



**Season 2**  
**Episode 5 Transcript**  
**Heroic Bystander Saves Handler From Alligator Death Roll**

**Torah Kachur:**

We've all seen them. And even if you haven't actually been inside one, I'm sure you've driven past a billboard advertising one: reptile zoos.

Scales and Tails is one of those places. It's in the suburbs of Salt Lake City, Utah. It's been run by the same family for 20 years. They've got exotic birds, lizards — even alligators.

One of their specialties is hosting birthday parties for kids. And that's what's happening this afternoon.

A five-year-old girl, a group of her friends and a handful of parents have already talked to the parrots and touched the turtles. The birthday girl even got her photo taken with a giant snake draped around her neck.

Now, it's time for the main event: watching Lindsay Bull, the head reptile trainer, feed a nine-foot alligator.

**Lindsay Bull:**

Something that I did on a very, very regular basis — so several times a week.

**Torah Kachur:**

But today, something happens. Something so quick and subtle that no one but a trained expert would have even noticed.

**Lindsay Bull:**

He turned to the side. My hand grazed his mouth, and next thing I knew my hand was inside his mouth.

**Torah Kachur:**

Thinking her hand is food, the alligator clamps down on it and begins thrashing in the water.

Lindsay has been working with these animals for years, so she knows exactly what the alligator is going to do next.

**Lindsay Bull:**

He's going to try to roll me.

**Torah Kachur:**

And that's exactly what it did.

**Lindsay Bull:**

He went into a death roll.

**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.

Scales and Tails has great slogan. Their advertising says, "We Say Fun with a Forked Tongue." And it's true. If you're a kid that loves reptiles and exotic birds, this place is better than an amusement park. That's why it's such a popular choice for birthday parties.

Today, a bunch of little girls are running around the place, fogging up the plexiglass walls of the enclosures as they peer inside, squealing every time one of the lizards moves, and generally just having a great time.

For Lindsay Bull, who works here, it's just another Saturday.

**Lindsay Bull:**

We do tours on Saturdays. This family reserved — I think it was a two-hour time block — for their daughter's birthday party. She was turning five and she was very adorable.

**Torah Kachur:**

Lindsay has worked at Scales and Tails for years.

**Lindsay Bull:**

I would say that I'm an animal person. It's just a passion of mine.

**Torah Kachur:**

She loves the turtles and the birds, but especially the reptiles.

**Lindsay Bull:**

I have always been very fascinated by them and wanted the opportunity to work with them and it just kind of fell in my lap. I got lucky.

In a private tour like that, we always do some type of a — a feeding.

**Torah Kachur:**

The kids are excited. And truth be told, this is also the part the adults have been

looking forward to.

**Lindsay Bull:**

I already planned to feed Darth that day. And so I just determined I'll go ahead and do that as the feeding demonstration.

**Torah Kachur:**

Darth — that's short for Darthgator. He's Scales and Tails' biggest star.

**Lindsay Bull:**

Darthgator has to be right around nine feet.

**Torah Kachur:**

Darthgator also happens to be one of Lindsay's favorites.

**Lindsay Bull:**

They do have personalities. Individuals will kind of behave differently within a species. So we have Darth who's a little bit more reactive. I think they're just a little goofy.

**Torah Kachur:**

Even though Lindsay's only five foot four, she's not intimidated in the least.

**Lindsay Bull:**

If you think about it, he's eight foot six — you know — long, but he's only six inches tall off the ground. You know what I mean? We tower over them; we look huge.

**Torah Kachur:**

So, for Lindsay and Darth, this is old hat. But the children watching are losing their minds.

**Lindsay Bull:**

The kids were all very excited, though apprehensive at first.

**Torah Kachur:**

Everybody stares at Darthgator. His head is out of the water resting on a raised platform near the door. The other eight feet of him is under the water. He's so still that one of the kids asks if he's real.

**Lindsay Bull:**

I actually told everyone before I opened the enclosure that it was going to be boring for a second, which 99 times out of 100 it is boring.

**Torah Kachur:**

In her right hand is a whole chicken. Not thighs or wings or breasts — the

whole thing.

**Lindsay Bull:**

They have to have whole prey. If you think about our food pyramid, it has grains on the bottom and then there's dairy and vegetables and fruit and protein — everything. Their food pyramid looks like, you know, bones, skin, organs. They need everything that's involved in all prey.

**Torah Kachur:**

She opens the door and carries it into the enclosure. Darth still doesn't move. But then, as soon as Lindsay reaches out her hand, he lunges.

Lindsay doesn't flinch. In a loud clear voice she tells the alligator to back away.

He stops, but he doesn't back up.

**Lindsay Bull:**

Any animal that you watch someone training and they ask it to go away from the food source is going to be a little slower at responding than it might be if you're asking it to come towards the food source. It's just a counterintuitive thing to ask an animal to do.

**Torah Kachur:**

It's a standoff. Everyone is still — Lindsay, the kids, the adults — even the alligator. Twenty long seconds pass. And then ...

Darth lunges forward. Lindsay stands her ground. She puts her bare hand under his lower jaw — basically his chin — and pushes him up and backwards.

**Lindsay Bull:**

Something that I had done fairly frequently. You dip your hand — one hand — underneath their mandible and then you can push back on the animal and manually move them back.

**Torah Kachur:**

It's a move she doesn't like having to do because it can turn into a battle of physical strength.

**Lindsay Bull:**

I was pushing really hard on him and he was pushing really hard on me.

**Torah Kachur:**

Picture that scene: An alligator is pushing forward and down on her hand. And the human is pushing back and lifting up.

**Lindsay Bull:**

In a situation like that, eventually one of us is going to bail off, so either he bails off the back or I bail off the front and his head kind of falls down.

**Torah Kachur:**

But this time, neither of those things happened.

**Lindsay Bull:**

He turned to the side. And at that point, there was so much force between us that my hand just popped right up from underneath his jaw. So he's thinking he's getting fed. So whatever hits him on the face, that's his food. My hand grazed his mouth, and next thing I knew my hand was inside his mouth.

I actually saw at the point when his teeth caused lacerations on my palm. I saw it, and once his mouth fully closed on my — at that point — wrist, I just started thinking, "What's the next thing that he's likely to do that I need to respond to?"

**Torah Kachur:**

Staying calm is essential, so Lindsay draws on everything she's learned about these animals over the years.

**Lindsay Bull:**

They can't masticate like we can. Their jaw doesn't move side to side. So they don't chew their food. They have to have food that is small enough to be swallowable without any of that really manipulation.

**Torah Kachur:**

While all of this is happening, while Lindsay plans and strategizes, the birthday party guests are frozen with shock.

**Lindsay Bull:**

I think it took everybody a minute to realize that my hand was in his mouth. The mom of the girl whose birthday it was started to get all the kids out of the room.

**Torah Kachur:**

And then Darth makes his next move.

**Lindsay Bull:**

He thrashed, so he could tell the food item wasn't going to be small enough for him to just swallow right away. He thrashed to see exactly how big it was — much bigger than even being able to thrash a piece off.

**Torah Kachur:**

When that fails, the alligator becomes perfectly still again. But Lindsay knows

what's coming next.

**Lindsay Bull:**

He's going to try to roll me. Their teeth are actually designed for this maneuver. They start spinning their body in the water rapidly until a piece of it rips off.

**Torah Kachur:**

This maneuver is known as the death roll. It's something she's been trained to handle, but only in theory. And this is a long way from the classroom.

**Lindsay Bull:**

Every time I would imagine all of this playing out, the one thing that I just couldn't really see myself doing — what you're meant to do is roll with him.

**Torah Kachur:**

The seconds pass. Lindsay feels it's teeth on her flesh, it's breath in her face. And then suddenly ...

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 lost on a backcountry road, or standing face to face with a giant reptile.

Lindsay Bull's hand is clamped in the mouth of an alligator. After a couple quick thrashes, Darth goes into a death roll.

**Lindsay Bull:**

I really don't know how I'm going to do this. But at some point, I just kind of had to — you know you just jump and try it. I just kind of dropped my shoulder and rolled along with him.

**Torah Kachur:**

Most of the kids have been pulled away by their parents, but a few of the adults are still at the edge of the enclosure. One of them is Donnie Wiseman.

**Donnie Wiseman:**

My wife's sister has a five-year-old daughter and we were there for her birthday party.

**Torah Kachur:**

And he was having a wonderful time.

**Donnie Wiseman:**

It's actually really cool. They got turtles there; they got snakes; they got a hissing — Madagascar hissing roaches. It's actually a really cool place to go

and take kids.

**Torah Kachur:**

Well, it's "really cool" when things go smoothly.

**Lindsay Bull:**

He stops rolling after two times.

**Torah Kachur:**

That's when Donnie decides he needs to help, but he doesn't know how. He's worried that Lindsay will be dragged under the water and drowned, so he reaches into the enclosure and tries to lift her up.

**Lindsay Bull:**

Like the hands of God or something, he grabs my shoulders and pulls me upright, at which point my legs kind of slid in front of me and I was able to lock them around Darthgator's neck. I can maybe keep him from rolling me again — trying to preserve my limb, right?

**Torah Kachur:**

But the alligator still won't let go of her hand.

**Donnie Wiseman:**

I just kept on asking, "What do you want me to do? What do you want me to do?"

**Lindsay Bull:**

Best case scenario, somebody can sit on the alligator and hold him down. And at that point, the alligator had my arm in his mouth and my legs were locked around his neck. And so I said, "Go on his back. Can you go sit on his back?"

**Donnie Wiseman:**

I said, "All right." I didn't say anything; I just acted. I jumped in there; I got on his back.

**Lindsay Bull:**

I just asked him to do it and he jumped in there right away. Didn't hesitate. I went through some amount of training before I ever jumped on an alligator's back. He went through exactly five seconds of training, maybe less.

**Torah Kachur:**

The alligator thrashes, but Donnie's a big guy and he's got his arms and legs wrapped around it, holding on like some wet and slippery mechanical bull ride.

Then, suddenly, the alligator goes still. So do Lindsay and Donnie. And for a

full minute, nobody moves.

**Lindsay Bull:**

It was just a waiting game. I hit my head pretty hard when we rolled. You know there's obviously excessive trauma to my arm, and so I could kind of feel myself potentially getting to the point where I could pass out. So I was like, "Just talk to me. Keep me with it." So he started asking me questions. I don't remember what he asked, but I remember even at the time, with my hand in the alligator's mouth, I think he was kind of funny — the conversation we were having.

**Torah Kachur:**

So Lindsay is in danger of losing consciousness, and potentially her hand. And Donnie is trying to figure out how he went from "world's best uncle" to gator wrestling. But amid it all, they are having a perfectly pleasant chat. And while they do that, the balance of power between them and the gator has shifted.

**Lindsay Bull:**

He's been turned from the predator to the prey. Something's kind of threatening him in his enclosure — that thing being Donnie sitting on his back. He's less concerned about eating and more concerned about getting away from whoever's sitting on his back.

**Torah Kachur:**

Without warning, the alligator opens its jaws.

**Lindsay Bull:**

Todd, who's Donnie's brother-in-law, comes up behind and gets me under the armpits and pulls me out.

**Torah Kachur:**

Her arm is in bad shape. She's also dizzy and probably in shock.

**Lindsay Bull:**

Then I looked back and there's Donnie sitting on Darthgator's back.

**Torah Kachur:**

That means now he's the one who needs saving.

**Donnie Wiseman:**

Shook me around a few more times. He's big — he's eight foot seven, 160 pounds. He's not a little guy; he's a big guy.

**Lindsay Bull:**

I kind of tried to explain to him. Told him to get his hands back on the neck as much as possible and then sit up and stand up and walk out of the enclosure.



**Torah Kachur:**

It sounds simple enough. But Donnie has his doubts.

**Donnie Wiseman:**

He's still ready to eat. You know, I mean he was frustrated. So everything's a battle.

**Torah Kachur:**

But Lindsay knows her stuff.

**Lindsay Bull:**

Just from terms of behavior of an animal, Darth went from predator to prey. Now somebody's sitting on his back. At the point that you get off of the animal's back in that situation, they're just happy to have you off. Maybe a crocodile is going to act a little differently, but with Darthgator, at the point that you jump off his back, he's like "good" and just goes away from you. Pretty unlikely that they're going to start trying to fight back.

**Donnie Wiseman:**

I kind of got myself together and I'm thinking to myself, "All right man, you just got to go. The door's wide open for me."

**Torah Kachur:**

He stands up, rushes for the door and makes it!

**Donnie Wiseman:**

I just got lucky and got out of there. I'm still young enough to be quick on my game, I guess.

**Lindsay Bull:**

He did it pretty textbook perfectly.

**Torah Kachur:**

Both Donnie and Lindsay are safe. And neither of them would be without the other's help.

**Lindsay Bull:**

I couldn't possibly say enough positive things about Donnie. He's a very humble personality — the type of person that you would meet and instantly just love.

**Donnie Wiseman:**

She's also a hero too. She stood back up after having a 2,500-pound bite on her left hand and got me together to the point where I could get myself out too. So I owe her as much as she owes me.

**Torah Kachur:**

This is the part of the show where I bring in an expert to give you some safety tips. And I actually talked to a wildlife expert about what to do if you encounter an alligator in the wild. Her answer was: “Leave it alone.” So, there’s your tip for the day.

But I got to thinking about other animals — specifically dogs — because it’s quite a bit more likely you’ll encounter an aggressive dog in your day-to-day travels than any kind of dangerous reptile.

So let me introduce Jennifer Shryock. She’s an expert in interactions between dogs and kids. And I asked her, “How can I keep my dog from being a danger to others? Specifically, children.”

**Jennifer Shryock:**

I think one of the most important things is to set proper expectations. I think we expect that our dogs are going to tolerate all types of interactions. We have high expectations of our dogs. So for example, I commonly hear people say, “Oh, he’s such a good dog because he allows them to do A, B and C.” Like pull his ears, sit on him, roll on him, play with him, wrestle with him. I’d really like to see that change because all those things are things that we know just by the fact that we’re saying, “He’s so good because he lets them do” — we are actually admitting that we know that those things are challenging their tolerance. And I’d like to not do that. We need to respect a dog’s boundaries and their comfort level, and teach that with our children — that dogs have spatial comfort levels as well. And we can look at their body language and we can understand whether they’re comfortable or uncomfortable based on what they’re communicating through their body language.

**Torah Kachur:**

So how do you interpret dog body language?

**Jennifer Shryock:**

Lots of observation and staying curious. So for example, a lot of people don’t realize that when your dog shakes its head — a lot of us think of it, “Oh, they just had a bath or yeah, so after a bath, a dog’s going to shake off.” When you see that behavior, at times, for example, after you just pet your dog or at a time where someone new comes over to talk to your dog, that actually can be an indication of stress — that they’d really prefer not to participate in that activity. So when I see a dog shake off, or when I see a dog yawn, I’m going to ask myself, “What just happened? Why might they have done that?”

Another common behavior that people don’t understand is when a dog rolls over on their back. People often think, “Oh, they want a belly rub.” Sometimes that’s true. Other times it may not be true. So I encourage people to look

at the ears, the eyes, the tail, the muzzle. Gather all those clues to solve the puzzle because honestly, dogs are communicating in multiple ways. And so, a dog on their back — they might want you to touch their belly at first. And they might change their mind and say, “That’s enough.” Or they may not want you leaning over them. And that becomes a stressful situation. So, we have to look at all their body language and look at the tension in their facial muscles and in general.

**Torah Kachur:**

And when it comes to an aggressive dog, what are kinds of signs that a dog is showing that people should watch out for?

**Jennifer Shryock:**

Definitely with dogs that show aggression — you know — the tension, the tightness, the stiffness, the hardness in their face. Usually you can feel it. Their whole body is tense, right? A dog with a high tail up, a dog that’s stiff. Some dogs come forward with aggression, very assertively forward, while other dogs retreat out of fear but will aggress if approached. So you know, either way, paying attention to what the dog is doing and, you know, being mindful and respectful of that. If you have any hesitation or concerns, it’s most important just to opt out. Don’t approach or don’t even invite them over if you think that that’s the case. I think sometimes people think, “Oh, they’re fearful, but all dogs love me.” And I think we have to really — again, I’m going to say it again — respect what our dogs and what other dogs are communicating to us. If they’re showing fear, let’s honor that and let’s not push them.

**Torah Kachur:**

So what do you do if you encounter an off-leash dog? It’s not necessarily supposed to be off-leash. Maybe it’s not aggressive, but you just don’t know. What’s your first reaction?

**Jennifer Shryock:**

So our first reaction is to stand like a tree. And the reason we want to do this is because motion and action is going to be enticing and intriguing for dogs. If a dog is excited, they might come up; they’re going to sniff you. And if you’re standing like a tree — so what we suggest is plant your feet, pretend they’re roots growing into the ground, look down at your feet, count in your head or count your breaths until help comes or the dog goes away. So standing like a tree is not going to guarantee a dog won’t bite you; however, running and screaming is the worst thing that you can do because you’re not going to outrun a dog. And if that dog is intending to bite you, it’s going to bite and you’re going to be running and now you’re going to have even more significant potential injury.

**Torah Kachur:**

Why do some dogs behave aggressively, particularly towards children?

**Jennifer Shryock:**

That's a great question. There's two different kinds of ways I talk about this. So when I talk about a familiar family dog that's in the home raised with the children, I almost don't usually see true outright aggression. I see miscommunication where a child has entered into the dog's space, and the dog has tried using body language to communicate discomfort. And the signals haven't been observed and seen. Versus aggression where a child is walking outside and a dog jumps a fence and comes to bite, right?

So there are two different categories we're talking about. One is with a familiar family dog that's been raised with a child where there often is miscommunication. And there's also — there's real true aggression where the dog gets frustrated. It could be barrier frustration and aggression where they jump, overcome, and it's an unfamiliar child. So there's lots of reasons. It could be frustration. It could be fear. It could be deprivation of resources that they need, like they're hungry or they don't have the shelter that they need. There's so many different reasons why dogs — just like if we could answer that question with humans, right? We can't. There's so many reasons too. I think we just don't allow for it with dogs.

**Torah Kachur:**

So what should kids be taught about being around a dog that they've never met before?

**Jennifer Shryock:**

So I am a big fan of a phrase "invites decrease bites." So children often want to approach a dog. And when they approach a dog, they approach a dog in a very human way. So if a dog's there, they want to go greet the dog face to face. This is how humans greet, right? We shake hands. We say hello. We greet. We look in the eyes. That is not how dogs greet each other. In fact, that can be very intimidating for dogs, especially with an unfamiliar child or an unfamiliar adult. Inviting the dog over with — again, I think we need to ask the trusted adult, "Does your dog like kids? Does your dog like to meet new people?" Even a better choice of questions. Does your dog like to meet new people? And, of course, hoping the child is with an adult when they ask this.

And if you invite the dog over to you — really observing. The parent should be observing: Is that dog loose in their body language, wagging its tail? Or is it kind of curving like in a C curve and hesitant, lowering its head, like not really wanting to come over? I teach children to opt out. If they see through the body language, if they use their doggie detective skills and they see that the dog is not comfortable, not excited about this, then they say, "No, thanks." So they should pay attention to what the dog is indicating, right? Looking at the ears, the eyes, the tail, the muzzle. We want to see a loose sweeping tail when you invite a dog over, and then we want to pet, pet and pause and see

does the dog choose to stay with you or do they go somewhere else? Do that shake off and say, I'm done? And let them go.

**Torah Kachur:**

Jennifer, thank you so much. This has been enlightening.

**Jennifer Shryock:**

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 more information about how to stay safe around animals — both wild and domestic — there's a link in the show notes to take you to our website.

Or you can go straight to [onstar.com](http://onstar.com) and tell us your favorite story about a time that a stranger helped you. Let's share some love for people who help others, in big ways and 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](http://OnStar.com/podcast)