



Season 4
Episode 6 Transcript
A 911 Miracle

Torah Kachur:

Stanley Praitnath has a morning routine. He takes the train from Queens ...

Stanley Praitnath:

And then I stop in the same bagel store, pick up a raisin bagel and a cup of coffee, the same thing I ate for 13 years working in that building every day for breakfast.

Torah Kachur:

The building where Stanley works? New York City's World Trade Center. After grabbing breakfast, Stanley takes the elevator up to his office on the 81st floor of the South Tower. Same routine day in, day out, but today, September 11th, 2001, is not like any other day. Just before 9:00, Stanley sees something out his window.

Stanley Praitnath:

Huge chunks of fireballs falling from the sky.

Torah Kachur:

Stanley and his colleagues don't know what's going on, but they decide to evacuate.

Stanley Praitnath:

I stepped out of the elevator, and the security guard looked at me and said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going home." He says, "No. Your building is safe. It's secured. Go back to your office."

Torah Kachur:

Stanley goes back to the 81st floor. A few minutes later, something outside the window catches his eye again.

Stanley Praitnath:

A gray airplane is bearing down on me and, with the most thunderous sound, the plane, bam, into the building.

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.

Stanley remembers the moment he first saw the Twin Towers.

Stanley Praitnath:

It was like a huge ant nest, everybody with a briefcase in their hand and everybody's running towards a train or grab a cab, and I thought it was the most magnificent building I've ever seen.

Torah Kachur:

In 2001, Stanley was an assistant vice president for a large international bank. The company occupied four floors of the World Trade Center's South Tower, also referred

to as Building 2. The view from his office? Unforgettable.

Stanley Praitnath:

I would just look at the Statue of Liberty, and you feel as if you can stretch your hand out and touch it.

Torah Kachur:

The morning of September 11th started out like any other work day for Stanley, but, when he got to his desk, he got a strange call.

Stanley Praitnath:

My mother is on the phone, and she says, "Are you okay?" I say, "Fine. Thank you. Okay," not a word else.

Torah Kachur:

Then his brothers called and asked the same question, but no one told Stanley why they were checking in on him. They all assumed he knew what was going on. He didn't. Stanley was in the elevator when the first plane hit the North Tower, so he didn't hear or see the impact.

Stanley Praitnath:

I hung up the phone and I'm thinking, "God, it's not even 9:00. These people really, really miss me. There's a lot of love here."

Torah Kachur:

Then Stanley looked out his window. He saw huge flames coming out of the North Tower.

Stanley Praitnath:

I said, "Let's get out of here," so you ran out of the office, ran down the hallway, massive amount of people, and you take this express elevator that go all the way down.

Torah Kachur:

When Stanley and his co-workers reached the ground level, a security guard in the lobby told everyone the situation was under control. Then an announcement came over the PA system.

Speaker 3:

Ladies and gentlemen, Building 2 is secure. I repeat, Building 2 is secure. There's no need to evacuate Building 2.

Stanley Praitnath:

I'm thinking to myself, "Something is not right with his picture."

Torah Kachur:

Then a co-worker turned to him and said-

Stanley Praitnath:

"Stan, I'm scared. I want to go home." "All right, take the rest of the day off."

Torah Kachur:

Stanley watched her walk away through the lobby.

Stanley Praitnath:

And that was probably the best decision I ever made.

Torah Kachur:

Stanley debated going home, too. His mind flicked back eight years to 1993 when a terrorist detonated a bomb under the World Trade Center. Standing in the lobby, Stanley relived the chaos of evacuating that day. From the elevator, one of Stanley's colleagues called out.

Stanley Praimnath:

“Come on, Stanley, man. You’re not scared to go back up. Come on, Stanley, man. We don’t have all day here.”

Torah Kachur:

Stanley didn’t know what to do.

Stanley Praimnath:

All your bosses are in that elevator and you stepped out. Do you go to the turnstile and go home or do you go back in and you can hear, “Your building is safe. It’s secured. Go back to your office?” Halfheartedly, I walked back into that elevator.

Torah Kachur:

When Stanley got back to the 81st floor, his phone rang. It was a colleague from their Chicago office.

Stanley Praimnath:

Then all she said when I pick up that phone was, “Get out.”

Torah Kachur:

Stanley looked out his window towards the Statue of Liberty. He saw something in the distance.

Stanley Praimnath:

Small at first, but within the split seconds, it’s getting larger and larger and larger, a gray airplane. I could still hear the revving sound of that engine as the plane is coming closer, closer, closer.

Torah Kachur:

The plane was at eye level, the same height as his floor in the World Trade Center.

Stanley Praimnath:

As I’m looking at this plane, frozen where I am, I can notice the plane starts to tilt, and all I remember saying was, “Lord, I can’t do this. You take over.”

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 buried in an avalanche, trapped in a rip current or caught in a terrorist attack.

On the morning of September 11th, 2001, Stanley was facing a terrifying view from his desk on the 81st floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center, but even on a normal day, being that high up, could feel exposed.

Brian Clark:

In heavy winds, you could feel the sway of the building.

Torah Kachur:

Like Stanley, Brian Clark had a pretty standard morning routine.

Brian Clark:

Every day, I would leave home at about 6:15 in the morning. The alarm clock would’ve gone off about 5:30, shower, shave, a bowl of cereal and out the door.

Torah Kachur:

Brian worked on the 84th floor of the South Tower. He was an executive vice president at an international brokerage firm, and he loved his work.

Brian Clark:

The phone rings. You pick it up. Chase Manhattan just yells in your ear, “He wants a quote for six months, and we would quote them an interest rate.” You ask, “How

much?" "50 million," and, boom, you yell it out into the room, and we loved it. It was like an athletic contest every day.

Torah Kachur:

On September 11th, Brian's day started out like any other.

Brian Clark:

I walked around the office and made sure things were functioning, that there was enough paper in the photocopier machine and that coffee was brewing, important things like that.

Torah Kachur:

By 8:46, Brian was sitting at his desk, typing at his keyboard. Nothing seemed unusual, and then the first plane hit the North Tower.

Brian Clark:

The lights above me buzzed, and my head jerked up. My peripheral vision caught something behind me against the glass. There was this glare, swirling flames right up against the glass. It dissipated and, floating out in the airspace, singed paper. Like what the heck is this?

Torah Kachur:

Brian had worked in the World Trade Center since 1974, so, like Stanley, he was there during the 1993 bombing. After that attack, every floor was required to have a fire safety plan. Brian had volunteered to be the fire warden for his office, so when he heard the explosion, he grabbed the flashlight he kept in his office for emergencies.

Brian Clark:

A lot of the brokers got off their phones, ran to the north windows of our tower and were looking up to see this ring of fire around the 93rd floor of the North Tower.

Torah Kachur:

Brian called his wife to tell her something strange had happened in the North Tower.

Brian Clark:

I put down the phone, and the strobe lights flashed in the building and a very familiar voice came over the PA system, the public address system, and said-

Speaker 3:

Ladies and gentlemen, Building 2 is secure. I repeat, Building 2 is secure.

Brian Clark:

Brian stopped someone to see if he knew what was going on.

Speaker 3:

He said, "Well, I was just down two or three floors and I heard this announcement, and I'd come back up, too, and in the midst of that sentence..."

Stanley Paimnath:

When that plane hit the building, the sound was tremendous.

Torah Kachur:

Both Stanley and Brian's floors were in the impact zone of the South Tower.

Brian Clark:

The building swayed enormously to the west and, in my mind, I thought the building was going over.

Stanley Paimnath:

Afterwards, all you could've heard was the debris getting sucked out and the crack-

ling of the flames.

Brian Clark:

Everything came out of the ceiling, all the ceiling tiles, air conditioning ducts, lighting, walls tore at a jagged angle. Everything just imploded.

Stanley Praitnath:

A large chunk of the plane was stuck in the office doorway, and it looked like somebody opened a giant bag of cement and just threw it in the air.

Torah Kachur:

Stanley had jumped under his desk just before the plane hit, but he was still badly injured.

Stanley Praitnath:

Covered in blood, black and blue, swollen, pulverized cement stuck on me.

Torah Kachur:

When he poked his head out from under his desk to look for his coworkers, he didn't see anyone.

Stanley Praitnath:

At one point, I thought, "Why would all these people leave me here to die?" not realizing, everybody who was there at the time, they were gone.

Torah Kachur:

Stanley was the only person in his office who'd survived, but he knew he was still in danger. The ceiling had come down above him.

Stanley Praitnath:

Oh, my God. Oh, my God, it's going to collapse. I'm going to get crushed, thousands of pounds of steel. I'm going to get burned by all this fire surrounding me or I'm going to get electrocuted. I'm going to die.

Torah Kachur:

A few floors up, Brian had come to a conclusion.

Brian Clark:

I knew in a split second it was terrorism just because something had happened next door like that, and now our building got hit, and I had been there in 1993. That was the instant reaction. It was just this feeling, and then, for the next 10 seconds, was I terrified, and then this feeling washed over me. "Brian, you're going to be okay. You're going to be fine."

Torah Kachur:

Brian collected himself and got moving.

Brian Clark:

I reached in my pocket, pulled out the flashlight and shunted around this dirty, chalky gritty air, and I gathered up three or four or five other people that were on that floor, and we stepped over all the debris on the floor and made our way into the hallway with my flashlight on.

Torah Kachur:

Brian and his coworkers had three exit options, stairways A, B, or C. C was the closest to Brian's office, the one he used the most, so they headed there.

Brian Clark:

As I got to that intersection, something inexplicable happened. I felt, and there was nobody there, this enormous push on my right shoulder. It was physical. There was

nothing there, but it pushed me around to the left and I went with it, and I went to stairway A and started down stairway A with this group of people following me.

Torah Kachur:

Brian would later learn that stairways B and C were blocked or destroyed. After a few floors, they met a group walking up the stairs. They advised Brian not to go down. The path was blocked by flames and smoke.

Brian Clark:

About 10 seconds into that, I dropped out of the conversation because I heard this banging noise inside the 81st floor and then this muffled scream for help. "Help, I'm buried. Is anyone there? I can't breathe."

Torah Kachur:

The person screaming? That was Stanley.

Stanley Praimnath:

I'm sticking my head out from under that desk and I start to scream. "Lord, I don't want to die. Please send somebody, anybody to help me."

Torah Kachur:

Brian left the group in the stairwell and followed the voice.

Brian Clark:

I remember seeing all my other coworkers turning around, and they had decided to go higher and they all started climbing.

Torah Kachur:

Stanley could see Brian's flashlight. He moved towards it, staying low to avoid the live wires and fire above him.

Stanley Praimnath:

I'm screaming out, "Please wait for me. I don't want to die. Don't leave me to die. I would die. I want to see my wife and our two children." I'm crawling. I crawled the entire length of the loans department to the lounge in the computer room, in the communication room and the mail room.

Torah Kachur:

A wall at the far end of his office blocked Stanley's path. Brian was on the other side.

Brian Clark:

I got finally to this person who's yelling, "Can you see my hand? Can you see my hand?" I dropped the flashlight closer to the floor and, indeed, here was this arm sticking through a hole in the wall waving frantically up and down.

Torah Kachur:

The hole was too small to squeeze through, but there was an opening at the top of the wall. Brian climbed on a desk and looked over. He could see Stanley on the other side. He held out his hand and reached down.

Stanley Praimnath:

The man is saying, "If you want to live, climb over. I'll catch you." I can't do it.

Brian Clark:

Well, he jumped once. I missed him. I said, "You must do this."

Stanley Praimnath:

I had a leg wound that was opening up. I took off my shirt, made a bandage and tied up my leg. This man is saying, "Think about your family. You're going to die. You're going to die."

Torah Kachur:

Stanley tried to grab Brian's hand one more time.

Stanley Praimnath:

I jumped, and he grabbed and he pulled.

Brian Clark:

Up he came again, and I heaved him up and up and over this wall.

Torah Kachur:

The desk Brian was standing on tipped over, and both men fell backwards onto a pile of debris.

Brian Clark:

This stranger lands on top of me and gives me this great big kiss, and I got up and I said, "Brian Clark," stuck my hand out, and he said, "I'm Stanley Praimnath. He said, "We'll be brothers for life."

Torah Kachur:

Then Brian said something Stanley will never forget.

Stanley Praimnath:

He said, "All my life, I lived as an only child. I was born and raised in Canada. I always wanted a brother, and I find that man today."

Torah Kachur:

Brian noticed that both of them had a puncture wound in their hand.

Brian Clark:

I said, "In fact, we'll be blood brothers for life," and I smooshed our hands together.

Stanley Praimnath:

He put his hand around my neck, and this good old Irish man says, "Come on, buddy. Let's go home."

Torah Kachur:

Using the flashlight to guide the way, Brian helped Stanley walk back to the stairwell.

Stanley Praimnath:

As we were running down the stairs, hobbling that is, you can see the flames just licking up the office space. You can hear the crackle of the flames, but this man had his hand around my shoulder at all times, navigating me where to go because I just lost it. I didn't know what to do, where to go.

Torah Kachur:

When they got down to the 31st floor, they stopped to phone their families. About 20 minutes later, they reached the ground floor.

Brian Clark:

We went through the revolving doors and then came across some firefighters who were just pulling on their jackets and putting on their oxygen tanks.

Stanley Praimnath:

These good men and women in uniform were belching orders. "Go to Liberty. Go to Liberty." That's Liberty Street, and we were running helter-skelter. "Don't look up. Don't look around. Run. Go. Go. Go. Go."

Torah Kachur:

They ran a couple of blocks and stopped outside a church.

Stanley Praitnath:

I'm looking at the building and I'm telling Brian, "It's going."

Brian Clark:

He said, "I think that building could come down." I said, "There's no way. That's a steel structure. That's just draperies and furniture burning," and I didn't really finish the sentence.

Stanley Praitnath:

Because the building starts to sway and then it starts to shake, and you can hear that eerie sound like when steel and metal is bending, and the next thing you know...

Brian Clark:

Floor upon floor, eight to 10 seconds for that whole building to dissolve in front of us.

Torah Kachur:

A huge plume of dust raced towards them. They ran and took shelter in a nearby building. While they were waiting, Stanley and Brian finally had a quiet moment.

Brian Clark:

Stanley and I, he started to tell me a little about his background, that he's from Guyana in South America, and I'm telling him, "Well, I was born and raised in Toronto," and we did our quick histories, if you like.

Torah Kachur:

During the conversation, Stanley gave Brian one of his business cards. When they left the building 40 minutes later, there was a half inch of ash on the ground.

Brian Clark:

And still very cloudy above, no sunlight, no direct sunlight, no blue sky.

Torah Kachur:

In the haze, Stanley and Brian lost each other. Alone, Brian was overwhelmed by a strange feeling.

Brian Clark:

Whoa, was this just a mirage? Was this a guardian angel? I reached in my shirt pocket and pulled out his business card, so I knew at that moment there really was a Stanley Praitnath.

Torah Kachur:

After they got separated, Stanley and Brian each found their own way home. At this point, neither knew the North Tower had collapsed as well. Brian caught a ferry home to New Jersey when it all sunk in.

Brian Clark:

All of a sudden, this silence on the ferry boat, because none of us knew really what had happened on that site, but both towers were gone. It was like there was a hole in the sky.

Torah Kachur:

Nearly 3,000 people died on September 11th. Only four people survived above the 78th floor in the South Tower. Stanley and Brian were two of them. On the first anniversary of 9/11, Stanley invited Brian to speak at his church.

Brian Clark:

At the conclusion of my remarks, I surprised him by giving him a box wrapped in white tissue paper, and it was a shoebox. I had put the flashlight that I used that day

to find him inside the box.

Torah Kachur:

That flashlight now sits in the 9/11 Museum at One World Trade Center. Today, Stanley and Brian are very close friends.

Brian Clark:

I still carry that business card in my wallet to this day 22 years later.

Stanley Praimnath:

Brian's daughter got married, and I was at the wedding. Brian introduced me to everybody who was there as his blood brother.

Torah Kachur:

They both believe things would have turned out differently if they hadn't met each other that day.

Stanley Praimnath:

I tell Brian, "Brian, thank you for saving me."

Torah Kachur:

Brian sees things a bit differently. All the people he was with in the stairwell before he found Stanley tried to get to the roof. None of them survived.

Brian Clark:

I said to Stanley, "Maybe you think that's true," but I said, "Maybe you calling me in on the 81st floor saved my life."

Stanley Praimnath:

Brian and I hold each other dearly, knowing that, without Brian, there would not have been Stanley and, without Stanley, there would not have been a Brian.

Torah Kachur:

Hopefully, you never go through anything like Stanley or Brian went through on 9/11, but even if it's unlikely that you'll ever experience a terrorist attack, it's still important to know what to do in an emergency if you have to evacuate your workplace or home.

Regina Wilson has been a New York City firefighter for 25 years, and she was working on September 11th, 2001. Regina might have been one of the 343 firefighters who didn't make it home that day, except she traded assignments before the start of her shift.

Regina, how did that experience shape the firefighter you are today?

Regina Wilson:

I think, for one thing, it helps me to appreciate time, so I think a lot of my friends know that you only get 10 minutes grace period for me to wait on you. Otherwise, I'm gone. I take the concept of time and what it means to be here more personal, of not wasting it and then also, because of the fact that everyone in Ladder 105 died, including my friend John who I switched with that day, I just try to make sure that my life is meaningful and that his death wasn't in vain because it could have been me. I try every day to make a difference, make this department better and to also just make sure that I'm contributing just to life and I'm living it to the fullest. I got a real good appreciation of valuing time and life.

Torah Kachur:

Regina, first of all, thank you and your fellow firefighters for your service that day and for every day you folks risk your lives. Obviously, we hope no one has to experi-

ence another day like 9/11, but what advice do you have for people who want to be prepared for an emergency evacuation?

Regina Wilson:

Oh, it's absolutely great to have an evacuation plan for home and for work. You should know how to safely get out of any environment that you're in. You should be conscious of where the exits are. Find out where the stairs are that will get you out the building. Sometimes, the exits will lead you to the lobby. You may not want to go to the lobby. You want to go to the exit that will lead you outside, and then, if you're supposed to meet up with people where you work, find a place away from the building that you guys can all meet up and make sure that everyone is okay.

You should do the same thing in your home. Make sure you have an evacuation plan if there's smoke in your house. Go over with your kids or family how to feel it on the walls and know where everything is and to also make sure you have a meeting place so that you can all make sure that everybody is okay because, if everybody has it when the firefighters show up, you can say your daughter, your son, your husband, your grandmother, your grandfather, they didn't come out, and you could tell them exactly where their bedrooms are or where they may be.

Torah Kachur:

How does evacuating from an office building look different than evacuating from a home?

Regina Wilson:

It's just different because you're dealing with a lot more people, you're dealing with a lot of panic and obstructions getting in your way, and then it also depends on how many stories of a building that you are working in. You have to figure out, if you're working on the 15th or the 20th floor, how are you going to get down if the elevators are off? It's just being strategic about it and knowing that, if you have more than one stairwell, how to get to it. What happens if one stairwell is filled with smoke? Do you know how to get off the floor below and then find the other staircase? It's just making sure that you have an awareness of your surroundings.

Torah Kachur:

What about after? What are some of the hazards that you have to be aware of, the direct aftermath of an emergency?

Regina Wilson:

It could be worrying about ceiling levels. You could be dealing with hazards from trees falling, branches, electrical wires in the street. There's so many things that could affect your own safety. People should really take an interest in how to keep your family safe. I know we get busy. We have things that are going on every day. We got to go to work. We got to come home. We got to take care of our kids. We got to take them to practice, but nobody knows when an emergency is going to happen and you just need to be prepared.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's Tell Me What Happened. 9/11 left a scar on our collective memory. Thousands died and many more lost family and friends, but those who survived the attack didn't walk away unscathed. There were many injuries and long-term health issues in the decades that followed. We still feel its impact today.

On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.