

Overcome the Podcast

By Christian Bowman

In the middle of the road, in the middle of the day, in the middle of America. It was a clear country afternoon exactly one hundred miles south of Chicago. It was 66 degrees. The I-55 stretch of highway had displaced old Route 66 to a bypass scenic historic landmark, only to be referenced in literature and leisurely Sunday rides. Except for those who lived by that famous road, it had been all but forgotten for most commuters trying to get from St. Louis to Chicago. A lifeline pulse in the heartland, decommissioned just seven years earlier. The shiny new Interstate was long and straight with slight bends here and there. An access road built in. Fields as far as you could see. The occasional farm scattered here and there. Wildflowers and grain. Birds flew beneath speckled clouds dotting the sun every now and then. The grass was July fresh and summer green. And stained with blood. I was pinned. The steering wheel column had penetrated my stomach. My boots were still stuck underneath the brake pedal. The image of my mom's body cracked and busted and broken burned into my eyes. Sonia was still fighting to breathe. I tried to reach her, but I still couldn't move.

My name is Christian Bowman, and this is Overcome.

After passerby's and good Samaritans stopped both directions of traffic, they did what they could to try to help by extinguishing a small fire that had started near my feet. One person broke in the rest of my window and tried to pull me out before realizing they weren't going to be able to. Time was simultaneously both slow motion and a fast blur. It's still a little hazy when it comes to piecing together the rescue operation.

Approaching this almost thirty years later, I had tried to reach out to the EMT, Fire and Police who were the first responders on the scene. I wanted to discover a little bit more about what happened that day from their perspective and to thank them. After contacting Jim Woolford at the Pontiac Police Department and Trooper Mindy Carroll at the District 6 Illinois State Police, I learned that most of those heroes have since passed on. I truly wish I could have been able to thank them, and all the people who stopped to help before, but it took a very long

time to be able to touch this. Still curious about what a first responder does when assessing a level one trauma, I reached out to Jay Menez, who has served as a police officer, EMT and a fireman:

Assessing the scene begins way before you actually arrive on the scene, it becomes with getting that initial call from dispatch. You're trying to gather as much information as you can from that dispatcher, so you can kind of plan ahead and anticipate things that might be going on. First of all, is this a crime scene or is it an accident? How many cars are involved? How many injuries were reported? That sort of thing? Is there going to be a traffic issue when you get there who is already on the scene as is as a police officer?

As his fire rescue already on the scene or the fire department is the police department on the scene, you're assessing these things. And on the drive to the scene, you're just in this information gathering stage and also going through a mental checklist of what you might expect. Now, once you arrive, it's very important to maintain calm, first of all, and avoid tunnel vision. tunnel vision is something that can really affect first responders. Because there is so much going on. You've got an emergency situation, there may be bystanders or other victims, waving you down and they're frantic, they're jumping up and down. They're yelling and they want something done now. And so it's very important to maintain your composure. Stay calm.

I'd note a lot of times, you may see, first responders when they come on the scene, they get out of the car kind of slowly and they're just walking up to the scene. And oftentimes bystanders don't understand, you know, why is there no urgency to what's going on? And trust me there is urgency. But these first responders are trying to stay calm themselves, because they have to set that tone for the scene so that everybody else stays calm. But also, they're processing information they may be going through a mental checklist themselves, and and also, in avoiding this tunnel vision they're taking in the entire scene. Are their victims who are ejected from this vehicle, how safe is the situation is there danger of traffic coming in, and, and maybe causing further injury at that scene, so you want to make sure that

That's all secure. As you walk up to the scene, you're really trying to maintain this wide view of what is going on and not get too focused on the most obvious part of the scene.

Now, in the case of a car accident,

as you walk up, you're assessing Okay, what is the condition of this car? How many victims Can I see if you can reach them? Now as a first responder approaches the vehicle?

The first thing they're trying to take note of is the condition of the vehicle. Is it

on fire? Is it leaking gasoline? Is there an imminent danger of explosion or fire? You've got to be very aware of that part of it.

Because of the things about to explode, you may have to cut somebody's arm off to get them out and save their life. But if it's not, you may have more time.

And you have time to get the tools out. Now, as you approach the victim or victims in the vehicle, you have to begin the process of what's called triage. And so as you go through each patient, or victim, you are assessing, are they conscious or unconscious? Do they have any, obviously, fatal wounds? Because

if they are clearly deceased, then you can move on to the other person.

Now, assuming they're not deceased,

then the next thing is to establish, are they breathing? Do they have an airway?

And do they have a pulse? And are they bleeding? Anything that's life threatening like that we need to assess. Now as a police officer, if there is emfs on the scene, this is where you would step back and kind of take a safety role and make sure

sure that the medical personnel have room to work

as an EMT, this is really where you take over and do your thing trying to save this person's life.

Once you have them stabilized, then you have to figure out how to get them out of the car. If you have to cut them out of the car, there are two main tools that are used, that the firefighters can use to get somebody out. The first is the jaws of life, which is really this huge wedge that will hydraulically open up and peel metal away from metal. If you've got a stuck door they can stick that thing right in the crease and crank this thing open and we'll just peel that door right open. The other thing is and they I believe they called it back then a K 12 and it's really a big circular saw. And this is what they need if they need to cut the roof off of a vehicle or

A door or anything else or, or hinges or what have you. So between these two tools, the fire department should be able to get you out once you have established safe egress from the car. And of course, that means probably a cervical collar to protect their neck and all this person out and get them on a stretcher. From there, they're transported via ambulance or via helicopter to the closest emergency trauma facility, all the while you're transmitting your findings as a condition of the patient, vitals, any meds that you have administered or want to request permission to administer all the way to the trauma center.

The sound of the jaws of life cutting the last of the twisted metal on Sonia's door brought my attention back to the efforts from these men and women trying to help us. I'm not sure how they got me free. They say that in many accidents, there is a psychological phenomenon called "freezing." Different than fight or flight to a certain stimulus, the numbing disassociation prevents some from engaging in a response.

Although people were working quickly to safely remove our bodies from the wreckage and ask me questions about my injuries and what had happened, I kept looking back at Sonia. I heard the sirens and everyone trying to help, but they sounded underwater. Beneath the slight ringing of tinnitus from the blunt trauma, everything else became a muddled mix of overlapping chaos and tones, scraping, grinding, yelling, crying, all of it at once. Everything but her breathing. Her breath was the only thing I could listen to. Wet and troubled. The little things

that stood out in the middle of that emergency remain embedded in my memory. A reflective yellow vest, a leatherman multi-tool, those little glass window shards that had hit my face, the taste of the fire extinguisher chemicals, the color of the brown red blood stains on the green grass.

In that moment, at that time, I don't remember feeling like it was real. Perhaps it was a dream, I thought. I had been sleep deprived for the last few nights since traveling from the island of Stromboli. The hydrofoil boat near Sicily, the taxi in Rome, the train, the plane, the car, the last 72 hours, it all blended together... When I fell asleep at the wheel, I was in America, I was with my mom and my girlfriend in the car. We were heading back to pick up Sonia and I's car in Missouri. We were about head back home to Philly where she was going to be graduating next year... maybe I just needed to wake up. Maybe we were still driving southbound on I-55 and I just needed to open my eyes.

A report from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety estimates 21 percent of deadly crashes in the United States involved a drowsy driver. These results suggest that drowsy driving is involved in 328,000 crashes each year. About 109,000 of those result in injuries. 6,400 of those are fatal. Just closing your eyes for a few seconds behind the wheel.

In 1992 there were 39,250 traffic fatalities in the US. On July 23rd, There were approximately 108 people across the country who died in a car accident. At 1:25pm three of those people were Patricia Shaftic, 55. Carolyn Walsh, 44. And Katy Sinn, 9.

On this beautiful summer day just south of the 116 exit outside of Pontiac, Illinois, this was considered one of the worst accidents in I-55 history.

The image of my mothers body haunted me, pushed up from her sleeping position where her head had been near the passenger side door. She died immediately on impact. She was already so skinny and fragile while she was alive. But to watch her body get pushed up and toward me, face to face, while my head was pinned looking into the back seat. It may have only been one second in real time before we landed and my vision was freed, but you can't unsee some things. The cadaveric spasms shaking her skeleton while blood dripped down her skull gave me

nightmares for many years. It still does. Hearing her scream my name as the last thing she said adds another layer to the nightmare.

Knowing how difficult it's been for me, personally, to witness all this sudden death first hand, even despite the oddity with which I grew up, my mother being a medium and living in murder houses and all. I was curious to learn how trauma affects first responders over time:

there's nothing really that could prepare you for seeing something like that.

I don't care whether you're it's your first day on the job or you've been there for 20 years.

You know, they train you to stay detached from the situation and not get so

personally invested in it. But when you're in the heat of the moment, and you look at it, oftentimes that that's much easier said than done.

It was really sad and it stayed with me for quite a bit. I, I still think about it today sometimes.

And at the time, the police department did their best to provide counseling and support to first responders who went through things like this. And personally, I think that I was able to adjust

fairly well.

But at the same time, I I know that there were other officers on the scene, and officers who had experienced, like circumstances who didn't handle it so well some of them turned to alcohol or you

And drugs, prescription meds. For some of them it manifested in their personal lives

or at work

where

they became chronically stressed or on edge

and some just would get just depressed and be shut off.

And all of these things are treatable. As long as you have the proper support.

They managed to pull us from the wreckage. They pulled Sonia and I out of our car. The urgency continued with getting us all loaded into the ambulances. As they carried me up on the gurney I could briefly see the whole scene of the accident. A small crowd surrounded the wood panel station wagon I had driven and began to pull my mom's body out. Then I saw the other car. A 1992 Geo. A whole other crowd was working on them frantically. The front end had been crumpled all the way in. The windshield shattered. The doors were open. I couldn't see much in the few seconds I looked over, but I saw two white sheets on the ground before they put a mask over my face and lifted me in.

We rode to one facility nearby and they transferred us to a helicopter.

In the helicopter, my gurney seemed like it was positioned a little lower than Sonia's. It was like I was laying on the floor of the chopper looking up at her on a small bed above me. I could see the life flight paramedics working on her. They were wearing helmets with shades and jumpsuits and had microphones near their mouths. They had a breathing mask over her face and were squeezing a bag for air. The pilot was flying as fast as he could. I knew time was ticking. I could barely make out what they were telling the ER to prep for. The sound of the helicopter was so loud. They had a series of wires attached to both of us and her vitals were being displayed as I watched. I didn't know what they meant. I could feel the helicopter lean forward as if there was an added sense of urgency. The paramedics worked quickly and talked to each other into their headsets. The hands of the paramedics continued to pump as hard as they could. I watched as they looked up and exchanged a solemn look with each other before my own body started to react. Suddenly, there was attention on me. I tried screaming to get

their focus back on Sonia but they couldn't hear me. I was frantic and wanted them to just save her. I watched as her machine begin to slow down, I saw her long flowing brown hair then I looked up and saw a red bag before I lost consciousness.