

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Season 6 - Episode 7

Escaping the Palisades Fire

Torah Kachur:

Aaron Sampson is walking through a nightmare.

Aaron Sampson:

It's just like a smoky, smoky fiery wide open road.

Torah:

He's moving as fast as he can, but he's pushing a four-wheeled walker — his father-in-law is sitting on it, facing him.

Aaron:

The back of my dad's shirt had three big holes in it from the embers just burning holes in the back of my dad's shirt.

Torah:

The smoke stings his eyes and fills his lungs.

Aaron:

I didn't see any police. I didn't see any firemen.

Torah:

All he sees are flames.

I'm Torah Kachur.

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 who helps someone else. This series tells the stories of regular people who find themselves in extraordinary situations, and of the people who save them.

Aaron Sampson is part of the sandwich generation. He has three school-aged kids that obviously take up a lot of his time and energy. He also has aging parents that

need looking after: In particular, his 83-year-old father-in-law, Ron.

Aaron:

He was very stubborn. And as a lot of people who reach a certain age, it's hard for them to ask for help.

Torah:

Aaron lives in the Bay area with his wife and kids, but Ron is just north of LA.

He lives in the hills of the Pacific Palisades. Overlooking Los Angeles and Malibu and the Pacific Ocean. He lived at the end of a cul-de-sac on a very long, windy road.

Ron's been there for 50 years, so it's a generational family home and full of memories. He raised his three children there, and now his grandkids come to visit every holiday.

Aaron:

We had our vacation over winter break there, and we took the kids to Disneyland between Christmas and New Year's.

Torah:

But this was to be their last Christmas together under that roof. Ron has been living here on his own since his wife passed away 20 years ago. But his health is going downhill quickly.

He has Parkinson's disease. It's a neurological condition that leads to tremors, muscle stiffness, slowness of movement, and loss of balance.

Aaron:

One night he was, you know, walking. He took a hard fall and fell right on his eye.

Torah:

That eye injury required surgery, which he had just a few days before New Years.

Aaron:

There was a lot going on with him. He couldn't be by himself.

Torah:

Because of that Ron has decided, begrudgingly, to move into an assisted living facility in San Diego. His move-in date is January 8.

To bridge the gap between New Years and his move, Aaron, who works remotely, volunteers to stay in the house. He can look after his father-in-law and help him pack up a few things.

So, his wife loads their kids into the car and kisses her husband and her father goodbye.

Aaron:

The last thing she says is "You two look after each other, ok?" She laughs and then heads out on the long drive home.

Torah:

That week, the two men settle into a routine. Aaron the caregiver, and Ron the reluctant patient.

Aaron:

So I would do work, get up, "Hey dad, you need anything? Can I make you an egg? What do we need? What do we got going on here? What do you need?" And he's like, "I'm fine, I'm fine."

Torah:

Ron uses a rolling walker to get himself from his bedroom to the bathroom and sometimes the couch.

Aaron:

He wasn't, you know, the hardest patient, but you know, you had to administer his medicine and his eye drops and just make sure that he ate because he wasn't eating as much. It was kind of hit or miss how he felt. But he had moments that were really good. We had a beautiful sunset overlooking the Pacific Ocean and he stopped smoking his cigars for years, but he pulled out a cigar and smoked a cigar looking over the beautiful Malibu and it was just one of the most beautiful sunsets.

Torah:

Tuesday January 7th starts just like the others.

Aaron:

He was just puttering around doing nothing. He was on the couch. And I was working in the bedroom.

Torah:

Then the phone rings.

Aaron:

The call happened on the landline, his landline, you know, and you know, I was picked it up and it's like, you know, some beeps and then, you know, warning there might be a fire in the area. There might be a fire. It wasn't like an evacuation call. It was like, there might be a fire in the area. And I was like, dad, it's one of these, you know, warning. And I think my dad was like, hang up the phone, Aaron. It's a scam.

Torah:

Aaron knows it's not a scam, but he's also not sure how serious to take it.

Aaron:

I remember being like, is it something? I don't know. I'm like, well, and I remember thinking if, there is a fire, I got to get him fed. So I started frying eggs. Literally after that, I was like, I'm going to fry some eggs.

Torah:

But then he gets an alert on his cell phone. Disaster response alerts are geo-targeted, so even if you are 500 miles from home you get alerts tailored to where you physically are.

Aaron:

And I'm like, dad, this might be serious

Torah:

Aaron opens the back door and looks across the yard.

Aaron:

You could see huge billowing smoke, like lot of smoke.

Torah:

Next, he goes out in the front yard, which faces east.

Aaron:

And I'm like in my skivvies, like I'm in shorts and a T-shirt, and I stood up on one of his little planters like a concrete planter thing and huge fire like, like large. And it was like a hundred yards away. It was, it was big.

Torah:

Suddenly the warnings, the alerts, none of it is hypothetical anymore. Aaron is standing in his underwear staring at a massively destructive, unstoppable force of nature.

Aaron:

And I immediately, I did what, you know, most people these days would do. I immediately like took out my phone and I started filming. Like that's what I thought to do. And like, you know, you can hear me in my videos. I'm narrating like, "My God, big fire." You know, it's getting closer. You know, and I'm like, at that point I wasn't like, danger, danger. I was like, almost like, whoa, this could be serious.

Torah:

Aaron's video is about 30 seconds long. That's how long it takes for him to go from awestruck observer, to being very afraid.

He runs into the house.

Aaron:

And then I was like, Dad, I think we gotta go. And at this point I'm starting to get texts on my phone from friends and family "You gotta get out of there. Get out of

there. Get him out of there.” I’m like, I don’t have a car!

Torah:

You see, Aaron’s wife has taken their car to drive home with the kids. And Ron, who was moving out that week, has given his car to one of his granddaughters.

Aaron:

So now I’m like, crap, we gotta get out of there. And meanwhile, my father-in-law, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Torah:

He calls 9-1-1 but can’t get through. The lines are overloaded.

Next, he tries to call an Uber.

Aaron:

I’m like, trying to get the app to open. It was just, you know, it’s spinning.

Torah:

His wife calls — she’s at home watching the live reports. Aaron puts her on speaker phone.

Aaron:

And she’s like, Dad, you’re putting in danger the life of the father of my children. You need to get out of there now, do whatever Aaron says and leave. And he was like, Ok, fine.

Torah:

He runs outside looking for neighbors.

Aaron:

And I see a car, a car pulling out of a driveway. I run up and I’m just flagging down this car. I’m like, “Can you help me with my father-in-law? He has Parkinson’s. We don’t have a car. Are you able to give us a ride?”

Torah:

The car is already full. The driver has loaded it up trying to save everything he can.

Aaron:

But he said, without thinking, I’ll pull around, just let’s be ready to go.

Torah:

Aaron runs back into the house to get Ron. There’s already a suitcase packed for his move to San Diego, so Aaron grabs that and the walker.

Aaron:

Now that we were about to get in this guy’s car with the chance of never seeing the

house again and the reality of the situation was dawning on me at this point. It's like this is serious.

Torah:

The fire is almost on top of them. You can feel the heat and hear the roar of the winds that are driving it.

Aaron:

And so I have like 90 seconds to grab what I need to grab from the house. I could have grabbed, you know, jewelry, some family photos, some heirlooms. No, the only other things that I grabbed that day were my flip flops and gummy bears. That's it! That's the mind of a... someone in panic!

Torah:

They get in the car. Aaron in the front seat with bags piled on his lap. Ron in the back seat surrounded by the driver's possessions.

Aaron:

He's like, how much is this Uber? And I'm like, not an Uber dad. This is, you know, and I'm like, what's your name? He's like, my name's Jeff.

Torah:

Jeff is having a rather intense day. He saw the fire reports mid-morning and jumped into action. His wife and kids left first. Then he loaded up his car with photo albums and other stuff he figured was irreplaceable. He was about to head out to meet up with his family when Aaron flagged him down.

Aaron:

But, what happened was we get towards the bottom, traffic is building up.

Torah:

They're moving slower and slower, and then they stop.

Aaron:

And as we're stuck in traffic, a huge fire just suddenly shoo, like lit up. And like, you know, all this dry brush just like exploded and, and suddenly was was a quite a big fire. You could feel it inside the car was getting hot, just like we were in, like, a sauna.

Torah:

They're stuck at an intersection that's blocked. Police are there trying to keep lanes open for fire trucks to get up the mountain and also facilitate people who are evacuating, but there are too many vehicles, and the fire is moving too fast.

Aaron:

They're running in between all these stopped vehicles yelling, "Get out of your cars, get out of your cars, get out, out, out."

Torah:

All around them, Aaron sees car doors fling open and people jumping out. They grab a box or a bag, whatever they can and start running.

Aaron:

So at that point, I'm like, holy shit, this is not good. And there's people frantic at this point, screaming under this apocalyptic orange sky. Because you gotta remember, there's fires everywhere now. There's smoke billowing from all parts of the Pacific Palisades. The orange is this kind of orangish red, had a glow with a smoky brown finish.

Torah:

Aaron climbs out of the car, opens the back door to help his dad.

Aaron:

I have him hug a lamppost as I try and set up the walker.

Torah:

Jeff asks if there is anything he can do.

Aaron:

Jeff made sure we were all right. Then he went off. And I just kept repeating, you know, we got this, Dad. We got this. We got this, Dad. We got this. And I was like, in a way, trying to convince myself that we had it.

The fires are right there. At this point, they're like flanking us. You could see the palm tree burning. It's like raining fire on us like a giant sparkler on the middle of the streets, like shhh, embers flying everywhere.

Torah:

Ron is sitting on the walker facing backwards. Aaron is doing his best to push him along the road, but it's covered in burning debris and ash.

Aaron:

I remember now pushing him and it's a long road. It's so smoky. I can't even see, you know, 30, 40 feet ahead of me. So smoky and I could see the fires on both sides and I'm trying to just push him. And I remember my arms are hurting. And I remember saying at one point, like, "I don't know that we got this, Dad." And I'm like, well, you know, and then my dad, said, you know, he said, you know, he's looking at me, he's like, "Aaron, if the fire gets any closer, leave me here. You run to safety. You run."

Torah:

Aaron keeps pushing, one step at a time, down the hill, through the smoke.

Aaron:

And at one point it was like almost like giving up and then out of the smoke. See this car do a U-turn pulls up alongside of us as we're like wheeling on the street. This guy rolls down the window and he's like, "Hey, do you need help? Hop in." And I'm like,

What? I'm like, you know, is this the Uber?

Torah:

This is Tell Me What Happened, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help, no matter what kind of danger you're facing.

Andrew Lin was born and raised in Southern California.

When he got married a few years ago, they decided to make their home in Pacific Palisades.

Andrew Lin:

This was not quite Santa Monica, it was just north of, it wasn't quite Malibu, it's just south of it, but it was just this quiet little secret where you could raise kids and have families and have a community.

Torah:

This is their third year living here. They celebrate New Years Eve with some friends in the neighborhood and then walk home.

Andrew:

At probably two, three in the morning, somewhere in the middle of the night of New Year's Eve. I was awoken and I said, "I think there's a fire." I can hear the helicopters dropping water.

Torah:

It's frightening — but unfortunately not unheard of. Part of living in the Palisades is that you do know that there is a danger of wildfire. Fire crews respond quickly, and it's extinguished in about 24 hours.

Andrew:

And we kind of went, okay, happy New Year, welcome to 2025.

Torah:

A week later, Tuesday January 7, Andrew's at work. He's a financial advisor. He works in a huge business tower in Culver City. It's on the edge of central Los Angeles.

Just before 11 in the morning he gets an alert from an app on his phone.

Andrew:

It's a thing that does a great job of alerting you if fires pop up throughout Southern California.

Torah:

There's a handful of people in the office that live in the same area — they all use the same app. Collectively they look out the windows to the north.

Andrew:

We're on the 16th floor and you kind of look out and you can just see over the ridge the smoke starting to come up. And as that happened, we kind of looked at each other, we were like, we got to go home, cancel all my meetings, we got to get out of here.

Torah:

Andrew heads home — as fast as he can.

Andrew:

And you can tell on the freeway who was going back to the Palisades. There were perhaps a few traffic laws that were broken on the way there, (laughs) I think part of that was just simply a natural reaction of saying, I got to get home so I can assess and then I can figure things out, but physically I need to be there.

Torah:

Andrew also has a dog and two cats at home that he's desperate to get out of harm's way. His drive up to the Palisades takes about half an hour.

Andrew:

And by then it had exploded into a ridiculous fire where you saw the air tankers and helicopters flying nonstop. It was literally out of a movie. They were dropping water. They were doing everything.

Torah:

"Everything" includes turning two-way streets into one-way roads to get people out of the area. That's great for the people evacuating, but it doesn't help Andrew who is trying to drive into his neighborhood.

Andrew:

And I wanted to get up just at this point. We knew it was bad, it was "grab the animals and let's get out of there."

Torah:

But all the roads up the mountain are blocked.

Andrew:

And that's where it became gridlock and emergency services personnel actually ran up there and told everybody in their cars that were coming down the hill to evacuate. You've got people evacuating on foot, they had packed things up, thrown things in their car and they were just abandoning things as in leave it behind, just step by step coming out of the smoke.

Torah:

Andrew is just two miles from his house, two miles away from everything he owns and also his pets, but emergency response personnel aren't allowing anyone past the blockade.

Andrew:

At this point they were just trying to make sure human lives were being saved and prioritized.

Torah:

Andrew sits in his car at the bottom of the hill as a steady stream of people walk past him. Some have backpacks or are carrying boxes. Others are walking dogs. He sees one woman with a parrot in a silver cage.

Andrew:

For probably a good hour, I'm sitting there just kind of in shock, just going like, give me an opening so I can run up the hill, grab the animals and get out.

Torah:

The flood of people on foot thins and then ends. The smoke is thicker now, and spot fires are popping up.

Andrew:

One palm tree up the street was on fire, then the next one behind you would catch on fire.

Torah:

He has the windows rolled up and the air conditioning running. But he can't see much beyond a few feet away. The emergency personnel have moved on to another location, but the road — all four lanes — is blocked by abandoned cars. A burning branch from a palm tree lands on the hood of his car.

Andrew:

That's where I was like, Oh, perhaps this is not the best place to be. It was just a little bit of a wakeup call. And I was beginning to turn the car around and just say, we're not going up there today.

Torah:

As he does that, he sees something moving in the smoke, two men, one hunched over, sitting on a walker and the other slowly pushing him down the road.

From Aaron Sampson's perspective it looks as if the entire world is on fire. The sky is orange and embers are blowing around like snow in a blizzard. There's no horizon, just grey smoke.

He's pushing his father-in-law — half-blind and unable to walk — on his walker through an absolute hellscape. Everyone who can escape, has. The two of them are completely alone.

Then, through the smoke he sees a car. It's driving away from them, but then without warning, it does a U-turn and pulls up beside them.

Aaron:

So at first I'm like a little bit stunned.

Andrew:

And they were like, "Who are you?" And I said, "Who cares, just get in the car."

Aaron:

I'm like, "Ok."

He didn't know where to take us. He was kind of just lost. He was kind of shell shocked, in shock. I think half of his mind was thinking about his pets. The other half was like, where do I take these two men? And I was just like, "Can you get us toward the ocean?"

Torah:

They make their way down the mountain and reach the Pacific Coast Highway.

Aaron:

Andrew pulled over on the side of the freeway on the side of the PCH. Because he was shocked, he didn't know what to do. He didn't know where to go. It was like this weird moment of like, What do I do?

Torah:

They don't have a destination or a plan. So, for a few quiet moments they sit at the side of the freeway and think.

Aaron:

And then at that point I was like, "Hey, can you drive us to Santa Monica?" It's another 15 minutes. He's like, "Ok." And so that's what we did.

We thanked him profusely, of course. He like let us off and then he was off to, you know, figure out what's next. Did he go back to Culver City or did he go try and get back up that mountain? I don't know.

Torah:

Andrew did not try to get back up the mountain. Instead, he found a hotel and called his wife.

Andrew:

I think the whole fabric of the story is it wasn't emergency medical services or the police or the fire department. But rather your neighbors, even the ones you don't know.

Aaron:

A lot of us think, we'd automatically do that, of course. But no, we wouldn't. Not everyone automatically does that. There's a lot of people that would. So very grateful to both Jeff and Andrew for being the good Samaritans that they were.

Torah:

A few loose ends to tie up:

Once at the hotel, Andrew got in touch with one of his neighbors who was sheltering in place. They went next door and grabbed Andrew's dog but they couldn't find the cats. They loaded up their car and made it out using a back road.

But there was another man in the neighborhood — his name is Eric. He was the local dog walker, so he knew a lot of the pet owners. He took it upon himself to rescue as many animals as he could.

Andrew managed to get in touch with him and explained how to get into their house, and he rescued both cats.

Eric risked his life to gather all the animals he could, then drove down the mountain with his truck packed with dogs and cats. The fire was so close it melted his headlights.

This is like a helper chain here. This was a network of helpers who didn't know they were helpers at the time, but they volunteered, saving lives, saving pets, and offering hope to their fellow neighbor and their community.

But that is the end of the good news.

Ron's home, the one he had lived in for 50 years, was destroyed. Probably just a few hours after they left it.

The same for Andrew's house. Three weeks later he was finally allowed to return.

Andrew:

I bought a metal detector, all the PPE and a shovel and threw it in the back of the trunk. And I was like, all right, I thought I could sift through this and maybe find something, find something, and that just was not the case. I had all that stuff, kind of picked that stuff with a shovel, kind of threw it aside, there was nothing to do other than to just kind of turn around and start the insurance process, I guess.

Torah:

Aaron and his father-in-law stayed with relatives that night. The next day they took him to the care home in San Diego.

Aaron:

And there's a picture of us, of that, where just the next day our hair was just like crazy or the same shorts, you and you can't smell that picture, but we stank you know we just smelled like fire. But we knew we had been through so much together, my dad and I.

Torah:

There are lots of heroes in this story, Andrew, Jeff, Eric, but I don't think there is any doubt that Aaron is also a hero.

If Ron had been on his own that day, he would have ignored the warnings. He probably would have turned off his phone to stop the constant ringing. His family wouldn't have been able to get to him. His neighbors, seeing the doors shut and no car in the driveway, would have assumed he had already left.

That scenario is often the case for seniors during a disaster.

I'd like to welcome Jennifer Oteng to the show — she's a Geriatric Outreach Nurse — to talk about helping people during an emergency. Specifically, those with physical or cognitive limitations.

Torah:

Do you ever balance the need to know and the too much information that might confuse them or scare them more?

Jennifer Oteng:

Yes, I think one of the most important tips or strategies to use with individuals experiencing dementia, is the fact that it's important to keep quite concise with your information. You do want them to know that there is urgency, but not too much information to over stimulate or trigger them and increase their anxiety, but enough to know that it is urgent enough to act quickly.

Torah:

What other things should we remember when helping seniors in an emergency?

Jennifer:

I think it's important to also consider their abilities. What can they do for themselves in terms of are they able to move and support themselves? And if they can, what kind of guidance would they need? Is it you just helping them put on their shoes? Or perhaps is it a little more where you're actually guiding them physically.

Something else that I would want to also just point out too, is that sometimes these individuals will have issues with bladder and bowel. And that is a cause for anxiety in terms of leaving and ensuring that they have everything. It is important to consider if they need products such as briefs or pads or any other incontinence products, but also to have that in your sort of emergency kit to make sure you also have additional wipes, because that can also help them to feel secure.

Torah:

How can we help plan for those emergencies in whether it's seniors homes or thinking about grandparents, parents that maybe need extra care?

Jennifer:

I would say that it's always good to have a current list of medications that is available

and accessible. Another thing is we want to make sure we sort of have a clear idea as to any other sort of related conditions that they might have. So, big one is dementia. You know, do they have hearing issues? Do they have any other chronic conditions such as diabetes or seizures that we need to be aware of, that should be put on some sort of piece of paper. And the best place to keep that usually is somewhere accessible. For a lot of people, that's usually right at the front of their refrigerator or freezer even.

Torah:

I was gonna ask, this is a document that is almost like in a folder of some kind that anyone can take with them.

Jennifer:

For sure, or even one of those sheet protectors. And it's just placed on with a little magnet, right? So it has the person's name, their age, their past medical health history. And then a current list of their medications is sort of the basic, I'd say, template to follow to help really assist that person in an emergency if needed.

Torah:

How do you prepare the seniors in your life without alarming, especially ones with cognitive decline and not instilling any fear or worry?

Jennifer:

In terms of preparing, it's just saying, you know what, in the event of an emergency, and there's not an emergency right now, what would we need to help you? And they could actually help and collaborate in identifying their needs as able. Right. They might say something like, you know what, I would definitely need this medication or I would need my bracelet or I would need my hearing aid, right? They can tell you that. Also, I think it's important to consider if there's something that provides the individual with comfort or sort of reassurance that they usually have. And so this could be an item such as a blanket or sometimes it's even a picture or a photo of somebody. So, making sure that we're identifying those other things, not just the mobility or medical component, but also the psychosocial component, something that just helps them to feel good.

Torah:

Jennifer, thank you for everything.

Jennifer:

Thank you so much, Torah. I appreciate it.

Torah:

That's it for this episode of *Tell Me What Happened*, and that is it for season six.

I hope you've enjoyed the whole season. If you missed any along the way, there are more than 35 episodes in the feed so go back and give some of those a listen.

And if you know someone in your life that could use a heartwarming story — please tell them about us.

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

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