



Episode 4 Transcript

A Helping Hand When a Winter Road Trip Goes Awry

Torah Kachur:

Lynn Marchessault is 2964 miles away from home. Driving a pickup truck on a frozen highway. In the middle of a blizzard.

Lynn Marchessault:

I couldn't even see the road. I couldn't see anything in front of me, barely five feet, maybe. I mean, it was a very heavy snowfall. It was scary. You couldn't tell what was your lane, what was the oncoming traffic's lane, what was the side of the road.

Torah Kachur:

With her in the cab are her two kids, aged 10 and 13. Everything she owns is in the bed of the truck, or loaded onto the twenty-foot, two axle trailer she's pulling behind her.

Lynn Marchessault:

I needed a little bit more momentum to get up the hills, but I didn't have it... I'm accelerating, my tires are spinning, the trailer's pulling me backwards... I don't want to wind up off a cliff somewhere with my children in the vehicle.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur - and this is "Tell Me What Happened - True stories of people helping people... and specifically 'strangers' helping people in difficult situations. This show was created by OnStar to help spread the word about how important human connections really are.

Toccoa, Georgia is about two hours outside of Atlanta. It's one of those perfect southern towns where people know their neighbors, and where sitting on your porch and complaining about the heat is a nightly ritual.

Lynn Marchessault is sad to leave it. But it's not a new feeling. Her husband, Tim, is a Staff Sgt. in the US Army. And moving frequently is just part of the deal.

Lynn Marchessault:

We've moved a lot. We've been to at least 6 or 7 duty stations already in 14 years.

Torah Kachur:

This time though, it's different. Tim has been redeployed to Alaska.

The sudden change in climate is not the only thing making this move different from previous ones. Tim is already up north... and because of restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic, he can't fly back and join the family for the drive.

Lynn Marchessault:

We had to make the trip by ourselves, unfortunately.

Torah Kachur:

On November 9th, Lynn closes the doors on the 20 ft U-Haul and checks the hitch. Her two kids - Payton and Rebecca - climb in the cab and plug in their devices.

Lastly, their two dogs and their cat named 'Midnight', jump up on their laps and settle in for the drive. The route is straightforward - northwest through Nashville, St Louis, and Kansas City, from North Dakota you cross into Canada. There, it's prairies, forests, and mountains until you eventually enter Alaska. Tim will drive down from his military base and meet them at the border.

Lynn Marchessault:

So, the trip was four days. Of course I was pulling a trailer and I had children and pets with me and I'm the only driver, so I knew that it was going to probably at least take roughly six to seven days.

Torah Kachur:

On her first day of traveling, the weather isn't cooperating.

Lynn Marchessault:

It was actually down pouring. I wasn't really wanting to start the trip out with bad weather, and then it just seems like it just progressed as I went.

Torah Kachur:

But it's November - and she's headed north - so when she thinks about bad weather, rain is the least of her worries.

It's the third day of her trip. She's reached the Canadian border. The display on her dashboard reads 19 degrees Fahrenheit. She can see her breath as she rolls down her window for the border guard.

Lynn Marchessault:

They weren't allowing visitors to the country. You couldn't just come in and travel Canada and sight-see.

Torah Kachur:

Lynn is making this move, you understand, with all her worldly possessions, two kids and three pets in the middle of a pandemic.

Lynn Marchessault:

We were given five days to get through. So, it was basically that timeline that they gave you was to make sure that you're not going off and just having a good time when you're not supposed to be.

Torah Kachur:

Nothing is normal, they can only stop for gas, take-out, and motel rooms. The guard hands her back her passport, looks her in the eyes and repeats 'only five days, no more than that.' Then waves her through.

Lynn Marchessault:

The first town that I came to that I drove through was Regina in Saskatchewan. They had a fairly decent amount of snow that night. It was a little bit of an eye-opener to me. I was kind of like, "I feel like it's going to get worse the farther I go. What did I get myself into?"

Torah Kachur:

She's exhausted - and it's after eleven at night when she finally finds a hotel room.

Lynn Marchessault:

I'm unloading the kids and we've got to unload the animals. We have to walk them. The kids need fed, the dogs need fed. By the time I'm asleep, it's 1:00 in the morning

Torah Kachur:

Even so, she's back on the road at eight. She covers about 180 miles before lunch. A fresh tank of gas, a pee break for the kids and the dogs, some takeout sandwiches from a gas station. Then back on the road.

She laughs when she thinks about what the border guard told her "No sightseeing." She has definitely not seen any sights, just a dashed line down the middle of the highway and ribbons of snow blowing across it. Five hours later than she expected she makes it to Edmonton.

Lynn Marchessault:

That was an even bigger eye-opening than Regina because they had snow piles the size of the buildings. I was just in awe how big the snow piles were. I don't think I've ever seen snow piles that big.

Torah Kachur:

A quick chat with the woman at the front desk of the hotel confirms for Lynn that luck is not on her side.

Lynn Marchessault:

I was like, "There's a lot of snow here. I didn't expect there to be so much snow." She was telling me, she was like, "Yeah, this is the biggest snow storm we've had since... 2007. "Perfect timing for me. Great job me. I picked the greatest time to travel."

Torah Kachur:

Lynn grew up in the south. Over the last 15 years her husband has been stationed in Texas, Florida, and even South Korea.

Lynn Marchessault:

Most of our duty stations have always been in the south. We've never been stationed in the north.

I never have driven really in the snow.

Torah Kachur:

But here she is, not just driving in snow, driving in snow in a foreign country, with the border agent's clock ticking away in her head.

Then...

Lynn Marchessault:

My windshield wipers quit working.

Torah Kachur:

They were still moving, but she was out of fluid.

Lynn Marchessault:

All that slush was being thrown up onto the window... I couldn't see. But then when the windshield wipers would go over it, it would just smudge it and make it worse.

Torah Kachur:

She stops and wipes the windshield clear with her scarf. That works for a few miles, but not long enough. She rolls down her window and reaches around with her left arm to clear the snow while she's driving, but her arm doesn't reach.

Every 4 or 5 minutes she pulls over on the snow-covered shoulder, praying she doesn't get stuck. She gets out, wipes the window, gets back in and drives on. It takes an hour and a half to cover the 25 miles to the next gas station.

Lynn Marchessault:

I called my husband and I was crying and I was like, "I don't want to do this anymore. Is there a way that we can fly out from here?"

Torah Kachur:

In a different time? Maybe, but the COVID travel restrictions are very clear.

Lynn Marchessault:

We have to enter here and leave here. We were not allowed to use the airports or anything.

Torah Kachur:

At the gas station, a teenager tops up her windshield fluid and sells her a couple extra bottles. He gives Lynn a smile, says “drive safe!” and walks away. Sitting in the driver’s seat, parked at a small gas station, in a town she doesn’t even know the name of, Lynn closes her eyes, takes several deep breaths, and pulls herself together.

Lynn Marchessault:

I was like, “No, I can do this. It’s fine.” That’s me. I like to think I can do everything and take on the world. I’m like, “No, it’s fine. It’s fine. Like I can do this”.

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 three miles from home or three thousand.

Lynn and her family continue their journey through the frozen landscape of Northern Canada. The roads remain snowy. But she can see. That night they sleep in another motel, then the next day they’re back on the road. The motels, the cold gray highway, the gas station sandwiches, everything blurs together.

But today for a change the sky is blue and the roads are clear. She’s actually making good time... Around midday they stop in the town of Dawson Creek.

Lynn Marchessault:

The kids needed to go to the restroom, so I just pulled into a gas station just to let them go to the restroom. It was starting to snow so I was just like, “Hurry up so we can get back on the road.”

Torah Kachur:

At first the flakes are beautiful - large and pretty and falling slowly - it’s like a Christmas card. Those images always seemed out of place during her childhood Christmases in Georgia, but here she was, living it for real. For the first time, she takes a moment to appreciate how beautiful this rugged landscape is.

But with every mile she drives there’s more and more snow. Soon the greeting card scenery is replaced by a wall of white.

Lynn Marchessault:

The snow was so heavy, I couldn't even see the road. I couldn't see anything in front of me, like barely five feet, maybe. It was a complete white-out condition.

Torah Kachur:

Lynn struggles to keep driving. She doesn't know what else she can do.

Lynn Marchessault:

I drove into the snowstorm blindly. I mean, it was scary. You couldn't tell what was your lane, what was the oncoming traffic's lane, what was the side of the road.

Torah Kachur:

For an hour and a half Lynn struggles to keep her truck on the road. The wind is blowing sideways. The trailer catches it like a sail.

Lynn Marchessault:

At this point I'm crying again... I'm driving and crying. And my son, he's in the passenger seat and he's rubbing my arm. He's like, "It's okay, mom. You're a great driver. You've got this. You can do this."

Torah Kachur:

But it's not just the weather, the terrain has changed too.

Lynn Marchessault:

Big ups and down, inclines, decline. I'm talking eight and 9% grades. They were pretty steep... There was a few times where I did almost lose control and slide off the road.

Torah Kachur:

She slows down, but this creates a new problem.

Lynn Marchessault:

I needed a little bit more momentum to get up the hills, but I didn't have it because I was going so slow. My tires are spinning, the trailer's pulling me backwards. I don't want to hurt my kids, I don't want to wind up off a cliff somewhere with my children in the vehicle.

Torah Kachur:

She stops the truck.

Lynn Marchessault:

I couldn't see if cars were coming from either direction, even behind me.

Torah Kachur:

It's a brand new vehicle for her. She has to fumble around to find how to

engage the four-wheel drive. Once she does, she puts it in gear and starts creeping forward.

With the added traction, the truck crawls up the snow-covered hill. She keeps driving. Every mile she's convinced that they'll be in the ditch or a crash. Then, from the top of a hill, she sees a truck stop. She pulls in, safe. But Lynn has reached her limit.

Lynn Marchessault:

At this point I'm just bawling my eyes out. The tears are full force. A woman comes out and she saw me and she started talking to me. Her name is Tina. I'm telling her the whole thing and she's like, "Where did you say you from?" I was like, "Outside of Atlanta." She's like, "You probably don't even have proper tires on your vehicle."

Torah Kachur:

Tina inspects the tires on Lynn's truck.

Lynn Marchessault:

She's like, "Honey, these are summer tires." "The farther north you go "it's going to be worse than here." So I'm freaking out. She's like, "You cannot be on this road anymore today." She's like, "if you were to go on this road any longer. Something bad would happen to you guys."

Torah Kachur:

But she can't stay here. She can't spend the night in a pickup with two kids parked at a gas station in the snow. Thankfully, Tina has a plan. She hops in her own truck and drives slowly back onto the highway. Lynn follows, using Tina's tail lights as a guide, until they reach a motel - the Buffalo Inn - in the town of Pink Mountain: Population 100.

Lynn Marchessault:

It was dark already. There's no street lights. The snow hadn't died down the whole time. I was kind of at a crossroads of continue trying to make this drive.

Torah Kachur:

While Lynn is holed up in a tiny hotel room feeding her kids, looking after the animals, and trying to figure out her next move... Tina is online.

Lynn Marchessault:

She had shared the story on her personal page and a veteran that she knows who lives in Alberta had seen it. She shared it and then another veteran saw it. Everyone's following the story now.

Torah Kachur:

And that includes a Canadian Ranger named Gary Bath.

Gary Bath:

I happened to see a post about a lady asking for help for someone to drive her and her family up to Alaska.

Torah Kachur:

Gary's more than a little impressed by what Lynn's managed to achieve.

Gary Bath:

The fact that she got all the way to Pink Mountain is crazy. With her never having driven in snow at all before and then finding out she was driving on summer tires. I'm surprised she made it as far as she did.

Torah Kachur:

The more Gary hears, the more he wants to help.

Gary Bath:

Nobody was able to go do the whole trip. They were saying things like, "I wish I could help," But nobody had really said that they could drive Lynn anywhere. So I talked to my wife.

Lynn Marchessault:

And he told his wife he said... "I really feel like I need to do this. I want to do this". His wife was like, "Then what are you still doing here? Make it happen."

Torah Kachur:

The next day as the snow covers Pink Mountain Gary, Lynn, and even her husband Tim meet over Facetime.

Lynn Marchessault:

He video chatted with my husband, he video chatted with me. I just knew in my heart that I was making the right choice and that they were good people. That they were going to take care of us and get us where we needed to be safely.

Torah Kachur:

On Monday, Lynn buys a new set of winter tires, and on Tuesday the cab of her truck has a new occupant.

Gary Bath:

It was a little bit crowded in the truck, but not too bad.

Torah Kachur:

Alaska is still a thousand miles away - two full days of driving - but with good tires and an experienced driver, they're able to enjoy the view.

Gary Bath:

We saw coyotes, wolves... We had a fox come right up to the truck and I'm

pretty sure if we had a sandwich or something, it would've eaten it right out of our hand. Buffalo everywhere, elk, deer. It's crazy, you've never been here, you need to come see it.

Torah Kachur:

On November 20th, just a few days before Thanksgiving they reach the Canada/US Border. They can see Lynn's husband Tim standing on the other side: happy and relieved.

Gary Bath:

Drove 20 feet across, then Tim came over. Said our hi's, quick goodbye, got a quick picture and Lynn and Tim went the rest of the way.

Lynn Marchessault:

I was really thankful, super, super grateful. I was just repeatedly, over and over thanking them, expressing so much gratitude.

Lynn Marchessault:

I don't know what I would've done, but I might still be there crying on the side of the road right now.

Torah Kachur:

The only thing left was for Gary - now without a vehicle - to get home. Well, some of those people online who said "I wish I could help" stepped up.

Gary Bath:

There was three people that donated money. We put all of it towards the plane ticket for me to get home.

Torah Kachur:

It's just another example of strangers helping strangers.

This is Tell Me What Happened - an original podcast by OnStar. Every episode has a story about someone who finds themselves needing help. OnStar has been helping people for 25 years. So, with that in mind, I want to help you, by making another human connection.

I'm going to bring in Wes Irek. He's a winter driving expert and a lead instructor at Road America - his job is to make sure people can get where they're going, even when snow and ice make it difficult. What he teaches people is that everything starts 'where the rubber meets the road.'

Wes Irek:

So a big part of winter driving is assessing the road conditions and driving at or below the level of grip.

Torah Kachur:

So what are the kind of suggestions you have for navigating the most difficult types of black ice and snow drifts? The kinds of things that we really white knuckle through.

Wes Irek:

One of the things I like to teach about black ice is that you're not going to be able to see it. That's kind of the idea of black ice. So we need to be looking for other things that indicate whether we're driving on ice.

First, you're going to listen to water splashing in that wheel well. And it's very subtle, but you can hear it. So we're going to turn down that radio. We're going to ask people to be quiet and be 100% focused and hear that water splashing in the wheel well. When we don't hear that anymore, it goes eerily silent, and we're driving on ice.

The other thing that we can watch for is if there's other traffic on the road, we can watch water spray off their tires. And as soon as that goes away and we just see their tires, no spray, they're on ice, we're on ice. We need to be slowing down and adjusting our speeds.

Torah Kachur:

And what about those snow drifts? One of the things that I always have trouble with in winter driving is the in between the lanes, you need to change lanes and you get caught kind of trying to cross, especially in highway conditions.

Torah Kachur:

Do you cross that lane more aggressively and just cut across and get it over with, or do you just kinda cross it normally and just make your way across?

Wes Irek:

Neither. We're going to cross it very slowly and gradually trying to keep that wheel as straight as possible in front of us as we're moving lanes.

Torah Kachur:

So Lynn, in our story, she faced winter conditions, mountainous roads. So now how do we adjust our driving habits?

Wes Irek:

So we need to understand the momentum of the vehicle. We want to conserve the momentum as much as possible. So especially in deeper snow, we need to keep on that throttle and just keep the speed up, especially going uphill because that's where you're going to get stuck. And if we get stuck going uphill, we're not going to get started again. Going down the hills, we need to really control our speeds and make sure we keep the speeds to a minimum so that we don't lose the ability to slow down anymore and lose

control.

Torah Kachur:

One of the things my dad always taught me as I learned on a stick was to gear down. How do you do that in automatic? Do you still do that? Is that still something that we are supposed to do?

Wes Irek:

Yep. You can do that in an automatic. You can go into a low gear or a manual mode where you can choose which gear you're in and you can go to a lower gear, that would help you at times where maybe you need a little bit more umph to get the car going. But especially if you're in a manual car, it's actually better to go up a gear. Going up a gear reduces the torque. And especially if you have difficulties with the rear wheels spinning or any of the wheels spinning, going up a gear can help. So actually I would recommend going up a gear, not down.

Torah Kachur:

Now, tires make a difference. What's the difference, I've always wanted to know this between all season and winter tires?

Wes Irek:

Huge difference. There's three main differences between what you're going to get as far as grip out of an all season tire, versus a winter tire. The first is the tread depth. Winter tires have good tread depth. And the tread depth is really important when you're going through that light, fluffy snow. It helps kind of grip into that and provide traction. Then you have what's called sipes. They're the little lines through the zigzag lines through the tire.

Those are specifically designed to deal with the icy conditions and help grip the ice. You don't get many of those in all season tires. So that's a big player. The third is the rubber compound. The rubber compound of the tire is much, much softer on that winter tire and helps it make sure that it's pliable at those cold temperature and gives you that increased grip. So all three of those factors help make sure that you're going to get much better grip and control and safety out of those winter tires than you would in all season.

Torah Kachur:

How much should we trust the technology when we talk about ABS, four wheel drive, winter tires? I mean those all help, but we are still behind the wheel. Right?

Wes Irek:

Yep. The technology all helps. You have to be like a pinnacle racing driver in order to beat the technology. For the average driver, we want all the electronic aids we can get. The ABS helps, the traction control helps, the

stability control and even the winter driving modes that most cars have nowadays can make a big difference in your winter driving and making sure that you can stay in control of your vehicle.

Torah Kachur:

Now this is a question that I have experienced, the full spin out on a main highway, hitting the ditch, did the full donut. Do you steer into your back end going out? Do you try and counterbalance the turn or do you just stay straight?

Wes Irek:

So when you're in a skid... we need to try to get out of that the best we can, and we're going to do it with a method called CPR, correct, pause, recover. So what that means is as the car steps out, we're going to correct or steer into the slide. Eventually that rotation of the slide will come to a stop and we'll be sliding sideways. That's our pause. And that pause is supposed to tell us that the car's going to straighten out. When the car straightens out, we need to get that wheel straight in front of us so that we don't fly off in the other direction. So, correct, pause, recover, will get us out of any oversteer condition. But the most important part is that we look where we want to go. Our vision's very important and our eyes will tell our hands where to go. So even though we might be sliding sideways, we still need to look where we want to go and our hands will get there.

Torah Kachur:

Now for a lot of people listening, they have never experienced winter driving conditions. So what are the kinds of things that you need in your car? How do you prep your vehicle? Say, you want go to Alaska for that wonderful once in a lifetime trip to see the bald Eagles, how do you prep?

Wes Irek:

The first thing that we want to do is making sure that all the maintenance is done on our vehicle. That we don't have any known issues that we haven't taken care of all summer long. We get all those fixed. We want to make sure that we have good tires. That our battery has been checked. Winter is really taxing on our batteries. Batteries only have about a five year lifespan. So we need to make sure that we're good to go there. And also making sure that we have a survival kit. We want to make sure that we have supplies in case we do get stuck so that we're not in a dire situation.

Torah Kachur:

What are those survival things? What goes into that survival kit?

Wes Irek:

...a spare cell phone, maybe some way to charge our cell phone, if the battery were to die. We want a collapsible shovel, blankets, heavy duty mittens, boots,

maybe some food, energy bar, water and a flashlight. Also, a first aid kit would be really helpful.

Torah Kachur:

So what happens if you get stranded, you hit the ditch, you can't get out, you're immobilized in winter weather? What happens?

Wes Irek:

The best thing that we can do is stay in our vehicle. Especially right after we get stuck, we don't know if other vehicles are going to be coming in behind us and might hit us. So getting out of the vehicle is very dangerous. We want to make sure we're in the vehicle where we're safe, as safe as possible. If we're going to be there for any extended period of time, we want to make sure that we try to stay as warm as possible. We can turn on a light in the interior so that people can see us, see that we're there. But otherwise, try to conserve energy as much as possible. You can run the vehicle every about 15 minutes, every hour, just to keep warm as needed. And that should be able to get you through a night, turning the vehicle on and off and just wait for help.

Torah Kachur:

Wes, thank you so much.

Wes Irek:

No problem.

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 Lynn's incredible odyssey: from Toccoa to Pink Mountain, and finally to the Alaska border.

There's a link in the show notes to take you to our website. Or you can go straight to onstar.com and share your favorite story about a time that someone helped you. We'd love to hear it. You can follow us on whatever app you're using and you'll be the first to know when a new episode is released. 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