

Rescue: ‘Everyone came to the rescue and came to help’

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Kanelakos seemed to wake up once he hit the rumble strips on the opposite side of the road, Johnston said. Suddenly, the Subaru whipped back to the right, slamming into the front of the pickup near the passenger side. Johnston recalls being jostled before the truck and trailer came to rest in a jackknifed position, while the Subaru stopped on a shoulder.

Both vehicles, which were in opposite lanes, quickly caught fire.

“I don’t know how long it was, but it seemed in my head like it was about three seconds,” Johnston said.

Kraushaar, a youth baseball coach, and a caravan of cars were traveling to Yamhill for a game. After rounding a curve, he could see smoke rising from about a quarter-mile away.

“That was kind of like the, ‘Oh crap, nobody is here yet. I better go help,’” said Becky White, who was also going to the game, and who would comfort the Johnstons as they awaited medical attention.

Kraushaar grabbed a radio, which he always keeps on hand, to call Medix Ambulance Service. But the location presented challenges.

The Elsie-Vinemapple Fire Station is about 3 miles away, but firefighters at the volunteer department are sometimes away from the station until they are notified of an emergency via pager. Once they arrive at the station and hop in the fire truck, they often must weave through a long line of cars that tend to back up when a crash happens on the highway.

“That is our biggest worry because it is so far from medical care,” Rzewnicki said. “It is our biggest fear when accidents happen out there.”

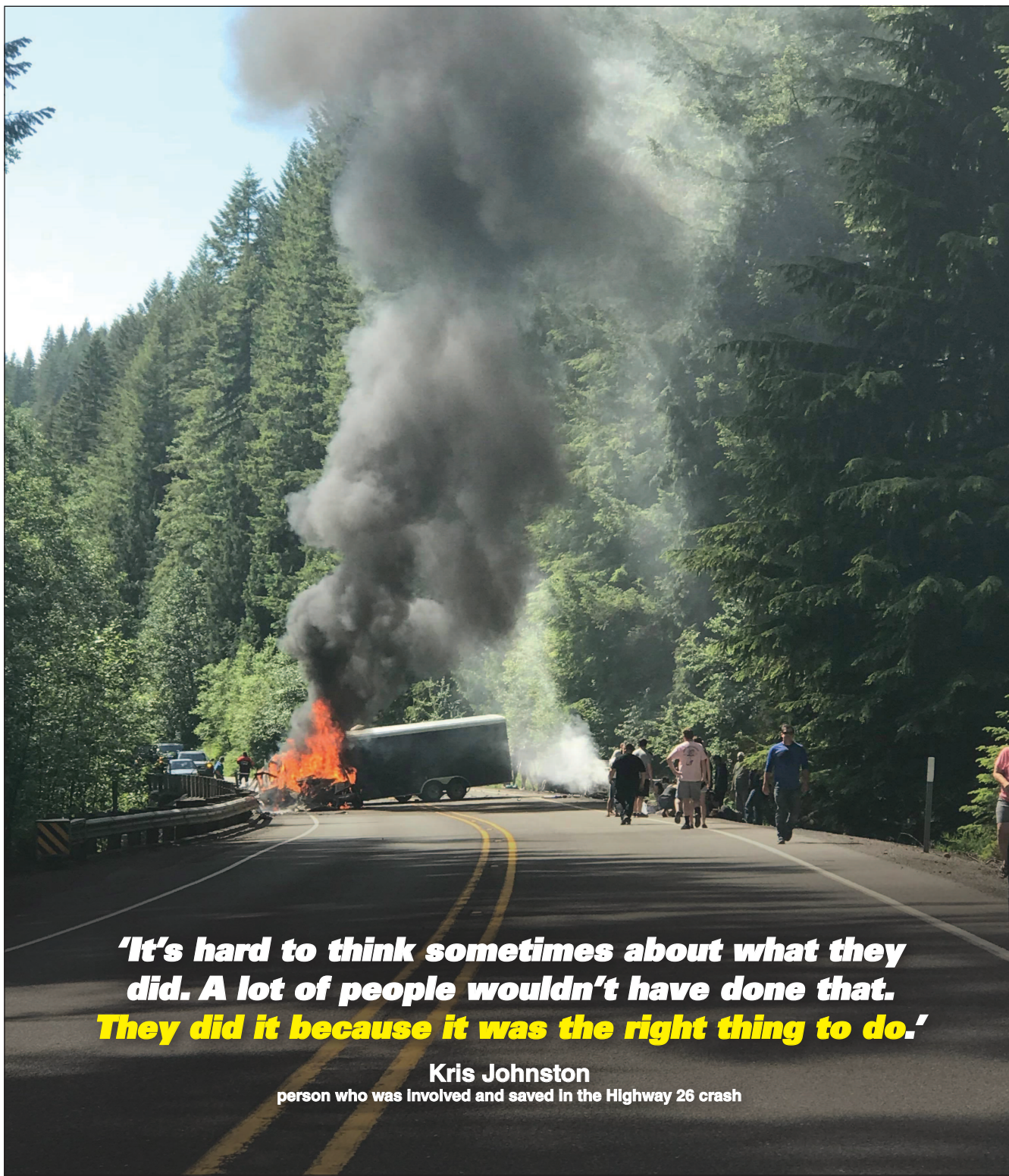
Time seemed to slow

Firefighters would arrive less than 10 minutes later, followed by Oregon State Police troopers and, eventually, ambulances and Life Flight. But in the bustle after the crash, time seemed to slow down for the people who were there.

“You could take one to two minutes to get out there and people say, ‘What took you so long?’” Kraushaar said. “Seconds seem like minutes and minutes seem like hours when you’re waiting.”

Once he approached the damaged vehicles, Kraushaar scanned to see who was in the most danger. The Johnstons — especially Eric Johnston — were in bad shape.

“I didn’t think he was alive any more,” Kraushaar said.



‘It’s hard to think sometimes about what they did. A lot of people wouldn’t have done that. They did it because it was the right thing to do.’

Kris Johnston

person who was involved and saved in the Highway 26 crash

Courtney Mattila

The crash occurred on a remote stretch of highway east of Elsie.

Moving people with potentially traumatic injuries without first stabilizing them is rarely the ideal option. In this case, it was the only one.

As Kraushaar and others prepared to move them, Josh Thompson, 39, of Warrenton, approached the pickup from the east with water in hand. Thompson and a car full of people were driving home from a day at the zoo when they stopped at the scene.

“People were running toward us looking for fire extinguishers,” Thompson said.

Once the truck settled after the crash, Johnston peeked to his right. He saw his son passed out and barely breathing on the floor with his face against the door.

Before helping him, he had to figure out a way to escape the truck despite sustaining a host

of broken bones. One of the more severely damaged body parts was his leg — twisted in multiple places and as weak as gelatin.

He started climbing toward the back of the truck, where rescuers had gathered to pull him out. As he maneuvered around the driver’s seat, he used his hands to toss his leg in the right direction.

As Johnston wriggled toward the back, Thompson reached in and doused him with water as the flames began to build.

“The heat was the most intense thing I’ve ever been around,” Thompson said. “At that point, you don’t think. You just do.”

After roughly 90 seconds, Johnston positioned himself near a window. In the time it took for him to make it there,

the amount of smoke in the truck tripled. Some people outside — including Kraushaar — grabbed Johnston under his armpits and pulled.

Once outside, the hyper-ventilating Johnston asked to be dragged — rather than carried — from the fiery truck due to the pain in his legs. Johnston momentarily lost consciousness at one point from the pain.

Someone asked Johnston if anyone else was inside: “I yelled, my son!”

Kraushaar scurried around to the passenger side and started jerking the door.

“He was angry,” Johnston said. “He was yanking on that door hard.”

Eventually, the door was ripped off and the younger Johnston was freed. Flames towered about 20 feet in the air above the truck and the tires

began burning and popping.

“You never know when that’s going to blow up,” Kraushaar said.

But the truck, while completely destroyed, did not explode. The blaze was contained until the fire department arrived.

Bystanders were able to extinguish the fire in the Subaru with water bottles. They saved Kanelakos and a passenger, Peter Moreno, 53, of Houston.

Eric Johnston and Moreno were taken from the scene via Life Flight, while Kris Johnston and Kanelakos left in ambulances.

“It was one of the coolest things I’ve seen in all the years doing this,” Kraushaar said. “Everyone came to the rescue and came to help.”

Rzewnicki, the state police

sergeant, agreed.

“I felt safe knowing they knew what to do,” she said. “The stars aligned for all four of those gentlemen.”

‘Guardian angels’

Kanelakos and Moreno are recovering from the crash in a Portland-area rehabilitation facility, Oregon State Police Lt. Andrew Merila said.

Kris Johnston arrived home nearly two weeks after the collision. He can only sit in a wheelchair for two to three hours before he needs to straighten his leg, which is covered by a 10-pound metal frame. He hopes to begin walking in the next month.

Eric Johnston went home this week — three weeks after the crash — and is preparing for a lengthy rehabilitation and possible spinal surgery. His many injuries include a broken pelvis — held together by a metal rod — and a broken jaw that prevents him from eating solid foods.

With medical costs and missed work piling up, Kris Johnston estimates his expenses alone have reached at least \$150,000. He said his insurance is capped well short of that amount.

The family has set up a GoFundMe page as well as an account with TLC Federal Credit Union and is asking for donations.

“It’s not like in the movies where people get in a car accident and get the money back,” Johnston said. “It’s all gone.”

Some of the people who helped at the scene have kept in touch with the Johnstons and have been promoting the family’s fundraising. Thompson and his wife, Crystal Thompson, have been especially helpful. Thompson called Johnston’s wife, Aundrea Johnston, the day of the crash to update her as events unfolded.

“I didn’t have to bury them. I call them my guardian angels — perfectly placed,” Aundrea Johnston said. “I tease them by saying, ‘You’re stuck with me for life.’”

The rescuers, for their part, are quick to deflect attention.

“I was just a small part in a big story,” Thompson said. “I was not the hero that day.”

Kris Johnston remembers most of what happened out on Highway 26. He is largely able to hold his emotions in check, except when he speaks about the people who saved him and his son.

“It’s hard to think sometimes about what they did. A lot of people wouldn’t have done that,” he said. “They did it because it was the right thing to do.”

Initiative: ‘This is a very poor idea for our state’

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Robison also is chief petitioner for a gun rights initiative in Deschutes County. The Second Amendment Preservation Ordinance would allow the county sheriff to block enforcement of local, state or federal gun laws the sheriff deemed as unconstitutional.

W.J. Mark Knutson, pastor of Augustana Lutheran Church in Portland, and Michael Cahana, rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel in Portland, were chief petitioners of an initiative to ban semi-automatic firearms. They said they oppose requiring sixth-graders to take a firearms safety class.

“This is a very poor idea

for our state,” Cahana said. “It accepts the status quo of guns as an ever-present danger, that there is no way to reduce the overwhelming prevalence of guns in our children’s lives. We believe it is time to change the status quo.”

Knutson and Cahana, who lead the interfaith coalition, Lift

Every Voice Oregon, proposed Initiative Petition 43 to ban assault-style firearms for the November ballot but had to suspend the effort because of legal obstacles to the wording of the ballot title.

The group plans to submit another initiative for 2020 to ban the sale of assault weap-

ons and high-capacity magazines. They said they also hope to work with state legislators in 2019 to ban the kind of weapons used in mass shootings

around the nation.

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