



Season 4
Episode 4 Transcript
Escaping the Hawaii Wildfires

Torah Kachur:

Lani Williams and her mother, Sincerity, are trapped. And they're not the only ones.

Lani Williams:

There are just like people running in all directions and you can hear the explosions and just loud roaring.

Torah Kachur:

That loud roaring is the sound of wildfire ripping through Lahaina, Hawaii. And those explosions? Abandoned cars blowing up in the blaze.

Lani Williams:

We just got stuck in gridlock. I couldn't move my car. There was nowhere to go. Everything around us is just burning. The world was on fire.

Torah Kachur:

Lani and Sincerity realized escaping the wildfire in their car isn't going to work. They need a new plan.

Lani Williams:

And so my mom and I were squeezing hands and she was praying, and at the same time I was like, "What are we going to do?" It just happened so fast. So fast.

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 the 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. Lahaina sits in the northwest corner of Maui. There's a small harbor beyond the stone seawall that lines Front Street, the main road in the town's old commercial district. Lahaina has lots of charming restaurants, quirky shops, and a bustling market where locals like Lani sell crafts. But the defining thing about Lahaina is its sense of community. Lani was born and raised in Maui, and her family has lived in Lahaina for generations.

Lani Williams:

Everyone's an auntie and uncle. Even if you don't know their name, if you see them, it's like, "Hi, auntie. Hi uncle." Everyone hugs and says hello to each other. It's a big family.

Torah Kachur:

On August 8th, 2023, Lani was getting ready to head to work at the market on Front Street. She smelled a slight hint of smoke in the air, but she wasn't concerned.

Lani Williams:

There are fires there all the time. Maybe like once a month you'll see smoke, but it always gets put out. We all saw it and none of us thought anything of it. I continued

on with my day.

Torah Kachur:

A storm had swept in earlier that morning and downed power lines. Sparks from the power lines had ignited dry, tall grass and brush, which were fanned and spread by the strong winds. The storm also caused a power outage in Lani's apartment building, but she still had to work. So she got ready, headed out the door and got in her car to head to work. She quickly realized this was no ordinary storm.

Lani Williams:

There were trees uprooted, and the wind was just so, so, so crazy. I had never ever experienced wind like that.

Torah Kachur:

Lani turned around and headed back to her apartment. In the few minutes it took her to get home, things had already gotten worse.

Lani Williams:

The roof on my neighbor's building flew off, like chunks of it were flying off.

Torah Kachur:

Hurricanes are pretty common in Hawaii, but this one, Hurricane Dora, was a category four. It never made landfall, but the winds were strong enough to do a lot of damage. They also created the perfect conditions for spreading fire. Lani decided to take her mom to the community center to wait out the storm. When she walked outside, she heard her neighbors scream.

Lani Williams:

"The fire's across the street." I peek over and I just see the old folks home is up in flames. I ran in the house. I'm like, "Mom, come on. We got to go. We got to get out of here right now."

Torah Kachur:

But a quick exit wasn't going to be easy. Lani's mom, Sincerity, has diabetes and needs a walker to take more than a few steps.

Lani Williams:

By the time we were just getting out the front door, it was already black smoke, black ash coming down. Hot embers are landing on us.

Torah Kachur:

Lani got her mom into the car, but at that point, everyone in Lahaina was also trying to flee the inferno. The traffic was so bad that Lani couldn't get out of her driveway. Eventually there was a small break in cars and they pulled out onto the road. It was only mid-afternoon, but the smoke was so thick it turned day into night.

Lani Williams:

It got really dark. Just I had to turn on my headlights just to see in front of me. I saw people just running.

Torah Kachur:

The fire, which started at the base of the mountains on the east edge of town, blew through two large residential neighborhoods, destroying hundreds of homes in just a couple of hours. As the blaze headed west towards the water and town center, it jumped two highways. The combination of downed power lines and debris from the storm forced police to close roads. The result? Everyone who was trying to flee the fire was being funneled towards Front Street, including Lani and Sincerity. By the time they got to the town center, the narrow two-lane road was pandemonium. Traffic was

at a standstill, and the fire was right outside their window.

Lani Williams:

Every time I thought we were getting away from a fire, another giant fire was next to us and the whole tree was on fire and a house, and I thought, “Oh my gosh, this tree is going to fall on us. My tires are melting.” It was so crazy.

Torah Kachur:

While they inched along, they watched other vehicles pull U-turns and head back in the opposite direction, looking for another escape route. Lani turned on the radio hoping an emergency broadcast might help her figure out what to do.

Lani Williams:

There was just regular music playing, just kind of creepy, right? When there’s all this going on.

Torah Kachur:

She saw other people leaving their cars and running down the street, but with her health issues, that wasn’t an option for Lani’s mom.

Lani Williams:

At one point I was like, should I take my mom? But then I don’t think she can handle it, and it was just so smoky.

Torah Kachur:

Holding her mom’s hand, Lani comes to a terrifying conclusion.

Lani Williams:

This is it, Mom. This is it. We’re going to die.

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 stranded in a blizzard, lost in the mountains, or trying to escape a fire. Lani Williams and her mother, Sincerity, were trapped in their car on the only open road out of Lahaina. The fire was getting closer and closer, and this tropical paradise was quickly turning to ash. Over 2 million tourists visit Lahaina every year. They go for its historic buildings and beautiful beaches. Then they go home. Not Benny Reinicke.

Benny Reinicke:

I came here on vacation and I was just in awe.

Torah Kachur:

Benny’s from San Diego, California. He visited Lahaina six years ago on vacation. He loved it so much that he never left. But it wasn’t the surf or the sunshine that convinced him to pack up his life. It was the people.

Benny Reinicke:

A community like this where I can go on the opposite side of the island and people are like, “Benny, what’s going on? You want some mangoes?” It’s an ancient kind of love, really. I knew this is where I wanted to be.

Torah Kachur:

Benny’s lived in Lahaina long enough to know brush fires and tropical storms are a normal part of the landscape. So when the wind started to pick up and he smelled the smoke early that afternoon, he wasn’t worried.

Benny Reinicke:

“Oh, another fire, another tropical storm, and the firemen are going to take care of it

as they always have.”

Torah Kachur:

Benny managed to stay calm and collected and went to get a glass of water from the kitchen.

Benny Reinicke:

I look outside and my roof is in my backyard.

Torah Kachur:

Outside, his neighbors were cutting up a fallen telephone pole that was blocking the street.

Benny Reinicke:

My backyard porch is completely torn off by this point and my fence is down. Just utter chaos out there.

Torah Kachur:

Benny still wasn't fazed. He went outside to record the story.

Benny Reinicke:

I'm thinking, "I have amazing footage. I can't wait to show this off to my friends." But then I just saw this cloud of ash. It got darker and darker, and it was coming with just such a force. And then within a matter of a second, just the fire jumped and now I need to get out of here.

Torah Kachur:

He searched for something to protect himself from the smoke and the falling debris.

Benny Reinicke:

I put on my motorcycle helmet. This motorcycle helmet will buy me a block or two of fresh air, if you will. So I grabbed my motorcycle helmet and I run out.

Torah Kachur:

He got in his car and started driving. He was trying to find a way out of Lahaina.

Benny Reinicke:

There's this cop that was outside telling everybody to evacuate. He's barricading that road and I'm honking like, "I need to go this way." He's like, "You can't come this way. The gas station is about to catch on fire. You've got to go this way."

Torah Kachur:

So Benny kept searching for an escape route.

Benny Reinicke:

And it's pitch black, and there's embers and branches of trees that are on fire, just smacking your car left and right. There's trees falling. People are honking and just freaking out. You look to your left, the whole mall, there's just a wall of fire. The hospital right there, that's on fire. All the restaurants, on fire. This wind is picking up and the fire is getting bigger and bigger by the minute.

Torah Kachur:

Like so many others that day, he ended up on Front Street. And just like Lani and her mom, Benny got stuck in a sea of panicked drivers, sweating in the intense heat. He pulled a U-turn to try and find a different road out of Lahaina.

Benny Reinicke:

And then boom, I'm assuming it's a tree, or maybe it was the traffic light or something, but something just lands literally five yards away from where I was and just ash explodes, just embers everywhere. And I mean, time essentially slowed, like just

...

Torah Kachur:

Eventually, Benny ended up back on front street beside the ocean. He was surrounded by fire. The only thing that wasn't in flames was the stone seawall separating front street from the ocean harbor. Soon after, a woman pulled up beside him.

Benny Reinicke:

She jumps out of her car and just leaps over the wall and gets in the ocean, and I see the person in front of me get out of their car and do the same thing. But it was just this eerie moment where I look behind me and there's absolutely nobody, just this entire town just engulfed in flames, and I'm like, "I can't die now."

Torah Kachur:

Benny closed the visor on his motorcycle helmet, abandoned his car and ran towards the seawall. Lani and her mom, Sincerity, came to the same conclusion. If they wanted to survive, they needed to get into the water. But for Lani's mom, that was no simple task.

Lani Williams:

I sort of started panicking once we got to the wall because there's a drop from the top of the wall down to the rocks. It's slippery. I'm just like, I don't want my mom to get hurt.

Torah Kachur:

And even if Lani somehow managed to get her mother over the wall and down the five-foot embankment to the other side, she would still have to cross a section of jagged rocks to make it to the sea, and they were running out of time. Fire was closing in on them from all sides.

Lani Williams:

At the ends of the walls, there are homes, and the other end it's shops and restaurants. Both ends of the wall are already up in flames.

Torah Kachur:

Then Lani spotted her friend, Lisa, and Lisa's mom. They were with a man she didn't know.

Lani Williams:

And there's this guy with a motorcycle helmet helping her mom over. She's like, "Lani, Lani, come."

Torah Kachur:

The guy in the motorcycle helmet helping people over the wall? That was Benny, and Benny quickly saw Sincerity would need help as well.

Benny Reinicke:

So then I run over and then I tell Lani's mom, "Just get on my back. Get on my back."

Torah Kachur:

But for an elderly diabetic woman who uses a walker, that's easier said than done.

Benny Reinicke:

She's in so much pain. You touch her arm, she's just screaming. She was at times crying, and I couldn't just put her on my back and just go straight there. We had to take breaks. She's saying things like, "Guys, just leave me. I'll be fine. Just go."

Torah Kachur:

Lani tried to be encouraging.

Lani Williams:

“Mom, you have to move your feet. You have to hurry.” I just was like, “Mom, come on. You have to push harder. Push harder.”

Torah Kachur:

But Benny was getting worried too.

Benny Reinicke:

Is she going to make it out of this whole thing? I have no idea, but I do know she’s safer down here than she is up there on her walker.

Torah Kachur:

Eventually, Benny gets Sincerity on his back. They climb over the seawall and drop down to the other side. Together, they navigated a patchwork of loose, wet boulders to get to the water. They stayed on the very edge of shore, hoping help would arrive soon.

Benny Reinicke:

We were just getting punished, punished by the waves, and it’s pitch black, the water’s freezing. There’s embers flying.

Torah Kachur:

Hours passed, and the blaze showed no signs of slowing.

Lani Williams:

So you see boats floating in front of you just in flames. I could just hear the fire, the wood crackling, and it hurt to open your eyes. Our eyes were burning.

Torah Kachur:

Eight long, smoky, scary hours passed, but it still wasn’t safe to return to shore. Cars were exploding on Front Street.

Benny Reinicke:

When the cars explode, you have to literally keep your eyes closed. If you keep your eyes open, then they’re just met by just pure tar, right?

Torah Kachur:

Benny knew it wouldn’t be safe to leave the water until every car had exploded. So around one in the morning, Benny poked his head up over the seawall and counted how many cars were left. There were three.

Benny Reinicke:

And then one car explodes, and then two cars explode, and then third one explodes. And so then I’m thinking, “Okay, we’re going to actually make it out of here, guys. This is amazing. We’re going to survive this whole thing.”

Torah Kachur:

And then at that point, the fire trucks came, and so it was at that point, we’re all just like, we feel relieved and calm.

Torah Kachur:

Soon after, emergency service workers arrived on the scene. They loaded Benny, Lani, Sincerity, and Lani’s friend and her mom onto a bus with about 70 other survivors.

Benny Reinicke:

We were one of the last people to get out of there, and I’m just witnessing my entire town, just this harrowing image of just both sides of the road just on fire still, and everybody that jumped over the seawall, I didn’t see in that bus.

Torah Kachur:

100 people died during the Lahaina wildfires, but Lani believes that number could have easily been even higher.

Lani Williams:

Honestly, I wouldn't have left my mom, and I really feel like if he wasn't there that we wouldn't have made it.

Torah Kachur:

Lani and her mom are now staying with family in another town in Maui, but they've had a chance to go back to Lahaina. Their home, like so many others, was gone.

Lani Williams:

And just driving through it was super emotional. My mom and I both cried. Like every time we go back, we cry. And it's weird because it's the people mostly that we miss. We're grateful we have a place, but at the same time, it was really hard because it's just not Lahaina, you know.

Torah Kachur:

Benny decided to stay in Lahaina. He went back to survey the damage shortly after the fire.

Benny Reinicke:

The place I once called home, just ash. And I'm looking around, there's what was once my kitchen where I ate breakfast and read good books, and there's my backyard where I had barbecues and good company, and there's absolutely nothing left of it.

Torah Kachur:

For Benny and Lani, it's the loss of a community, one where people look out for each other, that's proven to be the most difficult. When the three met for the first time after the fire.

Lani Williams:

We just hugged and I told him that he's a part of our family now.

Torah Kachur:

Sincerity said to Benny ...

Benny Reinicke:

"That's my angel. That's my angel." Yeah, she's an amazing woman.

Torah Kachur:

Now, Benny is part of a huge family.

Benny Reinicke:

Her family has just been pouring in, checking up on me for Christmas. I want to say something like 60 people wrote me cards, thank you letters, and I mean, it's just this overwhelming, the love and support that I'm getting from her family from all over the island.

Torah Kachur:

Benny, Lani and her mother share a special connection.

Benny Reinicke:

This bond that I don't really have with anybody else, and I'm so happy I was there.

Torah Kachur:

Hopefully you've never found yourself in the middle of a wildfire like Benny and Lani, but research indicates that climate change is creating warmer and drier conditions,

leading to longer and more active wildfire seasons. So if you live in an area prone to wildfires, it's important to prepare to minimize potential damage to your home and neighborhood. And even if your area isn't likely to experience a wildfire, fire preparedness is always important. Michele Steinberg is a wildfire division director at the National Fire Protection Association, also known as the NFPA.

Michele Steinberg:

I have walked around in the ashes, if you will, and then you realize what you were walking around is the remnants of other people's lives.

Torah Kachur:

She helps government agencies and residents in high-risk areas identify hazards and strategies to help protect against wildfires.

Michele Steinberg:

We have to stop thinking of wildfire as something that happens in the "wild", the forest, the grasslands. That does happen. That is a completely different phenomenon than what happens when it hits a community.

Torah Kachur:

So the wildfire in Lahaina, what was unique about that wildfire situation?

Michele Steinberg:

The hurricane wind force, the wind-driven wildfire. That is something that most people don't contemplate, that you could be experiencing hurricane force winds and have a wildfire ignition that then spreads. But Maui in particular, and Hawaii in general have wildfires all the time. So what was, I think, unexpected and shocking was the loss of life, obviously, and the lack of preparedness for the event overall.

Torah Kachur:

It was really awful. So how do we prevent that from happening again? How can homeowners reduce the risk?

Michele Steinberg:

So we start with the house, the structure of the roof, the windows, the siding, the eaves, the foundation area, if that is made as impervious as possible to embers penetrating it. So blocking up the vents, using things that will keep embers from coming in, making sure your roof is in good shape, so that envelope of the house and then starting to work out into whatever space you have.

Torah Kachur:

So that's like cleaning the gutters, right?

Michele Steinberg:

Right.

Torah Kachur:

Cleaning out the deadfall that's accumulated in your window wells.

Michele Steinberg:

Right, that's a lot of it. There's even things like if you think about a flat surface that's attached to your house, like a porch or a deck, making sure that's clear of debris. "Oh, maybe it's time for me to take in the patio cushions on the chairs that are sitting on the deck," because those will catch embers.

Torah Kachur:

What about landscaping? Are there particular types that you recommend?

Michele Steinberg:

The science behind it is if we can prevent that ignition in the first place, we can do a lot. So it's that envelope of the home and then working to clear out combustibles within about five feet from the foundation, and some of that is making sure in that zone that you're using bare earth, you're using gravel or rock. You're not using organic mulches, essentially a flammable, a combustible mulch. We talk about using things like we would say hardscaping, so rock, pathways that break up, say the grasses or things that you have in the yard. Keeping any grasses kind of mowed low. Using different materials. Thinking about low water landscaping, aircaping is the fancy term. Why not think about cactus? Why not think about succulents and things that won't carry fire the same way grasses or other kinds of shrubs and things will?

Torah Kachur:

What are some of the common mistakes, misconceptions that homeowners may have when they're thinking about wildfire safety and wildfire protection?

Michele Steinberg:

Oh, I guess the biggest misconception is people don't realize this is a community problem. We absolutely applaud anybody who takes the safety steps and precautions to make themselves and their families safer from wildfire. That's wonderful, but it has to be a neighborhood. It's working with that neighbor to say, "Could we make sure that we clear our fence line periodically of any debris that would catch?" This idea that, "Well, it's okay if there's a fire because a firefighter will be at my house," we have to get rid of that thinking. We've got surveys that show that most departments are telling us if there were 20 or more structures threatened by wildfire, we will not be able to respond to them. So essentially, across neighborhoods, across communities, it's all about working with your neighborhoods.

Torah Kachur:

What would your advice be now for people who've suffered a devastating loss like they did in the Lahaina and places that you've seen over your career?

Michele Steinberg:

What I would say as we unfortunately experience more and more of this trauma really in the communities, is to take care of yourself, to reach out to people, to get the help that you need psychologically as well as physically, and to realize that you're not alone.

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.