



Season 2
Episode 4 Transcript
Walking Through Fire to Save 65 Horses

Torah Kachur:

No matter where you live in the country — the mountains or the coast, the Midwest or the deep South — the middle of August is a very special time. This is the second half of the summer. A time to slow down, relax, take some time off and enjoy yourself.

That's what they're doing at the Covered Bridge Equestrian Center. It's a self-service horse boarding facility just south of San Jose, California.

Tamara Boole:

So, we're not like a hunter/jumper barn. We're not a western barn that does a bunch of barrel races. Most of the people have been here 25 years. So it's a little bit different in the fact that we're quiet. It's much more like a sanctuary.

Torah Kachur:

But today, that "sanctuary" has become a very dangerous place.

A single lightning strike has ignited a forest fire. It's burning out of control, and right in its path is the Covered Bridge Equestrian Center.

Tamara Boole:

The fire was getting really close, and someone proposed it could be within hours at the rate the wind was blowing and the heat.

Torah Kachur:

Tamara Boole gets the order to evacuate from the sheriff. But inside the stable there are dozens of horses. These horses are owned by different families, many of them in different towns. Even the ones who are nearby are busy evacuating themselves.

Standing in front of the barn, Tamara watches the smoke on the horizon growing darker.

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.

The town of Felton, California, has a population of just under five thousand people. It's a pretty typical rural community. In fact, the town's only claim to fame is a bridge — the Felton Covered Bridge — which happens to be the tallest covered bridge in the entire country.

The wooden bridge, which stands an impressive 35 feet high, has spanned the San Lorenzo River since 1892. And it stands at the entrance of the Covered Bridge Equestrian Center. Once you're there, you'll meet the center's owner, Tamara Boole.

Tamara Boole:

Oh, well, I'm 71 years old. I'm a very active outdoor person. My hobbies: art, being creative. I weld, work in stone.

Torah Kachur:

Tamara's family has been on the same 27 acres for almost fifty years. And for most of those years her ranch has served as a place for people to board their horses.

Tamara Boole:

It's part of the community. It's been a living part of the community for years and years.

Torah Kachur:

These aren't horses that win big races or command big fees to breed. They're just horses that need a place to stay. Many of them are rescues.

Tamara Boole:

They come from Texas, from kill pens. Little ponies that would be destroyed or sent to Mexico.

Torah Kachur:

Many of the animals here have been mistreated, and that has made them skittish, nervous, uncomfortable around people, and, as a result, difficult to handle.

Four days ago, a single bolt of lightning struck the ground in Southern California. It ignited the dry brush and soon it was a raging wildfire. On day two of the fire, it burnt through a pair of nearby communities.

Tamara Boole:

Horses up in Boulder Creek and up the mountain were already being evacuated.

Torah Kachur:

On day three, the fire is still burning — in fact, it's getting bigger. But for now, the Covered Bridge Center doesn't seem to be in its path.

Tamara Boole:

At about seven o'clock at night, a boarder who takes horses up to Costanoa called, and she said they were being evacuated, that there was fire close to them, and could she bring two horses down here? And I told her yes, put them wherever she thought they would be safest.

Torah Kachur:

Even in the face of a wildfire, Tamara won't say no to an animal in need, but it does mean that the center is very, very full. As she wakes up on the fourth day of the fire, the flames have reached Boulder Creek. That's only seven miles away.

Tamara Boole:

I got a text message, and they said they could see a glow of fire as they looked up the mountains, and were we going to be evacuating? And I told her at that time, I didn't know.

Torah Kachur:

Tamara has lived here a long time. She's seen wildfires that look threatening but then suddenly burn themselves out or change direction. She's hoping that will happen again.

Tamara Boole:

It was a really emotional time because who knew if it could hit our area? Things were burning that nobody ever thought would. We were really just wondering, just waiting for the call.

Torah Kachur:

The call came at 12 noon.

Tamara Boole:

By that time it was apparent that the fire had burned over the ridge, and we were in more threat. So at that point, the sheriff called the evacuation.

Torah Kachur:

For people living in a house in town, evacuating means loading your most irreplaceable possessions into the car, locking the door and driving away. But at the Covered Bridge Horse Sanctuary, it's much more complicated. They need to move 65 horses off the property, and they need to do it quickly.

Tamara doesn't have trailers for all the horses. The individual owners are usually responsible for transporting their animals. The problem is, because most of them are local, they had something else to focus on. They were being told to pack up and get out of their houses.

Tamara Boole:

Their homes were burning while they had to think of moving their horse.

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 are lost on a backcountry road, or standing at the gates of your ranch, watching the flames of a raging wildfire approach.

It's 1 p.m. It's been an hour since the local sheriff gave the order to evacuate, but Tamara Boole is still here. She has 65 horses she needs to move before she can even think of getting herself to safety. Twenty miles east of where she's standing is Michelle Le Clair.

Michelle Le Clair:

I am the owner of Pleasant Valley Horse Club and Gold Coast Equestrian.

Torah Kachur:

She's one of those lucky souls who doesn't see her job as work.

Michelle Le Clair:

I love life. I feel grateful to be able to do what I do. I really like people and, of course, animals.

Torah Kachur:

Just after the evacuation order was given, Michelle got a frantic call from someone she hardly knows.

Michelle Le Clair:

The woman gave me a call and said, "Hey, listen, I have a horse and a pony. Can you go pick it up and bring it to this address?" And I said, sure.

Torah Kachur:

The horses in need of rescue are being boarded at — you guessed it — the Covered Bridge Equestrian Center. So within minutes, Michelle hooks up her trailer and starts driving west — which, it should be noted, is directly towards the fire.

Michelle Le Clair:

The smoke is really dense, and it's sort of a brown, red color. So you couldn't really see flames, but there was a lot of density to the smoke.

Torah Kachur:

It's a 45-minute drive, and when she arrives...

Michele Le Clair:

There was smoke everywhere. There was embers flying around.

Torah Kachur:

She sees how dire the situation is.

Despite the evacuation order, despite the flames on the horizon, there are dozens of people at the center. Some owners have arrived to collect their horses, but there is mass confusion.

Tamara Boole:

People were already taking their own horses. The tendency was, "Well, oh, let me just go get this. Oh, and I want to get my saddle." And there wasn't really time for that. That wasn't the time to do that.

Torah Kachur:

Tamara sees a pickup pulling a trailer getting ready to leave. It's a trailer built for four horses, but there's only two inside.

Tamara Boole:

It was like, wait a second. Don't send anybody away without taking somebody. Take those two horses and let us know where you're going. You had to keep triaging, kind of moving, and as calm as possible.

Torah Kachur:

She starts organizing all the individual owners into a cohesive team; she gets them to work together. And while that's hard with people, it's especially difficult with animals.

Those unfamiliar with the ways of horses may not exactly understand how difficult and dangerous this situation is. Horses are not docile creatures. They're curious and intelligent, and they're suspicious of strangers. They're also easily spooked, especially with fire.

Michelle Le Clair:

There's a lot of aspects that happen that people don't realize happen. It's not like you're going to pick up a calm, soothed horse. Horses that are afraid, that are afraid to load up, that are afraid to come out of their pen, their barn.

Torah Kachur:

And that's the case with the horse Michelle has come to collect.

Michelle Le Clair:

I remember it looked like a thoroughbred that was pacing, very uncomfortable, very uneasy.

Torah Kachur:

The horse is resistant to follow a stranger's lead. So Michelle has to move

slowly, patiently.

Michelle Le Clair:

So I got a treat and I talked to him calmly, did a little petting. So I took a lot of time with that horse.

Torah Kachur:

All the while, the fire is getting closer.

Michelle Le Clair:

That horse was difficult to load just because he had a lot of anxiety and he was really worried.

Torah Kachur:

After minutes, which seemed like hours, the horse walks cautiously into Michelle's trailer. Next, is the pony.

Michelle Le Clair:

The pony was easy. The pony's like, get me out of here. I'll jump right in.

Torah Kachur:

That's two animals loaded, but she's running out of time. The smoke is thicker. More and more embers are falling from the sky.

Michelle Le Clair:

Your eyes burned, so it was kind of hard to see.

Torah Kachur:

All the trailers on site have been loaded and taken down the road to safety, but the stables are far from empty. There are still 20 animals in the barn. So Michelle starts working her phone. She calls everyone she can think of in the horse community — friends and strangers. Anyone with a truck, trailer and a little bit of horse sense.

Michelle has two horses in her trailer, so she heads to the local fairgrounds that's serving as a temporary stable. It's 20 miles away, so by the time she returns, she's been gone about an hour.

Michelle Le Clair:

There were helicopters. There were big fire planes that were dropping the chemicals. And that stuff was all over my vehicle. That's how close I was. I mean, there were firefighters everywhere.

They were trying to really hold the line, and it was miraculous. And you just take a minute and look, and you're like, wow, these people are really trying to hold it so we can rescue these animals, and they're trying to save these

people's homes and using their lives in jeopardy to do it.

Torah Kachur:

When she finally makes it back to the Center, she realizes her frantic phone calls have been answered.

Michelle Le Clair:

I had six trucks with trailers coming. So I sort of got a fleet.

Torah Kachur:

They load up all the horses they can and take them to the fairgrounds. Then Michelle makes one more trip back to Covered Bridge.

Michelle Le Clair:

They weren't letting anyone back in except for us. And I knew that there was going to be a point where when I came back, they may not let me in because it was no longer safe.

Torah Kachur:

She's allowed back in with a clear warning that if the fire moves in, she's on her own.

Back at the sanctuary the smoke is thick and the heat is building, but there are only three horses left.

There's Dansey...

Tamara Boole:

Dansey is huge, and she was young and she's sassy.

Torah Kachur:

...a horse called Worthy...

Tamara Boole:

Worthy is a handful. Just by sheer size alone, when he lifts his head up, you just want to sit there and go, help me.

Torah Kachur:

...and Napoleon.

Tamara Boole:

He's an ex-bull-fighting horse, and just by his breed and by his training, he was taught to not back down, so he can be an intimidating horse if you're not an experienced horse person.

Torah Kachur:

She's brought a four-horse trailer this time, so she's got room but not much time.

Michelle Le Clair:

So we want to get in there quickly and get out of there quickly and load them up like you would normally load up.

Torah Kachur:

But this is a situation that requires a balance of speed and patience.

Michelle Le Clair:

I had enough experience to understand, okay, this animal needs a minute or I can load this up really fast.

Torah Kachur:

One by one she leads Dansey, Worthy and Napoleon into the trailer. Then Michelle and Tamara hop in the cab of the truck and set off down the road to the safety of the fairgrounds.

Tamara Boole:

So by six o'clock, all the animals were off the property. It was profound, I have to say. The help and just the whole — I think the whole of it.

Michelle Le Clair:

That was intense. But we were actually able to evacuate all the animals safely.

Tamara Boole:

In the time of a crisis, it was the most genuinely sincere offering of help — in an emergency situation.

Torah Kachur:

The wildfire would burn on for another week, and Michelle would end up saving dozens of other horses at other ranches.

Tamara Boole:

Michelle's presence — she was easy going in the emergency. And that was just her horse knowledge. She was a very experienced horse person, so she had the skill. The extra skill.

Michelle Le Clair:

I'm just grateful to be able to be helpful. It's really amazing to know how many people actually care and are ready to help. It's shocking and wonderful. It's wonderful. So many people helped. So many people came out of the woodwork. People who didn't even have animals were like, what can I do to help? And that was great.

Torah Kachur:

A wildfire isn't the only natural disaster that presents a threat to horses. A lot of animals were put in danger by Hurricane Katrina and the subsequent flooding of New Orleans in 2005. Dr. Lais Costa is a veterinarian who worked as part of the rescue team that went looking for them.

Dr. Lais Costa:

It made landfall on August 29th. The first convoy of trucks and trailers was the 1st of September, and so some of the water had receded. There's a lot of devastation, and I think people that go in search-and-rescue missions have to be creative in how to get the animals out.

Torah Kachur:

What kind of strategies do you do when you say you're creative? How do you get the animals out?

Dr. Lais Costa:

Well, I mean, I think it's important to understand the behavior of the animals. For example, if you identify a horse that trusts you and want to be with you, you can use that animal to approach the other animals. The other horses will say, "Well, I guess those humans are all right." Sometimes you use feed and water because they oftentimes — they're starving. They're very thirsty.

It's really important to be prepared. It's just like when you go to the airplane, you know exactly how to buckle your seatbelt, that the oxygen is going to come up, right? It's so second nature, you don't even need to pay attention. You need to try to think of disasters the same way, because exactly what they're doing in an airplane is preparing for a disaster, right? There are rules that you practice or plans that you practice often enough, that becomes second nature. And so if the disaster is to happen, you're not as panicked because you had a plan and you practiced your plan, and you know you can do it. It's for you, and it's for your animal too.

So if you practice loading up the animal, figure out some animals don't like to go from the light to the dark trailer. Position your trailer differently. Practice. Put the horse in the trailer, bring to a nice green pasture, ride for a little. Put the horse back on and come back home. Put your cat in a carrier. Try to make the carrier be the space the cat wants to be, so when they are worried about something, they figure, "This is my safe place. I'm going to go into the carrier, or I'm going to go to my trailer."

A lot of horses — and there are stories that are very sad of horses. There's a fire coming. The barn catches on fire. They let the horses out and try to get the horses to run away. But they're so panicky. They come back to the barn because the barn is their safe place. So you need to create an alternative safe

place for your horse, so they say, “Okay, the trailer is the place for me to get out of here. And I love to be in my trailer, so I’m going to go to my trailer.” And that is the really important part that you can prevent the panic and optimize your evacuation strategies.

Torah Kachur:

So it’s clear that the only way to move horses long distances would be to have a trailer. How important is it to have equipment on your property to help move your dog, your cats, your chickens?

Dr. Lais Costa:

I mean, there’s people that train their llamas. They had four llamas, I think, they put in their van — their family van — and they evacuated. And the llamas were content sitting there. They pulled the seat out, but they’re just squished in the back.

And we see the animals left behind. A lot of times, they’re cats — household cats, because they panic and they go to their safe spot. So they hide, and people can’t find them. And so if you have a pet carrier that they love, they’re going to hide in the carrier, not in the corner of the house or under the house. They’re going to go in their carrier.

For chickens, it’s the same way. There are a lot of people that have their chickens trained to go into pet carriers. They just call, and the chickens go in, and they put them. And so training the animal to be comfortable in whatever device you’re going to use to transport them is the best way.

Torah Kachur:

Should we pay a little bit more attention to our animals in terms of when maybe a natural disaster is coming, that they have a little bit more sense with their hooves on the ground sometimes?

Dr. Lais Costa:

Oh yeah. I think the animals do sense changes in barometric pressure, in a lot of things that we don’t. We look at the Weather Channel, right? But they can tell.

Torah Kachur:

What kind of behaviors would you watch out for?

Dr. Lais Costa:

They start to get more eerie about things. They have this sort of — that adrenaline going. They seem worried about something. And some animals will express more than others. But knowing what the normal behavior of your animals are, and then start paying attention when there are changes, and you will see, they can tell before it’s going to rain that it’s going to rain. They can

tell those things, especially the animals that are backyard animals because they're really in tune with the environment. But even the inside animals — they're very aware of those things.

Torah Kachur:

Well, Dr. Costa, thank you so much. And thank you on behalf of all the animals that you have saved in your career. It's much appreciated.

Dr. Lais Costa:

You're welcome.

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 more information about how to stay safe during wildfire season, there's a link in the show notes to take you to our website.

Or you can go straight to OnStar.com and tell us your favorite story about a time that a stranger helped you. Let's share some love for people who help others, in big ways and small.

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

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