



(EXTRA) ORDINARY

INSPIRATIONAL STORIES OF EVERYDAY PEOPLE

KEITH MAGINN





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This book is dedicated to those who serve others
and try to make the world a better place,
that they have strength and wisdom;
and to all who are suffering,
that they may find relief.







Contents

PREFACE ... *vii*

CURT, PART ONE ... *1*

DR. JENNIFER ... *7*

MATT, KAYTEE, AND JACK ... *19*

J ... *45*

JOY ... *55*

MARTIN ... *73*

BETH ... *83*

CURT, PART TWO ... *93*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ... *116*







Preface

Life is damn hard, way more difficult than I thought it would be. As a kid, I naively thought we grew out of things like anger, jealousy, and heartbreak when we got older. Boy, was I wrong.

People are pretty adept at hiding their issues. To look at Facebook, you'd think everyone is living happy, wonderful lives. And I don't need to tell you about all of the negativity and sensationalism daily in the news.

Sometimes I wish previous generations had done a better job of warning us of how tough things would be. At least then we could have been prepared. Maybe they thought it best we believe in the fairy tale for as long as possible.

While the idea of this book took shape, I saw many people around me struggling in their lives. Divorces, layoffs, addictions, financial stress, depression...on and on. I wanted to highlight feel-good stories to give them hope.

Fortunately, I know several people who are an inspiration to the rest of us. I asked if they would be willing to let me share their stories with anyone who might read this book. These brave souls gave me their time, invited me into their homes, and poured out their hearts. For all of this, I am grateful.





(EXTRA)ORDINARY

I quote the people in this book fairly often, because hearing directly from the source is important. This gives readers a better idea of the heroes' personalities and captures their feelings in the moments when certain events took place.

Writing this book gave me even more respect for people as a whole. Most of us are doing the best we can with the cards we've been dealt, often in trying circumstances. Thank God we are not in this thing called life on our own. We need one another.

One of the things Dr. Jennifer Rafey and I talked about when I interviewed her for this project was that everyone has a story. And the reality is many people are struggling with something, which brings to mind the wise quote, "Be kinder than necessary, for everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle."

We are survivors. Often, the periods of adversity are when we find out what we're made of and that we are stronger than we think. We are also reminded about what is important in life.

The people I admire aren't perfect. They are flawed. They are, in a word, human. I can relate to someone like that. We pull for the underdog, and every so often, the underdog prevails against all odds.

Most of us face struggles we have to overcome. We either can give up or we can keep giving our best effort. With this in mind, the stories in this book are about people I know who have gone through significant challenges. Their wills were tested, or they took a leap of faith.





INSPIRATIONAL STORIES OF EVERYDAY PEOPLE

So here's to family, friends, coworkers...to parents, like you'll meet in this book, who are willing to do anything for their children...to those trying to live life to the fullest... to those who help others along the way. May God bless you all. I hope these stories inspire you as much as they have inspired me.

Keith Maginn

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Curt (part one)



Black-haired and mustached 39-year-old Curt Schaeffer arrived at his gate at Juan Santamaria International Airport around 5:15 a.m. on October 21, 1989. Though based in New York, he was visiting local offices as the Deputy Regional Manager for Latin American operations for CARE, an international relief and development non-profit organization. For the past week, he had been working at the CARE office in San Jose, Costa Rica. His wife, Magaly (pronounced “Muh-GOL-ly”), was meeting Curt later that morning in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, where the couple planned to celebrate Magaly’s birthday together a day late.

Curt was anxious about flying with a non-U.S. carrier, but no American airlines were available in that region. One of only 138 passengers on the Boeing 727-200, Curt was going to sit in the back of the plane before a flight attendant suggested he might prefer a more comfortable, unoccupied first-class seat near the front. Curt settled his slender, 6-foot-2 body into a fourth-row aisle seat on the aircraft’s right side.

The passengers had a short, smooth trip to a stopover at Augusto C. Sandino Airport in Managua, Nicaragua. After a brief respite to board several more passengers,





(EXTRA)ORDINARY

Flight Number 414 resumed. The 30-minute haul would get passengers to Tegucigalpa at 8 a.m.

As the plane ascended, Curt noticed the weather conditions quickly turning ominous with strong winds and dense clouds. Just as a flight attendant announced they were preparing to land, Curt saw a flash of green out of the corner of his eye. A passenger in front of him shrieked: “No, no, no! We’re going to hit!”

In *Escape with One’s Life: Learning to Live with Survival*, Curt describes what happened next:

The impact was immediate as the 170,000-pound behemoth careened across mountainous terrain at an approach speed of close to two hundred miles per hour. We were thrown into darkness. I heard the grotesque sound of metal scraping on earth while people screamed hysterically. My first and only thought was that this was it. I was surely going to die.

I put my arms over my head as I was thrown forward. In a matter of seconds, I passed through a wall of flames. I covered my face with my hands to protect it from the intense heat. There was a dream-like quality to those seconds; I was aware of moving and burning, with no discomfort or any control over what was happening. I lost consciousness.

I came to in a field. I was still belted into my seat. Miraculously, I was sitting upright as I had been





inside the plane. My aisle seat had separated from the window seat next to me, and I was ejected from the plane. A short distance to my right was the blazing inferno of the exploding 727. High winds whipped the flames away from me.

I felt numb. I looked down at my hands and arms and noticed a pale, lifeless quality. The skin had been burned. I was still in a stunned state but was regaining my senses. I seemed to be the only one in this field—no other survivors, no dead people, no locals, nobody else but me! The odd sight momentarily struck me as being surreal until I felt chills course through my body.

I was in a state of shock, and it did not occur to me to try to rescue other passengers, as the plane was an inferno. I assumed that they had escaped on the other side of the fuselage.

Curt was doused in fuel oil, his left shoe missing. Cold and in pain, he was able to unbuckle his seatbelt and stand up. He then stumbled to a small house a few hundred yards below him while coughing up smoke from his lungs. A woman in the house—no doubt startled at the intrusion of a disheveled foreigner—offered him water, but Curt declined when he noticed the water was dirty.

Stepping outside, he saw other survivors who had staggered or were carried from the wreckage getting into a small pickup truck on the dirt road. Without a word, Curt climbed





(EXTRA)ORDINARY

into the truck bed. Two men in bad condition were lying on their backs. While the truck owner's young daughter gazed wide-eyed at the bewildered group, her father drove them an hour to the Hospital Escuela in Tegucigalpa.

“Those of us who survived were struggling with the shock of our own survival—second- and third-degree burns, multiple fractures, and the terror of what we had just experienced,” Curt says. “We were quickly becoming aware of the fact that survival has both physical and emotional costs.”

Curt was extremely fortunate to survive the tragedy on the mountainside (named Cerro de Hula), but the road ahead would be far from easy. Physically, he would have to endure grueling measures to repair the burns on his body; mentally, Curt would be terrorized by sadness, anger, and nightmares of the awful scene he had narrowly escaped.

He would also face another major ordeal: guilt over having survived when others did not. Of the 138 passengers on Flight 414, Curt was one of 11 survivors. Four of the eight crew members lost their lives. In total, 15 had made it; 131 had not.

Some died on impact, but many were burned alive. Most of the victims were Hondurans and Nicaraguans. Ten Americans were killed. Because authorities were slow to cordon off the area, looters had ransacked the debris. Valuables were stolen from corpses, including wallets and jewelry. (Some locals later were arrested and charged with theft.)





INSPIRATIONAL STORIES OF EVERYDAY PEOPLE

The disaster devastated Honduras and neighboring Nicaragua, homes to 104 of the deceased passengers. Three days of national mourning were declared. U.S. President George H. W. Bush and Pope John Paul II were among those who sent their condolences.

Why had the flight attendant recommended Curt move to a seat at the front of the aircraft, which probably saved his life? (Ten of the survivors were in the front of the cabin, four in the middle, and one at the rear. Curt had been heading to the back.) Why was Curt's seat ejected, and how did he land upright in a field, far enough away to avoid the explosion? Why didn't he burn up like so many other passengers, even though he was covered in fuel oil?

Curt reasoned:

It is a miracle that there were any survivors at all. The plane flew out of a cloud right into the mountainside. One possible mitigating factor was that the pilots did have a few seconds to try to pull the plane back up into the air and, in so doing, caused the nose to break off. Most of the survivors were sitting in the front of the plane. It was propitious, too, that the aircraft made impact on a small but relatively flat soccer field and not on the rougher terrain of the surrounding mountainside.

Two months shy of 40 years old, Curt Schaeffer was one of the few to live through the worst air catastrophe in the history of Central America.

