



Episode 3 Transcript A Mother's Intuition Leads to Rescue

Torah Kachur:

Katharina Gröne is in a tent at an elevation of 6000 feet. In a blizzard.

Katharina Gröne:

The weather itself is scary because you're by yourself and it's really dark. It was just freezing cold. You think, well you think you're going to die.

Torah Kachur:

She pulls out her phone to call her brother. He's in Germany, the other side of the world. Too far away to help.

Katharina Gröne:

I didn't know if I make it or not, I realized that just in case I should already say goodbye... but what do you tell your brother when you are thinking that you're going to die?

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur - and this is "Tell Me What Happened - True stories of human connections" - an original podcast by OnStar. This series is about people all over the world that help people... it's also about the people that need that help. Because we all have moments when we need some assistance from a stranger.

Katharina has a dream of completing the Pacific Crest Trail. It runs 2,650 miles -- from the Mexican border to the Canadian. The PCT as hikers call it... is a test of endurance that takes four to five months. Completing it is a badge of honor for serious hikers. But by her own admission, Katharina is not, at least initially, a 'serious' hiker.

Katharina Gröne:

Before I did the PCT, I had one hiking experience, which was not as hard as the PCT. It was basically a walk through the park and I have never slept in the forest in a tent by myself

Torah Kachur:

It's fair to say she may not have been fully prepared for what she's about to encounter.

Katharina Gröne:

I went on YouTube. This is the main place where I got my information from. I saw how people managed to do it.

Torah Kachur:

“Managed to do it” – that’s a good way to phrase it. You see, the PCT is long and it’s technical, you don’t conquer it, at best you ‘manage to do it.’

Katharina Gröne:

It’s said that the PCT is the hardest one... It was something where I thought if I achieve that, then I will feel so strong and afterwards I can just do anything.

Torah Kachur:

She starts in Campo. It’s a small town on the United States-Mexico border, but hiking in Southern California is an eye opener for a hiking novice from Europe.

Katharina Gröne:

My sleeping bag, which was perfect for Spain, but didn’t work out on the PCT at all. So basically the first month... I almost froze to death every night.

Torah Kachur:

Hiking the PCT also means dealing with a different kind of wildlife than she saw back home.

Katharina Gröne:

When you’re hiking through the desert, you meet a lot of snakes. So if you afraid of snakes, you should probably skip the beginning, like the first 700 miles. Afterwards, you go into an area, where you have a lot of, wild cats that can eat you alive.

Torah Kachur:

Poisonous snakes and hungry mountain lions rank second and third on the list of animals that hikers should worry about. The top spot belongs to something a little bigger.

It’s late at night. The branches overhead block out any light from the moon or the stars. The last embers of the fire are burning low. Katharina’s lying in her tent, waiting for sleep to take over her exhausted body.

Katharina Gröne:

I turned around and there was a bear one meter in front. I will never be able to tell you how close this bear was. But I think I felt his breath. So I started screaming. And the good thing is that I learned all I needed to know on YouTube. So I knew I have to be loud.

Torah Kachur:

Look, I’m not saying online videos are the best way to get your wilderness survival tips, but in this case what she learned was right. If you encounter a bear in the woods. Be loud. Make yourself look big. And make sure you give

the bear an avenue to escape, so if you're camped beside a lake, don't put the bear between you and the water. Move sideways so it will have a clear path to get away.

That's what Katharina did, and sure enough, the bear took one look at her and ambled off into the forest. That was about three months into her trip. She might have started out unprepared, but she's learning as she goes. She's listened to other hikers, she's upgraded some of her gear. Most importantly, her confidence is growing.

Katharina Gröne:

When you're in a bad situation... this makes you stronger. This gives you strength. This is how it feels.

Torah Kachur:

Katherina, like most hikers, started the trail in the spring and headed north. The plan is to finish before winter arrives in the Pacific Northwest. The problem is, after six months she still isn't done. She's covered more than 23-hundred miles. Which means she still has 270 to go.

Early in the trip she was strong and fresh. She was covering 30 miles a day. But now, in the wilderness of Washington State, as the terrain gets tougher and the days shorter, her mileage totals start to drop.

Katharina Gröne:

I was just exhausted. I was literally exhausted. My body didn't know what to do anymore.

Torah Kachur:

It's October 22nd. Carved pumpkins have been set on front steps. Ghosts made of old sheets hang from porches. It's a time of year when Nancy Abell usually has the PCT all to herself.

Nancy Abell:

I hadn't seen any PCT through hikers all day.

Torah Kachur:

Nancy lives in Washington State not far from the trail. She uses it for day hikes, and over the years, she's come to recognize the seasonal ebb and flow of the "Through-Hikers" people doing what Katharina is doing, covering the whole route in a single summer.

Nancy Abell:

Everybody was pretty much gone further north trying to get up to the Canadian border. And so, I was really surprised when I saw Katharina.

She had a lot of gear on her back. So it looked to me like she was a through hiker and knowing how late in the season it was, right away the alarm bells went off.

Katharina Gröne:

She asked me what I'm doing. I told her I'm doing the trail.

Torah Kachur:

Nancy and Katharina spend a couple of hours talking and hiking.

Nancy Abell:

She kinda reminded me of my daughter, who was the same age. And so we actually became pretty good friends in those two hours.

Torah Kachur:

It's a lovely walk on a gorgeous late fall day, but Nancy knew the weather would change quickly.

Nancy Abell:

She did not have key items for snow travel and she did not have leg gaiters to protect your lower legs from deep snow. She also didn't have snow shoes. So I was concerned.

Torah Kachur:

But Katharina is an adult - and a stranger -- there's only so much Nancy can do or say.

Nancy Abell:

I tried to talk her out of it. but she was very determined. She seemed really confident that she'd be all right. So I said goodbye to her and I went home.

Torah Kachur:

The next morning, Katharina keeps heading north. She's so close to her goal - less than 250 miles now. But unlike yesterday - today, the weather isn't cooperating.

Katharina Gröne:

It got cold, but it gets cold on trail. It gets wet on trail. You go through with it. You don't stop early because it gets a little bit harder. So this is what I did. I just didn't stop. I just continued.

Torah Kachur:

The next day, and then the next, the weather doesn't improve. Every day she covers fewer miles. And she's alone. It's as if every other hiker has called it quits.

A storm front is rolling in. This time of year, at this elevation, it won't be rain. It'll be snow. The trail will disappear under a white blanket.

Katharina Gröne:

I check the weather. I knew if I'm fast enough, I will make it to the next stop.

Torah Kachur:

There are periodic spots along the trail that are very important for hikers, spur trails that will take you off the main trail and into a village or at least intersect a highway. Or simple cabins built to shelter people who are caught out in bad weather. Katharina knows the next one is at least a full day's hike away. That's a big day, on fresh legs, not after months on the trail.

Katharina Gröne:

I didn't expect to be so tired. I don't know what happened.

Torah Kachur:

She lasts until noon. She can't keep up her pace, and ultimately, she just can't go on. Fatigue and exhaustion force Katharina to make camp on a high rocky plain known as Fire Creek Pass.

Katharina Gröne:

I just couldn't move. Maybe it was the cold at night. Maybe it was just too cold for me... this gut feeling like seriously, it was just a gut feeling that I won't make it.

Torah Kachur:

She is at over six thousand feet, the snow covered peak of Mount Baker looms above her. Under different circumstances it would be one of the most beautiful places she's ever seen. But not today.

Katharina Gröne:

My problem was that everything was full of snow already. So I had no spot to pitch my tent. I had no strength to do another mile to a spot where there is actually a place. So I was stuck on the mountain. And it started to snow.

Torah Kachur:

It starts as a few gentle snowflakes. Within the hour it's a blizzard.

Katharina Gröne:

The weather itself is scary because you're by yourself and it's really dark. I was sleeping under a tarp but somehow water got into it, the sleeping bag was soaked with water. Which is really, really scary.

Torah Kachur:

The winds get stronger. The snow is whipped through the air. It's growing dark, the temperature plummets. And Katharina loses hope

Katharina Gröne:

I just got scared. I didn't know if I make it or not but there was a moment where I realized that just in case I should already say goodbye.

Torah Kachur:

She tries to call her family. It's a desperate act. And ultimately meaningless. There is no cell phone signal up here. No way to send a voice mail or a text. She leaves a voice recording on her phone, for someone to find later.

Katharina Gröne:

If something really happens, they will have my message. They won't feel guilty anyhow. It was like, all right, so you can't do anything about it. It is 100% your own fault. So you don't have to blame anyone.

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 are driving through a crowded city, or hiking alone in the mountains.

At the exact moment that Katharina is shivering in her tent, staring at her phone, Nancy is in her kitchen, her hands wrapped around a steaming mug of herbal tea. It's been a full week since her brief encounter with a young hiker on the trail. And yet she can't stop thinking about her.

Nancy Abell:

My instincts were that something was going to happen to her and I couldn't even sleep the night before. I was really upset. And Monday morning it was terrible weather here, even in the lowlands.

She had told me she hiked about 15 miles a day. So I got my map out and I started adding up the mileage from point to point. And it looked like she was going to be at Fire Creek Pass... And unfortunately they were calling for a foot of snow in the high country and that's exactly where she was going to be. And I was just like, well, I have to call search and rescue and let them know she's up there. I just have to tell them.

Torah Kachur:

It's morning but the storm is still howling. Katharina is still in her tent, her clothes and sleeping bag are soaked, she's in a bit of a daze. She's been alone for so long. She's starting to hear things, hallucinations maybe.

She rushes out.

Katharina Gröne:

There was this one moment where sun opened up where the clouds opened up.

Nancy Abell:

A little weather window opened. And so, they're able to fly down close enough to where they actually saw her tracks in the snow.

Katharina Gröne:

And then I saw them - In the middle of nowhere, there's a helicopter with two guys who look like a rescue team.

Nancy Abell:

They could not land where she was because it was too rugged. There was not a good place to set the copter down. So they had to fly down about a mile

Katharina Gröne:

This was the moment where I tell myself run. Run or you're going to die.

Torah Kachur:

The helicopter's blades whip snow into the air. The rocks are slippery and jagged. But Katharina runs towards it as fast as she can.

Katharina Gröne:

I don't know how to describe it. A life-changing moment.

Torah Kachur:

From the air all Katharina can see is the tattered remains of her tent. And the footsteps she's left in the snow.

Katharina Gröne:

They would have risked their lives to just save someone. And this is something I learned from those guys. It doesn't matter who you are. It doesn't matter how much you achieved in your life so far or going to, you are important just because you are a person. So thank you.

Torah Kachur:

Katharina has frostbite on both of her feet. She's severely hypothermic. But she's safe. And without being told, she knows that there's only one person who could have possibly known how much trouble she was in.

Nancy Abell:

The sheriff called me and he said, "We have her". Sorry, I get emotional when I think about it.

Katharina Gröne:

She actually picked me up at the station, and asked me if I want to stay at her place. And I said, yes.

Nancy Abell:

We hugged each other and the pilots, they were just so happy.

Torah Kachur:

Katharina stays with Nancy for two weeks until she's ready to fly back home to Germany.

Nancy Abell:

It was really fun having her at my house and I took her around to some local places, and showed her around a little bit. And she got to kind of rest and get her strength back.

Katharina Gröne:

It was just like being part of family... I owe her a lot.

Torah Kachur:

Katharina Gröne is alive because Nancy Abell spent seven days thinking about someone she'd known for just two hours - a stranger she met on the trail.

This is Tell Me What Happened - an original podcast by OnStar. Every episode has a story about someone who found themselves needing help. OnStar has been helping people for 25 years. With that in mind, I want to keep the good vibes going and make another human connection.

I'm going to bring in Cheri Higman. She's the Chairperson of Seattle Mountain Rescue - her job is to make sure people can safely enjoy the incredible backcountry trails. She is intimately familiar with the area Katharina was hiking in.

Cheri Higman:

Out near Glacier Peak in that part of the PCT is pretty intense. There's a lot of elevation gain and loss, so it's pretty strenuous. And the peaks are rugged, you're oftentimes in old growth forests and there's just moss dripping off of your environment. Then you're several hours later standing on top of a ridge line with these vast mountain ranges out before you.

Torah Kachur:

How quickly can conditions change up there?

Cheri Higman:

As we move it into fall or early spring, it can change in hours. Oftentimes if you're in heavily forested area, you can't even look at the sky to understand if you have incoming weather or not.

Torah Kachur:

What was the area like that Katharina was found in?

Cheri Higman:

So she was in an air area that is really well forested, often hard to see from the

air because of the woods where they actually found her was somewhat in a clearing where you could kind of see from the air where she was at, which is pretty lucky. Because quite honestly, when we are doing searches in heavily forested areas, oftentimes that's not the case. And we have ground troops going in, looking for people, which it takes a lot more time.

What's nice is she was on a trail. We kind of had a rough idea where she might be, which does narrow down the window. But there are often times when we are scouring for days looking for people off trail.

Torah Kachur:

Well, Katharina hiked the trail for miles without any major issues, so then where did she go wrong? How did it go so quickly to life or death situation?

Cheri Higman:

Looking at the forecast and understanding the weather systems that move into the region and which you're traveling in will take you a long way. Especially since we're in a maritime environment. Though we have more milder climate, the weather changes quickly and it's really wet, and so all of a sudden you can end up in a storm, whether it's snow or rain and be absolutely drenched.

Torah Kachur:

What's the general rule for search and rescue? Because it kind of was responding on Nancy's hunch. I'm assuming that's not the norm.

Cheri Higman:

It's not the norm, but it does happen. And quite honestly, if we are getting the call out, we'll go. We look at urban settings oftentimes if somebody's missing, it's you have to wait 24 hours, but for us, sometimes it's within hours and we're like, "All right, here we go. Let's rally troops."

Torah Kachur:

How common is it?

Cheri Higman:

How common is it? For a rescue like that we probably get a couple a year that are that sort of resource intensive. But as far as, how often do we get called out in King county? We had I think 87 missions last year. So roughly one every three days.

Torah Kachur:

Wow... Wow.

Cheri Higman:

Yeah. So, often.

Torah Katchur:

Well, Katarina wasn't calling for help, but what would you recommend if someone wanted to call for help and they needed help in the backcountry?

Cheri Higman:

Oh for sure. And so what's really awesome about the world we live in today is we frequently do have access to service out in the middle of the mountains. And so with that call 911, if you have service call 911, what that gets you is gets you help immediately. Also, it helps us triangulate where you're at, which is pretty cool. The technology can do that, but where's she's at, there's no service out there.

And so what we recommend folks use is what's called a personal locator beacon. And so that is basically, it's a call for help. And so there's a button on these devices, you hit the SOS button, a signal gets transmitted up to satellites and that gets deployed out to typically military stations and help gets on the way.

Torah Kachur:

So if you're in a location you may require air rescue, you don't have one of these personal locator beacons. How do you attract attention?

Cheri Higman:

Oh yeah. So I mean, if you can get into an open space, get in an open space, because it just is much easier for us to see from the air. And that is ideal. Other things you can do is have one of those little mirrors, just a mirror. So you can signal a helicopter from above. And then the other thing is wearing bright clothes. That helps a lot.

Torah Kachur:

So what should someone be equipped with now, broader? Not just the gadgets. What should someone be equipped with if they're taking on the PCT?

Cheri Higman:

Oh yeah. If you're taking on the PCT one, I applaud people that do that. That's a lot of effort, so it takes a lot of planning and a lot of digging. And so I think the biggest thing is having a plan and leaving that plan with somebody and so that way, if something goes awry, you have somebody that's looking out for you and looking to see when you come back.

And so on that plan would be your entry point, so your trailhead what your planned route is in addition to the destination, so at least we can hone in on where you might be and then what you're wearing, because that again, allows us to ask passerbys. It's like, "Hey, did you see a person wearing this bright pink jacket?"

And the final thing that's really key is what time do you plan to be out? Because that gives us an idea of how fast you might think that you'll be traveling.

Torah Kachur:

What if the worst happens? I mean, you're lost, you get hurt. That's what I'm always worried about. What if I just like... I'm clumsy. What if I trip and I break my ankle, then what do I do? What if I'm out of service?

Cheri Higman:

Oh, for sure. We like to say is hug a tree. stay put right, stop, moving around. We're pretty good at finding people. The other thing is just to take a deep breath and calm your mind because oftentimes when we are amped up and anxious, we end up making decisions that could further increase the consequences of where we're at right now. And you might end up in an even more difficult situation.

And then try to protect yourself as best as you can from the environment. Try to maintain your body heat when it's cooler. And so that might mean putting all your stuff on and also trying to get yourself insulated from the ground. Conversely, if it's summertime, you're really hot, find that shade because dehydration is a killer as well.

Torah Kachur:

Well thanks Cheri.

Cheri Higman:

Thank you.

Torah Kachur:

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

If you'd like to read more stories like this one, or if you want to see a map of the Pacific Crest Trail - maybe plan your own adventure. There's a link in the show notes to take you to our website.

Or you can go straight to onstar.com and tell us your favorite story about a time that someone helped you out of a particularly challenging situation. Let's share some love for people who help others, in big ways or small.

On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur - and please... "Be safe out there."

Find more episodes of *Tell Me What Happened* at OnStar.com/podcast