



Season 4  
Episode 1 Transcript  
**Badly Burned in Iceland**

**Torah Kachur:**

Nicole Rakowski is on vacation in Iceland. It's the second to last day of her trip, and she and two friends want to get in one last adventure before they fly home. After a two and a half hour hike, they spot their destination, the Reykjadalur hot spring thermal river. They see other hikers enjoying the warm pools. Excited, they make their way down the hillside and get ready to take a dip.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

I got changed into my bathing suit and I took my hiking boots off.

**Torah Kachur:**

Nicole looks for a spot to step into the steaming water.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

But as I stepped down onto what looked like a hard mud surface, I quickly fell through. I knew right away that something wasn't right.

**Torah Kachur:**

A flash of pain shoots up Nicole's legs as she sinks deeper into the muddy riverbank.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

My feet were essentially burning, and no matter how hard I tried, I just could not get out.

**Torah Kachur:**

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. Nicole is a big traveler. She's trekked all across Europe, explored a handful of countries in Africa and been all over South America. When Nicole goes on a trip, she likes to go outside and find adventure.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

Whatever I can do, whether it's swimming somewhere, whether it's going paragliding, I've been skydiving in different areas. So definitely an adrenaline junkie when it comes to these things, but really it's just touring, seeing natural landscapes, that to me is huge.

**Torah Kachur:**

In February, 2017, Nicole and two friends went to Iceland. Iceland is known for its rugged landscapes and unspoiled nature. It's home to some of the biggest glaciers in Europe and the most active volcanoes in the world. This volcanic activity means lots of geysers, steam vents, thermal pools, and hot springs.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

We decided to drive to somewhere called a Hot River, and it was located in this beautiful valley in southern Iceland. The place that we went to literally means Steam Valley. That's what it translates to into English.

**Torah Kachur:**

But first they had to get to it. The hike from the trailhead to the hot spring is about two and a half miles and over a thousand feet in elevation gain. But Nicole was in great shape, so she still had plenty of energy to enjoy the scenery.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

There was sort of this black, beautiful volcanic stone as we were walking to get to our destination, the colors of the landscape were beyond stunning.

**Torah Kachur:**

After a leisurely two and a half hours, they reached the hot spring. Perched on a hill-top, Nicole took in the snow-covered valley.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

You see these blue hot pools all around you. You see steam coming into the air. It was truly something out of a fairytale to say the least.

**Torah Kachur:**

Nicole and her friends headed down to the hot spring. They walked along a network of wooden boardwalks on the valley floor.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

We're trying to get as many photos as we can. We're chatting about how incredible this is an experience and how lucky we are to truly be here.

**Torah Kachur:**

They stopped to talk to a group of locals who were already in the water.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

They said, you know, "If you go a little bit further up the river bank, it's actually a lot warmer." So that's what we had sort of decided to do. There were certain areas that you could actually see were bubbling and you see the steam coming out of these geysers, so sort of common sense you would know not to touch those.

**Torah Kachur:**

After a few minutes scoping out the area, Nicole found a spot she liked. She took off her hiking boots and changed into her bathing suit. Then she took a step onto a mud river bank directly beside the hot spring.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

It was slowly starting to sink and make its way up my shins, up to my knees, and I could feel that hot bubbling and acidic mud essentially just burning through my skin.

**Torah Kachur:**

The pain was excruciating.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

I remember the feeling of a million different knives that were just stabbing my feet and lower legs, and my nerve receptors were just on fire, and at that point I started screaming.

**Torah Kachur:**

Nicole tried to escape.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

I was scraping at the moss trying to make my way out, but I couldn't. It was almost like quick mud that your feet and your legs were completely caught and you couldn't move.

**Torah Kachur:**

Her friends heard the screams and ran to Nicole as fast as they could. They grabbed her arms and pulled her out.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

We looked down at my legs and I just remember thinking they're burnt. The skin was peeled to the side. There was this extreme, extreme redness. They started bubbling, and at that point, we knew that things were serious.

**Torah Kachur:**

Nicole's friends yelled for help.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

This was a lot more of a serious situation than we had initially thought, and to make matters a lot worse, nobody could get any cell phone reception and there was no emergency help nearby.

**Torah Kachur:**

A few concerned hikers heard their cries and ran over. One person put snow on Nicole's burns to try and help the pain.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

But no one had anything to treat second and third degree burns. It was not something that was readily available at hand in a first aid kit.

**Torah Kachur:**

The people helping Nicole figured out that the only thing they could do was to try and carry Nicole out of the park.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

I was essentially a dead weight. This area is very hilly. There's gravel, there is ice. It's slippery. There's also areas where there's mud surfaces, right? So carrying someone on your back proves extremely, extremely tedious.

**Torah Kachur:**

Not only that, the hikers helping Nicole didn't know the proper technique for carrying someone who couldn't walk.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

There was different individuals that tried putting me in the sling, but again, my head sort of kept falling around. My legs were sort of bouncing around. I just remember it being a very strenuous battle to try and get me to some sort of safety.

**Torah Kachur:**

But there was a man at the hot spring who could deal with this emergency.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

We came across an unbelievable stroke of luck when we met Lee, and that's when the entire rescue mission changed is when we met him.

**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 trapped by a wildfire, fighting off a shark attack or suffer third-degree burns from a hot spring. Nicole was badly injured. There was no cell reception, so her two friends and a group of concerned hikers tried to carry Nicole to safety.

**Lee Ricasa:**

I would venture to say that it was probably the worst day in her life to this day is my guess. It's a very serious trauma.

**Torah Kachur:**

That's Lee Ricasa, like Nicole, Lee loves to travel. He's crossed the globe twice, and his favorite thing to do when he travels is hiking.

**Lee Ricasa:**

I'm the unfortunate hiker who likes to venture in the places that I shouldn't go. So

Iceland was perfect for getting lost.

**Torah Kachur:**

Lee is a retired firefighter. He hung up his helmet in 2008 because after 14 years of battling blazes, the job was getting to him.

**Lee Ricasa:**

Sometimes when I would go home after a call, I would still be in that call mentally. I would still think about it, you know just horrible stuff that happens. You want to get away from that mode.

**Torah Kachur:**

And Mother Nature helps get Lee out of that mode.

**Lee Ricasa:**

Actually, what I loved about Iceland was its silence, and the only way I can find that is by getting into nature, and I find peace there.

**Torah Kachur:**

Lee and a few friends hiked to hot river in search of that peace. When he reached the hot spring, he saw hikers peppered throughout the grasslands and bathing in the steaming water. He hiked down the final hill on the trail, undressed and slipped in.

**Lee Ricasa:**

It's kind of like a warm blanket when you're inside the water.

**Torah Kachur:**

Then a noise interrupted the silence.

**Lee Ricasa:**

Just this high-pitched scream that you can hear from way off in the distance.

**Torah Kachur:**

But Lee didn't get the sense that anything was wrong, and he also wanted some peace and quiet.

**Lee Ricasa:**

I sort of shrunk down in the water and kind of went downriver a little bit, thinking, "Okay, there's people coming close. Let me scoot away." And I thought it was just a bunch of kids being noisy, laughing, screaming, having a good time.

**Torah Kachur:**

Then Lee heard one of his friends say ...

**Lee Ricasa:**

"Hey, he's a firefighter," and I kind of looked up, I poked my head like, "Well, who are

you talking about?” And then they were talking about me and I was like, “Okay, I’m almost naked here.”

**Torah Kachur:**

Lee hesitated, but he wanted to see what was going on, so he toweled off and crossed the other side of the river. There, he saw a group of people carrying a young woman.

**Lee Ricasa:**

So they had her in a backpack style carry, kind of like how you would piggyback with a friend, and my mind was like, “Why are you carrying her like that?” I was like, “That doesn’t look very comfortable.”

**Torah Kachur:**

Then he saw the look on Nicole’s friend’s face.

**Lee Ricasa:**

Mortified like she had just seen death.

**Torah Kachur:**

Then Lee looked at Nicole. He could tell she was in terrible pain, but he couldn’t see where she was injured. The group carrying her made the mistake of putting her clothes on over her burning legs.

**Lee Ricasa:**

Her socks, her pants, everything over burns that were actively open deep down to the muscle, and of course, she’s going to be in 10 out of 10 pain. She had third degree burns, and when you talk about third degree burns, you talk about loss of sensation at that point because of the charring, the damage of the nerve endings and the fact that she’s in shock.

**Torah Kachur:**

The wheels in Lee’s mind started to turn.

**Lee Ricasa:**

We all knew how to get out of that valley. It was uphill. So therein lies the challenge. How do we get her out of there, up that hill without her being hurt?

**Torah Kachur:**

Lee knew he had to take the lead.

**Lee Ricasa:**

My muscle memory kicks in, my triage brain kicks in, and my desire to get that person out of there kicks in, and I remember slinging her over my back. I said, “Let’s go.”

**Nicole Rakowski:**

Lee ended up doing something called the Fireman's Carry, something that made the carry a lot easier.

**Torah Kachur:**

A fireman's carry allows someone to carry a person without help by draping them across their shoulders.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

Once Lee joined the picture, I knew that there was a sense of hope.

**Torah Kachur:**

But they weren't out of the woods yet. Not even close. Remember, the hot springs were a two and a half mile hike from the parking lot. The trek out was going to be difficult, but Lee wanted to make sure the situation didn't get even worse.

**Lee Ricasa:**

She was losing a tremendous amount of body heat through the burns, and I personally want to know that she wasn't going to pass out or go into any other state of shock. Then I was just trying to talk to her. I was like, "Hey, what's your name? What happened?"

**Torah Kachur:**

If Nicole lost too much body heat, she could become hypothermic. If she went into cardiogenic shock, she could have a heart attack. All these possibilities were running through Lee's mind as he walked uphill through gravel, dirt, and ice. After 20 minutes, he passed Nicole to another man in the group. They took turns carrying her.

**Lee Ricasa:**

Every so often I would shoulder her in the stomach, pop, pop, like, "Hey, wake up. Wake up." I was resituating her just to get her to open her eyes and take a deep breath.

**Torah Kachur:**

Nicole was slipping in and out of consciousness, but she remembers bits and pieces of the rescue.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

One of the most vivid moments for me was when I looked at Lee and I just asked, you know, "Am I going to die?" And his response was, "Not on my watch."

**Torah Kachur:**

- But Lee knew that Nicole's death was still a real possibility.

**Lee Ricasa:**

She can die. This can happen. She can lose blood pressure, she can lose her pulse, her heart can go into arrest right now. I was like, "Not okay. You're not going to die here. Not while I'm here. Absolutely not."

**Nicole Rakowski:**

And at that point, I had that glimpse of hope that I would still make it alive.

**Torah Kachur:**

Lee, Nicole's friends and the group of hikers who first rushed to Nicole's aid walked for almost an hour. Then they came across a young man in uniform on the trail. He was a rescue cadet doing training exercises with his crew.

**Lee Ricasa:**

I was like, "You got a frickin radio? Who's that connected to? Can you call somebody?" He's like, "Yeah, we have helicopters." I was like, "Call one." So we were really excited to find this guy.

**Torah Kachur:**

A helicopter wasn't able to get to them, so they called for an ambulance. This meant that Lee and his group had to march on. Then about a hundred yards from the trail-head, they spot the group of emergency responders.

**Lee Ricasa:**

There had to have been 45 uniform rescuers there. I was like, "We got this young lady from the hot springs. She's in incredible pain. We need to start IVs and start pushing medications right now."

**Torah Kachur:**

Responders put Nicole in a large basket on the back of an ATV and drove her to the waiting ambulance.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

I remember laying in the ambulance and seeing the faces of several paramedics hovering above me. It is extremely, extremely scary. I truly felt like this was ... I was experiencing something that was just completely out of my body.

**Torah Kachur:**

After Nicole was rushed to the hospital, Lee got into his car and went back to his hotel. He repeated two things over and over again in his mind while he drove.

**Lee Ricasa:**

Her name was burned into my brain. 'Cos I kept saying, "Nicole, wake up. Nicole wake up." And she kept asking me was she going to die? I just remember those two things, Nicole, and am I going to die? And it just played in my mind like a tape.



**Torah Kachur:**

At the hospital in Reykjavik, a large team of doctors and nurses treated Nicole's wounds.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

The physicians and the nurses were speaking in Icelandic, and I was being told information that I couldn't understand. So I think the scariest part to me was I had no idea if I would wake up and if I did, if my legs would still be attached.

**Torah Kachur:**

Nicole woke up, her legs were intact, but she still needed more surgery. Nicole wanted to get back to Canada as soon as possible. So the next day, her medical team in Iceland bandaged her legs, put her in a wheelchair and got her to the airport. She boarded the plane with a nurse who volunteered to take care of her during the flight and was given an entire row of seats so she could lay down. When Nicole got home, she got skin grafts and spent two weeks in the burn unit. It was a slow and painful recovery.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

It was a long time of being an outpatient, of being in a wheelchair, of then moving to a walker, then moving to crutches, and then just sort of limping around, not being able to put a lot of pressure on my feet. It was a miracle to be able to walk again as stated by most medical professionals. But this traumatic event brought both Lee and I together.

**Torah Kachur:**

Nicole emailed Lee to update him about her recovery. Then she asked him for his address. A few days later, a package arrived at Lee's house.

**Lee Ricasa:**

It came from an organization called the International Star Registry, and I was like, "What's this?" And then there's a letter there and it says, "A star has been purchased on your behalf and donated to you." And it says by Nicole Rakowski.

**Torah Kachur:**

Nicole named the Star after Lee.

**Lee Ricasa:**

Which was the coolest thing I've ever heard of, ever. And the name of the star that she selected was Lee, my first name, and then -A, and then -Hero. And I was like ... Speechless.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

- A star is something that has this fire ignited, and he was a star to me and continues to be. So I just thought that that elicited a lot of meaning.

**Torah Kachur:**

When she was well enough, Nicole invited Lee to visit her family in Hamilton, Ontario. About a 60-minute drive from Toronto. When he arrived, Lee gave something special to Nicole.

**Lee Ricasa:**

I handed her my fire helmet.

**Torah Kachur:**

There was burn marks on the helmet. It was one that was clearly used and used for the purpose of saving other people's lives, which made it even more meaningful.

**Lee Ricasa:**

People retire and die with those things, you know what I mean? They don't let go of that particular piece of equipment. It's sort of a birthright you know when you're a firefighter. You have that to pass down as an heirloom. I don't have kids, and I was like, "I want to give her something to remember me by, to remember what happened," and I gave her my helmet.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

That was probably one of the most memorable gifts that I could have ever received.

**Torah Kachur:**

Lee shared stories about the people he saved and lost while wearing that fire helmet.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

Hearing his stories made me realize that you know, we're all human, but it takes individuals like Lee to stand up and do incredible work on a daily basis. It takes that human connection to make a difference.

**Torah Kachur:**

Today, Nicole is thriving. She's currently completing a PhD in health management and is the CFO — chief fitness officer — for a fitness startup in Toronto.

**Nicole Rakowski:**

I couldn't have done it without Lee. I couldn't have done it without my friends. I couldn't have done it with all these strangers that essentially stepped up to help. I've lived life differently because of this experience. I don't take things for granted.

**Torah Kachur:**

And Lee, this experience changed the way he sees things too.

**Lee Ricasa:**

As we speak, I'm becoming a paramedic and a lot of it has to do with wanting to

start higher levels of care for people like Nicole who need it, and sometimes it's all the world really needs is somebody willing to make a little bit of a change to offer just a little bit of help, and you can make a world of difference. Nicole kind of taught me that.

**Torah Kachur:**

When you think of injuries that might happen while camping or hiking, what comes to mind? Cuts, sprains, broken bones? These are common injuries and that often means we're prepared for them, but as we learn today, burns can be just as or even more serious and people tend to be less prepared for them. Tod Schimelpfenig has been an instructor at the National Outdoor Leadership School for over 50 years. More recently, he was the school's wilderness medicine curriculum director and volunteers with ambulance and search and rescue squads. He regularly leads outdoor expeditions and has treated wilderness burn victims. Tod's also spent time in Iceland.

**Tod Schimelpfenig:**

It's an incredibly beautiful place and I get a chance to lead trips there. Last summer, I went and in addition to doing this hiking hut-to-hut trek on the volcanic trails, my wife and I went up into the west fjords and she wanted to see puffins, and we had never seen puffins, and we went out to this little puffin rookery. It was just wonderful.

**Torah Kachur:**

What's the most common type of burn accident when you're in a remote landscape like that?

**Tod Schimelpfenig:**

Most of what we see when people are camping is the most common burn is to spill hot water. So you get small burns on your feet, on your hands because when you're cooking, that's where you have the most concentrated form of energy and accidents do happen.

**Torah Kachur:**

How frequently do you see those kinds of events?

**Tod Schimelpfenig:**

They're common enough that we worry about them all the time. And when you're cooking, when you're camping, when you're in a hut. Being cognizant of this hot water, the heat sources, people bumping around, bumping pots, that sort of thing, the safety issues, it's common enough that you have to be aware of it.

**Torah Kachur:**

- What makes administering a burn like that more challenging than at home?

**Tod Schimelpfenig:**

You often have limited supplies. Burn care takes a lot of dressings, especially if the burn is extensive and we don't carry enough in our first aid kits, so you're going to be limited by your supplies. They can be very painful, they can take a long time to heal, and you also don't quite know often how bad the burn is.

**Torah Kachur:**

So what are some of the do's and don'ts of treating a burn?

**Tod Schimelpfenig:**

You start out by managing risk, safety and not having anybody else hurt. So if it's a fire, a hot water situation, you just have to be careful about that. Then ideally, you try to cool the burn, and if a burn isn't an extensive burn, say less than 10% of your body surface area, you want to cool it so you can dissipate that energy as quickly as you can. But again, that takes a lot of water to cool a burn, and you often don't have that available.

If it's a big burn that I'm not going to make my patient hypothermic, but I dissipate that energy, I can maybe lessen the extent of the injury and manage the pain and make the patient a little more comfortable. Then I would dress that burn with the cleanest dry dressing I could. I'd pull watches off. I'd try to get rings off. I'd try to get boots off, and that can be difficult because burn skin can be really sensitive, and as you start pulling things off, you can start pulling tissue off, and if that's going on, you just have to stop and dress the burn, and then we ideally try to keep it well-dressed and keep it as clean as possible.

**Torah Kachur:**

And then how do you dress that burn?

**Tod Schimelpfenig:**

Very loosely wrap it. A burn is going to swell, become swollen after the injury, so I don't want a tight dressing. I want a big loose dressing over it. And a lot of first aid kits have two or three inch wide roller gauze. You just roll that loosely over that burn, extensive burns you lose a lot of fluid into, and you expose yourself to what's called cardiovascular shock. Burns also are easily infected, which is the reason we want to address it very quickly, is to try to manage the risk of infection.

**Torah Kachur:**

If you don't have gauze and you don't have as well a supplied first aid kit, is any kind of clean clothing kind of dressing good enough?

**Tod Schimelpfenig:**

You put the best dressing you have on there.

**Torah Kachur:**

Okay.

**Tod Schimelpfenig:**

People also will put on Saran wrap, plastic food wrap around burns as well. And improvised, not ideal, but not necessarily harmful.

**Torah Kachur:**

Now, of course, the best way to treat burns is to prevent them from happening in the first place. What are your tips to avoid accidental burns when you are in the wilderness?

**Tod Schimelpfenig:**

With the most common burn being a sunburn; wear clothing, wear a hat, wear sunscreen. With the common burn of the spilled hot water, just be careful around where you're cooking, have a disciplined well set up cooking area. Make everybody cognizant of that. Campfires, I've actually seen somebody strip and fall into a campfire, any kind of heat source energy, hot water, flame, it's just a question of being careful.

**Torah Kachur:**

That's it for this episode of OnStar's Tell Me What Happened, true stories of people helping people. 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&A feature. Let's share some love for people who help others in big ways and small. 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. Please, be safe out there.