

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Season 6 - Episode 8

A Daring Whitewater Rescue

Torah Kachur:

Daniel Hartung is submerged up to his neck in a frigid, Alaskan river.

Daniel Hartung:

I was at the bottom of a small waterfall and the water itself was flowing very rapidly.

Torah:

The current has him pinned to an underwater tree. He's clinging to a rope hanging down from the riverbank.

Daniel:

But there was no way I could pull myself off the log because of the force of the water.

Torah:

Kicking with his legs, just makes it worse.

Daniel:

As I was trying to inch my way up, was actually moving deeper into the water. The current catching my legs when I pushed up would inch me down a little bit further in the water.

Torah:

He gasps for air as waves break over him.

Daniel:

The water, it was coming over my head and I just had a little space there to breathe. Last thing I remember is going under for the last time.

Torah:

I'm Torah Kachur, and welcome to this bonus episode of *Tell Me What Happened*.

It's a special summertime edition of the show and today's story of strangers helping strangers comes from Alaska — a place I have never been, but have always imagined is full of cold, rugged wilderness and warm, friendly people.

This story proves both of those things are true.

Growing up in Michigan, Daniel Hartung was a Boy Scout.

Daniel:

When I was a teenager, I read a story in *Boys' Life*, which is the Boy Scout magazine, and it was about Alaska and being a stream guard and watching the salmon migrate up rivers and counting them.

Torah:

He went to school, studied biology, became an environmental scientist, and, at the age of 27, found himself standing beside a river in Alaska watching the salmon jump through the rapids.

Daniel:

And that was over 40 years ago. So even though I've traveled around a lot, my home has been Alaska for over 40 years.

Torah:

Daniel is retired now — so he has time to indulge in a lot of different hobbies.

Daniel:

I enjoy construction. I write. I'm also an artist. I play guitars.

Torah:

He also likes kayaking. For the past 15 years he's explored flat water rivers, small lakes, and coastal bays.

Daniel:

I saw that there was going to be an event close to me about whitewater rafting. And I thought that this would be a good time to try my first whitewater rafting. I would be around a lot of other people with a lot more experience than I.

Torah:

It's a weekend-long party beside a river. Part music festival, part whitewater event. Some people use inflatable rafts, others use kayaks. It's just a bunch of people getting together in the middle of nowhere to have fun.

Daniel:

There was no one there when I first arrived early in the morning. As I waited on the side of the road, I saw cars going by, so I kind of followed them. They drove off to a place which is just a big dirt patch off the road, parked, hauled their equipment out and started hauling it through the woods, down a little one-way trail.

Torah:

He gets to the edge of the river — it's a little piece of flat ground at the bottom of a small waterfall — and starts setting up..

Daniel's gear is pretty simple. A skirt which keeps water out of the boat, some waterproof gloves, a life jacket, and a bicycle helmet.

A handful of other kayakers are there getting themselves ready as well. Again — it's not an overly organized event — so everyone is kinda doing their own thing on their own schedule.

Daniel:

A couple of the kayakers came over the waterfalls and continued on. Well, I thought this was the start of the event, so I kind of took off after them.

I kicked off from the bank, didn't tip over, got my kayak pointed in the right direction, started around the first bend.

Torah:

He's got a lifetime of experience in boats, both big and small, but this is different.

It was very loud, very fast, very intimidating.

Daniel:

The water was raging. There's no houses or towns or anything around it. It's really out in the wilderness. The water was extremely rapid. It definitely was white water all the way along.

Torah:

After about two minutes Daniel rounds another bend.

Daniel:

And with the water flowing that fast, it was covering quite a bit of river.

Torah:

A wave catches him on the side. He feels cold water on his legs and looks down. A couple snaps on his spray skirt have come loose, now the water breaking over the top of his boat is sloshing inside.

As the boat fills up, he sinks lower in the river.

Daniel:

So it's floating on the top of the water, but it is submerged because it's filled with water.

Torah:

No matter how violent rapids look on the surface, the real dangers are underneath — rocks, logs. And the lower you are in the water the more likely you are to get caught on something.

Daniel:

That's when I decided to kick out and point my feet downstream and ride it down.

Torah:

He figures he's safer floating freely with his life jacket, than sitting in a sinking boat.

Daniel:

So I started just being pushed down the river and went through, went around one corner, went around another and that's when I got stuck on the dead head, which is a submerged tree that's stuck underneath the water.

Torah:

Daniel stops, but the water keeps flowing. Thousands of pounds of pressure pinning him in place.

Daniel:

The log was across my waist. My feet and legs were underneath it. The current at that depth is really strong. The water that's above my waist is coming on either side of my head.

Torah:

He's facing downstream, and his head and shoulders are above the surface of the river — for now.

Daniel:

But as I tried to free myself, I was inching lower and lower in the water. At one point I noticed a rope, a small line coming over the bank and I reached up for it.

Torah:

He grabs it, but pulling yourself up a rope is hard enough in ninth grade gym class. Daniel is freezing cold, soaking wet, and pinned against a log by a raging river.

Daniel:

So I just kind of hung on to that trying to wiggle myself out, slowly submerging until through exhaustion, I just went under for the last time.

Torah:

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

Every episode is built on the premise that when you wake up in the morning, 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 as a reminder that every day, you could be either one of those people.

Obadiah Jenkins:

I am an outdoorsy Alaska boy who just loves being in the wilderness.

Torah:

That's Obadiah Jenkins.

He's a tall man with a large beard. He's young — just 33 years old — but he carries himself with a kind of natural wisdom drawn from the world around him.

The mountains, the glaciers, the ice fields, the ocean, the lakes and rivers, the tundra, the wildlife — the enormity of Alaska's wilderness.

He's also an academic. He graduated from Alaska Pacific University with a degree in Outdoor Sciences.

Obadiah:

I had written a curriculum on learning how to use the wind and snow to travel in Alaska.

Torah:

Yes — his university thesis is on Arctic Kiteboarding.

Post-graduation, Obadiah spends his days gliding across icy landscapes pulled by the force of the winter winds.

Obadiah:

And so for a long time, my life was entirely built around being in the mountains, following the wind.

Torah:

He uses a kite and a snowboard, or sometimes skis to cross frozen lakes and glaciers. He even kites up to the top of snow-capped mountains.

Obadiah:

And that really dominated my life until I started recognizing a trend.

What he realizes is that he's become an adrenaline junkie. Pushing his limits every chance he can.

Obadiah:

I was living my day-to-day life based on this serotonin and dopamine release, this infatuation with adrenaline. My life was based on getting this feeling that was being close to death, taking on these risks to feel alive. And I had this conversation with myself, man, if I have to get closer and closer and closer to death to feel more and more alive, that is a one-way street.

Torah:

Then a close friend — the guy who had taught Obadiah how to kite — shows him

where that street is heading.

Obadiah:

He had an accident and actually became paralyzed from the waist down. And sitting in the hospital room with him, and being with him through his recovery process where he would never really walk again, I realized that I had to change the driving focus of my entire life.

Torah:

And so, he did.

He walks away from the adrenaline rush of surfing through the mountains and settles in the small Alaskan town of Homer to become a farmer. He builds a house, clears five acres of land, and starts an organic farm.

In his free time, one of the things he loves doing is white water kayaking.

It's a very tough state to be an active whitewater kayaker, as you can imagine. More than half of the year, the water's frozen.

The highlight of the brief kayak season is something called the Six Mile Whitewater Bluegrass Festival. As the name implies, it takes place on Six Mile Creek. It is a premier, technical whitewater rafting and kayaking destination with a series of dramatic, narrow canyons.

Fifteen years ago — Obadiah and some friends were doing a kayak trip down the river, and spent a night camping on the riverbank.

Obadiah:

And one of them's playing a guitar. And a couple of them are throwing a frisbee and we have this roaring fire and we have, you know, a salmon filet cooking on the side of it. And we have reindeer hot dogs on sticks and we just all had this moment, this click of, "We should throw a party!" And that's how the Six Mile Whitewater Bluegrass Festival began.

Torah:

Over the years they invited more friends, then friends of friends, local bands came, and it grew.

Obadiah:

All of a sudden we're having two or three or four or five hundred people come and camp out for a weekend.

Torah:

It's Saturday morning. People are milling about on the riverbank getting themselves ready for a day on the water. It's a casual event but safety is a key element. There are going to be more than a hundred people of all different skill levels going through

the rapids; some in kayaks, some in rafts, and part of the fun is that they launch in groups of 20 at a time, and have a race.

All along the banks there will be spotters with throw ropes. And experienced kayakers are on hand to patrol the edges of the river, especially in the spots where they think people might get in trouble.

An hour before the race starts, Obadiah is feeling a little nervous. He hasn't kayaked since last year's festival.

Obadiah:

And I'm like, oh, I know we've got time. I'm just gonna blast through these rapids real quick by myself, get my face wet, get my muscles loosened up, and I can make it back up in no time and be ready for the races.

Torah:

That seems like a reasonable thing to do, just a quick run to shake out some cobwebs and, as he says, "get his face wet."

But other kayakers on the riverbank see him shove off and think the event is starting.

Obadiah:

So a bunch of other people got in their boats and followed me down through the rapids. But we didn't have the safety in place. We weren't doing the race yet.

Torah:

Of course, at the time Obadiah is only vaguely aware of this. He's just piloting his boat down the river.

Obadiah:

The first wave that I go over and that crashes over my kayak and the white water crashes on my body and fills my face with this feeling of how cold and clean and crisp this water is. It's so pure. It's such an experience of just pure elation and enjoyment. And I'm lost in just this cacophony of sound, of experience, of this visual feast of these canyon walls and this beautiful water. And I know I'm just grinning from ear to ear, like how lucky I am at age 33 to be living in Alaska on my birthday to be able to be doing something like this.

Torah:

Oh right, today is Obadiah's birthday.

Obadiah:

It's my happy place. It's my happy time of year. I'm back in a kayak.

Torah:

At the bottom of the first set of rapids, he paddles to the shore and climbs out.

Obadiah:

As I'm lifting my kayak up onto my shoulder to start the hike I hear someone yelling from the other side of the river: "Swimmer!"

Torah:

The water in the river is barely above the freezing point. The current is strong and there are rocks everywhere. No one came here today to go swimming. The cry of "swimmer" means someone is out of their boat and that means they're in trouble.

Obadiah sets down his kayak. He grabs his throw rope from the boat and climbs up on to a large rock sticking out over the water.

Obadiah:

And a couple seconds go by and I don't see anyone and then that same strong loud voice from the other side of the river yells out, "He's stuck he's stuck he's trapped."

And I'm looking, and I'm looking, and then all of a sudden I look right beneath me where there's this vertical cliff face and a lot of the water gets pushed into this wall.

Torah:

It's a part of the rapids he knows well — a place where the unstoppable force of the river meets an unmovable wall of rock.

Obadiah:

And immediately I see that this is a person that's in the water in a very, very turbulent area with a lot of powerful water hitting them and they're stuck.

Torah:

During the actual race, there would be a person standing here with a rope, and a rescue kayaker in the water. But the event hasn't started yet so none of the safety team are in place.

They're face down. There's water going into their back. He can't lift up. He's having a hard time breathing. He's struggling. This is a classic whitewater entrapment.

Obadiah:

And I make eye contact with him for the first time as he pushes himself up. And I see that in his eyes. He is fighting for his life.

Torah:

Obadiah is just 10 feet above the drowning man but with no way to reach him.

In the water — Daniel sees the end of a rope dangling in front of him — Obadiah has lowered it from above. He grabs it and holds on as tight as he can.

Obadiah:

And I'm just yelling at him, fight it, get your legs out of there, kick, whatever you can.

Torah:

He ties the end of the rope to a tree making it a solid lifeline for Daniel to pull against. All the while the clock is ticking. It's been two minutes, maybe three.

Obadiah:

Well, in order to actually pull off this rescue we should set up a Tyrolean traverse this enormously complicated rope system from one side of the river to the other.

Torah:

With a traverse in place, they could lower a rescuer down to the person in the water and extract them. But that requires coordination between well trained professionals on both sides of the river.

Obadiah:

There's no way. That's gonna take 30 minutes to set up. I don't have the resources. We don't have the time. I'm about to watch this guy die right in front of me. We gotta do something. There's gotta be something. There's always something. What haven't I thought of? What can I change in this situation to give this person just even just 1 percent of a chance at surviving.

Torah:

There's only one thing he can think of, lowering himself down into the water, but that's the one thing you should never do. The first rule of rescuing someone is that you don't make the situation worse by also putting yourself in danger.

Obadiah:

Now I'm potentially making decisions where there's going to be two bodies to recover because I don't know if we can pull this off.

Torah:

He's standing on the rock — frozen with indecision.

Obadiah:

I'm frustrated. I'm helpless. But this man that's been fighting for so long, five minutes, maybe six minutes now, this man has been fighting so hard for his life, holding himself up against these thousands of pounds of water. And suddenly he disappears, forced underwater. And all I can see is a, a lump where the water is going over him and the end of the rope that he's been holding onto, he lets go of it and I'm thinking to myself well shit that's it he's dead. What do I do now?

And right then I jump in.

Torah:

It's not a graceful dive. Obadiah's foot slips on the wet rock as he launches himself into the river. As a result, he isn't nearly as far upstream as he wants to be.

As soon as his life jacket pulls him to the surface, he smacks into Daniel.

Obadiah:

I hit him across his back. Part of the limb of the log that he was stuck on actually hit me in the ribs and through my life jacket broke two of my ribs.

Torah:

He grabs him with both arms and holds on.

Obadiah:

OK well maybe I can hold them up. Maybe I can get them some air. Maybe I can make an air bubble for the both of us. Maybe we can survive just long enough. And then I didn't have to finish that thought because we moved.

Torah:

The impact of Obadiah crashing into Daniel, and the force of the river pushing against the two of them together was enough to snap the log they were pinned against.

The current carries them downstream, through the tail end of the rapids into a flat-water section where they float on the surface.

Obadiah:

I rolled Daniel over into a rescue position where his face is up. And he's not alive. He's not breathing. There's nothing.

Torah:

He swims to the edge of the river and drags Daniel up onto the sand. He rips off his life jacket and shirt, searching for any sign of life.

Obadiah:

There's no pulse. And I start doing my CPR compressions. And I get through two rounds of CPR compressions and the next miracle happens. I feel this hand on my shoulder and I look up and there's this man standing there. And he's like, "I'm a doctor. I'll do compressions." Turns out he like a cardiologist.

Torah:

A random stranger who was there to watch the races and enjoy some bluegrass music — who just happens to know exactly what to do.

Another spectator introduces herself as a nurse. She jumps in and starts doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Obadiah:

And in less than two minutes, there's a slight sign. There's a cough. There's a gurgle. They're continuing to do CPR compressions and breaths. Color comes back to his face. One more round of compressions. Roll him over. He starts spluttering and

coughing. All this water is coming out of him, out of his lungs. We establish a decent pulse. He's breathing. He opens his eyes.

I just remember sitting back and being like, thank God, man. Nobody dies on my birthday. And I know that's just a stupid, silly, selfish thing to say, but it was just the funniest thing that I could say at the moment to just lift the spirits of the people around us.

Daniel:

I remember the gentleman who jumped in and saved my life, telling me it was his birthday and that the best thing that could happen was me to come back.

Torah:

An ambulance arrives and takes Daniel to the hospital. He stays overnight for monitoring, but goes home the next day.

Daniel:

The only injuries I had was a couple of broken ribs probably obtained when they were doing CPR on me.

Torah:

And Obadiah, he spends the rest of the day on an adrenaline rush — not from the risk he took, but because of the outcome.

Obadiah:

I immediately went back down, grabbed my kayak, went right back to the put in — went and somehow won the whitewater kayak race down through the same gorge. I just went right back to it, but I didn't stop at the bottom. I was so excited that this guy was alive. I didn't stop at the takeout. I just kayaked all the way seven miles back down through more whitewater by myself, straight back to camp so I could sit down and take a breath and get myself a birthday drink.

Torah:

Alone at the campsite, nursing his cracked ribs, he has a revelation that changes the way he views the entire event.

Obadiah:

All of a sudden I realized and I thought to myself, "Aah shit. It's my fault. No one would have gotten on the river at that moment if it wasn't for me." Everyone makes their own choices. I get that. But I was the impetus. I was that first kayaker that was like, I got enough time to do a little warm up run. And I was the influence that put Daniel on the water at that moment.

Torah:

There is no way of knowing how things would have played out if Daniel had waited and pushed off an hour later, but it's something Obadiah still thinks about today.

Obadiah:

I pulled this off, thank God, but it's my fault anyway. So maybe it just cancels out on the karma sheet.

Torah:

In the weeks and months that followed this incident he has faced a lot of criticism about what he did.

Obadiah:

You're never supposed to endanger a rescuer. I get it. I broke the rules. That's just who I am. I'm not asking anyone else to do what I did. I will speak adamantly against it because just as easily, this could have been a story that had a very succinct and simple ending. Two people die on a river. One person died trying to rescue another. What a shame. What a tragedy.

Torah:

But it wasn't a tragedy. It was a miracle. And something Daniel will always be thankful for.

Daniel:

One of the amazing things that I think about all the time is that life seems, to be so fraught with dangers, that we lose the realization that there are good people all over.

There are heroes out there, we just don't know 'em.

Torah:

I'll be honest with you — I was a little nervous about doing this story. You see, Alaska has always been a spot that I have wanted to go to but never have.

And honestly, it is a little intimidating. I mean it is so big and so wild, and stories like this make it seem dangerous.

So, I sat down to talk with Zen Godfrey from Alaska.org about what it's really like to visit.

Zen Godfrey:

The really great thing about Alaska is that the highlights that you think of like glaciers, wilderness, happen all over the state. I am based in Anchorage. And so from here, easy car rides are, it's about two and a half hours to Seward, which is the gateway to Kenai Fjords National Park, which is water-based. You take a day cruise, you're seeing these massive tidewater glaciers that meet the ocean. You might see whales, sea otters, sea lions, it's just incredible. And then if you go north from here, Denali National Park is another big highlight and there you're in the high tundra so kind of the trees disappear and it's just jagged mountains and the Alaska Range and Mount Denali in all of its glory and the scenery is so different between the two of them.

Torah:

How long do you need to do that?

Zen:

A seven-day trip is perfect. It gives you a couple of days in Seward, gives you maybe three days in Denali, a couple of days on either end for flying in and flying out. It's a really comfortable trip.

Torah:

And Alaska's a big place. What's the best way to get around?

Zen:

Renting a car gives you the most flexibility if you're comfortable driving. And I think that Alaska intimidates people. They think the whole state is *Ice Road Truckers*. And that's not the case. You know, we have highways and they're paved. Most of them are paved. There are just a few that aren't.

Torah:

So when we talk about wanting your own car, what are some of the things that people need to keep in mind?

Zen:

Sure. So there's a few things that tend to trip people up. The first is underestimating how far apart things are. Everyone knows Alaska is big, but then they look at the map and they see two towns and they don't realize that it's a five-hour drive between them.

Torah:

Can you expect cell service throughout the roads, the major roads?

Zen:

Mostly, but there are some dead spots. So there again, just be aware of it. And if you have car trouble, you know, the roads are really well trafficked, especially in the summer, someone's going to come by and help you even if you don't have cell service.

Torah:

A lot of our stories involve people who like to get into the backcountry, get in for a little bit more adventure travel. I'm assuming there's tons of opportunity in Alaska to do that. Would you recommend a guide?

Zen:

The benefit of a guide to me is less about the safety aspect and more about the richness that you'll get from the experience of hiking with a guide who can tell you about natural features, the history, the geology, the flora and fauna. You learn so much I think that really adds to the overall richness of a trip. Now, certainly, if you are someone that is concerned about bears or wildlife, which we have them here, it does add a layer of comfort.

Torah:

What kind of wildlife might you see?

Zen:

Yeah we certainly have bears. I mean they really try to keep to themselves. They don't want to see you any more than you want to see them. You're more likely to see a moose than a bear.

If you do want to see bears, if like seeing a bear is on your list, there are dedicated tours who take you to known areas where bears gather. And in those places, you have a guide, the bears are used to people kind of coming in and watching — not disrupting or harming, right? So they don't see you as a threat.

Torah:

Most people have heard of Brooks Falls. That's where kind of the famous scene of the bears swatting at salmon as they're trying to fight their way up the waterfall.

Zen:

That's a perfect example of that, right? People can fly there from Anchorage and then you just get to be in this little like cocoon of wilderness watching bears in their natural habitat doing what they love and then you get to fly back and be in the city and go have dinner at a restaurant at the end of the day. It's really quite incredible.

Torah:

Well, I'm completely sold. I want to come. I love the wilderness. I love getting outside and I also love the cold. So I might actually, I don't know, is winter, is it a winter destination?

Zen:

Absolutely. Yeah, you should definitely consider Alaska in winter. There's less daylight. A common misconception is that it's dark all winter. That is true for the most northern part of the state, but anything below the Arctic Circle, like here in Anchorage, we get about five, five and a half hours of daylight in the winter. Great skiing, cross-country skiing, downhill skiing, snowmobiling, dog sledding, and the big draw is the northern lights. That's what brings most of the winter travelers to Alaska. But yes, definitely a winter destination. I would say come in both seasons.

Torah:

Okay, deal. Thank you, Zen. Thank you for all your advice.

Zen:

Absolutely. Thank you.

Torah:

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

Thanks for joining us on this incredible ride.

We'll be back in the new year with a whole new season, but if you can't wait until then, scroll back in time to one of our earlier episodes. There are more than 40 in our back catalogue.

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).