

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Season 6 - Episode 1

A Jogger, His Dog and an Icy Canal

Torah Kachur:

Mike Wise is drowning in a frozen canal. Desperately trying to pull himself up on the ice. Beside the canal is a jogging trail, and just a hundred yards beyond that is a road jammed with rush hour traffic. But in the darkness, with only his head and arms above the water, Mike is invisible.

Mike Wise:

I thought I was dying in that moment. Like I, I knew it might take another 10 minutes, but if I did not see anybody on the trail — all I saw was car lights going by, none of which could see me in the pitch black, you know, of a January night in D.C.

Torah:

The cold seeps into his body, stripping away his strength.

Mike:

I just remember feeling really numb and what am I going to do?

Torah:

I'm Torah Kachur. This is Tell Me What Happened, a series of true stories about people helping people, produced by OnStar.

All of our stories start with a simple idea: 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.

This show is here to remind you that any of us could be either one of those people every day.

If you're a sports fan, regardless of whether it's basketball, football, or the Olympics, you've probably read an article by Mike Wise.

He was a regular contributor for the *New York Times* for a decade and then got his own column with the *Washington Post*. By the time he hit his early 40s, he had a great job and a really nice house in the suburbs.

Mike:

You know, I loved to cook. Every now and then I'd have people over for dinner parties.

Torah:

From the outside, his life looked great.

Mike:

I was trying to live the important journalist, Washington life. Of course, I wasn't that important. I was a sports columnist, but still, it was kind of cool.

Torah:

Privately, he was a mess. He broke up with his fiancée just four months before their wedding, and he had a long list of unhealthy habits.

Mike:

I was addicted to excitement. I was addicted to chaos. When all shit was breaking loose, that was when I was at my best. And it was just how I got to live. Whether it was I was on deadline or in a really crazy, unhealthy relationship.

Torah:

As a sports reporter he travelled a lot — went to big events. He was always surrounded by people. But something was missing.

Mike:

There was a part of me that was a little alone at that point. And so, I wasn't really dating anybody seriously. Pretty much my identity was my work. So I thought, okay, I'll add in a dog. Maybe that'll force me to live a better life between the lines instead of outside the lines. And dog just seemed like a great way to start.

Torah:

That's when Looly entered his life — a six-month-old golden labrador.

Mike:

So, I think the biggest thing with how my life changed with her is I just felt more complete with the dog. I mean, Looly was something that I looked forward to every day when I got home.

For me, she definitely was part of the emotional recovery, psychological recovery. I look back on it, and the dog was all part of that.

Torah:

Looly also became his running partner, and, together, they logged a lot of miles.

Mike:

She was sort of like, okay, when you going to take me out? Are we going running? She just had a big personality.

I just remember it was a pretty cold January day in D.C.

Torah:

Washington is in the midst of a cold snap, the temperature hovering in the low 30s during the day and plunging into the 20s at night.

Mike:

I didn't feel like going out at first. It was a great night to just stay in and have cocoa and pizza and anything but go out in a fricking cold and run. But I just remember telling myself, I got to do this.

Torah:

It's only 5 o'clock, but it's already getting dark as he heads out.

Mike:

I was planning to run six miles. I had it all mapped out.

Torah:

His route is along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal Trail. Three miles out to where there is a little foot bridge and then three miles back. At the halfway point he stops and does some light stretching while Looly waits patiently at his side.

Mike:

And I threw a stick, not on the water, not on the canal, but close to it and she went and got it.

Torah:

The next time Mike looks up, he sees Looly has run out onto the ice.

Mike:

That's a little far. Alright, come on. Come on, girl, let's go. Come on, let's come back. And she's just looking at me out there, what's the problem?

Well, I just remember spoosh and like, Oh man, she's in there. I'm looking at her pawing and doggy paddling and trying to get to a solid piece of ice. And she's just in a little circular area where the ice broke, but she can't get her paws up on the thing. She can't get her body up on the ice.

And now she starts doing the whole whimpering. Whmmm whmmm. And I'm like, Oh my God, my dog is going to freeze to death and drown out there.

Torah:

Mike looks up to the busy road at the top of the embankment – but even if he could flag down a passing car, what could they do?

Mike:

She just kept whimpering and she kept moving in the water, but she really, she wasn't able to keep herself stable or get on any piece of ice.

Torah:

He decides to slide out onto the ice on his belly, keeping his weight spread out as much as he can. But the math isn't in his favor.

Mike:

She's only 60 something pounds and I'm over 200 pounds. What are the chance of boom sploosh? And all of a sudden now it's a big hole and we're both in the water. And worst part about it is I can't stand!

Torah:

Mike is 6-foot-4 but the canal must be deeper than that because he can't touch bottom.

Mike:

All I'm worried about at that point is her. She's whimpering. She's been in there for a good two, three minutes. But all I kept thinking was, okay, I'm going to do this quick. And for some reason, she was just too heavy. I couldn't get her out.

And at some point I just realized, okay, I'm going to put my right arm underneath her belly, like a big fishing hook. And I just jerked like one time. And she got up on the ice a piece that wasn't cracking, and she shook really quick. She went right up the side of the canal and got up on the ground. And I'm like, oh God, I'm so glad she got out. Okay, good, good, good.

Torah:

Of course, there remains the small problem of Mike getting himself out.

Mike:

At some point she realizes I'm not with her. Now she's looking at me going back and forth, pacing back and forth up there. She's not going to get back in the water, but she's like, I'm not leaving without you.

Torah:

Looly's loyalty is commendable, but there isn't a lot she can do.

Mike:

And at that point, I'm trying to get up on the ice. I couldn't get my whole body up there. Every time I tried to get my body up there, a little bit more of a crack, and so now I'm getting cold and I'm feeling like, I dunno, I'm just feeling numb. My lower extremities are all in the water.

Torah:

Looly is pacing on the bank of the canal.

Mike:

And I look at her and she looks at me and I'm going, I'm not getting out of here. And I don't know how you're going to get home.

Torah:

Mike calls out for help.

Mike:

At the top of my lungs in the most bone-shrilling way. I was like, "Help!" I mean, I screamed as loud as I could ever in my life and nothing. And I just remember thinking, that's pretty much it.

Torah:

Mike is a writer — and somewhere in his brain he starts composing his own obituary. And what annoys him the most is that this isn't happening in some remote wilderness. He isn't in the high Arctic or in the Himalayas.

Mike:

This stupid canal is like 10 minutes from Georgetown, one of the most affluent communities in America. And Jesus, I'm going to die here? This sucks.

Torah:

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 being chased by a grizzly bear, or having a heart attack beside a highway, or drowning in a frozen canal.

Jason Coates:

So I like running a lot. Yeah, I do it like five days a week.

Torah:

That's Jason Coates.

Jason:

I joined the high school cross country team when I was in ninth grade and yeah, I just stuck with it.

Torah:

He's now in university — law school actually. He's only 22 years old, but he lives a very disciplined life.

Jason:

Wake up and then go to school and I would come home, have a snack or maybe dinner, and then I'd wait an hour, then I'd run, and then I would do whatever work I had to do for school, and then I would study and type up my notes from class.

Torah:

Tonight, despite the cold, he's out running.

Jason:

Straight down like the main street in the neighborhood, and then cross a bridge over the Potomac River into the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, D.C.

Torah:

It's a very specific route that he runs almost every day.

Jason:

I turned a right off the bridge and then I turned left on the trail. So I was going west on the C&O Canal.

Torah:

It's dark, cold, and the trail is pretty much deserted. Jason reaches his turn around point and starts heading towards home.

A dog runs across the trail and barks. Then, he hears a voice in the darkness.

Jason:

... and then I heard "Someone, anyone, please help."

Torah:

That's when he sees a man struggling in the water.

Jason:

He was in the canal, like surrounded by ice, I think. Yeah, like up to his neck. He was like making like the sort of, like a drowning, motion, like where his arms are above his head, only his head is above water along with his arms.

First, I looked for a stick to try to see if he could like grab onto that and I could, I could pull him to me. I didn't find any sticks long enough for that.

Torah:

Mike is floundering. The cold draining his strength. On the shore, Jason is getting desperate.

Jason:

So, I walked down, like, sort of like an embankment towards the ice, and, like, started to step on it, and then I fell through up to like on my chest.

Torah:

Now, both of them are in the water. Fortunately for Jason, he's still close enough to the shore that he can touch the bottom. That keeps his hands and arms free to break the ice. He makes a path towards Mike.

Jason:

And he's like reaching out his hand and I'm just trying to lunge and I couldn't do it.

Torah:

Seconds tick by, Jason, afraid to go any deeper, Mike, unable to get enough leverage to break the ice separating them.

Mike:

And I just remember lunging once, and, all of a sudden, I could touch the bottom. I was like, oh my God, that's the bottom. I think I might be able to get out of here.

Torah:

Now that he can stand, Mike uses both hands to break the ice.

Jason:

And then he had, like, a clear path like to get out, and, yeah, I like pulled him towards me and I pulled him up the side of the canal — he was out.

Mike:

And I just got up there and I was just like, oh my God, thank you, thank you.

Music

Torah:

Their parting is remarkably brief.

Mike:

It was weird. The guy saved my life, and I feel like I'm inconveniencing him.

Jason:

And I asked him if he was okay. And he like insisted that he was.

Mike:

And he goes, you sure? You sure? He made sure I was, and I go, yeah, yeah, no, thank you so much. And I remember he is starting to walk away and I'm going, "Wait, what's your name?"

Torah:

Jason tells him, then, soaking wet, starts his two-mile trek to get home.

Mike:

He walked away and I started bawling. I started crying, and I was like, oh my God. And it, a couple minutes went by, and then I said, all right, I got to get out of this cold.

Torah:

Mike heads for a nearby public washroom to wring the water out of his clothes. He uses the hand drier to thaw his hands. Then walks to his car.

Mike:

And Looly was funny. The ice droplets on her chest had frozen because it was so cold. She never left my back heel for a moment, the whole way home, three miles back.

Torah:

He drives home, strips off his wet clothes, and crawls into bed.

Mike:

My dog was laying right beside me. And at that time, I dried her off and she was fine. And she just looked at me like, Hey, we're alive. And I was like, Hey, we're alive. That's good.

Torah:

That incredible rescue took place in 2008, so more than 15 years ago. A lot has happened since then. Mike — being a reporter — tracks Jason down to say thanks. They go out for pizza, and, despite being 20 years different in age and coming from very different backgrounds, they become close friends.

Jason graduates from law school and gets engaged. Mike gets ordained through a mail-order ministry so that he can perform the ceremony.

Mike:

I could never repay him for saving my life, but the fact that he made me a part of his life at that point, and you know I'm looking out while I'm doing the ceremony and I'm going, man, this doesn't happen if he doesn't save me that day.

Torah:

Then about a decade after the incident, Looly passes away.

Mike:

Looly was 12 1/2. She'd gotten cancer at the end. I slept with the dog the last night I remember, and she just kind of licked my forehead and I am like, she knows that she's going away, and I know she's going away. It was pretty hard.

Torah:

Looly is cremated and Mike decides to have a small ceremony, so he calls up Jason.

Jason:

We just went to the spot where we met and he spread some of her ashes and it was just nice to remember her. She was a very nice dog.

Torah:

Summers and winters, weddings and funerals, Mike and Jason have been a part of each other's lives for a long time now. But Mike still gets choked up talking about what happened that freezing cold night by the canal.

Mike:

I just tell him, thank you. Thank you for having the courage to go in the water. Not everybody would've done that. You know? He didn't know who I was. It was sort of, it was a leap of faith.

They always say things happen for a reason, and it's such a cliché, but now I'm looking back on it and it's like, no, something did happen for a reason. Jason was supposed to save me. I really believe that there was a reason for all of it. And I miss that dog though.

Torah:

This is one of my favourite stories we've done on this show, because of the way it starts.

People get into bad situations for a lot of different reasons: carelessness, arrogance, foolishness, sometimes just bad luck. But Mike almost died because he loves his dog. He willingly went out onto the ice to save his pet.

That's not a smart thing to do — any safety expert will tell you not to do that — but I'm not going to lie, I probably would do the same thing to try and save my dog.

So, I wanted to know why: Why do we have such strong attachments to our pets? And does it extend beyond dogs to cats, to horses, to pet lizards?

I sat down with Jay Ingram, a former Discovery Channel host and the author of the book *The Science of Pets*.

What do you think makes our connection so strong with Pets?

Jay Ingram:

It's a hard question to answer. I, for myself, I tend to separate pets into two groups, roughly. Mammals, mostly, so everything dogs, cats, horses, because I really think other than the awkwardness of having a horse in the house, on all other grounds they qualify as pets. They're smart, they're responsive. They communicate fantastically if you know how to communicate with them.

So, all of those hamsters, gerbils, ferrets, you know, I think it's possible to have some kind of emotional connection. And I think it's because mammals communicate pretty well. Well enough that you can become very attached to them.

On the other side of that threshold are animals that I've had like lizards, turtles, tropical fish. And I think they're different. I think they're very interesting to watch. It's fascinating, actually. I did love the pair of lizards I had, but I got the very strong sense that they really didn't even know I was there. Or if they did, they didn't care. And I didn't really register unless I, you know, I had some mealworms that I was going to put on the top of their cage so they could leap up and get them. Now, that doesn't mean those aren't good pets because I think we can relate to our pets emotionally or not emotionally, maybe sort of maybe intellectually, that's not quite

the right word, but you know, love to watch them.

I suggested in my book that an ant colony would qualify as a pet because here's a complex set of organisms that communicate in a way that's pretty alien to us, you know, using chemistry to communicate in an incredibly wide variety of ways. They're fascinating. You keep them alive, you feed them, but, you know, they don't know you're there. I mean, I guess I'm guessing about that, but I'm pretty sure. And you don't think of them as companions, you think of them as almost an exhibit in your house. So, I think there's differences, but why exactly, deeply, emotionally, we connect to our pets and think of them as members of the household, equivalent to the humans in the household, or in some cases even more so. I think that's still mysterious.

Torah:

When did we start having pets in our human history?

Jay:

Well, the best evidence is the dog was first. Cats, probably a few thousand years later. Their origins very different. Wolves somehow became socialized into dogs. I think that's the right way to put it. Cats never really became dramatically socialized to humans, but they were extremely useful because they killed mice and rats that were plaguing the first farmers. So there was a difference there. The oldest demonstrated — demonstrably a dog — is an animal that was found in Germany. It's about 9,500 years old. And what makes it demonstrably a pet is that part of its jawbone has been found and its teeth show really severe marks of canine distemper disease at the age of, five to six, and then again at seven. So two times in its short life, it really suffered from canine distemper, which would kill it had it not been with humans. And it was buried with a human. And it's just the most logical way to look at this, they were buried at the same time, is that without the human, that animal, that dog, wouldn't have survived canine distemper, but it did. And it did so because in some way, this ancient human found ways to keep it alive.

Torah:

Do you think our pets can understand us?

Jay:

Well, to some extent, well, it depends on the pet, okay. I was away from home for about three weeks recently and somebody asked me if my dog had missed me. And I said, I think, well, his reception when I walked in the door, he realized I'd been away because he was more excited than he ever is when I walk in the door. OK, so he knows I was away. But if you'd somehow been able to ask him at the halfway through my absence, are you thinking about Jay? I would think it's 50-50 at most and probably not.

The philosopher Wittgenstein said something like once, even if a lion could talk to us, we wouldn't know what it was talking about. And to me, this is really the most fascinating part of all this because dogs, like, especially border collies, can be

trained to associate a particular type of toy with a word. You can put a bunch of toys in another room, have the dog in this room, say the word, dog goes and gets that toy.

And you know, the best of those dogs can memorize 30 to 40 terms. So that's pretty amazing. But you know what? Like that's 40 terms for toys. That's not what is going on in their minds. And I just came across an article this morning that people are trying to apply AI to cat sounds and somehow, and I put heavy quotes around this word, translate those into actual thoughts.

But there's obviously a lot of interest in this because we all want to know what our pets are thinking. But I think we're just barely, barely scratching the surface of that.

Torah:

Thanks Jay. I really enjoyed this.

Jay:

Thank you, Torah. Good to talk to you.

Torah:

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, and we've got a lot more coming over the next couple of months, so be sure to click "follow" on Apple Podcasts or Spotify so you'll know when the next episode drops.

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

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