



Season 2
Episode 6 Transcript
**Slackliner Saves Skier Hanging
From Chairlift**

Torah Kachur:

Snow fills the air. Visibility is down to about fifty feet. The temperature is hovering around zero, even colder with the wind chill. And Richard Dempsey is having one of the best days of his life.

For hardcore skiers like him, this is known as a powder day.

Me? When the temperature gets that low, I'm looking for a warm blanket and a fireplace. But for Richard, this is a day to cram in as many runs as he can.

Richard Dempsey:

It was really great snow. That's the best feeling in the world to be skiing through fresh snow.

Torah Kachur:

But on one of those runs, just as he's reaching the top of the mountain ...

Richard Dempsey:

As I'm getting off the chairlift, something's going wrong.

Torah Kachur:

The strap from his backpack gets tangled up in the chairlift. He gets pulled off the seat. And the chest strap is pulled over his shoulders and around his neck.

Richard Dempsey:

I'm stuck on the chairlift hanging from my neck off of the chest strap.

Torah Kachur:

He's hanging thirty feet in the air. The only thing keeping him from falling is the strap around his throat.

Richard Dempsey:

The chest strap blocked off my airway.

Torah Kachur:

He struggles to get free, but the strap draws tighter. Everything around him starts to go dark.

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 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.

It's January, just before nine a.m. on a Wednesday. Richard and two of his friends, Hans and Billy, have already gotten in a couple of runs on the slopes of Arapahoe Basin, a ski resort in Colorado. Today is a skier's dream: Several inches of fresh powder fell overnight, and the snow is still falling.

Richard Dempsey:

Big fat flakes. So that's always a good sign for a powder day.

Torah Kachur:

Richard is an exploration geologist for a gold mine, producing resource models. What that really means is he spends most of his time staring at a computer screen. So the chance to get in a couple of last-minute runs — on a powder day no less — before returning to the daily grind is just too tempting.

Richard Dempsey:

I was supposed to be flying out that evening.

Torah Kachur:

He's a powder hound. He's not into bouncing over moguls or even going super fast. He just loves the smoothness of cutting through deep, recently fallen snow.

Arapahoe Basin has a vertical elevation of 12,000 feet. It's a smallish resort, and Richard and his friends know it well. They've been skiing here since their college days.

Richard Dempsey:

I have skied at Arapahoe Basin hundreds of times. Just going there for three, four hours after class or on one of the off days and then on the weekends.

Torah Kachur:

Even as a college student, he was experienced.

Richard Dempsey:

I started skiing probably around age five. And my parents used to take us up to Utah, California, go try Lake Tahoe, go try Sun Valley. Basically the only thing I really enjoyed doing was going skiing.

Torah Kachur:

Richard, Hans and Billy are in line for the chairlift. Even for them it's cold, but the conditions are too good to pass on. And because it's cold and it's mid-week, the hill isn't that busy. Just as they're about to hop back on the chairlift, Billy recognizes an old high school friend.

Richard Dempsey:

Billy was the one that first saw him and said, “Hey, Mickey.” Mickey had long hair and generally stood out in a crowd.

Torah Kachur:

Billy invites Mickey to ski with them.

Mickey Wilson:

I tell him, “Yeah, I’m so down. Let’s go ski.”

Torah Kachur:

Richard, Hans and Billy are pretty strait-laced guys. But Mickey — well, he’s a bit of a character.

Mickey Wilson:

My real full-time job was as a professional slackliner.

Torah Kachur:

Slacklining is kind of like being a tightrope walker. It turns out you can even be a professional at it. And Mickey is one of the best.

Mickey Wilson:

Decided to follow a dream of mine, which was to be a professional athlete. And it just so happened that I picked the goofy, crazy, esoteric sport of slacklining, and that’s what I got really good at.

Torah Kachur:

In the summer, Mickey competes at the professional level in slackline competitions. In the winter, he works as a ski instructor. And even though Richard and Mickey have never met before, they actually went to the same high school.

Richard Dempsey:

Mickey was a couple grades lower, and I didn’t know him. He was a nice guy. He clearly liked the powder.

Torah Kachur:

And today, there’s a lot of powder to like.

Mickey Wilson:

It was just a massive powder day. One of those — you know — real deal powder days that you just dream about.

Richard Dempsey:

I think by that point we had done eight or nine, right? We were starting to set

into the powder coma, where each lap is really, really good and they're starting to blur together.

Torah Kachur:

After skiing short runs for a couple hours, they decide to head right to the top. But the lift going there is an older model and it presents a problem.

Richard Dempsey:

There was four of us, and the chair only has three spots.

Mickey Wilson:

Rich looks at us and goes, "Hey, you guys ride together. I'll go by myself up ahead. No big deal. See you at the top." So that's what happens. Rich gets on the chairlift in front of us. We get on the chairlift — the three of us — behind Rich, and we ride up.

Torah Kachur:

The ride up takes 10 minutes, and it's the coldest part of the day.

Richard Dempsey:

Most of the time, you're just trying to recover and get ready for the next run, which lasts about five minutes just bombing down the mountain as fast as you can to get that powder before somebody else does.

Torah Kachur:

Near the top, Richard lifts the guardrail.

Richard Dempsey:

So as I'm getting off the chairlift, all I'm thinking about is, "Let's go meet up with Hans, Mickey and Billy."

Torah Kachur:

But the weather at the top is a little more intense.

Mickey Wilson:

At the top of it, we're in the middle of a blizzard. It's always windy at the top of A Basin. It's pretty tough conditions, very tough. The kind where you have your hood over your head, tight around your goggles, and your hands are in your pockets. You're just survival chairlift riding.

Richard Dempsey:

As I'm getting off the chairlift, something's going wrong.

Torah Kachur:

Richard's wearing a backpack. In addition to the two shoulder straps, it's got one around his waist and another around his chest.

What he doesn't know as he sits shivering on the metal lift, is that his waist belt has gotten jammed into a crease of the chairlift.

So, when he tries to get off, the backpack stays attached to the chair. As he falls, the chest strap is pulled over his shoulders and around his neck.

Richard Dempsey:

The force of the whipping around the bull wheel brought my skis and boots and everything up and out in a horizontal plane where I skipped the wooden stop that's supposed to automatically stop you if your skis hit it. So I've now bypassed what was an automatic safety device.

Torah Kachur:

That leaves him dangling in mid-air as the chair heads back down the hill. His poles and skis bang into a passing tower as he struggles.

But he can't get free. He can't even breathe.

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 dangling from a ski lift with a strap wrapped around your neck.

Mickey is riding the chairlift to the top of the mountain with Hans and Billy. Rich has gone up by himself, one chair in front of them.

Mickey Wilson:

The three of us get off, and we don't see Rich. Which is very odd, right?

Torah Kachur:

Richard should be right there, waiting. But he isn't.

Mickey Wilson:

It's a very small area on top of the base, and he was one chair ahead of us. He couldn't have even skied off that fast, and he wouldn't have. So where did Rich go?

All of a sudden, we hear people screaming. And then we see actually a couple guys throw their ski poles at the chairlift operator's booth. And then the chairlift stops, and we know something's going on. We don't know what, but we know something's going on.

Torah Kachur:

So they ski forward a little bit.

Mickey Wilson:

That's when we get our first sight of Rich. He's hanging underneath the chairlift, probably 30 feet off the ground, and he's hanging below it.

Torah Kachur:

One strap from his backpack is tangled up with the chairlift. The other is wrapped around his neck.

Mickey Wilson:

Hans, he goes, "He's choking. He's choking up there." That's when the fear set in. That's when the urgency set in.

Torah Kachur:

They kick off their skies and jump into action.

Mickey Wilson:

The three of us run down the hill. At this point, the chairlift operator in the box has come out, and the four of us try to make a human pyramid to get to him.

Torah Kachur:

There's five inches of fresh powder on the slopes. They sink into it, nowhere near being close enough to help.

Mickey Wilson:

We couldn't even touch his ski boots. Even if we had touched his boots, what then? Grab his boot and pull him down? That would just break his neck. His feet are probably only like 15 feet off the ground, but he might as well have been a mile away.

Torah Kachur:

Mickey stands underneath Richard, looking up, and comes up with a crazy plan.

Mickey Wilson:

My mission in that moment was so crystal clear. Instead of seeing a chairlift tower and a ski lift cable, I just see a tree and a slackline. That's sort of what I imagine that I'm looking at. I go, "OK, I can do this. I know exactly what I have to do. I have the skills. I'm doing it."

Torah Kachur:

Mickey rushes to the tower and starts climbing.

Mickey Wilson:

As I'm climbing the tower, a crew of six or eight patrollers arrive. One of them yelled at me, "No, no, no, don't climb that tower!" But I was already, like, to the third or fourth rung. I was a man possessed. So I keep climbing.

Torah Kachur:

It's the middle of a blizzard. At an altitude of 12,000 feet, the temperature is well below zero and the visibility is poor. And Mickey is wearing ski boots. All of this to try and rescue someone he just met that morning.

Mickey Wilson:

So at the top of it, I rip my gloves off because I know I'm going to need all the dexterity I have to pull this move off. I basically just — without thinking — I just grab onto the cable and I sort of jump onto it into a straddle position, kind of like riding a horse.

Torah Kachur:

Mickey begins sliding himself away from the tower towards the chair Rich is hanging from.

Mickey Wilson:

I obviously am not going to walk across this thing like a slackline or whatever. It's a blizzard. It would have been kind of wild, but the fastest way to get across this cable for me was to shimmy. Was to hand over hand pull myself across it while I'm sliding down it in a straddle position.

Torah Kachur:

It's a long way to go. And he's just inching along.

Mickey Wilson:

I remember being about halfway across to him, and I remember thinking about how hard I was breathing and how cold, how cold that cable felt on my hand.

Torah Kachur:

All the while, Rich is just hanging there. Limp. Unmoving.

Mickey Wilson:

It's really windy. It's really cold. It's really snowy.

Torah Kachur:

Each time Mickey pulls himself forward, his hands get a little bit colder, and he loses the feeling in his fingers. But he makes it. He makes it to Rich's chair.

Mickey Wilson:

I let go from the cable, and I drop a foot or two. I land — thud — onto his chair. And then I realize what's happened: his chest strap had become entangled and wrapped around his neck, while the waist belt had gotten jammed into the creases of the chairlift.

Torah Kachur:

All Mickey has to do is cut the strap. But when he reaches for his knife — the knife he always keeps on him ...

Mickey Wilson:

It's not there. My knife is not there. Turns out, I had thrown my knife in my lunch bag.

Torah Kachur:

Out of pure desperation, Mickey tries ripping the strap. But it's a two-inch thick piece of webbing with all of Richard's weight on it. It's an impossible task.

Mickey Wilson:

All while this is happening, ski patrol is now beneath me. They're trying to get a ladder up to the chairlift.

Torah Kachur:

Mickey makes eye contact with one of the patrol members. And in that instant, they're both thinking the same thing.

Mickey Wilson:

He yells, "Knife!" And he's holding a knife in his hand, holding it up, gesturing like he's going to throw it to me. I go, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, throw me the knife." And he just — no countdown, no nothing — he just hucks it up there.

Torah Kachur:

Have you ever thrown a knife to someone 30 feet overhead in a blizzard? Have you ever tried to catch a knife while hanging on a chairlift in a blizzard? Can you imagine what would happen if he misses? The knife would fall to the ground and disappear in the snow.

Mickey Wilson:

It reached the apex of its toss right at the point when it hit my hand. It just landed perfectly. I didn't even really catch it. I just put my hand out, and it was right there. I unfold the knife super quickly, and with one quick stroke, it just cuts through the webbing strap like butter. That was probably the trippiest thing I've ever seen in my life. Just watching Rich fall lifelessly 15-20 feet into this huge powder poof.

Torah Kachur:

The ski patrol dig Richard out of the powder. They start doing CPR as Mickey looks down from the chairlift.

Mickey Wilson:

A minute later they're like, "OK, he's breathing." Within five minutes, he was on a toboggan down to the base area, where an ambulance was going to drive him

to St. Anthony's Hospital in Denver.

Torah Kachur:

But he's been unconscious for at least four minutes. And four minutes is an awfully long time to be without oxygen. There's nothing anyone can do now but wait for Richard to wake up and hope for the best.

Richard Dempsey:

The first real memory that I have was waking up that evening in the hospital and asking, "What happened?" The next memory that's very clear is seeing Billy rushing into the room and just being glad and saying, "I'm so glad that you're not brain dead."

Mickey Wilson:

I got a call from them that evening, from the hospital bed. A video message call. Rich was awake and smiling, and everything was fine.

Torah Kachur:

His neck was very sore but his brain function was normal.

Richard Dempsey:

I felt normal. I felt fine. I'll always remember the two nurses that were on shift before I was discharged, saying how grateful they were that somebody got to leave the ICU because that doesn't happen for everybody that gets into a scenario like this.

Torah Kachur:

The two men that started the day as strangers are now very good friends. Richard just attended Mickey's wedding. And they even took a skiing holiday together.

Richard Dempsey:

Mickey was the perfect person to save me. The ability and confidence to do what he did.

Mickey Wilson:

This event had a profound impact on me and my perception of life and just how quickly things can change. That could have easily been one of us.

Richard Dempsey:

It's a weird world where you meet somebody and become fast friends because he saves your life.

Torah Kachur:

Richard isn't the only person to get into trouble on the slopes. Patti Burnett has made a career out of rescuing people from snow-covered mountain sides.

Patti Burnett:

We had a situation where a woman was buried under four feet of snow, and the people who had witnessed the situation were probing with their skis and their poles. And they're probing in one area. My dog went over to another area and started digging. And we probed and, sure enough, that's where she was. When you train avalanche dogs, you're used to the idea that you'll never find somebody alive. And I watched, as we pulled snow away from her face, I watched this crystal — as she moved her eye — this ice crystal was on her eye and it moved and I thought, "Oh, wow." That was definitely the most exciting, the most gratifying rescue that we ever had.

Torah Kachur:

Patti worked on the ski patrol in Colorado for 23 years. Sometimes doing search and rescue, and other times training rescue dogs. So I wanted to probe her for some outdoor wilderness safety ideas.

How frequently did you and your team engage in rescues?

Patti Burnett:

Well that was a full-time job. And so we rescued people every day on the hill, but it was more the normal type of ski injury. Things like knees and shoulders and every now and then they bonk their head. You know, lacerations — that kind of stuff.

Torah Kachur:

What are the most common ski injuries?

Patti Burnett:

Probably knees, shoulders, wrists, thumbs, heads, hips — that type of stuff. And usually some kind of a ligament strain.

Torah Kachur:

I feel like you've just listed like every part of the body. You make skiing sound very dangerous.

Patti Burnett:

Actually, it's really fun. I still do it. And I love skiing. Yeah.

Torah Kachur:

There's a lot of skiers who love a nice, fresh snow. Are there different hazards that appear because of the big dump — that there's tons of powder — that maybe people aren't as aware of?

Patti Burnett:

There could be, sure. Signs could be not scraped off yet, and so you might not see that there's an area that has more hazardous terrain. Or they could get trapped in a tree well, in which case sometimes it can be really hard to get yourself out if you're upside down and all by yourself. We had a situation — this little girl was down in a tree well and my dog found them. And that was really fun to be able to pull her out of that tree well. But just this little girl, you know, there's no way she would've gotten out of that tree well all by herself.

Torah Kachur:

So what's a tree well? How hard is it to get out?

Patti Burnett:

What happens is people will ski around pretty far from the part that's underneath the bows of a tree. And so they don't compact the area that's right underneath the bows of the tree. So a person, if they get too close to a tree, they can kind of — we say — get sucked into that tree well. And once they get down there, it's pretty tough to — for them to get themselves out.

Torah Kachur:

So say you find yourself stuck in a tree well. What should you do?

Patti Burnett:

Probably the best thing to do is to get your equipment off, get your poles and your skis off. And then you can kind of use your skis to pull yourself out, the way you would do on ice — trying to get off of ice that's breaking. Use your arms to kind of pull yourself up or perhaps you can put your skis up on the edge of the tree well and use that to kind of leverage yourself out of the hole.

Torah Kachur:

So if you get caught in an avalanche, what do you do?

Patti Burnett:

Used to be said that you should get rid of your equipment — get rid of your ski poles, get rid of your skis, your backpack — but now they've come around a bit, thinking that if you get caught and your ski is still attached to you, there's a good chance that your ski could be sticking out of the surface of the snow and somebody could find you that way. Or there's a thought that if you have a backpack on, maybe you should keep it on because the bigger you are, the more possibility there is that you could float to the surface. So there are some changing sentiments.

Now it's thought too that you should fight for your life to get to the surface of the snow. Do whatever is necessary to get up to the top. And if you feel like the snow is starting to settle, slow down, get an arm up over your head, because possibly your hand will be sticking out of the snow and somebody will find you that way. Create an air pocket using your hand in front of your

mouth. And then most important of all, when the snow is finally come to rest and you realize you're totally buried — this is crazy — but they say you should relax because the more worked up you are the more oxygen you're going to use.

Torah Kachur:

Are most of these avalanches generally in the backcountry?

Patti Burnett:

Yeah. Not much in the ski area fortunately. Yeah. They're in the backcountry, almost every one.

Torah Kachur:

And what are people doing in the backcountry?

Patti Burnett:

Well, they want to get away from — and I don't blame them — they want to get away from the crowdedness of the ski areas. Sometimes it just gets way too crowded and it's beautiful in the backcountry. And if you know what you're doing and you don't take risks, in most cases, you're going to be OK. We had this philosophy — and I think the group as well as the ski patrol still has the philosophy — that if you are going someplace and there's one person out of five who says, "I don't feel good about this. We're not going in there." Then, you don't go in there. Because there's something about that sense that you get in your gut that just, this is wrong. So enjoy yourself, but be smart.

Torah Kachur:

And take a nice deep breath because you're in the mountains and that mountain air is something you can never compare with.

Patti Burnett:

And there's not that much of the air. So don't be surprised. If you don't want to get altitude sickness, then it's a good idea to drink not just water, but drinks with electrolytes help a lot. And staying warm. If you're cold and you have altitude sickness, they exacerbate each other. So dress warmly, even when you think it might not be that cold. When you get up higher, it will get cold.

Torah Kachur:

How frequently do you see altitude sickness issues?

Patti Burnett:

Pretty often. We live at 9,100 feet and the top of the ski areas around here can be above Timberline, which is about 12,000 feet.

Torah Kachur:

So if you're coming from the city or you're going to Colorado from the coast, you

will feel altitude sickness pretty quickly.

Patti Burnett:

That is really good advice for people. Basically, if you are coming here from sea level, maybe spend a day in Denver and then come up because Denver's only a mile high, but the ski areas, they're more than two miles high.

Torah Kachur:

Well, fantastic Patty. Thank you so much for all of your expertise.

Patti Burnett:

You're welcome. It was great talking to you, Torah.

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 when you're outdoors this winter, 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 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.

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