



Season 3

Episode 5 Transcript

Frozen and Fading in the Buffalo Blizzard

Torah Kachur:

Joe White is walking to his job at a movie theater in Buffalo, New York. He does this every day. In the summer, he rides his bike. It's not a short trip.

Yvonne White:

It's probably about 15 to 20 miles. And in the wintertime, unfortunately, he walks.

Torah Kachur:

That's Joe's sister, Yvonne White. She's speaking for him because it's difficult for Joe to tell his own story.

Yvonne White:

My brother is probably one of the most innocent, nicest people you will meet. He's 65, but unfortunately he is diagnosed as Asperger's syndrome, which is like a form of autism, and mentally disabled. So his mental capacity is that of a 10 or 11 year old child.

Torah Kachur:

Which helps to explain why Joe is walking to work in the middle of a winter storm so severe it shut down power to over 20,000 homes and paralyzed emergency services. In Buffalo, 31 people died, many of them trapped in the freezing snowbound cars or on the streets. Joe was never supposed to be out in that blizzard.

Yvonne White:

The day before I told Joey, "Look it, nobody's going to go to the theater, honey, so you don't have to go to the show." You know? And he's like, "Okay, okay."

Torah Kachur:

But Joe didn't understand that he also shouldn't go to work the next day.

Yvonne White:

So in his mind, he didn't go the 23rd, so he woke up the 24th, which was Christmas Eve, and says, "Okay, well, I have to go to the show now."

Torah Kachur:

Yvonne has no idea her brother's out in the storm. He's been walking for hours. His hands are covered in ice. His shoes are frozen to his feet. He's reached the point where he can't take another step. Joe stops and calls for help. Even though he's in a residential neighborhood surrounded by homes, all he can see is snow.

I'm Torah Kachur and 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 that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things, every day.

Joe White has had the same job at the North Park Theater for over 40 years. Yvonne, his younger sister, remembers the day he got it.

Yvonne White:

I was 17, he was 21, 22, and we saw an ad that they were looking for some help, so I drove him up there. I helped him fill out the application, and they hired him, and he has been working there ever since.

Torah Kachur:

The North Park Theater opened on Hertel Avenue on November 21st, 1920. The original interior is still intact. Lots of velvet, art deco chandeliers, brass fixtures and doors.

Yvonne White:

No matter rain, snow, wind, summer, anything, that brass is polished, the shine is unbelievable. And that's his dignity. He takes pride in what he does.

Torah Kachur:

Over the years, Joe's become a staple at the theater and the neighborhood around it.

Yvonne White:

Everybody on Hertel Avenue knows Joe. "Hey, Joe. Hey, Joey." He gets free coffee. They give him cookies. He milks it sometimes, don't get me wrong. He knows how to work it, but everybody knows him.

Torah Kachur:

And they take care of him, look out for him.

Yvonne White:

Envision a 10-year-old liked Bruce Lee. He could talk to you forever about Bruce Lee. He could basically tell you a lot of statistics about the Buffalo Sabres, loves the Buffalo Sabres and the Buffalo Bills. And as far as like money goes, and he'll go to a store, and if something's marked 9.99, he has a hard time deciphering, "Well, what do I give them?" So he'll just always give \$20. It's a form of autism, and that's where he's coming from.

Torah Kachur:

Every day, Joe gets up and goes to work. The theater's about 15 miles from his apartment, but Joe doesn't mind, especially when he can ride his bike.

Yvonne White:

Joe's bike is his life. He has a Mickey Mouse bell on it. He has a radio on it. He has bags on it. I mean, it's just beautiful. Here he is. There's Joe riding down the street with his bike.

Torah Kachur:

But Joe can't ride his bike in snow.

Yvonne White:

They were warning people and they said a strong storm is coming up, and then within the days leading to this, they were saying this is a possibility that this is going to be a historical blizzard.

Speaker 3:

Conditions will continue. Really cold weather will continue as well, and we'll see more accumulation-

Torah Kachur:

Yvonne calls Joe and told him he shouldn't go to work. That was December 23rd, the day the storm arrived in Buffalo. It's bad. There are power outages. Authorities announce a travel ban. The storm gets worse overnight.

Yvonne White:

But Joey, I don't think he realized the impact of it.

Torah Kachur:

The next day, Christmas Eve, he gets up and gets ready to walk to work as usual. Outside, four feet of snow has fallen. Hurricane force winds are blowing it into massive drifts. Plow crews can't keep up and they're pulled from the streets. Emergency services are suspended in parts of Erie County.

Speaker 4:

Travel ban, a driving ban, has been issued for the city of Buffalo.

Torah Kachur:

It's the storm of the century, and Joe, without telling anyone, is getting ready to walk 15 miles to work. Joe's not totally unaware of what's happening. He wears his warmest clothing, hoodie, coat, gloves, packed several cloth grocery bags.

Yvonne White:

And in his mind, he was like, "Well, if I get snowed in, I have to shave, but I'm not going to bring one razor. I'm going to bring 11. If I get snowed in, I'm going to need clothes. I'm not going to need one pair of jeans. I'm going to need three pairs of jeans."

Torah Kachur:

Carrying all these bags, Joe sets out for the theater. He's the only one out, and the blizzard is intensifying.

Yvonne White:

The snow was just, you couldn't see your hand in front of your face and the winds were kicking up.

Torah Kachur:

At some point, Joe takes off his gloves, his hands freeze. His clothes are

covered with snow. Winter storms aren't unusual for Buffalo, but this blizzard is not usual. The National Weather Service issued a winter advisory to over 200 million people from Florida to Washington, and Buffalo's getting hit the hardest.

Joe White cannot take another step. He's frozen. It's too far to go home and too far to the theater, and he can't see a thing. The wind just keeps blowing. This is Tell Me What Happened, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase the importance of a human connection when you need help, whether you're trapped in a mudslide, lost in the mountains, or stranded in a blizzard. It's 6:00 AM on December 24th, Christmas Eve day. Sha'Kyra Aughtry can't sleep.

Sha'Kyra Aughtry:

Honestly, the winds were just blowing extremely hard. I thought my roof was going to blow off. This storm was the worst of my 35 years of life.

Torah Kachur:

But Sha'Kyra's got power. Her kids are safe at a cousin's house. She's wondering if she'll be able to get them home for Christmas. And then she hears a strange noise.

Sha'Kyra Aughtry:

You ever hear somebody talking into a fan? That's how I heard him scream out for help, which made me look out the window, and when I looked out the window, I realized it was a person.

Torah Kachur:

Sha'Kyra hesitates for just a moment. Who would be outside in the storm?

Sha'Kyra Aughtry:

From watching him through the window, I know this guy really needs some help. If he was going to hurt me, he would've made his way in the house, but he didn't.

Torah Kachur:

And it's clear: He's not going to last much longer outside.

Sha'Kyra Aughtry:

He kept falling, kept standing up, kept falling, kept standing up. He couldn't brace his self on anything. I just really knew then he really needed help.

Torah Kachur:

Sha'Kyra asks her boyfriend Trent to go outside and get the stranger.

Sha'Kyra Aughtry:

He had to brace himself on a car that was in the driveway to be able to have balance to carry him in.

Torah Kachur:

She sees immediately Joe was in really bad shape.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

He was froze. He had so much snow on him, so I start trying to chip off some of the snow, but it was so much of it that I ended up having to use a blow-dryer to actually defrost his clothing.

Torah Kachur:

Joe is disoriented. Sha’Kyra’s a stranger to him.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

He was saying, “Please don’t rob me.” But I just kept telling him like, “No, I’m not here to do any of that. I’m here to help you. You don’t have to worry about any of that. I’m here. My name is Sha’Kyra. His name is Trent. We just want to help you.”

Torah Kachur:

Sha’Kyra knows she’s got to get Joe warmed up quickly.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

I cut off his socks, but he had a bag in his hand, so I end up cutting off that bag that was stuck to his hand. It was froze to his hand, and I was thinking to myself, “This guy is in really bad condition, and what can I do to help him?”

Torah Kachur:

As she’s taking care of Joe, Sha’Kyra tries to find out more about him. Eventually, he gives her the number for his sister, Yvonne.

Yvonne White:

I didn’t know the name. I’m like, “Who’s going to call me on Christmas Eve at 8:00 in the morning? I don’t know.”

Torah Kachur:

Sha’Kyra leaves a voicemail.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

“Hello, Yvonne. This is Sha’Kyra. I have your brother, Joe. He was stranded outside and we brought him in our home. Whenever you get this message, give me a call immediately. I’ll call you back shortly. Thank you.”

Automated:

End of message.

Yvonne White:

And I’m like, “What the heck? Who are you? Who is this person? What are you talking about?”

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

Sister ended up calling me back, actually giving me some insight on him, letting me know that he was a 65-year-old older gentleman and that he has a mind of a 10-year-old.

Yvonne White:

We’re FaceTiming and she’s sending me pictures and everything.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

His hands kept blowing up, and his hands were getting bigger and bigger and bigger.

Torah Kachur:

Joe has severe frostbite. They both know he needs medical attention.

Yvonne White:

I’m like, “Okay, we’re going to call emergency services.” So she starts calling. I start calling. I said, “We need help at this lady’s house. My brother looks like he’s going to die.” And I was told, “We don’t have any vehicles. We can’t do anything.” And I’m like, “Dude, this is my brother. I am not going to lose my brother.”

Torah Kachur:

But what can they do? It’s impossible to drive in the storm. So Sha’Kyra tries to make Joe as comfortable as possible.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

I treat him like I would treat my kid. I washed him up, I fed him. I washed his clothes. And as time went on, me and him started to grow a bond. I made sure that he knew he was in a safe place with me.

Torah Kachur:

They even watch a football game together. Sha’Kyra and Yvonne try 911 all day.

Yvonne White:

“You’re on the list, you’re on the list.” That’s all we were being told. And in the interim, he’s getting worse and worse and worse.

Torah Kachur:

The next morning, Christmas day, the blizzard is still raging and Joe is even worse.

Yvonne White:

His hands were just, they were turning purple but also blistering. Blistering the size of a baseball.

Torah Kachur:

Sha’Kyra calls a medical hotline. They tell her his hands could be gangrenous, his organs could shut down. It’s clear they have to do something fast, but what?

Yvonne White:

You’re helpless, you’re literally helpless, and just the weather was getting worse and worse and worse. I was pacing. I was going nuts. I couldn’t sit still. Oh, my gosh. What is going to happen? What is the outcome going to be?

Torah Kachur:

As Christmas Day drags on, Joe seems to be in more and more pain, getting weaker and weaker. Around 9:30 PM, Sha’Kyra decides to put out a call for help live on Facebook.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

I’ve called everybody. I’m asking for help from whoever. This man needs serious help. I have did everything that I can do. This man needs help. He’s in pain. He’s in pain. Look at this, y’all. This man going to lose his fingers. Come on, now, y’all. We got to do better, man. We got to do better.

Yvonne White:

When I saw that and when I heard that, that’s when I got the pit in my stomach. I was like, “Dear, God, this is …” It’s just my brother and myself. I’m like, “Dear, God, whatever you do, please, please save this man. Please, somebody help.”

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

When I got off of social media, about 15 minutes later, some people came honking down the streets, shoveling out my driveway to help get him in, get him inside the vehicle.

Torah Kachur:

Sha’Kyra’s livestream has gone viral. Within minutes, there are 611 comments and over 2,000 shares.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

Random people just showed up at the house. They just, because I said my address and my phone numbers online, they ended up coming and little angels just fell out the sky and came to help us.

Yvonne White:

One of the guys was going throughout the whole city trying to help as many people as possible. And then there was a gentleman who had the truck, and apparently he was a ex-football player for a college or something, and just all these people showed up at her house, and it was just amazing.

Torah Kachur:

After more than 36 hours of caring for Joe, Sha’Kyra refuses to leave his side.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

I didn’t want the guys to take him without me knowing where he was going or what he was doing. I had to be with him at the rest of the way to make sure he was fine.

Yvonne White:

Honestly, it was like my sister was helping my brother, okay? That’s how I felt. But it was just beautiful to see.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

So I said, “These guys are here, Joey. They helped us get some help,” and he

told me that he loved me. It let me know that I did the right thing for him, and it let me know that he felt secure with me.

Torah Kachur:

They arrive at the hospital, find a wheelchair, and push Joe into the ER.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

And I explained to him that these are nurses and they’re here to help him and he has to be patient with them, and then they took him in the back.

Torah Kachur:

But they won’t let Sha’Kyra stay with him.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

I end up crying because I was just scared and I didn’t know what would happen after that.

Torah Kachur:

Yvonne gets to see her brother a few days later when the travel ban is lifted. The doctors do their best, but the frostbite is too severe. After weeks of treatment, they amputate his fingers.

Yvonne White:

But the silver lining is he’s alive, and hopefully in the future we can get the prosthetics for him. So I tell him that he’s got to get strong like Rocky, just like Rocky. I even bought him a Rocky T-shirt. You got to get strong, dude. You got to get strong, because the stronger you’re going to get, we can get you magic fingers. I go, “You remember The Six Million Dollar Man? That’s how we’re going to get. We’re going to get your fingers like that.”

Torah Kachur:

Joe wants to get strong enough to go back to his job at the movie theater. He wants to ride his bike. One of the things helping him get better, his bond with Sha’Kyra and her family.

Yvonne White:

Oh, we talk. We talk at least two, three times a week, and if we don’t talk, we’re texting. She saved my older brother, and now it’s like I have a sister, another brother, and three nephews, and I tell Joey that all the time.

Sha’Kyra Aughtry:

I keep in contact with him, he keeps in contact with me, and we go from there. I mean, he’s a part of my family for the rest of my life and the rest of his life. And let’s always continue to be family.

Torah Kachur:

Plus, there’s even a bigger network of people rooting for Joe.

Yvonne White:

The amount of love and support that Joey has, he doesn’t even realize. I mean, we received cards from Australia. I received messages from Hong Kong.

I mean, all over the entire world. Here's the guy who lost all his fingers in the blizzard when saved by a stranger. It's a beautiful story. When you think about it, it's a beautiful story.

Torah Kachur:

If you live in a place that gets any amount of snow in the winter, it's a good idea to prepare for severely cold weather. This show was produced by OnStar, and they're focused on keeping you safe. So I'm turning to Teimojin Tan. He's a doctor with a military background in arctic warfare survival. Teimojin, if you have to be outdoors in severe winter weather, how should you prepare yourself? What to wear, what not to wear?

Teimojin Tan:

So number one, good headgear. So I like having a fleece kind of liner, whether that's a balaclava or a little Skull Cap. In addition to that, on top of it, you have a wool or fleece toque or beanie, and neck warmer, and multiple layers. So you have your base layer, you have your mid-layer that's fleece or wool, making sure that your jacket number one has loft to it, preferably has some kind of reflective layer integrated inside it, and has waterproofing kind of shell to it.

And despite all the fears about being cold, being too hot is a concern too, so being mindful when you're purchasing or modifying your equipment to make sure you can ventilate things really quickly. So armpit zips, layering down as you're walking to work. It is as important to keep that body temperature normal so you're not sweating, because that freezes, and then that also disrupts your clothing's ability to keep you warm.

So one of the biggest mistakes is piling on wool socks and it being tight. You block blood flow, which means there's less warm blood circulating and warming up that area. Same thing for the gloves. You want multiple layers. Keep everything as covered as possible. Preferably you'd have some goggles. And if the only thing I see on you is two nostril holes, you're set to adventure in -40 degrees and below.

Torah Kachur:

Okay, maybe you don't have all that gear, but you have to be outside for a long period of time in the cold. What should you be on the lookout for?

Teimojin Tan:

So hypothermia is kind of the top mind of dangers. When we think about survival priorities, the main thing that differentiates, "Hey, I'm cold," versus, "Hey, I have moderate to severe hypothermia and probably need hospitalization," is that core temperature, which none of us regularly can measure because you need special equipment for that, but to changes in your mental status. That can be imbalance, that can be speaking funny, acting like a drunk person, doing things that you wouldn't otherwise with a sound mind. And when you get into that stage, you are not capable of caring for yourself, so catching yourself before that and knowing the signs and symptoms before you get to that is important. And you can see a lot of people who get frostbite, severe frostbites, amputations from it, typically have some degree of hypothermia, whether that's mild, moderate, or severe.

Torah Kachur:

What about being at home during a severe winter storm? There may be power outages. Maybe your home is not insulated so well. What can you do to prepare?

Teimojin Tan:

Now, if you are thinking about heating actively and you don't have electricity, your job is to find the smallest room, preferably no windows, that is insulated from the outside, and then make a shelter inside of that. Start with things that you already have at home. Start with your duvet cover, your bedsheets. You might need to cover all your walls. Try to find the smallest space that you can, just fits whatever amount of bodies you need to protect, and make the shelter quite small.

Torah Kachur:

Teimojin, what keeps you so interested in survival strategies?

Teimojin Tan:

I try to inspire people by sharing the skills, the knowledge, the many failures I've had in life and in survival situations, so that they can learn and know that it's okay to not know everything. It's okay to develop yourself as a person, and it's okay to fail.

Torah Kachur:

Oh, thank you, Teimojin. This has been great.

Teimojin Tan:

It's been a pleasure.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's Tell Me What Happened, true stories of people helping people. And if you want to share your own story about a stranger who showed up for you at just the right moment, look for a link at onstar.com. Or if you're listening on Spotify, check out the Q and A feature. Let's share some love for people who help others in big ways and small. And while you're at it, share some love for this podcast. It really helps if you review and rate us or share this with someone who would enjoy it. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur, and please, be safe out there.

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