

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Season 5 - Episode 6

Pulled Free and Paid Forward

Torah Kachur:

When it rains in Houston, it really rains. They've had hurricanes — Harvey in 2017 caused more than \$125 billion in damage and claimed more than 100 lives. But even the storms that fall short of that benchmark can bring widespread destruction. And they each have their own character.

Bryan Pederson:

So, the storm that hit us that day was unique. A very unique storm and it caught everyone by surprise.

Torah Kachur:

That's Bryan Pederson. He was driving to meet some work colleagues for dinner one evening when he got caught in a freak weather event.

Bryan Pederson:

As I started driving, I could see the trees really starting to move. My wife called me and said, "Hey, are you sure you need to go?" So I said, "Sarah, I'm fine." And as soon as I said that she heard this loud crash, And she said, "My gosh, are you okay? Did somebody hit you?" I was pinned and I said, "Sarah, I don't know what that just happened." I said, "Call 911, I can't breathe."

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur. Welcome to *Tell Me What Happened*, an original podcast by OnStar. This is a show about people helping people — specifically, strangers helping strangers. Every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help, or if you'll be in a position to help someone else. And sometimes, like in this story, you could be both. Bryan Pederson and his family are always on the go.

Bryan Pederson:

We're a very sports-focused family. Both my kids play sports. My wife played sports. We played at the collegiate level, so we're a little bit competitive.

Torah Kachur:

And despite living in south Texas, their sport of choice is hockey.

Bryan Pederson:

Just to give you an idea of what hockey's like in Texas, in Houston specifically, there are not a lot of rinks. There's only four rinks in a city of eight million. So when we have to go to hockey, it's getting your kids out of school, feed them, and then jump into Houston traffic.

Torah Kachur:

To try and cut down on the driving, Bryan's son carools with a teammate. Today, it's the other family's turn to drive the boys to practice.

Bryan Pederson:

The plan was to meet this family at a gas station that we always meet at, drop off my son, and then that day I had actually had some colleagues from work that were in from the UK, and I was gonna meet them for dinner, because they had never really had any Texas barbecue, so I was gonna go meet them about 20 minutes away for dinner.

Torah Kachur:

It might sound busy, but, really, it's just a typical Thursday for the Pederson family. The only thing that's noteworthy is that it's raining — and the forecast is for a storm to roll through.

Bryan Pederson:

You know, you'll get these big monsoon rains and they come and go and they're gone in 15 minutes. Clouds move quite quickly off the coast and into the mainland, they dump the water and then that's it. So when my son and I left, my wife was like, "You know, be careful. The weather doesn't look great." We loaded our gear and we went on our merry way. And, we got to the gas station, which is about seven minutes from my house. And the other family was waiting there.

Torah Kachur:

Bryan says goodbye to his son as they transfer his hockey gear from the back of his SUV to their friend's vehicle. Then he drives off to introduce his British colleagues to some authentic Texas barbecue. He's on the edge of Houston — a single lane road that runs through a mixed neighbourhood, past some industrial properties and a couple of larger homes with big lawns.

Along the way, his wife calls. She's still worried about the weather.

Bryan Pederson:

And she goes, "Are you sure you need to go to dinner? It's really getting windy here." And I said, "Sarah, it's OK. I've done this before. It's just a storm. It'll pass probably in the next 10, 15 minutes." And she said, "OK, well just drive really careful." So I said, "OK, no problem."

Torah Kachur:

But as he's driving, he starts to have second thoughts. The rain hasn't let up and the wind is building. He can see the treetops swinging from side to side.

Bryan Pederson:

Then it hit me, like, you know what, this isn't worth it. I haven't seen a storm like this in a while.

Torah Kachur:

So, he pulls over and texts his work friends to say he won't be able to meet them for dinner.

Bryan Pederson:

And at the same time, my wife called me and she said, listen, Loretta, my daughter, who was 10 at the time, she said, "Loretta is worried sick about you. She's in tears right now. She said, 'Something bad's gonna happen to dad and we need to pray for him.'" And I was like, well, that's not good. I reassured them, I said, "I'm okay, guys, it's okay. I am turning around, and I'm coming home."

Torah Kachur:

He pulls out onto the road, heading back in the direction he came from. He gets to the intersection where the gas station is — the one he dropped his son off at ten minutes ago. The light's red, so he stops. That's when his wife calls for a third time. She sees the rain and the wind whipping through the trees in their backyard. She's really worried.

Bryan Pederson:

And she said, "OK, where are you?" And I said, "I'm on my way back." And she goes, "Well, Loretta, just grabbed my hand. She said, 'We need to pray for dad,' and I'm just making sure you're okay." So I said, "Sarah, I'm fine. I'll be home in seven minutes."

Torah Kachur:

Just then his wife and daughter hear a loud crash. A bang followed by glass shattering and metal twisting and breaking.

Bryan Pederson:

This tree comes crashing through the roof of my vehicle and she's on the phone with me still.

And at that point, the tree had come down on my shoulder and pushed me into the console.

I was pinned and I said, "Sarah, I think a tree fell on my vehicle."

Torah Kachur:

Sarah is caught between wanting to call 911 but not wanting to hang up on her husband. Meanwhile, Bryan is slowly being crushed.

Bryan Pederson:

The tree hadn't stopped coming down. And so I was doing my best to wiggle my way to a point that I could breathe and alleviate the console squishing into my ribs. And I said, "I don't know if I'm gonna make it."

Torah Kachur:

This is *Tell Me What Happened*, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help, whether you're lost in the forest, being swept away in a river, or trapped in a car being slowly crushed by a fallen tree. A massive storm is pounding the city of Houston. Low-lying areas are filling with flood water. Loose shingles are being ripped from rooftops. And trees are being toppled. One of those trees — a giant oak tree — has landed on Brian Pederson's SUV. He's pinned in the driver seat. The dashboard has crumpled on top of him crushing his chest. He's surrounded by twisted metal and shattered glass.

Bryan Pederson:

The bulk of the crushing happened on the back of the vehicle. A branch came through the very back and then it also came through the majority of the driver's side. But there was enough room there that I could squeeze between the console and the roof coming in.

Torah Kachur:

But every time the wind moves the tree, it crushes the roof a little more. Inch by inch the small space that is keeping him alive is getting smaller.

Bryan Pederson:

I'm just thinking in my head, okay, stay alive, stay, figure this out. You can turn, you can twist and just find a way to breathe.

Torah Kachur:

He was on speaker phone talking to his wife when the tree fell. Despite the damage to the car, they're still connected.

Bryan Pederson:

As soon as the tree hit and it knocked my phone down and it pushed me down and I'm staring now literally inches away from my phone. And I see my wife's name on the phone. And I'm like, this is the last time I'm having this conversation. And I told her I loved her.

Torah Kachur:

Outside, the storm is still in full force. A dozen cars are waiting at the red light behind Bryan. Behind the wheel of one of them is a single mom and her three kids. Her name is Veronica Marin. Veronica moved to Houston nine years ago. In Mexico, she was a nurse, but right now she's working as a house cleaner. She speaks some English but is more comfortable in Spanish.

Veronica Marin:

Salí de mi trabajo a las 4.30 y ese día fui directo a la guardería de los niños. Yo los recogí.

TRANSLATION:

I left my job at 4:30 and that day I went straight to the daycare for the kids. I picked them up.

Torah Kachur:

Veronica says she was on her way home from picking up her kids when the storm hit.

Veronica Marin:

Yo era algo muy feo, muy feo.

TRANSLATION:

It was something very ugly, very ugly.

Torah Kachur:

Sitting there in a long line of cars, she sees the cars in front of her making U-turns and heading the opposite direction. As she drives forward, she sees why. A giant oak tree is blocking the entire road, and under it is a silver SUV, crushed like a pop can. Her three kids, aged 6, 4, and 3, are in the back seat. She tells them to stay put. Then, she opens her car door and steps out into the storm. Fighting the wind, she makes her way to the crushed car. The tree's branches have blocked off the driver's side.

Bryan Pederson:

So this woman came to the passenger side window and she hit the window, the only one left intact at this point, and she said, are there any kids in the back? And I said, no, there's no kids.

Torah Kachur:

The tree shifts and drops another inch.

Bryan Pederson:

And she goes, you need to get out.

Torah Kachur:

Veronica grabs the door handle and pulls. But the car was in drive when the tree landed on it, so the doors are locked.

Bryan Pederson:

I reached under and I hit the unlock button on the door and she pulled on the handle, but the damage had kind of wedged the door shut. She actually ripped the handle off the vehicle.

Veronica Marin:

Y no sé, en ese momento, la adrenalina.

TRANSLATION:

And I don't know, at that moment, the adrenaline.

Torah Kachur:

At this point another driver arrives to help: His name is Travis. He sees the crumpled door will only open part way — about a foot and half — so he runs back to his truck to get a crowbar.

The tree is still slowly coming down. Pieces of glass are raining on the seats.

Veronica Marin:

Tienes que venir. tienes que venir rápido.

TRANSLATION:

You have to come. You have to come quickly.

Bryan Pederson:

She said, “You have to get out you have to get out.”

Torah Kachur:

Veronica is tiny. She’s 5-foot-2. She crawls through the half open doorway, reaches her hand around the wreckage and undoes Bryan’s seatbelt.

Bryan Pederson:

Which I hadn’t even thought of and she undoes that and then she grabbed my arms and just started pulling.

Torah Kachur:

She pulls as hard as she can, but Bryan is 6-foot-7. He outweighs Veronica by more than 150 pounds. Travis returns with a crowbar and bends the door so it’s fully open and he can lean inside. Then the two of them pull together. Bryan contorts himself around the center console. Slowly, he slides across the seats. With every movement, more glass falls. Finally, they drag him out onto the rain-soaked road. Bryan stands up and looks at the crumpled piece of metal that used to be his car. He looks at the back seat and realizes that if one of his kids had been in there, they wouldn’t have survived. The rain is still pouring down so Travis guides him back to his truck. Bryan climbs in, still in shock.

Bryan Pederson:

And I said, “Where did that woman go?” And he goes, “I don’t know.” He goes, “I said thank you to her and I gave her a hug and she disappeared.”

Torah Kachur:

What she had done was go back to her car, comforted her frightened kids, and driven home to make them dinner.

Veronica Marin:

Todo ha terminado, vámonos a casa.

TRANSLATION:

Everything is over, let's go home.

Torah Kachur:

Bryan calls his wife, who picks him up and takes him to the hospital.

Bryan Pederson:

Actually, had a girl come in and use this little vacuum and take all the glass out of my leg.

Torah Kachur:

On the phone from the hospital, he reassures his daughter that he's ok. His son is at home too. The family driving him decided the weather was too bad, so they skipped practice and took him home.

Bryan Pederson:

It was really hard for me to even hear my kids' voices at that point. The magnitude of what had happened really sunk in. You don't realize how a moment changes everything. And it can be a moment that is completely not your fault. And this is a freak accident, a very bizarre freak accident. And initially, is it unlucky? Is it something that, you know, is there a bigger story or is there something, is there a reason why it happened? And you search for that, you really do. You start thinking, why did this happen? But I'll tell you, it just changes, not that I was ungrateful for the life I have, but it certainly changes the way that you perceive life after.

Torah Kachur:

It's later that evening and the kids are in bed. Bryan and his wife are sitting on the couch, decompressing. There's still one question circling in Bryan's mind: Who was that woman that knocked on the window, opened the door, undid my seatbelt, and helped pull me out?

Bryan Pederson:

It just really stuck with me. like, we have to find this woman. I mean, she got me out.

Torah Kachur:

Sarah posts a photo of the accident scene on social media. She explains what happened and asks if anyone can help them find the woman. But despite being reposted more than 2,000 times, they get nothing.

Bryan Pederson:

It was hard because by Day 3 that we had posted it, we still hadn't had any leads. But finally, by Day 4, my wife comes in as I was on a conference call, and she shows me her phone, and she goes, "I think we found her."

Torah Kachur:

Veronica had actually seen the post the first day, but she hadn't wanted to respond. She didn't feel like a hero. Besides, she was busy working and looking after her kids. But at the urging of some friends, she relents, and sends Sarah a message.

Bryan Pederson:

She had said, "I think I'm the woman that you're looking for."

Torah Kachur:

Later that day, they speak on the phone.

Veronica Marin:

Y la señora me dijo, estamos muy agradecidos, usted le salvó la vida a mi esposo.

TRANSLATION:

And the lady told me, we are very grateful, you saved my husband's life.

Bryan Pederson:

She said, "I'm so sorry I left. I was scared and my kids were crying and I needed to get out of there because it was very, it was very crazy."

Torah Kachur:

They agree to meet in person, and decide that a nearby firehall is a good, safe, neutral place.

Bryan Pederson:

I gave her a big hug and I said, "Thank you so much."

Torah Kachur:

After the tears, hugs, and thank you's, the conversation moves to other topics.

Bryan Pederson:

And then we got to hear her story. Which was quite amazing. She's come from a lot of hardships. She's got three kids. She's a young, single mom. She's 26. She was homeless 18 months ago. And she worked hard to get things going for her family.

Torah Kachur:

It's clear to Bryan and Sarah that there is a way they can try to thank Veronica for what she's done. They arrange to visit her and bring some groceries and new clothes for her kids.

Bryan Pederson:

She lives in a mobile home. It wasn't in great shape. I mean, she keeps her house meticulous and she provides a great home for her kids. But there was water damage. We could see the roof leaked. We could see that the floors had experienced a lot of water damage. They were all warped.

Torah Kachur:

A friend in the construction business tells Bryan it will cost \$15,000 to fix up Veronica's home, so they set to work through their local church group and online to raise money. Bryan even goes on local TV to tell the story.

Bryan Pederson:

The story ran, ran a couple of times on the news, it was on their website, we went from \$5,300 to like \$12,000.

Torah Kachur:

Then a national magazine picks up the story.

Bryan Pederson:

And after all was said and done, we ended up with about \$66,000.

Torah Kachur:

Veronica is shocked.

Veronica Marin:

Y me mostró las cantidades y yo Dios, Padre, eso es demasiado dinero.

TRANSLATION:

And he showed me the quantities and I God, Father, that's too much money.

Bryan Pederson:

She texted me and said, "Bryan, this is way too much. Tell them to stop." And I was like, "The world wants to help you. I don't know what to tell you. You did something amazing, and I know you don't believe it, but it really is."

Torah Kachur:

At this point Bryan figures that fixing her current home isn't the best option. They almost have enough to buy a brand-new mobile home, so he emails a local manufacturer.

Bryan Pederson:

The owner called me the next day and he said, "We would love to help this woman out."

And, so, they came to the table and they gave her a brand new home with everything, warranty for \$50,000. And so she still had money left over, which was even more incredible.

She wants to go back to school. She wants to take care of her kids better and this gets rid of her mobile home payment altogether. So it's just amazing how it turned out.

Torah Kachur:

Veronica says the whole incident and everything that has happened since has given her a new outlook on life.

Veronica Marin:

Cuando Dios da algo, lo da con alegría, no añade tristeza.

TRANSLATION:

When God gives something, He gives it with joy, He doesn't add sadness.

Bryan Pederson:

She's just a giving person. She's humble. She doesn't ask for anything. She never wanted anything out of this. She hates the limelight. She doesn't like the cameras, but I think it's reinstilled her faith too.

Veronica Marin:

Él dijo, salvaste mi vida y yo la tuya. Dije que sí.

TRANSLATION:

He said, "You saved my life and I yours." I said, "Yes."

Bryan Pederson:

I just keep going back. Yeah, I didn't do it. You did it, and the rest of the world thought it was awesome.

Torah Kachur:

It took eight weeks to make all the arrangements, transfer the money, and get the home delivered, but in the end, it was everything they had hoped for.

Bryan Pederson:

I got to tell you when that home came down the street and just looking at Veronica, I couldn't keep it together. I mean, she was just elated and you know, you realize how good things are when, you know, you see, see somebody have so much gratitude and so much happiness. And she said, "My kids have their dream home."

Torah Kachur:

On that terrible, stormy day, 10 other people saw a massive tree sitting on top of a crushed car and decided to turn around and drive away. But Veronica decided to get out and help. And that is what this show is all about. To Veronica, and all the other people who brave the storm to help others, thank you.

Having a giant tree fall on top of your car is a pretty rare occurrence, but every day, all across North America, drivers find themselves in some kind of unexpected trouble. So, what should you do first? Who should you call? To answer those questions and more, we've got David Bennett from AAA joining us. So David, what should I do if I'm in a collision?

David Bennett:

Well, that's always, know, first thing you're just, you're freaked out. Let's face it, you know, you're like, what did what just happened? Make sure everybody's safe, you know, and make sure everybody's not injured. If they are injured, call 911. Let's get some emergency vehicles out there as soon as possible. After that, what you want to go ahead and do is just assess the damage.

Start taking pictures of the vehicle itself. You want to go ahead and capture the

vehicle information, maybe the other driver's information. But you know what, if they're irate and you're not feeling comfortable about talking to a driver, at least capture their license plate number, and then at that point, you want to go ahead and call your insurance company right away and report that damage as soon as you can. If there is no one's injured, it's a quick little fender bender or whatever go ahead and call the non-emergency police number and have them come out and write up a report for you.

Torah Kachur:

When do you call the police first versus when do you call your insurance company first?

David Bennett:

I would call the police first so that way they are traveling on their way to the location and at that point then you call your insurance company right away and just say, hey, I was just in an accident. The police are on their way. Then you start collecting that information.

Torah Kachur:

If your car does need to be towed, what do you expect? How do you know where your car gets towed to? All that kind of information?

David Bennett:

Well, that is definitely something you just never know. So that's why you could call your insurance company. They will direct you to a repair facility that they work with. And so the tow provider that comes out to help you will take it over there.

Torah Kachur:

What kinds of things will the insurance company want to know?

David Bennett:

Well, they're going to want to know, okay, all the facts, did you get a police report?

They're not going to ask if you were at fault. That's why the police are there. And that's, that's another important point is, is don't admit fault in an accident to the other driver or anything else. You don't want to admit, you're just gathering facts. The police, if they show up, they can figure all that out.

Torah Kachur:

It would be great to be able to prevent surprises, minimize my chance of a breakdown, but I'm not a mechanic. So what can I do to make sure my car is road ready?

David Bennett:

You can check your tire pressures, check the tread of the tires. Very easy to walk around and look at those things. When you're looking at tire pressure, you want to look at what the recommended pounds per square inch, or PSI is, and you want to do that by opening the driver's door and there's a little placard right there. And it will tell you, this is what the recommended is for front and back. They may be different,

so you want to take a look at that.

Then also look at the tread and how you can tell when the tread of the tires is take a quarter, put the quarter upside down, look for Washington's head. If you can see Washington's head, that means it's time for a new set of tires. Then also don't forget about your spare tire. And right now, there's probably 25 to 30 percent of the vehicles on the road do not come standard with a spare tire. And people get surprised when they pull over, "I don't have a spare tire? I didn't know that. I always assumed that they came with spare tires," but they don't anymore.

Torah Kachur:

What about pieces of equipment you should have in your vehicle first aid kit?

David Bennett:

First aid kit is huge to have. You know, make sure the basics: some tape, band-aids, some ointment, things like that. Leave that in your glove box so it's easily accessible. If you're driving in the winter, make sure that you have a blanket. You know, carry a blanket just because you're thinking about warmth at this point. Ensure that you have some water, snacks. And if you have a pet traveling with you, make sure that you bring a little bit extra. Include them.

So, a couple other things, I would say a flashlight with some extra batteries, rags, paper towels, basic set of hand tools, screwdrivers, hammer, pliers, things like that, and duct tape. Let's face it, duct tape always helps, right? Anything else fails, you use a little bit of duct tape.

Torah Kachur:

David, thank you so much for your expertise.

David Bennett:

Well, I appreciate you having us on here. Thank you. Have a great day.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people.

You can subscribe or follow us on whatever app you're using so you'll know as soon as our next episode launches. Until then, on behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.

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