

Swept Away in an Avalanche!

“I know that this work is ruled by infinite intelligence.” Thomas Edison

Swept Away

January 6, 2007 was a beautiful winter day in Colorado – cold and crystal clear. The sky was deep royal blue, not a cloud in the sky as we made our way up Berthoud Pass on Highway 40. We had picked up 13 year old Gary Martinez at about 7:00 that morning and were heading up for two days of skiing at the Winter Park – Mary Jane ski area. We had met Gary at the Boys and Girls Club of Larimer County – Fort Collins Unit. He was in the First Serve Fort Collins program that I run at the club. It teaches kids life skills and helps them with school work by using the game of tennis as a platform.

Winter Park is our favorite ski area in Colorado for both its family centered atmosphere and its easy access to our home in Fort Collins. Since we have a small cabin there that we own with our dear friend Dick Roark, we usually go up the night before to avoid the morning ski traffic. Another friend of our family, Mike Garcia was suppose to be going up skiing with us but his work schedule had changed and he couldn't make it but he had waited until late on Friday night to tell us. We didn't realize until later that this may have been for a reason.



The trip down I-25 from Fort Collins to Denver had been uneventful. Traffic was moving along at a good pace and we talked about how good the skiing would be that day. There had been several large snow storms over the Christmas holidays and it had snowed again just a few days before. The powder would be exceptional this weekend. When we headed west on I-70 the traffic started slowing down and by the time we had reached Morrison exit were the interstate starts climbing steeply into the Rocky Mountains the traffic had all but come to a stand still. Oh boy! This was going to be a long drive. The traffic did not improve and it took us nearly 90 minutes to travel the 31 miles to the turnoff at Highway 40.

We finally got off the interstate at Highway 40 and went through the small Town of Empire. We had Gary on the lookout for Big Horn Sheep since we usually see them between the interstate and Empire. No Big Horns this time. As we continued to climb toward Berthoud Pass we pointed out avalanche chutes to Gary. As we rounded the hairpin turn at the Henderson Mine turnoff I mentioned that we had not seen these avalanches run in quite some time. I would eat my words in just a few minutes.

We started the steep climb after the turn toward the summit of Berthoud Pass and the song, *Affirmation* by Savage Garden started to play on the CD player. The road to the summit of Berthoud Pass is two lanes on both sides now so the traffic moves quickly and safely up and over. Stanley Mountain rising to a height of 12,524 feet was on our left as we saw the first “Avalanche Area – No Stopping” signs. We had driven this road hundreds of times over the past 15 years going up to Winter Park to ski.

Hit By The Force of a Freight Train

I was marveling at the gorgeous deep blue sky when something caught my eye about ten yards ahead of our car and to the left. A small cloud of powder came down onto the road. Both of my hands were on the steering wheel and this little white puff of powder was the only warning we got. Less than a second later our car was literally blown out of control and slammed into the guard rail by a blast of air and snow. It was a total white out, I could not see past my windshield and I could hear snow and ice hitting our car as it was being blown by a 120mph wind. One moment I was going 45 mph looking at royal blue sky and now something very wrong was going on – my mind knew I had not hit a car, I wasn't in an accident, I just thought, “What is going on.”

The next instant we were hit by an incredible force – one I can only describe as being hit by a freight train. The impact caused the car to flip into the air – then I knew what it was. We had been swept away by an avalanche – a massive avalanche. Everything went dark and we flew into the air. Over and over we went in total darkness. We must have flipped several times in the air before we hit the ground and started to roll. We had driven this road hundreds if not a thousand times and I thought about the steepness of the slope the



avalanche was going down – with us in it. The slope must be 30-40° so we were going for quite a wild and long ride. We rolled over and over. Everything was black, we couldn't see anything. We just kept rolling. Then we hit something and the car starting spinning upside down. We started slowing down and as we did, June shouted, “Make an air space. Make an air space.” It seems that the avalanche training we had taken over 20 years before flashed back into her mind. Everything was dark – we were upside down and we were buried alive.

My side window had blown in on me when the avalanche hit. I stuck my hand out and when I pulled it back I could see daylight. I immediately asked June, “Are you OK? Are you with me?” She replied, “Yes.” I asked Gary, “Are you OK? Are you with me?” He also replied, “Yes.” Then I said, “We are going to be OK – we’ve air!” It took me several minutes to get my seatbelt released. All the snow inside our car, and there was a lot, had jammed the release mechanism making it difficult to unbuckled. Finally it released and I dug my way out my side window.

I immediately turn around and went back in head first to dig the snow away from June’s face. She was spitting snow and crumbs of glass from her mouth. Her head was in a low position in the car so all the snow that was still sifting in was piling up around her head and mouth. I dug like crazy to get the snow away so she could breath. Once I had her face cleared I tried to release her seat belt. Hers was even tighter than mine – it wouldn’t come loose!

I crawled back out the hole through my window that I had made and stood up. I could see people standing way above us on Highway 40 looking down. A few people had started down the slope with shovels. I couldn’t see clearly because my glasses had been blown off my face when the avalanche hit us. I screamed at the top of my lungs, “Call 911 and somebody get me a knife. Get me a knife now!” I dropped to my knees and went back inside the car. More snow had accumulated around June’s face so I helped her clear it again. She was starting to breath harder and faster but I couldn’t do anything until someone brought me a knife.

Now I turned my attention to Gary in the back seat. I said to Gary, “It’s time to get you out.” Gary was able to snake his way between the two driver seats and out my window. He was bleeding a little from a cut on his face but he looked OK – a little shaken up after all. We had just been hit by a massive avalanche, been thrown down a cliff, broken a tree and then got buried alive. I asked him if he was OK and he replied, “Yes.”



I went back inside to check on June. She was starting to panic a bit. As I crawl in through the window I heard her say, “Calm down. I need to calm down.” I clear some snow from her face again and held her hand. She told me she was very uncomfortable and that her head, which was pinned between the collapsed roof and her head rest, was starting to really hurt. Gravity was pushing her down and lodging her head tighter. I held her hand and reassured her that everything was going to be alright. Someone would be here in a minute with a knife and we would get her out. It had been over 10 minutes since we were hit and buried and she had been pinned upside down with her head trapped for the entire time. Finally I heard someone say that they had a knife. I came back out the window and told the guy (don’t know who it was – so if you were the one please

contact me) to wait a minute. Someone had found my avalanche shovel that had been thrown from our trunk when we hit the tree and had been digging out the driver side of the car. I took the shovel and shattered the only intact window – the driver’s side back window and crawled into the back seat. I pushed up on June’s head and shoulders while the man cut her shoulder restraint and she was pulled out the side window. She was finally free!

I crawl out from the back seat. As I stood up June pointed to the other car that had ended up ~100 feet below us. I turned and got a sick feeling in my stomach and I thought I hope they are OK. June immediately said, “We’re OK – go check on them. They are probably in worse shape that we are. Everyone that had gathered around our car started running toward the other car to help. We were left completely alone – we turned to each other and had a big group hug. At that exact moment the CD player started playing right were it had left off when the avalanche had hit us – *Affirmation* by Savage Garden. Very, very weird!

Alive and Well

I had blood seeping down from my several small cuts on my head and down the left side of my face. My left hand was bleeding from some small glass cuts on it and I had some blood coming out of my mouth from were I had bitten my tongue. My back hurt some, June’s right shoulder was hurting and Gary said his jaw hurt. All in all – we were OK. We would find out later that we had no serious injuries. We were very fortunate to be alive. We looked up at the road – it seemed so far and away and so steep. Then I noticed the tree that we had hit. It must have been the impact (thump) we felt right before we started to slow down. The tree was 10-12” in diameter and was lying right next to the other side of the car pointing downhill.



It took up about 10 minutes to climb the hill and get back to the road. When we finally reached the road we were on the east side of the avalanche debris field and had to climb up and over it – WOW! It was a really big pile of snow. We learned later from the Colorado Department of Transportation that it was 18’ deep. WOW!

We were so cold – we were shivering uncontrollably. I was only wearing a long sleeve tee shirt and my pants were soaked from the waist down from standing in the snow. I had pulled my coat out from the backseat before we headed up the hill and had put it around Gary. I had also recovered June’s coat and she was wearing that. Even with their coats on they were shivering uncontrollably. Someone offered me their coat and then I asked if I could borrow someone’s cell phone to call Gary’s mother and my daughters to tell them we were OK. We went by ambulance to St. Anthony’s Hospital in Denver, Colorado.

We were released at ~3:35 that afternoon. We learned that 4 of the 5 passengers in the van from Iowa had also walked out of the accident and that only one had to spend the night in the hospital. He was released the next day.

Miracle Happen – So Does Divine Intervention

Whether you believe in miracles – divine intervention – whether you believe in God, Buddha, Mohammad, Jehovah, or some other belief -- I must tell you that something happened that day to protect all eight of the individuals that were hit by the massive avalanche. I was speaking to a dear friend, Jamie, shortly after the accident. She was born in Iran, a Muslim country, but I believe that she is a Christian. I was talking to her about what had happened and about her thoughts on God, Mohammad, Buddha and Jehovah and whether she thought anyone of them had anything to do with our miracle survival – she replied, “Yes – I think it must have been a team effort.”

I guess that some one has a bigger plan for me and that I must still have lots of work to do on this planet. My calling in life is to “safe kid’s lives.” I cannot stand to loose a kid to drugs, alcohol or crime and it hurts me to my very soul to see young people not reach their full potential in life. I used to work with “at-risk” youth. Show me a teenager who is not at risk in today’s world! So I prefer to say that I work with youth with “unmet potential.”



I will continue to help youth through the First Serve Fort Collins program that I run at the Boys and Girls Club of Larimer County – Fort Collins Unit and I will continue to coach and mentor all the young people that I can. I have only one goal that I am pursuing through my presentations at schools, through my web site, through my upcoming book, *My Wish*, and through my one-on-one interactions with kids. That goal, my purpose in life, my wish, is to help teens and young adults discover their gifts and their purpose in life. I want each and every one of them to become happy, healthy and productive members of our world. That is my wish – that is my purpose in life!

Lessons Learned from Being Swept Away

1. We are more grateful for all the people (family, and friends) that we have in our lives.
2. We are highly energized to do more of what we feel we should be doing in this world.
3. We have always believed that people are inherently good and this has renewed that faith because of all the individuals who helped out at the avalanche site.
4. We don’t dwell on the little things – they are unimportant in the big scheme of things.
5. We see more humor and laugh at things and situations that may have bothered us before the accident.
6. We believe in divine intervention and truly value our lives.