

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Season 5 - Episode 1

Face-to-Face With a Hungry Grizzly

Torah Kachur:

On a remote and overgrown logging road somewhere on the west coast of Canada, Colin Dowler is riding his mountain bike.

Colin Dowler:

Yeah, having a great time. Feeling pretty stoked to be back on my bike. And, you know, it was a nice sunny day. It was my birthday the next day. So I was in a good enough mood that I forgot all about any sort of worry about, you know, bears.

Torah Kachur:

Really his only worry is trying to avoid as many ruts and boulders as he can. Then he sees it. Standing in the middle of the road... a grizzly bear. Nine feet from nose to toe, weighing more than 350 pounds. And hungry.

Colin Dowler:

I stopped my bike, I put my feet down, I yelled at the bear. That's what I was taught to do, right? You see a bear, just yell at it. Hey bear or woah bear.

Torah Kachur:

Colin grew up exploring the wilderness. He's seen plenty of black bears – timid creatures that scamper away if you yell and wave your arms. But this isn't that. This bear is standing his ground.

Colin Dowler:

So at that point I thought, 'Oh man, is uncharted territory for me.' Not only is it a grizzly bear, it hasn't run away on me.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur. This is season 5 of *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. Colin grew up on the edge of a small town in British Columbia that has a million-dollar view.

Colin Dowler:

So if it wasn't a cloudy day, you could see the mountains, a proper alpine mountain that sticks out high.

Torah Kachur:

That mountain, that 'proper alpine mountain,' is called Mount Doogie Dowler. It's a point of pride for him because it's named after his grandfather.

Colin Dowler:

Pretty proud of it and I'd be a liar if I didn't say I'd point it out to my friends pretty often just because I could. It was kinda cheeky, but it was fun.

Torah Kachur:

That was when he was a kid. Now, as Colin approaches his 45th birthday, he's beginning to feel the creep of middle age. You know that feeling: too much time at your desk and not enough time outdoors. And the things you used to do easily are now just a little bit harder. So he decides to do something he's never gotten around to doing — climb his grandfather's mountain. This isn't a trip you take lightly. The summit of Mount Doogie Dowler is almost 7,000 feet above sea level.

Colin Dowler:

There's no path or guidebook or any written route on how to climb the mountain.

Torah Kachur:

Ever prudent, Colin decides to do a reconnaissance trip, get the lay of the land before he embarks on his summit attempt. He carefully maps out his route. The trip will start with a 30-mile boat ride from his house to an old logging camp, then a bike ride up an old logging road, then he'll follow a river through the forest until he reaches the alpine meadow above the treeline. But that's as far as he plans to go on this trip.

Colin Dowler:

I wasn't going to try to actually climb the mountain. I just wanted to see what it was like punching through the forest to get to where the alpine was accessible. It was going to be a one-night trip and my intention was to be home before six o'clock the second day. And I told my wife that if I'm not home by eight, something's gone wrong. I brought a little bivvy with me, right? You know, a ridiculously tiny one-person tent. And then had a little handheld GPS unit to help me not get lost and know where I'm at. A compass, a pocketknife, I had pepperoni for food and some power bars.

Torah Kachur:

It's early morning and the weather is perfect, nothing but blue skies as he motors over to the abandoned logging camp. Except when he gets there, it isn't empty.

Colin Dowler:

There was no boat at the dock, but there was a generator running at the camp, so it was obvious that it was active. So, I poked around until I found someone to talk to there.

Torah Kachur:

The person he finds is the camp cook.

Colin Dowler:

I explained, I'm going for a hike up the hill. He asked me if there was anything I needed. And I didn't have pepper spray with me. So he gave me some pepper spray, which was pretty cool.

Torah Kachur:

Colin stuffs the small can of bear repellent in his coat pocket.

Colin Dowler:

And then he offered me a ride up the hill. So I graciously accepted.

Torah Kachur:

The cook takes him about five miles up the road.

Colin Dowler:

So yeah, he drove me until it didn't make sense to drive anymore. And took a picture of me and said this is for the milk cartons in case you don't return.

Torah Kachur:

They laugh, then Colin hops on his bike and starts pedaling. It's uphill. The ground is uneven, full of ruts and rocks. And the farther he goes, the more overgrown it becomes. After just half a mile he gives up, leans his bike against a tree and starts hiking. Eventually he reaches a stream. He figures this is the valley that will take him through the thick forest and up above the treeline.

Colin Dowler:

I hiked through that stuff for probably three hours and then I thought, I got a feeling I've taken a wrong turn here. So, I thought, well, I'm this far in, I'm not gonna backtrack and start over from the bottom. So what I'll do is just finish my hike, get as high as I can, see if there's maybe some kind of alternate way to get there.

Torah Kachur:

But what he finds is a dead end. An alpine lake with no way around it.

Colin Dowler:

Came to a lake and it was a beautiful setting and there was a place for me to set my bivvy up and, you know, spend the night. So I sincerely thought I may have been the only person that's ever been there because I hiked somewhere where it wouldn't necessarily be an objective for most people because it wasn't a mountaintop, right?

Torah Kachur:

At sunrise, Colin has a light breakfast. Some fruit and a protein bar. Packs up his tiny tent. And retraces his steps down the mountain.

Colin Dowler:

I did take a moment, on the way up. I lost my pepper spray...

Torah Kachur:

It must have fallen out of his pocket.

Colin Dowler:

... and I tried to find the spot where I had lost it, and I gave up trying. I probably invested, not a ton of time, maybe a half an hour. I just didn't really think I'd ever have to use pepper spray, so I wasn't super concerned about leaving it behind.

Torah Kachur:

He reaches the road and then follows that down to where he left his bike.

Colin Dowler:

I was just bombing, you know, back down the logging road, you know, making decent time and taking in the view as much as I can and still, you know, ride without hitting too many potholes. And then I looked ahead and was like, holy crap, there's a grizzly bear standing on the logging road.

Torah Kachur:

Colin stops his bike and yells.

Colin Dowler:

It's a pretty standard yell, "Hey Bear!"

Torah Kachur:

But the bear just stands there, 200 feet away, staring straight at him.

Colin Dowler:

It looked to the bush and looked back at me, looked to the bush and then back at me again. I remember thinking, man, would you please just run into the bush? And then it started walking towards me.

Torah Kachur:

The bear is moving slowly, but he keeps getting closer. The bush on either side is thick, so escaping there isn't an option for Colin. Turning around and riding uphill, that definitely won't work.

Colin Dowler:

There was no way I was going to ride that logging road faster than he could run to catch up.

Torah Kachur:

Colin pulls one of his hiking poles off the side of his backpack and extends it. It's four feet long and thinner than a broomstick, but it's all he's got. He bangs the metal pole on the handlebars of his bike to make noise. But the bear keeps coming closer.

Colin Dowler:

I could hear his claws clicking on the gravel and he got right up close enough, I mean, he was maybe two or three feet. And looked him in the eyes and I felt really uncomfortable.

Torah Kachur:

The bear continues his slow walk. He goes past Colin. Well, almost past him, then does a 180.

Colin Dowler:

So, I spun and did for me a 90 degree turn to put my bike in between him and myself.

Torah Kachur:

Colin starts talking to the bear.

Colin Dowler:

But, I'm not sure what I was saying. I think I was just trying to negotiate with the bear, right? "Hey man, don't do this. We're good. We're friends, right?"

Torah Kachur:

At that moment Colin has an idea. It's late spring. The bear is hungry. Maybe he can smell the food in his backpack. He sluffs it off and tosses it to the side.

Colin Dowler:

And he turned and sniffed it for a fraction of a second and then came back towards me again.

Torah Kachur:

The bear starts probing with his paw. Feeling the bike. Then he rises up on his hind legs.

Colin Dowler:

So out of desperation I threw my bike at him while he had his claws in the air and I remember seeing his arm extended through the A-frame of my bike and then next thing I know he's come down, he's lunged at me, and it was super slow motion. Like it just seemed so slow and so easy to dodge but he got me by the side.

Torah Kachur:

He drags Colin 40 feet. Over to where the bush is thicker. Then shakes his head, sinking his teeth even deeper into Colin's ribs.

Colin Dowler:

So I thought, right, I'm going to go for a double eye gouge here and grab him by both ears and sink my thumbs into his eyes and sincerely thought that it was going to be, like, an ultimate invincible move. And it turns out I couldn't reach his far eye because his head was too broad. So I just got my hand around what would be his left eye and jabbed my thumb in for all it was worth.

Torah Kachur:

The bear goes wild, slamming Colin into the ground and jumping on top of him. Colin is on his back, frantically kicking with his legs. The bear bites down on his thigh and rips open the flesh.

Colin Dowler:

I thought, Man, I gotta do something here. So I'm going to try to pry his mouth off my thigh.

So I got my thumbs in there and I was trying to peel his mouth off and I remember seeing his yellow teeth and he was like breathing out of his mouth and there was like drool and bubbles kind of, you know, huffing out of his jaw.

Torah Kachur:

The bear lets go of his leg and bites his hand, then goes back to the leg, but further down near his knee.

Colin Dowler:

You know, I was at wits end. What do I do? I was out of options. I remember yelling stop. And I yelled why? Because I couldn't understand what he was doing was eating me alive.

And I'm certain I was hearing the front of his canines grinding off my femur. And it sounded like a lab chewing on a big cow bone.

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 in a car accident, caught in a wildfire, or face to face with a hungry grizzly.

Colin Dowler had woken up that morning in the most peaceful setting he could imagine. He was in an alpine meadow at the edge of a mountain lake.

He had waited for the sun to dry the dew from the grass before he started his hike down to the logging road which would lead to his bike, then his boat which would have him home for dinner.

But here it was, not yet lunch time, and he was in a fight for his life with a grizzly bear that was tearing the muscle from his leg.

Colin Dowler:

When he hit whatever he hit in there, right? Like, I screamed and reacted loud, like I arched backwards and howled in agony.

Torah Kachur:

Somehow, in the midst of this, Colin remembers he has a knife. It's a small folding pocketknife that his dad had given him as a gift just three weeks before. He just has to get to it.

Colin Dowler:

My pocketknife is in my right-hand pocket and both of my hands were pinned on my left and I didn't have strength enough with the bear on top of me to pull my right hand across my body to get to the knife one-handed. So I had to like push with my left hand and pull with my right hand and wiggle to get across my abdomen and then I crawled into my pocket with my fingers. I had both hands on my right hand side, so I was able to open that pocket knife, get it into my left hand and then fight to get my left hand out from under his forearm, for lack of a better term.

Torah Kachur:

The blade on Colin's knife is only three inches long. He figures he'll keep stabbing away until the bear reacts.

Colin Dowler:

And so I leaned forward and from probably 10 inches out, I stabbed him in the neck. He lifted his head up off of me and he did that so quickly that I wasn't able to get a second stab into his neck.

Torah Kachur:

As the bear rears up, a huge gush of blood shoots out of his neck. It's so much blood coming out so fast. Colin knows he must have hit a major artery.

Colin Dowler:

And in that moment, I guess with adrenaline, I told the bear, "Now you're bleeding too, bear."

Torah Kachur:

The giant bear stands up. He gets off Colin. And staggers back a few steps.

Colin Dowler:

And he left an unbroken trail of blood. At this point, there were huge gushes coming out with every heartbeat. And he got to my bike and he pooped three times and took a huge pee. And he would look at me and then back at the bush and back towards me, back at the bush. I remember laying there thinking, Would you just die?

Torah Kachur:

The bear is now 20 feet away. Not a safe distance, but enough that Colin can take stock of his own condition. He's lost a lot of blood, and he needs to put a tourniquet on his leg. His knife is still in his hand, so he uses it to cut the sleeve off his shirt. With one eye on the bear, he manages to tie it around his leg.

Colin Dowler:

I started tying the tourniquet on and I thought my pants were bunched up and were interfering with me getting a good tourniquet on. So I kind of looked up and was pulling my pants down. They were pretty ripped. And I realized that it wasn't bunched up pants that was the problem. It was actually meat bulging out of the tooth wounds. And I finished that and I looked over and the bear was gone.

Torah Kachur:

The bear is gone, but Colin isn't out of the woods. In fact, he's quite literally, very much, very deep in the woods. The nearest human is four miles down the road at the logging camp. His left leg is mutilated. Walking there is out of the question. But he does have his bike, and it's mostly downhill. Pushing himself with his hands and his one functioning leg, he scootches over to his bike. He stands the bike up and then uses it to pull himself up. He straddles it and starts rolling down the hill.

Colin Dowler:

And immediately crashed and face planted off the other side of my bike. Incredibly disheartening, you know, really felt like I was going to get somewhere. I was like, Man, like you're in huge trouble here.

Torah Kachur:

He drags his body back up onto the bike, puts his right foot on the pedal and pushes down to get some momentum. The bike rolls forward. He pumps again on the right pedal and the bike moves ahead. Rolling down the bumpy road is painful enough, but the sections where the road flattens out and he has to pedal are excruciating.

Colin Dowler:

It's kind of one step at a time, right? I need to get to the logging camp to get saved.

Torah Kachur:

And that requires staying on the bike.

Colin Dowler:

Absolutely certain I would not have had the stamina to get back on my bike had I crashed.

Torah Kachur:

Miraculously, he makes it. Colin rolls into the logging camp and steers towards the front steps of the dining hut. He crashes into it and collapses.

Colin Dowler:

So my legs were on the stairwell, most of my upper body was on the deck. And then I just screamed, "Help, I've been mauled by a bear!" They came running out and immediately realized like, holy shit, like, right, it was a really bloody scene that they came across.

Torah Kachur:

The five men at the logging camp are used to working in the outdoors in dangerous conditions. They are also used to encounters with wild animals. But a blood-soaked cyclist crashing on the steps of their dining hut is not something they planned for.

Colin Dowler:

And I asked, "You know, guys, can you please get me off these stairs?"

Torah Kachur:

A couple of the loggers carry him inside. They lay him down on some blankets then cut off his pants to get a full look at his injuries. They start by wrapping his leg but while doing that they notice the damage done to his torso. The skin has been ripped away and his internal organs are fully visible.

Colin Dowler:

From what I gather was each time I took a breath the wound would open, and my internals would like bulge, not necessarily right out of the wound, but bulge up outwards of the wound and then as it collapsed it kind of went away a little bit more, and they essentially were looking at it as an exposed kidney.

Torah Kachur:

It's pretty clear that his injuries are life-threatening and beyond what they can deal with on the floor of a dining hut. So they get on the radio and call for an air ambulance. But that's going to take some time. And they aren't sure Colin has much time left. One of the loggers pulls out a phone and asks who he wants to call. After all, this might be his only chance to say goodbye. Colin tries his wife, but it goes straight to her voicemail. Then he calls his dad. No answer. Finally, he gets through to his brother and explains the situation.

Colin Dowler:

I had the most awkward conversation in my life because it's like, what do you tell someone when you're dying on a logging camp floor? And I didn't want to be making phone calls, but they wanted me to so badly. It didn't feel like I could say no. As odd as that sounds. And they asked if there was another call I could make and I told them they could call my boss and tell him that I won't be in to work on Monday.

Torah Kachur:

After that, there wasn't much to do, but wait, and hope.

Colin Dowler:

What I remember is I'm laying on my side and I was fading away, right? I could feel myself just slipping into a warm, peaceful place where all my life's problems were going away. I didn't have a concern in the world, right? I wasn't sorrowful. It was closer to blissful. Like it was just, I was going into a peaceful place. And then I heard the helicopter.

Torah Kachur:

It's a beautiful sunny day in Vancouver. Kalani Polson has been on duty for a couple hours without a call. He's a paramedic with the air ambulance service. Today, the alarm goes off just after lunch.

Kalani and his partner hop in the helicopter and take off. They get more details once they're in the air.

Kalani Polson:

It was pretty graphic, even over the phone. We were told that the patient had organs hanging out of him after a bear attack. We landed, we grabbed all of our resuscitation gear, and then the loggers met us at the helicopter and led us to where Colin was. They had cleared a bunch of tables and we found Colin on the floor in there and a very large pool of blood.

Torah Kachur:

When you spend 25 years as an air ambulance paramedic in western Canada you see more than your fair share of bear attacks. But this was extreme.

Kalani Polson:

When you looked at his body, he had wounds all over his arms, all over his legs. We're talking probably 70 to 100 wounds over his body.

Torah Kachur:

His blood pressure dangerously low, and his heart rate frighteningly high.

Kalani Polson:

So that tells us that he's lost a significant amount of his blood volume and his body's doing everything possible to try and compensate by speeding up his heart rate, but that has limits. So we knew he was in trouble.

Torah Kachur:

There was a tourniquet on each of his four limbs, and a large bandage on his abdomen.

Kalani Polson:

When I lifted that up, this was the first time I've seen this in my career, was there was a window into his body. So in his flank you could actually visualize his kidney and his adrenal gland almost like a surgical window into the side of his body there. The folks that were helping him were calm. They'd done an unbelievable job of managing his injuries to that point. The loggers shared with us that they had just taken their first aid course days earlier. So this was literally their first patient. Quite the introduction to the first aid end of things, but they did a wonderful job.

Torah Kachur:

And an essential one. By this point, Colin had been at the logging camp for about one hour. And if the group of loggers hadn't been there, say, if they had been working in the field or out on the boat...

Kalani Polson:

I have no doubt in my mind that he'd be dead. They controlled the bleeding with direct pressure, bandages to try and slow the bleeding. They applied tourniquets to each of his four limbs. They kept him warm; they moved him inside. So sometimes those simple interventions can make a great deal of difference in the type of patient that we arrive to.

Torah Kachur:

Colin needed blood. And he needed it quickly. Fortunately, this particular crew and this particular helicopter was part of a pilot project, and they were carrying a supply of blood — specifically ‘packed red blood cells.’

Kalani Polson:

If that had occurred the summer before, he wouldn’t have had access to that. And I think the outcome would have been significantly different.

Torah Kachur:

Kalani inserts a needle into Colin’s arm and starts a transfusion with one of the loggers holding the blood bag. Meanwhile, two others go back to the helicopter with Kalani’s partner to grab the stretcher.

Kalani Polson:

I was trying to get satellite phone connectivity to speak to our physician regarding the case and discuss the transfusion and such. So I stepped outside and had to walk towards the helicopter to get reception. And at that point, the loggers burst out of the trailer yelling “bear.” And there was actually a second bear that was in the vicinity behind one of the big shipping containers. The loggers did their thing and made a bunch of noise and the bear ran away.

Torah Kachur:

Back inside, they place Colin onto the stretcher then start a second bag of blood. Together — while keeping an eye out for the bear — they carry him to the helicopter.

Kalani Polson:

The whole team just worked together to expedite his transport.

Torah Kachur:

Colin was taken to the hospital in Vancouver. He had six-and-a-half hours of surgery followed by two years of rehab. But after all that, he is back to enjoying the great outdoors.

Colin Dowler:

So I’m not necessarily emotionally recovered. I don’t know that I ever will be fully, right? It kind of comes and goes and how well I sleep and, you know, my different sorts of dreams and whatnot. Physically able to continue to pursue the stuff I used to do and still love doing. Yeah, I’m phenomenally blessed in that regard.

Torah Kachur:

Four years after the attack, Colin finally reached the summit of the mountain named after his grandfather.

Colin Dowler:

Yeah, I climbed Doogie Dowler last summer. It felt awesome. Yeah, it was good to get it done.

Torah Kachur:

And he has no question about who he owes his life to.

Colin Dowler:

You know, if those loggers weren't there, I would have died for sure.

Torah Kachur:

Kalani agrees.

Kalani Polson:

If they hadn't been there, Colin wouldn't be here. Again, they were just, you see all the different elements of humanity in this line of work. In this particular case, we just had an amazing group of humans that came together to help another. That just brings it home for me. You know, this is just people helping people.

Torah Kachur:

A grizzly bear attack is an incredibly rare event, but every day, all across North America, more than 10,000 people need a blood transfusion. Matt Levy is a doctor with the American Red Cross and he has seen firsthand how critical it is to have the ability to do blood transfusions in the field.

Dr. Matt Levy:

So what's really interesting in medicine is that things have a way of coming full circle and the ability to give blood in the out of hospital environment, en masse, if you will, is still evolving.

Torah Kachur:

The first human blood transfusion was done 200 years ago. Eighty years ago, during the second world war, the American Red Cross began collecting blood for wounded soldiers. But despite that long history, we're still learning a lot about best practices.

Dr. Matt Levy:

And so, when we think about pre-hospital blood administration, it was not that long ago where the only thing that we could really do for patients who were suffering from hemorrhagic shock or the type of shock that occurs after someone is traumatically injured was give them IV fluid. In fact, you've probably seen a picture of someone holding up a bag of IV fluid in the scene of a car collision or something like that. And that fluid was thought to expand the blood volume enough to help circulate what blood was left to perfuse the tissue. But the reality is that clear fluid doesn't actually carry oxygen and doesn't carry the clotting factors and the nutrients need to stop bleeding. So in some ways we were actually accelerating the death process.

And so fast forward to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and there's a lot more science and precision coming out of the early resuscitation of those patients. These recent trends and lessons learned from the battlefield have really identified the importance of getting that blood into victims as soon as possible, you know, in the

ambulance or in the helicopter, while being transported all the while, while stopping the bleeding, controlling that loss of blood and buying us valuable time.

Torah Kachur:

Why has it been so hard to do blood transfusions in the field?

Dr. Matt Levy:

First and foremost, it's important to acknowledge that blood is truly like the most precious commodity, right? Having access to blood is an incredible gift and a blessing. And that only works through the goodwill and the civic responsibility of people to donate blood. So availability has always been an issue. That's one part of it. There are also some logistical issues that need to be maintained. You know, you can't just throw a bag of blood in a medic bag and expect it to do well. It has to be kept in very, very tight temperature monitoring and temperature control parameters because that blood needs to be optimally stored so that those cells in the blood will not die in between patients.

But here's the bottom line, Torah. The bottom line is that it is doable, and with the right teams, it can make a huge difference, as is the case in Colin's outcome.

Torah Kachur:

We often hear about different blood products like whole blood plasma. What are they? How are they used differently?

Dr. Matt Levy:

As we saw many, many advances in medical care in the latter part of last century, we began realizing that there are patients who just need certain elements of that blood, but not all of that blood. So we could take one bag of blood that's donated and give some people the platelets that are in it and some people that the plasma that's in it and some people that the packed red blood cells that are in it.

Torah Kachur:

OK, so hopefully there's some people out there going, I'm thinking about donating some blood. How do you go about to do that? What's the process?

Dr. Matt Levy:

First of all, we would welcome everyone to donate blood. It doesn't matter what blood type you are, we need your blood, we need your help. And if you're able to donate, we'd encourage you to do so. We just go to redcross.org, Get to that page and it'll be pretty self-apparent as to what to do.

Torah Kachur:

How often can you donate?

Dr. Matt Levy:

If everybody would donate blood twice a year, my goodness, we would be in such a wonderful place. And I think that's the ask. And you know, every single

person's ability to donate really does have an impact on someone's outcome. Being on the other end of this as a physician caring for patients who are in shock and traumatically injured and to see the life come back into someone who's receiving blood is just one of the true miracles of resuscitation science, and one of the true miracles of the practice of the type of medicine that I practice.

Torah Kachur:

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

We share a new story every other week, but if you're in the mood for another one right now, scroll back in time to one of our earlier episodes. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please, be safe out there.

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