

HERO

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the map, a community of less than a dozen homes about 5 miles west of the city.

Few people in Oregon have heard of the place. But Steele knew it well because railroad tracks cut through the site of what had once been a thriving mill town. From his spot on the train, Steele estimated, he'd spent thousands of hours looking at the town and the most distinctive feature — the Historic Upper Perry Arch Bridge, a 312-foot-long structure on the old Oregon Trail Highway.

Built in 1924, the bridge spans the Grande Ronde River and the railroad tracks. No longer needed when Interstate 84 was completed, the bridge fell into disrepair and was going to be demolished until preservationists persuaded officials to restore it, a project completed in 2009. A sign on I-84, before a sweeping curve on a high overpass that crosses the river, tells motorists a historic bridge is up ahead. The bridge has been given a second life, a place for people to ride a bike, walk and take in nature.

Steele had been living in Perry about a year when his son died in late January 2019. The cause of death, he said, was the toxic effects of methamphetamine.

"It broke my heart," said Steele. "He had problems with drugs, but he'd looked me in the eye and told me he was never going to use again."

Steele said his son had been accepted to Eastern Oregon University. He wanted to earn a psychology degree to help people dealing with the demons he'd battled. But he faltered one night, and then he was gone.

"He left behind two children who are precious to me," Steele said. "They're my whole world."

Crossing the bridge

Steele, raised a Catholic, believes in God and describes himself not as religious, but spiritual. His son's death took something out of Steele, and he searched for a way to heal.

There is no church in Perry, no chapel where a grieving father could slip into a pew and pray while trying to reconcile the past while contemplating the future. What he longed for was a place where he could be alone and contemplate, seeking a measure of peace by asking questions for which he knew there will never be an answer.

He found it on the Arch Bridge.

"Almost every day I get up early and ride my bike three miles on the highway from my home," he said. "I cross the bridge coming and going. One day, I noticed a dragonfly had gotten embedded in the pavement right near the fog line when they resurfaced the bridge. It looks like a fossil."

Steele took it as a sign.

When he approached that spot — coming and going across the bridge — each morning he began a ritual.

"I do a Hail Mary, make a sign of the cross and say the Our Father prayer," he said. "I feel God's spirit there at the spot. I let my boy know he's in a better place and that I'm watching over his kids."

On July 25, Steele left home a bit later than usual and arrived at the dragonfly at 7:30 a.m. He was praying, thinking of his boy when he heard an explosion that echoed off the hills.

He turned.

A midsize SUV was falling from the I-84 overpass. It slammed into the hill and tumbled toward the Grande Ronde River.

Riverbank rescue

Oregon State Police responded at 7:38 a.m. to a single-vehicle crash on I-84 near milepost 256. A silver

Mazda CX-9 was traveling westbound when the driver fell asleep and left the roadway.

The vehicle went around a guardrail and then down an embankment for approximately 200 feet until coming to a rest on the driver's side on the banks of the Grande Ronde River.

Mark Duffin, 62, was the driver. His wife, Karen Duffin, also 62, rode in the passenger seat. Sitting in booster seats in the back were grandchildren Emmerson, 7, and Gracie, 9.

The children's parents, Lindsey and Trevor Duffin of Idaho Falls, have six kids. They drove to Boise, where the grandparents live, and let Emmerson and Gracie ride with the older couple. They set off with the remaining four children, the two-car caravan setting out at 5:30 a.m. to drive to the Oregon coast for the extended family's annual summer vacation in Yachats. By 7:30 a.m. the four children and their parents were 60 miles ahead of the grandparents.

Mark Duffin was always afraid of falling asleep, something that had happened to his older brother long ago. His brother, then a young man, fell asleep at the wheel, crashed and remained in a vegetative state until the day he eventually died. His grandson was named Emmerson, after his brother, as a tribute to the man.

As he approached Perry, Duffin told his wife he was tired. She chatted with him to keep him alert.

"Then I felt something strange," said Karen Duffin. "We were off the road, and I saw we were going over a cliff. It happened in an instant. I was so confused. Then there was just a lot of noise."

The vehicle bounced and rolled over multiple times before reaching the edge of the river, where it lay on the driver's side.

"When we finally stopped, I knew I was hurt bad," she said. "I wasn't breathing very good. I needed to get out of the seatbelt, but the car was on its side, and I was disoriented. The engine was running loud. I couldn't remember how to unlock the seatbelt. When it did, it was so painful. I fell out of my seat and I fell into my husband."

She called to her grandchildren.

"Gracie said her brother was bleeding really bad. Both were in their seats and couldn't move. If I rested my head on the driver's car seat, I'd start to pass out. I struggled to put it on my husband's hand to feel connected to him and stay awake."

She accepted this could be the end.

And then, from behind her, she heard her grandson's voice.

"Someone's coming."

First at the scene

With a combination of awe and horror, Steele's eyes followed the car all the way from the top of the I-84 overpass to the river's edge.

He saw flames.

He raced across the bridge on his bike, down a hill to the railroad tracks that had once been as familiar as his own hands. He tossed his bike aside and ran into the river, up to his knees, wading it to cross to the other side where flames near the car's engine had grown more intense.

He braced for an explosion and dreaded what might come next.

"I was yelling as I crossed the river," he said. "I got no response. I wasn't looking forward to what I might find. I ran up to the car and saw a woman through the windshield. Her arm was on the driver's side. But everything was scrambled in the car. No movement."

He tried ripping off a large piece of plastic that had come loose from under the front bumper. He wanted to use it as a makeshift ladle to get river water

to throw on the flames.

He couldn't pry it free.

"I made a cup with my hands and threw river water on the fire," he said. "Just kept dousing it. Finally, the engine froze up. That car was so hot. I walked around it to see what I could find."

He heard a faint rapping on the back door.

"I forced it open and found a little boy with a huge gash on his forehead," Steele said. "Lots of blood. I got him out of the car. He said everything hurt and he couldn't walk. I picked up and carried him about 15 feet away and had him sit on a rock."

Steele ran back to the car and peered inside.

"I saw the top of a little girl's blond head," he said. "There was so much stuff in the car. I had to go through coolers and headrests and collapsed seats and camping gear to get her out. It wasn't easy. She was in shock and in pain. She couldn't walk. I carried her to the rock and told her to sit next to the boy."

Once more, Steele ran to the car.

"I tried to make a path for the woman to get out. She was wedged into the driver's seat. All I could see of the man was an arm. I asked if he could move it so I could get her out. He moved his arm, but he wasn't talking. The woman said her ribs hurt and her foot was trapped. She couldn't get out."

Steele had no cellphone to call for help.

He glanced up the Arch Bridge, the place where he felt most connected to a higher power, and then above the bridge, high up on I-84 he saw faces of people, motorists who'd stopped to see what was going on.

"I knew then," he said, "that someone would call for help."

'That guy was a hero'

Dylan Hamilton, 29, and John Suttin, 33, two deputies with the Union County Sheriff's Office, heard the call requesting Oregon State Police troopers to rush to the scene.

When they learned of initial details called in from witnesses on the I-84 overpass, both deputies expected a gruesome wreck with fatalities, something they'd both witnessed during their careers. Although troopers would handle the investigation, the two deputies, knowing they were closest, headed to the scene.

Suttin got there first. "When I looked down that cliff, I figured there'd be no survivors," he said. "I headed down this goat trail. As I got closer, I noticed a couple kids sitting on a rock."

Hamilton arrived minutes later.

"A paramedic spotted me and told me, 'Let's go,'" said Hamilton. "We made it down that cliff in what I'd call a controlled slide."

At the bottom, Hamilton surveyed the scene. He noticed a civilian, an older man, near the car. Then he walked over to join Suttin, who was with the kids. The boy and girl, Hamilton thought, were about the same age as his two children.

"The boy grabbed my hand and asked me to stay with him," said Hamilton. "I told him I was hanging with him no matter what."

Paramedics and a search-and-rescue team arrived to help. The two adults remained trapped in the car.

Suttin talked it over with Hamilton.

"We didn't want those kids to see what was going on in that car," Suttin said. "We didn't know what could happen."

The two men came up with a plan: Each deputy picked up a child in their arms and waded across the river to ambulances, where the children could be treated by paramedics and then taken to the hospital.

"The boy asked me about his grandparents," said Hamilton. "He wanted

to know if they were going to be OK."

Watching a flurry of activity around the car on the other side of the river, he didn't know what to say.

"Then he wanted to know if his mom and dad knew what was going on," said Hamilton. "He told me his name and gave me his mother's cellphone number."

Far away, a cellphone rang in a car.

Lindsey Duffin was in the back of the family car, trying to rest. Her husband picked up his wife's phone.

"Yes, Emmerson is my son."

He listened, then hung up and told his wife there'd been an accident.

Duffin took the next exit and circled back to I-84, speeding east. They were at least 90 minutes away.

Meanwhile, at the scene of the wreck, nothing was going well.

"They couldn't get Mark out of the car until they got me out," said Karen Duffin. "A paramedic climbed into the back and started me with an IV and pain medication. He kept telling me everything would be OK, but I didn't believe him."

The rescue team couldn't get the correct angle to use a hydraulic tool used to cut open the car.

"They pulled me out through the window," Duffin said. "Then they got Mark."

The grandkids were on their way to a hospital in La Grande. Two medical helicopters had landed near the wreck. One took Karen Duffin to a hospital in Richland, Washington; the other took her husband to a Walla Walla hospital. Troopers were doing interviews, compiling names and details for official reports to be written later that day. Dan Steele had given troopers what they needed.

Word began filtering through the crowd about what the older man had done before any of them had arrived.

"We both agreed we were just doing our job," Suttin said.

"That guy was a hero." They looked for him. But Steele was already gone.

'I think I passed out'

At the La Grande hospital, Lindsey Duffin went into the emergency room, her husband staying in the car with their four other children.

"I was shocked," she said. "I began crying. My son had a big open gash on his head and was in a neck brace. They were planning to do a scan to see if he had any head injuries."

Her daughter had been taken for a scan after throwing up blood. Doctors found nothing, but admitted her to the Intensive Care Unit, wanting her to spend the night to sort it all out.

"The doctors figured that when they were trapped in the car Emmerson was suspended above her," said Duffin. "Blood from his head dripped on her face and she had swallowed a lot of it."

Miraculously, her children would be OK.

The news about her in-laws, though, was grim.

After an initial exam at the Walla Walla hospital, the air ambulance flew Mark Duffin to Boise to be examined by a neurosurgeon, who determined Duffin had two broken vertebrae in his spine. He was admitted to the hospital there.

When Karen Duffin arrived in Richland, she was fading in and out of consciousness. Doctors, suspecting internal bleeding, wanted to give her an ultrasound. But she began fading so fast they rushed her to surgery.

Once she was in the operating room, surgeons found massive bleeding. They ultimately had to replace nearly 75% of the blood in her body and removed her spleen. She

was taken to the Intensive Care Unit, put on a ventilator.

Emmerson had his head wound stitched up and then he and his sister were released from the hospital to the care of their parents.

"I've never been in a car crash," said Emmerson. "I think I passed out."

He doesn't know how he learned his mother's cellphone number. At age 7, he'd risen to the occasion.

"She never told it to me," he said. "But every time she talks on the phone, she always says it. I guess I just remembered."

'I'd like to think he was proud'

And so, life goes on. "We're all fine," said Karen Duffin.

But she's haunted. "I don't know why any of our lives were spared," she said. "Why? We're all different now, more grateful. We appreciate the little things we probably took for granted."

She called Dan Steele to thank him.

"There are good people in this world," said Duffin. "I know one happened to come into our lives."

Steele, meantime, is back to riding his bike back and forth across the bridge. When he sees the dragonfly fossil on the bridge, Steele says his prayers for himself, his son and his grandchildren.

There is a new addition. He also prays each day for Emmerson and Gracie, for Mark and Karen Duffin.

Twenty years ago, on March 22, a baby boy was born, Steele's second chance in life, a chance to be a better version of himself.

"Our past is not who we are," said Steele. "I'd like to believe that the good I've done far outweighs any bad I've done."

"I believe my son's soul was with me that day," Steele said. "I'd like to think he was proud of me."

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