

Season 6 - Episode 3

A Heart Attack and Help From the Crowd

Torah Kachur:

Blaine Russell-Webster is driving his work van down a quiet residential street.

Blaine Russell-Webster:

Driving off of Egert going over to Pine Ridge. There's a couple roads there that go into it. I had passed that. And then I got up to East Delavan and just passed out.

Torah:

He collapses on the wheel, unconscious. The van swerves off the side of the road, flips over, and smashes through the gates of a cemetery.

Sarah Brown:

It was just crumpled up like paper. It was completely on its side, and it was flipped over. The scene was like out of an action movie. And all I could hear was people, screaming, does anybody know CPR? Does anybody know CPR?

Torah:

I'm Torah Kachur. This is Tell Me What Happened, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar. And we are now in our sixth season of sharing these stories with you.

As always, we start with the idea that '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 us that any of us could be either one of those people every day.

Blaine Russell-Webster is a gem of a man.

He goes to church.

Blaine:

I'm a very patient person, a very godly person.

Torah:

He works hard.

Blaine:

I'm a service technician, going into people's homes fixing stuff, whether they have internet, TV, phones, whatever the issue is, going in there and fixing it.

Torah:

And he loves being a granddad.

Blaine:

My kids are all adults now and they have kids, so going to, now, my grandkids' school events, activities, their activities. And you know that's basically about it.

Torah:

It's the middle of March in Buffalo, New York. Winter has passed and the snow is off the roads. Blaine is working, driving his service van from house to house.

Blaine:

Has two ladder racks on top. You know, a bunch of equipment inside. My tools. Anything I need to get the job done.

Torah:

Over the past 23 years Blaine has put hundreds of thousands of miles on vans just like it. The only thing notable about today, is that it's Friday.

Blaine:

I work Tuesday through Saturday. So I was in a great mood because Friday, Saturday, and then I'm on vacation. (laughs)

Torah:

He's taking a week off to celebrate his 60th birthday, which is just a few days away. It's late afternoon and there is only one more job on his list for the day.

Blaine:

But instead of giving me a three to four, they gave me a four to five job, which was in Cheektowaga. But I wasn't really too far from home and hadn't taken my lunch yet. So I'm like, all right, whatever. Get a little overtime. I'm gonna go home, eat lunch, hang for a minute, then take a slow drive out there, get to the next job a little bit before four o'clock. Finish that up and come home. That was the plan.

I left my house through Amherst. There's a road called Egert Road and Cheektowaga is south from where I was going.

Torah:

It's a residential neighbourhood. Houses on one side and a cemetery on the other. He's not in a hurry. He's driving 35 miles an hour, 40 tops.

Blaine:

I mean the weather was kind of nice so I had the windows down a little bit. You know a nice song on the radio. I was enjoying myself. I was good. All of sudden, boom, out of nowhere, just, just passed out.

Torah:

Blaine blacks out. He slumps forward onto the wheel and the van careens sideways.

The front right tire hits the curb and the van flips on its side, sliding across the sidewalk and smashing into the fence around the cemetery.

After the crash, everything is still.

Blaine:

You know I've heard when people say certain things happen it seems like a dream or a nightmare. That's true. It seemed like whatever was happening really wasn't happening, but it actually was.

Torah:

What is happening, is four strangers have smashed the windshield of his van — which is laying on its side — and have pulled him out. They prop him up against what is left of the fence and call 9-1-1. Blaine is bleeding a lot. He's awake, but incoherent.

Blaine:

I was trying to get somebody to get my cell phone out of the truck so I can call my wife.

Torah:

Someone tells him not to worry — that help is on the way.

Blaine:

I sat against the railing. I was breathing. Then, all of sudden, I slumped over and just passed out.

Torah:

The four strangers look at each other desperately. One of them asks, "Does anyone know CPR?"

This is *Tell Me What Happened*, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help.

When we started this series, we weren't sure how long we would go for. I mean, how many stories are there where a person jumps in to save someone they don't know? Well, it turns out, it happens a lot.

So, whether you're high on a mountain top, lost in a forest, or on a suburban road in upstate New York, halfway between Tonawanda and Cheektowaga, your best

chance of getting help might be someone you've never met.

When Sarah Brown was 17 years old — with no formal training beyond her high school diploma — she got a job as a teacher's aide.

Sarah:

I felt like God moved on my behalf and placed me where he wanted me to be and that was with children and to be a caregiver.

Torah:

She was placed at School 84 in Buffalo — which is for children with special needs.

Sarah:

I had to toilet, feed, wipe. So, you know I've had different experiences not only with general ed students, but I've worked with autistic children.

Torah:

It's challenging work. Something not everyone is cut out for. But Sarah — hard-working and a natural learner — flourished.

Now, more than 20 years later, she's still at that same school and still helping children.

Sarah:

I just been full speed ahead, standing firm in this position and I haven't regretted since.

Torah:

Tuesday March 13th was unseasonably warm.

Sarah:

Buffalo, you could get all four seasons in one day. So, but that day was a great day. The sun was shining. I'm like, okay, I had a good day at work. No, you know, not stressed. Cool.

Torah:

Other than the weather, it was just a regular day.

Sarah:

I was in route to go to pick my daughter up Angelia from daycare and I normally take my normal route home and nothing different.

Torah:

Traffic in front of her slows. She figures it's a crew doing road-work.

Sarah:

As I'm approaching and getting closer, I'm like, what's going on?

Torah:

There's a work van laying on its side, bent and twisted. There's two ladders strewn on the boulevard. The front window is smashed out.

Sarah:

It looked like an action movie. It seemed like the Transformers and the Decepticons ripped through this van.

Torah:

What makes the scene look even more bizarre, is that the van is lying on the edge of a cemetery.

Sarah:

I did see two men standing over another guy, which was laying in between the tombstones. And I seen a vest, a reflection vest, and I just saw a guy's arm.

Torah:

There are a handful of people gathered around. Some calling for help, some shooting videos on their phones, most of them baffled about what to do.

Sarah:

But I'm like, my god, my god. And all I could hear was people, people different people screaming, "Does anybody know CPR? Does anybody know CPR?"

Torah:

Sarah Brown, does.

Sarah:

And the crazy thing about it is, earlier that summer, I was at Erie County Fair cause I kept going past the firemen station where they have the old fashioned fire trucks and they have the CPR.

Torah:

Sarah was already trained to do CPR. It's one of the skills she picked up through her job — but it's been decades since she took that course, and she's never actually done it for real.

Sarah:

And then my ego and my pride was like, I know what I'm doing. I don't need to freshen up. Hour later goes by, I'm like, small voice, like, No, go freshen up. Go, you know sharpen that skill.

Torah:

Eventually she heeds the voice in her head.

Sarah:

Yeah, they have classes where they show you how to do CPR on adults and children.

They have dummies to show you the rights and wrongs and the do's and don'ts. And you can practice as many times as you want.

Torah:

All this is going through Sarah's head as she looks out her car window at the crumpled van and gathering crowd.

Sarah:

I hear the screams, "Does anybody know CPR? Does anybody know CPR?" And I'm like, and in that moment, I can honestly say, like, the devil will have you second guessing yourself because like, soon as they said it, I'm like, I know CPR in my head, but then that little, that voice, no you don't. And I'm like, yes, I do.

Torah:

She pulls over to the side of the road. Jumps out and runs to where the man is lying on the ground. She rushes past the two men standing over him.

Sarah:

I started doing chest compressions and everything. And my mindset at that time, it's like, God, let your will be done. But he's not dying on my watch.

Torah:

Sarah hears a crack as one of his ribs fractures under the pressure.

Sarah:

And I'm like, come on, baby, come on. Like I'm trying to talk to him, and you know, I'm like, come on, come on. And then when he first started to breathe again, you know, I'm like, okay, thank you God, you know.

Torah:

He breathes for a minute, maybe two...

Sarah:

But then, he stopped breathing again. So then I went back to do more chest compressions.

Torah:

While all this is happening, people in the crowd start to pray.

Sarah:

That's what I noticed. Like when we're in distress. God have to work a miracle through me and he did. And that's all I could call on to help me help this man.

Torah:

He starts to breathe a second time.

Sarah:

When he did the big gasp, I'm like, okay. I'm like, can you hear me? You know, I'm like, we right here with you.

Torah:

She hears someone say "an ambulance is here," and a minute later a pair of uniformed paramedics kneel down beside her.

Sarah:

I felt so relieved. They put him on a stretcher and I see his bald head at the top.

When the officer came over, she was like, "He's good. He's actually good. He's answering to his name. Everything seems fine. He knows what date it is." And he's in, I said, "Okay, thank God."

Torah:

Blaine was taken to a nearby trauma hospital.

Blaine:

I had a bunch of cuts, bruises. I had three or four broken ribs.

Torah:

But surprisingly, no sign of a heart attack.

Blaine:

My heart just reset for some reason. Did it just decided to say, let me just restart, stop for a little bit and then came back. Because they didn't find anything wrong with any of valves or the heart itself. They did put in a defibrillator. So if something like that does happen again, that would prevent it. But that was it.

Torah:

After a couple days he was released, but it was three months before he was allowed to drive again.

Blaine:

Me and my wife would be going places towards that area and she would ask, "You know, do you want me to take this road? You want me to avoid this road?" And early it was like, "Yeah, go around. Don't, nah, don't go down that street." And then eventually I said, "Let's go." You know, so we went by it and it was emotional, but hey, I got through it and kept going. We go by it now and it's all I can say is thank God every time I drive by it.

Torah:

The city held an event to thank Sarah and some of the other strangers that saved Blaine's life.

Blaine:

We met up and we hugged, we cried. It meant a lot, you know, just to say thank you. Thank you for being the person that you are. Because if you weren't that person, you wouldn't have stepped in to help a stranger.

Sarah:

I said, "Blaine, I just want to let you know, God told me to tell you, he's not done writing your story."

Torah:

One uncomfortable part of this story is the behaviour of the crowd of people who gathered at the scene.

Sarah:

I know that there was a ton of other people there that didn't help, that maybe either kept driving or just stopped and watched or either got out their cars and watched or took video or whatever the case may be.

Torah:

It's difficult for any of us to know what we would do in that situation, but Sarah doesn't hesitate to call out the people who did nothing.

Sarah:

There's somebody laying down, dying. And instead of taking your phone out and recording someone dying, take the initiative and go do something or try to do something.

Torah:

It might be that a lot of the people gathered on the sidewalk that afternoon wanted to help but didn't know what to do. Maybe they had a little voice in their head saying, "let someone else do it."

Sarah:

I can honestly say this, if I did not freshen up, I probably wouldn't have the confidence that I did that day to run over to do CPR.

Torah:

You can't know when, or where, or how, a life-threatening situation might arise, but you can take steps to be ready for it.

Drew Ashley is another person who had an unexpected dangerous situation develop right in front of him. In fact, it happened right beside him on an airplane. Thankfully, like Sarah, he was prepared.

Drew Ashley:

So in the summer of 2023, I was on a plane ride with my father and my mother, visiting my little sister in West Palm Beach, Florida. An hour into that flight, a young man sitting next to my father started to have a drug overdose. We got him into the

aisle. He was going through respiratory arrest. We did life saving techniques for about 45 minutes until we emergency landed in Orlando, where EMTs grabbed the young man. And then two days later, he ended up calling us. He survived, calling us, thanking us for saving his life. And we were just grateful that we could be there to assist.

Torah:

You said you performed 'life-saving techniques,' what were those?

Drew:

So he was going through respiratory arrest. So what that is, basically the victim isn't getting enough oxygen into the brain, so every few seconds, we have to give him a breath with the BVM bag valve mask. At the same time, we had to clear out his airway and nose passage, not to gross any of the listeners out. But when someone's going through an overdose, they usually projectile vomit. So, we had to clean out his mouth to make sure he'd get oxygen in and clean out his nose. He had to make sure that his pulse was strong enough, above 60 beats per minute, just to make sure that he wasn't going into cardiac arrest. Thankfully, what we did, was enough to keep him alive.

Torah:

How did that make you feel?

Drew:

I played football in college, so at the time, it kind of just felt like I was in practice or in a game, you know, all the preparation that we'd done beforehand, you know, now it's time to put it to use. So it kind of felt like that during the situation. Hindsight, just grateful, to be honest, man. Just glad I could be there to, or we could be there to help save that man's life.

Torah:

What got you into CPR and first aid training?

Drew:

I went to college for business. When I got out, I got into the church with, my father's a deacon, so we got into that. And honestly, it just felt like a calling to try and help somebody, to try to save or help save as many lives as possible. Me and my father, we have a business called Life Saviours where we go around and teach, you know, CPR and life saving techniques. You know, we have a partnership with the Red Cross.

Torah:

Can you explain how you know when to use CPR and why administering it so quickly is important?

Drew:

First of all, you only administer CPR to a victim going through cardiac arrest or who's unresponsive. What that means basically is that they're unconscious, but there's no breathing, there's no pulse, there's no heartbeat, right? And that's the

only time you really want to perform CPR as a last-ditch effort to try to resuscitate that person. If you see an unresponsive person, you want to first try to wake them up, tap them on the shoulders, try to see if they respond. If they do not respond to the stimulus, you then want to check for signs of life to make sure they're in cardiac arrest. And we do that by putting your ear near the victim's mouth, eyes on the chest cavity. You're listening for air to come in and out of the mouth for at least five to 10 seconds. Okay. Now after five to 10 seconds, and if you do not hear a single breath, this is then when you want to start CPR immediately. The reason why you want to start immediately is, you know, the longer the brain goes without oxygen, the more likelihood of brain damage, as well as return of spontaneous circulation or ROSC. If the blood isn't pumping from the heart to the other vital organs, after a while it's gonna be hard to get the blood going again to restart those organs or restart that heart. So starting CPR cycles immediately as soon as we see somebody in cardiac arrest is a huge percentage boost to saving their life.

Torah:

Do you have any stats on anything that can help us understand how important giving CPR quickly is?

Drew:

With compressions, ventilations, and using the AED, Automated External Defibrillator, you have about a 20 to 25 percent survival rate of saving a person during cardiac arrest. With just compressions and ventilations, that drops to about 15 percent of survival rate. Compression only CPR, which means just continuous compressions, that's only about a 5 percent survival rate. But, if we don't do anything, it's 0 percent. So, you want to try to put yourself in the best chance to save that person.

Torah:

Once they're in cardiac arrest, it's intervention or death. Those are only options, right?

Drew:

Yes ma'am, that's the only two options. Cardiac arrest means that the heart's not beating or isn't beating effectively enough to pump blood from the heart to the other vital organs, thus those organs will then die. So, if someone is in cardiac arrest and help isn't on the way or no one's giving care right away, every second that goes by is a less likelihood that that person will survive.

Torah:

Has anything else in CPR administration changed that we need to learn new techniques or new tricks of the trade that you can share?

Drew:

As of now, the current status is after we're checking for care and we realize the victim is in cardiac arrest, you start with 30 compressions, doing two ventilations. The compressions are done at a rate of 100 to 120 compressions per minute I know a lot of you probably have heard that you know you can sing "Staying Alive" as well

when doing the compressions that is very true. You know we tell that in our classes you can sing that while doing compressions that will help you stay on a correct rate. You're also saying "Another One Bites the Dust" now. I'm not sure you want to say that trying to save somebody, but totally up to you. "Baby Shark," "We Will Rock You," there's a lot of songs you can sing to help you stay on that correct rate, right?

We also use the AEDs, the automatic external defibrillators. They also have a metronome attached to them that'll set the pace for your compressions as well.

Torah:

I find it's getting more more common where I see AEDs on walls of all kinds of places from schools to campuses and everything. Are they hard to use?

Drew:

They're actually very simple. As soon as you get an AED, you want to turn on the power button. It will tell you step by step what you need to do. There's pictures on it. They count for you. They tell you when to do your ventilations. You can call the operator from the AEDs. They're very nifty, pretty nifty devices and very helpful.

Torah:

Thank you, Drew. Thanks so much for your expertise.

Drew:

No problem. Thank you for having me.

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 if you want to know when the next one is available, please follow us on Apple Podcasts, or Spotify.

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

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