

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Season 5 - Episode 4

River Outing Takes a Twist

Torah Kachur:

Abi Sherman has lived her whole life in the beautiful Northwest.

Abigail Sherman:

I mean, Oregon our summers are very short, roughly like maybe two to three months of nice weather.

Torah Kachur:

And when the weather is hot, a great way to spend the day is to get some friends together, grab some inflatable tubes, and float down a river through the most beautiful scenery in the country.

Abigail Sherman:

I was excited, you know, this is going to be a fun day and it's going to go great.

Torah Kachur:

But sometimes, the river has other ideas.

Abigail Sherman:

I'm bracing myself, making sure I'm holding on, making sure I'm paying attention to what is coming, trying to, I mean, you can only position yourself so much in the river, moving yourself. The water's gonna kind of do whatever it wants to do.

Torah Kachur:

And today what the water wants to do, is drag Abi to the bottom.

Abigail Sherman:

In that moment, there was a part of me that was like, I don't know if it's possible to get out of it without something like tragic happening. I remember thinking like, there's no way I'm making it out of this.

Torah Kachur:

This is *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast series by OnStar. I'm your host, Torah Kachur. We make this show because 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.

We all have days when work and life and everything we're dealing with just feels like a lot, and you just need to take a break from it all. For Abi Sherman, this is one of those days.

Abigail Sherman:

I was living down in a small, small town in Oregon called Monmouth, and I was actually supposed to be going to work that day, and I worked 12-hour shifts like three days a week.

Torah Kachur:

She's a caregiver for adults with developmental disabilities. An incredibly rewarding career but also demanding.

Abigail Sherman:

I was just like I don't want to go to work, like I'm just mentally and emotionally drained.

Torah Kachur:

Her best friend, Stephanie, who lives about 3 hours away, just across the border in Washington State, has a solution.

Abigail Sherman:

She was like, "My gosh, like a bunch of our friend group is going to the river and we're gonna float, come up and take the day off and you can spend the night and we can just have a day to have fun and relax."

Torah Kachur:

That's the life, right? Just lay back on an inflatable tube and let the river do the work as you chat with friends, laugh, and unwind. So, she hops in her car and heads north.

Abigail Sherman:

The first time I had to probably been like 13, 14 years old floating the river. So, I've gone at least 10 times.

Torah Kachur:

It's June, and it's early afternoon on a scorching hot day — so the river is busy.

Abigail Sherman:

There's a ton of people. We had to wait to even find a parking spot and then to get onto the shuttle to go to the river. There's a ton of people: loud, lots of music, big groups like friends, families, lots of kids.

Torah Kachur:

Abi is with a group of friends — there's six of them. They all know the routine. You park at the bottom of the river. Anything you don't need you leave in your car. You

put your keys and your wallet in a waterproof bag. A shuttle bus drives you up stream. That's where you inflate your tube, hop in the river, and float back down to where you parked. It's a 15-minute drive followed by a couple hours of floating.

Abigail Sherman:

I was excited to be with friends and to have a day off of work and to not have to worry about that.

Torah Kachur:

There are tubes to rent, but Abi has her own. It has some netting over the donut hole in the middle, so she doesn't slip right through. But she's sitting low enough that her backside is in the frigid mountain water.

Abigail Sherman:

I mean, we're not like getting fully in. It's cold once like your bottom initially touches and then it's kind of like, okay, like, that's it. Like maybe your feet get splashed, but like your body isn't fully in the water.

Torah Kachur:

As most people do, Abi and Stephanie tie their inflatable tubes together, so they don't get separated. Initially, the water is a swarm of people and rafts...

Abigail Sherman:

Everyone smiling, having a good time. We're just all hanging out on the river together.

Torah Kachur:

...but as they float downstream, each group at their own pace, the crowd gets thinned out.

The river winds its way through some beautiful scenery. The banks are lined with trees, and you can see mountains in the distance.

Abigail Sherman:

There were spots where it was really slow and pretty just easy. But there were spots that were pretty rapid, like they had quite a few rapids and were very intimidating, for sure.

Torah Kachur:

Riding an inflatable tube isn't like whitewater kayaking — you don't have a lot of control over where you're going, or even what way you're facing.

Abigail Sherman:

I don't really know if there's any like strategic thing that actually works versus just hoping for the best and hoping you're getting to where you want to go or hoping you turn around in time.

Torah Kachur:

After three quarters of an hour, they reach a sandbar. It's a pretty well-known spot for floaters to take a break. The sandbar forms a little lagoon area, sheltered from the current and about waist deep where some people like to swim. There's also a log to sit on and have a snack if you've brought one. They spend 15 minutes stretching their legs and then shove off again.

Abigail Sherman:

So there was this part basically right in the middle of the river where we were trying to avoid because there's a lot of rapids going and there was a stump or a rock, we were assuming it was a stump. We tried to maneuver ourselves so we didn't go right over the rapids or right through the rapids, but that did not work out in our favor. And our tubes that were connected like the rope, ended up kind of making like a U shape around the stump, which got us stuck.

Torah Kachur:

They see the rest of their group floating away downstream.

Abigail Sherman:

I remember, like, going into such like a panic mode of like instant fear. And like I don't know how we're gonna get unstuck. And I don't know how anybody's gonna help us being in the middle of the river on inner tubes.

Torah Kachur:

They grab the rope between them and try to pull it up over the stump, but when she leans over to do that, Abi's tube flips and she tumbles into the water. Stephanie reaches out and Abi grabs hold of her arm.

Abigail Sherman:

And I'm like holding on as tight as I can. Not that I thought she'd be able to pull me out, but just like hold onto me so that I don't go any further. My face is like underwater and holding my breath for as long as I can.

Torah Kachur:

In that panic filled moment, Abi has to make a choice.

Abigail Sherman:

Either I continue holding on and continue to hold my breath as long as I can, or I just let go and hope that I may get to the side of the river.

Torah Kachur:

And there is something else to consider: the force of the water is so strong and her grip on Stephanie's arm is so tight, she might pull her friend off her tube and into the water.

Abigail Sherman:

If I let go and I go, she'll be okay, hopefully. But if I stay and she's still trying to hold on to me and not able to get unstuck, and then like something happens to the both

of us. If I just go, she still has a chance to get unstuck and make it out.

Torah Kachur:

She releases her grip, and the water carries her away.

Abigail Sherman:

When I let go, I kind of in my head already thought, like, I'm not making it out of this river. Like it was already like, it was a very... a very like surreal experience like thinking like I'm never going to see my mom again. I'm never going to see my sister again. And like that was 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 a foreign country, struggling with depression, or drowning in an ice-cold mountain river.

Hailee Hannah:

In the summer when it's warm, I'll be outside every moment I can get.

Torah Kachur:

That's Hailee Hannah. Like Abi, she's lived her whole life in the Northwest.

Hailee Hannah:

Anytime that I can be on the water, I'll be on the water. Rivers, lakes, ocean, whatever kind of water I can get to.

Torah Kachur:

Today, that water is the Snoqualmie River.

Hailee Hannah:

So, that's near a city called Fall City, which is somewhere in the pass over the mountains. So, kind of in between Seattle and Ellensburg.

Torah Kachur:

She's tubed down this river once before, but that was late in the season, so the current was slower and the water was warmer. Today is different.

Hailee Hannah:

All the glaciers were melting. It was running fast and cold. We were very prepared. We had bought the tubes and the life vests and the paddles and everything in preparation for this event.

Torah Kachur:

The 'event' is Hailee's 23rd birthday. She's got her partner and her best friend with her. They tie their tubes together tightly and set off.

Hailee Hannah:

So we were kind of floating as a little trio down the river, and we had another tube connected to us that had a cooler in it with drinks and food and stuff. It was nice to be together. The sun was shining. It was gorgeous. You know, the water was moving pretty quickly. The sound that the river was making was gorgeous. I couldn't have asked for a better day.

Torah Kachur:

They round a bend and enter a section of the river where the current picks up. There's rocks and logs sticking out of the water creating a natural obstacle course. Using their paddles they maneuver around a stump.

Hailee Hannah:

And as I'm moving away from it, I noticed that there were multiple tubes that were already caught up on this knotted log.

Torah Kachur:

But she doesn't see any people, so she just lets the current whisk them along. A couple of minutes later, in an area where the water has quieted down a little bit, Hailee sees something splashing about.

Hailee Hannah:

At first, maybe I thought it was a fish or something moving in the water. But when I looked, I noticed, I was like, I think that's hair. I think that somebody is in the water. So I kind of tapped my friends. I was like, does that look like a ponytail to you?

Torah Kachur:

She tries to paddle their raft in that direction, but it isn't very maneuverable. Her only option is to slide off and swim while pulling the tubes behind her.

Hailee Hannah:

The water was so cold that the moment your hands or arm or leg or whatever entered the water was so cold, was like pinpricks. It was freezing.

Torah Kachur:

Dragging her two friends and four tubes with her, she swims across the current. She's being pushed downstream, but so is the person she's trying to reach.

Hailee Hannah:

Every inch of my body from my toes to my fingertips was immediately numb. It was almost painful to move in the water at that point.

Torah Kachur:

As she gets closer, her fears are confirmed — it's a young woman struggling to stay afloat.

Hailee Hannah:

I couldn't see her head above the water. All I could see was her hair. And that told me that if she was alive, that she didn't have very long, but you know, if she was left

to herself.

Torah Kachur:

The person in the water is Abi. She's conscious, but just barely. Her whole body is shutting down from the cold. Hailee, holding on to her own tube with her left hand, reaches her right one under Abi's shoulder. She pulls and lifts her enough to get her head up on the tube. When she does, Abi gasps for air.

Hailee Hannah:

She was kind of sputtering, like coughing a little bit of water out. She was panicked, so she was kind of grabbing on to me as much as she could. She said, "My God, I didn't think I was gonna make it. I really thought I was gonna die. Thank you so much." And as we continued down the river, she continued to be thankful, but then her concern shifted to her friends, who she was tubing with.

Torah Kachur:

They reach a spot where the banks are low enough that they can climb out of the water. Together, the two of them stagger to a log and sit down to catch their breath and warm up.

Hailee Hannah:

She was hyperventilating, very panicked, very concerned about her friends. And so I knew first step would be to get her to calm down, to breathe.

Torah Kachur:

By now word has spread along the river that there's been an incident. A rescue boat is heading upstream. They wave the boat down and explain that Abi was one of the people involved and that she's out of the water. But the search and rescue team say there is still one person unaccounted for.

Hailee Hannah:

And she really panicked at that point, crying and screaming and yelling because I think at that time, she took that as her friend was, didn't make it if they still hadn't been located.

Torah Kachur:

Hailee is a strong swimmer. That gave her the ability to reach Abi and pull her up on the tube.

But she is also a trained therapist. And what she did, sitting in the sunshine on the riverbank was also an important part of the rescue.

Hailee Hannah:

So when people go through traumatic or highly stressful situations, there isn't a prescribed method for helping bring them down. But one of the things that we know is very successful can be distraction. And when we're in a situation like this, where she literally thinks that her friends are dead, it's really hard to find something

that will get her mind off of it enough so that she can start breathing, getting some oxygen, slowing down.

Torah Kachur:

Hailee starts talking about herself, in a slow measured way, taking exaggerated breaths between sentences.

Hailee Hannah:

I didn't force her to take a breath, but I very loudly kind of modeled this breathing behavior that was getting her to slow down. I was holding her hand and really trying to take her mind off of this incident that was occurring.

Torah Kachur:

After 20 minutes, emergency responders arrive.

Hailee Hannah:

They tried to get her to walk up the path and she couldn't make it. She fell at some point and was laying on the ground. So I kind of grabbed both of her hands with both of my hands and was looking at her straight in her eyes and just breathing, telling her everything was going to be okay. And it was luckily at that point, in that exact moment, they got the call that everyone was found safely. The relief that shook through her whole body was just incredible to see.

Torah Kachur:

Abi is taken to the hospital. She has large bruises all over from being banged into the rocks.

Abigail Sherman:

I remember the doctor making a comment about how cats have nine lives and this was just one of yours.

Torah Kachur:

It's there that she's reunited with Stephanie who had been plucked off her tube by the rescue boat.

Abigail Sherman:

It was like a huge relief and just knowing like, okay. Yes, we are banged up and definitely have some like emotional stuff to work through, but we're all alive. And I think that's like the biggest thing I could have asked for is just everybody making it out alive.

Torah Kachur:

When she is released from hospital, Abi drives herself home — three hours back to Oregon.

Abigail Sherman:

And I probably should have stayed the night but, in my mind at the time, I was embarrassed and felt like I just did something that was so wrong and that was within my control. And so I actually was like, I'm gonna drive back home and I'm gonna go

to work the next day.

Torah Kachur:

It has taken her a long time to process what happened. To this day she can't go near a river or any fast-moving water. Abi and Hailee have been in touch online. But haven't met in person.

Hailee Hannah:

I'm glad that she's okay and it makes me happy to see her kind of online continuing to experience life and be happy. I'm really glad that I could be there.

Abigail Sherman:

Every year, I think about her. And I've always been like, I'm going to reach out. And I'm like, no, maybe I shouldn't. Like, to not know if she still thinks about me or that day or if that day was hard for her. Not wanting to bring up maybe something that's uncomfortable. But if I have the chance, just thanking her and like just give her a hug and you know, like, I'm still here because like you decided to help me.

Torah Kachur:

One important fact we have to address with this story is that Abi was not wearing a lifejacket. If she had been, maybe there would never have been a need for Hailee's heroism. But here's what I find interesting. She did have one with her. She was sitting on it to keep her bottom out of the cold water. And that's not unusual. In fact, a large number of people who get in trouble on the water, have a life jacket with them, but they aren't wearing it. Peg Phillips is the executive director of the National Safe Boating Council. And any conversation about water safety has to start with lifejackets. So, I asked her what kind she recommends.

Peg Phillips:

I say the smart choice is buy a life jacket that you are going to wear. But there are a lot of boaters who will just go buy the orange life jacket that goes around the neck and they'll stick them up under the seats and say, okay, I've met the carriage requirement, we're good, right? Well, they're not gonna actually wear those. They're very uncomfortable. Nobody's actually gonna wear that. So I say the best life jacket is the one that you're actually gonna wear.

Torah Kachur:

Is there a difference between a PFD and a life jacket?

Peg Phillips:

That's a great question and those terms kind of get used interchangeably a lot, right? But there is a distinct difference. So a life jacket should have the ability to turn most unconscious people over onto their back. A PFD stands for personal flotation device, and that could be a life ring. That could be some sort of suit that provides a little bit of buoyancy. But in order to be, to get that life jacket distinction, you're gonna need to be able to turn that unconscious person back over.

Torah Kachur:

What other kinds of equipment should you have on board?

Peg Phillips:

So we have a boating essential list, so, a life jacket that will fit everybody on the vessel. You also need a throwable device. So that's either a pillow or that life ring that people are familiar with. You need a sound signaling device, which could be as simple as a rescue whistle, or maybe it's an air horn. There are fire extinguisher laws. So you need a fire extinguisher on your boat. And then the kind of "should haves" on the boat, we like to have a medical kit of some sort. For my power boat, I wanna make sure I have an anchor and some sort of bailing device. Some sort of communication device and everybody has a smartphone, right? But a lot of times when they get wet they will not work and so having a VHF radio or some other way to signal to somebody is a good idea as well. I always carry a Leatherman knife with me just in case I need to cut a rope.

Torah Kachur:

What if you just want to go for a paddleboard or a kayak?

Peg Phillips:

So stand-up paddleboard, canoe, kayak are all considered vessels and so there are still federal and state laws around those so everybody again that lifejacket is required and I see, I see so much, especially with paddleboards where somebody has a leash, attached from the paddleboard to their ankle and they consider that the paddleboard becomes a flotation device, right? So if they were to fall off of that, they could just grab onto the paddleboard, right? Well, what if they hit their head? Law still requires a life jacket on that vessel.

Torah Kachur:

When it comes to kids and boats, what should we know?

Peg Phillips:

With kids in boats, the safety starts in the parking lot. And, you know, I tell I tell families to keep your life jackets in you know the trunk of your car and that's where you're going to put it on. Don't wait until you're on the boat because you're walking down a dock. You're carrying a lot of gear and equipment. You're trying to keep the kids close to you and they're, you're in an open water environment, right? The other thing is we want everybody in the family to learn how to operate the boat, not just the dad, right? Let's get women playing an active role in boating and let's teach the kids as well. Because what if you've got one parent and a 15-year-old out on a boat and the parent fell overboard. We need to make sure that teen knows what to do, right? What kind of action to take and can at least start the boat, use the VHF radio, throw a throwable, kind of have an action plan for safety. But we want to make them actively involved as boaters.

Torah Kachur:

What is the one thing you wish more people would pay attention to about boat safety?

Peg Phillips:

I would say just the most important thing is the life jacket. So, you know, if we look at statistics, which are kind of boring, right? But if we look at statistics, 75 percent of boating deaths are due to drowning and 87 percent of those victims are not wearing a life jacket. And we hear all the time from the families, “but they were such good swimmers.” So being a good swimmer doesn’t give you a pass. Just put that life jacket on.

Torah Kachur:

That’s it for this episode of *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people. Today I have one request of you: Please tell one friend, just one person, about this show. I mean, if you enjoy it, they probably will too, right? Thanks for helping us. 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://www.onstar.com/podcast).