeing it more and more in these what we would call a flash flood event, where there's forecasted rain but the rainstorm essentially just stays stable and static there and it just dumps inch after inch after inch of rain. Unfortunately, at some point in time the ground just can't absorb it anymore and you end up in a flash flood situation. In those situations, really what we want you to do is, if the water is coming in on your first floor and you have a second floor, going to the second floor.

A lot of people think that they want to go to their enclosed attic. You do not want to do that unless that is the absolute last thing you need to do, and then we want you to come out the side and sit on top of the roof. But staying out of the water is first and foremost, and then once the flood waters have receded, really being careful about going back down and calling for 911 to have some emergency crews out there to make sure that you can and get out of that safely after the fact.

Torah Kachur:

Of course, if the flood is more predicted than a flash flood, heed the warnings, evacuate.

Jennifer Pipa:

Heed the warnings, leave the area, especially if you're near a floodplain. The last thing you want is to be stranded and then have to call for help. Evacuating is going to be the smartest thing you can do. Then, as hard as it is for folks, be patient and wait for the officials to tell you it's okay and it's safe to come back in, because we want people, you know road crews and utility folks to be able to get in to get everything reestablished, to make sure that there's no dangers there.

There's additional complications with flood waters. Most of the time, you don't know what's in flood water, so there's definitely a hazard issue there, but things like pulling out your drywall. If you have a basement, you don't pump all your water out at once, because if the soil outside of your basement is still waterlogged, it'll actually create additional pressures. They recommend about a third of the level you take out each day to let everything dry and stabilize.

Torah Kachur:

It's interesting, you mentioned one of the don'ts, which is don't pump out your basement all at once. I would've never thought of that. Are there any other

don'ts? Are there any other things that people tend to do, that if they're not informed you go, "Oh, stop, don't do that. It's going to make it worse."

Jennifer Pipa:

Well, there is. Unfortunately, we see this after most disasters, is the most dangerous time is typically right after a storm has passed and people are going back into their homes. Especially if you are in a flood and there is still standing waters, you have no idea if you've got energized power lines that could potentially be under there, so you don't want to be walking in any water at all if you can, avoid it at all costs. Not driving over standing water, I cannot emphasize this enough. A lot of times people look down a road and say, "Oh, only looks a couple inches deep. I'm just going to drive through. I've got a big, heavy SUV." It does not take much water to move a vehicle off the road.

The other ones we talk about is watching your power and making sure that you've got everything unplugged ahead of time and not plugging things back in until you've at your home inspected. If you've got wet insulation behind a drywall and you plug stuff back in and you turn your power back on, you could end up in a home fire situation that's an outcome because of the water damage that occurred in the flooding.

Torah Kachur:

What are some of the key takeaways that you've learned? You're assisting all these people in various natural disasters, the people that have experienced flood, what have you learned?

Jennifer Pipa:

Flooding, I would tell you, is an incredibly challenging disaster to recover from because it's not just about the flood event that happens, it's about what could happen afterwards.

Sometimes it's about being separated from your family as well. A lot of times we see things like Hurricane Harvey, which dumped copious amounts of water in Houston. We had about 12,000 folks the first night in the George R. Brown Center. These weren't people who necessarily evacuated their houses, these were people who went to work that morning and thought they were coming home that night and found that the streets were flooded and they couldn't return home.

It's very easy to be sometimes dismissive about people who are impacted by a disaster, but what you have to understand is that some of these disasters, they're not predictable, you don't know that they're coming. There are many of us now who have been sitting at home, know that a rainstorm is coming, maybe we'll lose power, but have no concept of a flash flooding incident. We saw this in Waverly. This is a beautiful community with this gorgeous river that runs through it, but there was a rainstorm that just sat over top of them

for hours and hours and hours. It takes no time at all for a flash flood to come through and can be an extremely traumatizing thing for people to experience.

Torah Kachur:

Well, thank you Jennifer, for all this advice. I don't think I live in a floodplain, but I know I definitely have to check.

Jennifer Pipa:

Yes, you do, everyone should.

Torah Kachur:

Thank you

Jennifer Pipa:

Thank you

Torah Kachur:

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

If you'd like to read more stories like this one, or if you want to learn more about the August 2021 flood that tore through Waverly, there's a link in the show notes to take you to our website.

We'll even provide a link to the Red Cross so you can help support their efforts to assist people in need.

We've got more great stories still to come so be sure to follow us on whatever app you're using and you'll be the first to know when a new episode is released.

On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur -- and please "Be safe out there."

Find more episodes of *Tell Me What Happened* at [OnStar.com/podcast](https://www.onstar.com/podcast)