Episode 11: Jeremy was bitten by a rattlesnake

Jeremy lives near Corpus Christi, Texas with his wife Jennifer. In May of 2018, just a few months ago, they experienced a day that neither of them will ever forget.

This was on a Sunday, about 10:30 in the morning, and they were getting ready for a family barbecue that was going to happen at their house that afternoon. Jennifer was working in their rock garden, and came across an aggressive snake. But it wasn't just any snake – this was a Western Diamondback rattlesnake.

She called out for Jeremy, and he quickly got a shovel and swung down on the snake, and chopped off its head. And of course, if that were the end of the story, it wouldn't really be much of a story, right?

A few minutes later, Jennifer is about to let the dogs out in the yard, so Jeremy knows he needs to dispose of the dead snake. As he reaches for a nearby stick, the severed head of that rattlesnake jumps toward him and bites down on his right hand.

Jeremy immediately yelled for Jennifer that he's been bit, and he struggles to pry open the jaws of the snake to get it off his hand – all the while feeling the pulsation of the deadly venom that's being pumped into him.

Jennifer called 911 and they got in the car to meet the ambulance a couple of miles down the road, just to save some time.

I'll let Jeremy tell it, but what I find fascinating about this story is how life can end so suddenly and without warning. I mean, Jeremy was just doing routine yard work on a Sunday morning, and literally within 15 or 20 minutes, he's waiting for an ambulance to show up, and he's thinking there's a good chance he's about to die, and he's saying his last goodbyes to his wife and daughter. Just incredible.

Partway through the conversation we'll hear from Jennifer, and the fact that she's a nurse I think played a big part in Jeremy being able to survive this.

On the website I'll have pictures of Jeremy, as well as his email address if you want to contact him, and that's at WhatWasThatLike.com/11. And you can see additional pictures about this story on my Instagram, which is WhatWasThatLike.

And now, let's hear the whole story from Jeremy.

Scott

Jeremy, before this happened, have you ever been bitten by a snake before?

Jeremy

No, never.

Scott

So that was the first time you hit a home run.

Jeremy

Yeah, it was my very first time.

Tell us about how this happened. Your wife Jennifer was just working out in the yard. Were you in the house at that time when she--?

Jeremy

I was outside mowing grass and she was working around in her garden, pulling out weeds, and doing different kinds of things. She stumbled across the snake. It didn't rattle out or anything. It just, kind of, sat there. Then, it started coming after her, freaking her out, cornering her up at the corner of the house, and striking her. After she yelled, I went to get to shovel and tried to scoot it out of the way, but it was striking at my wife so, like, any other person would-- you know.

Scott

She was cornered outside the house?

Jeremy

Yep, up against the house in between the garden area.

Scott

So, she couldn't go anywhere without going past the snake. So you came in as the knight in shining armor with the big shovel and, literally, decapitated this snake.

Jeremy

I did. It was too aggressive and just wanted to bite something, so I cut its head off, toss it to the side in the garden, and we figured it was done then.

Scott

You're in Texas. So, it's pretty common to see snakes - right?

Jeremy

It's pretty common here. Rattlesnakes are pretty common. Yeah.

Scott

Okay. I'm in Florida. We have rattlesnakes too. Have you seen them on your property before?

Jeremy

Rattlesnake? No. But when we first came down to Texas, when we were camping down here, there was one on the front porch of our camper when we come outside - just a little baby one. But I hear about them all the time. I see them on the roads when driving up and down the road.

Scott

It's just something you got to be aware of.

Jeremy

Yeah, yeah.

Scott

Okay. So, you came over and chop the head off of the snake. Obviously, that puts the snake out of commission. He wasn't moving or attacking anymore.

Jeremy

I mean, it was squirming around like a chicken with its head cut off, but it wasn't striking at anything anymore because the head was laying there and the body was separate. The body was still wiggling. We thought that was over.

Scott

So, as far as you knew, it was completely dead.

Jeremy

As far as I knew, it was dead. Now, I've learned to dig a hole and bury the head first, but I figured that it was okay not to do it. My wife yelled out to me that she was gonna let the dogs out - that was after she'd been in the house for a while. I reached down to grab this stick that was laying in the garden to move the head off the sidewalk. Before I even got to the stick, the head was on my hand. The head and whatever remains of its neck jumped onto my hand from, probably, a foot or better away.

Scott

It moved a distance of about a foot to get to your hand?!

Jeremy

It moved about a foot to get to my hand. It probably has too much neck left - there was about 1.5 - 2 inches of neck left on it. I've seen it turn around and look at me, which I just chalked off as strange. Then, the next thing I was doing was peeling the snake off my hand.

Scott

How much time had passed after you had decapitated it before it struck you?

Jeremy

It was probably around 10 minutes. She went inside and started doing some stuff. I was about ready to go back a moment. I'm not exactly sure about the time, but it wasn't immediately.

Scott

Yeah. After 10 minutes, you would figure that this is all done.

Jeremy

Absolutely. And not turn and look at me, that's for sure.

Scott

So, it bit your right hand?

Jeremy

Yep. It grabbed onto my right hand and got ahold of my middle finger first. I finally got it pried off after a couple of minutes of struggling with it. Somehow, it got a fang into my ring finger, so I tried to pry it off again. I stuck my fingers underneath the front of his mouth and between the fangs and, finally, flipped it off of there. By that time, my wife was running out because I've been yelling, "I've been bit!"

Scott

What did it feel, like, Immediately? I mean, was it like a pin sticking into your skin or--?

Jeremy

It was like somebody drove a horseshoe stake into my hand. It was an intense amount of pain and it felt like my whole hand was taken over. It's almost like a stick being driven through the middle of my hand. Then, 30 seconds after that, I started going numb and I could barely walk. I mean, it was an immense amount of pain. I could feel the venom going in which made it even worse. I could feel its mouth pulsating and filling up my hand with venom. It was strange.

Scott

Yeah. Because it's more than just the tooth of an animal going into your skin - it's the venom. So, obviously, Jennifer heard you calling out that you've been bitten. And she's a nurse, right?

Jeremy

Yeah. She is a nurse.

Scott

Okay. What did she do when she first came out?

Jeremy

When she looked at me, she knew that I need to get some help immediately. So, she was dialing 911 right away while trying to get me to the car. She stayed level-headed and focused - I mean, she's great. She stayed level-headed and tried to keep talking to me and me talking to her.

Scott

So the table has, kind of, turned. At first, you were saving her. Now, she's saving you.

Jeremy

Yeah. We're each other's knights in shining armor, for sure.

Scott

All right. So, you got in the car and she was on the phone with 911.

Jeremv

She was on the phone with 911. Dispatch told her to meet us down at the road. We're going to go to El Gordo, which is a couple of miles away, to meet the ambulance. I ended up going out of it. I could no longer see or hear anything. I couldn't talk. She said I started going into seizures. I remember coming into the church parking lot while we were waiting for the ambulance. Some guy - first responder - came out of the church and was doing chest rubs and stuff to try to keep my heart going. By that time, I was just a mess.

Scott

So, you weren't really even fully conscious?

Jeremy

No. We got 2 miles down from my house when I was already going in and out of consciousness.

Scott

And a lot of that is because you got more venom than just a typical snake bite.

Jeremy

I did. Yeah. Usually, rattlesnakes will give you a warning shot because venom is really precious to them. So, had I left the head on, we probably wouldn't be sitting here today.

Scott

But it would still have been serious.

Jeremy

Yeah. But maybe, I could have gotten out of there in a couple of days instead of the whole ordeal.

Scott

Right, right. But because it was just the head, it automatically shot all of its venoms.

Jeremy

It did. I took every bit of its venom. They said that was a really bad thing to do especially to a snake that size. That western diamondback rattlesnake was between 3.5 to 4 foot, so it has a pretty big head. So, I took all that venom because they don't have the shut-off capability - it's just, kind of, a fight or flight. They're going to give it their all in that last bite.

Scott

Right. So you went down and met the ambulance. Were they going to transport you to the hospital in the ambulance?

Jeremy

Yeah. They were to meet us wherever we could meet because they wanted to get us on the road as fast as they could. So, they were dispatched out of there and met us at the church. They assessed the situation. I don't know how long time went by. We were sitting in a church parking lot waiting for the ambulance which seemed like forever. A couple of miles down the road, everybody was working on me. I can remember going in and out of it. I can remember talking to my daughter and telling her, "I don't know if I'm going to make it. I love you guys, Please go on." It was sad because I could tell my daughter was crying, my wife was in tears, and everybody was scared. I was scared too.

Scott

How old is your daughter?

Jeremy

My daughter is 22 now.

Scott

Okay. So she went with you in the car - I didn't realize that.

Jeremy

She actually drove and met my wife and me at the church. She was at home, but she only lives about 2 miles away from where we would turn to go to town.

Scott

Wow, I can't imagine being in a situation like that. I mean you were working in your yard and planning some kind of family outing later that afternoon

Jeremy

Yeah. We were going to barbecue that afternoon.

Scott

And suddenly, now, you're telling your wife and your daughter that you may not make it. I can't imagine going through that.

Jeremy

No. It was horrible. I can't imagine what they were thinking too. I thought that was going to be it because of the way my body felt and the way my chest felt - I mean, I chalked myself up as done.

Scott

Obviously, you've never felt those symptoms before.

Jeremy

I never have. I felt a lot of horrible things in my life, but never to an extent like that.

Scott

So, is this where the helicopter came, or did you get in the ambulance and begin--?

Jeremy

They loaded me up in the ambulance and they began traveling. We traveled about 7 miles to a town called Orange Grove. By that time, they had to pull over because they had to dispatch the helicopter. They said that I would no longer make it if I had to go to the hospital in an ambulance. I don't know how long we sat there because, by that time, I was out. My wife said it was only like a minute or so when the HALO-Flight landed. I can remember getting in and out of the helicopter. My bowels hurt horribly. I thought I was just having a bowel movement, but I came to find out that I was pouring blood from every hole that I had because that venom turned everything to mush.

Scott

Yeah, it affects every system in your body - right?

Jeremy

It does. Yeah. So, I have lost a lot of blood.

Scott

Hey, this is Scott jumping in here. At this point in the story, Jeremy is pretty much out as he was being transported to the hospital by helicopter. So, I asked his wife, Jennifer, to record some of her thoughts and what she was going through at that time and for the next few days as Jeremy was put into a coma and the doctors did everything they could to save his life. So we'll hear from Jennifer now. After that, we'll get back to the rest of my conversation with Jeremy.

Jennifer

As a nurse, when we first got into the car, I was just really worried because I knew I needed the anti-venom pretty quickly. I had never actually dealt with a snake bite in my nursing career, so I didn't know how bad it could get. But within 2 miles of getting down the road, he got really bad really quick and I knew that it was not going to be a good situation. So, 911 instructed me to go to a church just another couple of miles down the road and they had a sheriff meet me there.

So, that was the first responder he was talking about - it was actually a sheriff. He's the one who was helping to do the sternal rub to keep him awake. Honestly, I didn't know what to expect, because I had never dealt with a snake bite before. Just two miles down the road, at first, he said, "I can't see." I said, "You can't see?" Then, he just went out of consciousness and slumped over. I was driving with one hand and trying to rub him off my shoulder and get him to wake up - I had to do that several times before we got to the church. He was bad. He had a couple of seizures and just kept going in and out. I honestly didn't know if he was gonna make it.

They didn't get his first dose of anti-venom to him until 3.30 PM. The bite happened at 10.30 AM. He got his first dose of anti-venom at 3.30 PM. There's a process for mixing it, apparently. So, that took a while. There was a lot going on up to that point that the doctor in the ER pulled me out and said, "This is a really grim situation. He's really in bad shape. We're going to get ready to move him up to ICU." At that point, that's when it hit me that I didn't know if he was gonna make it because the doctor did not look very good when he was talking to me about it. They did take him up to ICU. Within, like, five minutes of them calling me, they already had stuff ready and set up to intubate him. They said that his organs were already starting to shut down and he was in septic shock. They wanted to put him into a coma - while they could still control it - because they didn't think it was going to be very long before his lungs were going to start to shut down. So, they wanted that to be controlled. So at that point, they put them in a coma.

The doctor came in about 3.30 AM. His pressures could not stay up so they look at what they call the mean arterial pressure. It has to stay above 65 for your body to pump blood to the organs. If it gets below 65, that's when you can pass away from that. He was constantly between 50 and 60. They had him on 4 vasopressor IV medications to try to maintain that but it wasn't working. So, the doctor pulled me out of the room - because he said, "I know that they can hear us know when they're in a coma, so I didn't want to talk in front of them." - and told me that they've done everything that they can do, explained the arterial pressure issue, and the meds he was on. They wanted to prepare me in case he wasn't going to make it within the next hour.

I was pretty stressed at that point and I ended up going back into the room. I remember the nurse was working on IVs or something. I grabbed his hand and said, "They told me that you're going to die. You need to push that venom out of your body, or find the venom and push it out of your body!" Literally, within 30-45 minutes, his pressure started to come up and it just got better from there. I know the nurse looked at me like I was nuts. "Why would you be saying that to him?" But I believe that if I hadn't said that to him, I don't think he would have made it. When his pressure started to come up, they were able to start decreasing the vasopressors. It took several days before they were actually able to start, like, getting rid of those medications one at a time. They would get one gone and, then, they would start decreasing the other.

The second day, he hadn't had any urine output because his kidneys had completely quit. They were just monitoring that. The end of the second day was when they told me that they were going to have to do dialysis - I gave the okay for that. They actually did that the next morning. They got him all prepped for that because there's a certain type of IV they have to have in for that. They did several blood transfusions because he was bleeding internally, pretty badly, from that. They have 2 really high-powered antibiotics to try to fight off the septic shock - basically, the infection getting in the body. They hadn't really done anything with his hand at that point. They just kept it on a pillow and kept it covered because it was very swollen and had very large pockets where the venom and fluid had collected. So, he had some really big pockets in his hand.

It was not until Thursday that they did try to wean him off and wake him up. Basically, Thursday was when he was stable. They said that they had to keep doing the anti-venom and they worked with Poison Control. The hospital was working with Poison Control, calling every couple of hours, going over lab work, deciding if the next dose of anti-venom had to be given over that course of time. By Thursday was when the lab work started to level out - it wasn't improving, but it wasn't decreasing anymore. So, that's what they look at to decide if the anti-venom is working. So Thursday was when they decided that they could pull him out of the coma and started decreasing his meds for that. I saw him come out of the coma. They had to reduce his medications to, basically, wake him up. They have to leave the tube in to help him breathe over the machine. That's how they decided whether or not he can safely come out of the coma completely. So, they did that for about an hour or so. When they decided that he was good enough to pull the tube out, that's when they pulled the tube out. They did ask him if he knew what day of the week it was, he thought it was Monday - he thought it was the next day - even though it was Thursday. He was very disoriented. He didn't remember the snake bite, so we had to, kind of, remind him of what happened. It took several days for him to actually put it all together and remember everything that had happened.

Scott

Do you remember anything while you were in the coma? Did you hear anything at all?

Jeremy

I don't remember anything at all. I'd like to say I remember her talking to me and I can hear this voice, but I absolutely don't remember anything.

Scott

When they told her that you're probably not going to make it, she came in and told you, "You have to push the venom out of your body!" Of course, you may have heard it and not remember it now.

Jeremy

Right. Absolutely. Yeah. Because I feel that I could hear things. I didn't remember it, but I was hoping I heard it - I've must have - because it was either 'death' or 'push that venom out'.

Scott

So when you first woke up, obviously, you were a little or maybe a lot disoriented. What was that like when you came out of the coma?

Jeremy

It was like being at a circus. When I was conscious, everything just had a different turn on it - it was strange. It was like a big dream. For quite a few days, I would even ask her every day, "What happened? Hi, what are you doing here today? Can I go home now?"

Scott

But you knew you were in the hospital, though.

Jeremy

I did. At that time, even being in the hospital, I would think that I was waking up out of my bed at home, and then, all of a sudden, I'm right back in the hospital. So, it was really strange. The first few days are pretty bad.

How long was it before you, kind of, got oriented again to know what had happened and what was going on?

Jeremy

After about the 4th day of waking up from a coma, some of the swellings went down, I started to realize what was going on and then the severity of the issue, kind of, hit me. I'm sure that I was on quite a bit of pain meds that have kind of fallen off, so I could stay more focused at that moment. But, it was just strange.

Scott

It's got to be strange just to wake up and realize that 4 days have passed and you didn't even know they went by.

Jeremy

That was very weird. I thought the next day was Monday. In my mind, I knew I've been bit. I thought I was home and done by now. They had to tell me about what happened within a few days in a row. But yeah, it was really strange because I lost almost a week by the time I can focus again.

Scott

Did you feel any sense of relief? When you were getting ready to get on the helicopter, you kind of said your last words and last goodbyes to your family. Now, you're awake and alive.

Jeremy

Yeah, I felt a definite relief. I'm glad that I woke up. I'm not sure what my purpose is yet but something's out there.

Scott

I read that for a typical rattlesnake bite, the typical anti-venom is 2-4 doses.

Jeremy

That's right.

Scott

But you were given 26 doses!

Jeremy

26 doses to get me back to normal where they could manage my health.

Scott

Even with that, it was still touch-and-go. Like, you were right at death's door.

Jeremy

Yeah, I was definitely. I mean, even the anti-venom caused problems with my kidneys - the combination between the high dosage of venom and anti-venom just gave me a whole new set.

Scott

Let's talk about your recovery since then. This happened at the end of May. As we record this, we're in the middle of November. So, it was several months ago.

Jeremy

It was.

Scott

What happened from the time you got out of the hospital? What ongoing problems did you still have when you left the hospital?

Jeremy

I spent quite a few weeks in the hospital. They had me on dialysis for quite a while. They were trying to save some of my fingers because it was starting to deteriorate. The bone was starting to show - eventually, I had skin just hanging and just a raw bone sticking out of my finger.

Scott

Because that's right where the point was.

Jeremy

Yes. That's where the bite was. The snake doesn't have a clean mouth, so you'd get all the bacteria, the venom, and everything mixed. It was starting to gangrene in my hand, so they put me in a hyperbaric chamber and I did that every day for a couple of weeks.

Scott

What is that? What's a hyperbaric chamber?

Jeremy

In a hyperbaric chamber, they take you down to a low pressure to take all the pressure out of this - I think they said I was, like, going 100 foot underwater - and then, they pump it full of oxygen. It's supposed to help your body regenerate in those pressures, but it didn't work. Before that, they actually did a skin graft. They took a skin graft from my lower belly and tried to skin graft one of my fingers that was going pretty bad. Then, that's when they started the dialysis. So, I did that for a while. They couldn't get it fixed. I went to my hand doctor. He and the surgeon tried to take care of it. Eventually, he's like, "Your fingers got to go. We got to take it off before it causes any more infection inside." - because I was on pretty powerful antibiotics and still having problems. So, I got rid of that one it healed up pretty good.

Scott

That was your middle finger?

Jeremy

That would have been my ring finger.

Scott

Okay, so you lost your ring finger.

Jeremy

Then, the skin graft on the middle finger didn't take. So, after about, probably, a couple of weeks after the hyperbaric chamber, they decided just to go ahead and take it off. My knuckle was broken right where you bend at the knuckle. It was just hanging there with a piece of meat. I had

a raw bone sticking out from my first knuckle where my skin was attached. You could see it just started eating down into my hands. So, they wanted to get rid of it as fast as they could.

Scott

Was all of that exposed, or was it bandaged up, or you could just see it all the time?

Jeremy

They haven't come in for, like, wound care for a little while. When they found out that my wife was a nurse, they let her do the wound care at home, which she was great at. She did better wound care than the wound care. But yeah, we kept it wrapped up, but he didn't want anything tied over it because he still wanted it to breathe and everything. And I just couldn't get it wet.

Scott

When you described your knuckle being broken in the bone showing everything, did you ever get used to seeing that?

Jeremy

I got used to it, but when I fling it around a little bit, my wife kind of got a little stick at it. I would say, "That used to be your thing." I'd flick my finger around while I was just hanging there, but that was just to entertain myself because it was a pretty hard time anyway. So, I kept positive and funny.

Scott

I mean, in a situation like this, you got to find something to laugh about.

Jeremy

Exactly, absolutely.

Scott

Even if it's dark humor,

Jeremv

I'd trade fingers for kidneys any day. I'm already diabetic and insulin-dependent.

Scott

Before this whole thing, you were diabetic?

Jeremy

Yeah. The whole process of dialysis just scared me more than the snake bite itself - seeing all the people in there fighting for their last pieces of life. So, I think that helped kickstarted me into just focusing on my house and trying to get back. Then, after that, I came home and I was bedridden pretty much for the next week. A few days after we were here, I was back in the hospital due to bowel problems which I had for about 10 days. They were worried about things started messing up inside. I couldn't go to the bathroom very easily anymore. So, I went back to the hospital and they took care of that. They got me cleaned out, made sure I was urinating fine and sent me back home. Same problem - I couldn't keep anything down. I was sick and weak all the time. I couldn't get out of bed. They gave me some medicine to help deal with that. But even until now, I still can't eat well, I'd still get sick, and I'd still get dizzy. So, I have a little bit of aftereffects of it too.

How are your kidneys doing now?

Jeremy

My kidney functions were actually just right at - if not better - before the snake bite. So, I bounced back very well.

Scott

So, that's the best recovery you could hope for then.

Jeremy

Yeah. I just did my lab work today so I'll know in the next week. I think this is my 5th-6th month of checkup, something like that. Hopefully, everything stays on track.

Scott

Is there any ongoing issues other than, obviously, missing a couple of fingers?

Jeremy

Yeah, I do a lot of remodeling. So, holding hammers has been a little rough.

Scott

What's been the biggest adjustment to your everyday activity without those 2 fingers?

Jeremy

I just have to relearn how to hold everything. I can no longer hold a cup of coffee because I hold it with my first finger and it just wants to turn right - I'm right-handed. So, it's been a real learning curve to hold it between the 2 fingers. Then, I got to hold it with my other hand. Those are, kind of, everyday things. I'm right-handed, so it's been a little bit odd to get used to the left hand.

Scott

So are you starting to become a little bit ambidextrous now?

Jeremy

Absolutely.

Scott

Because you're forced into it.

Jeremy

I'm forced. Even when I do use my right hand with these two fingers and a thumb, I'd get super worn out and my hand would cramp. It, kind of, draw in from a previous issue. I had Guillain-Barre about seven years ago - I got a lot of nerve damage. My pinkie draws in, so it's just kind of my two fingers. So, they get worn out.

Scott

So, you're using different muscles than you normally would?

Jeremy

Yeah. It reminds me of somebody with real bad arthritis. My two fingers, kind of, have to do everything now.

Yeah, you've got a few ongoing things. But still, it could have been a lot worse.

Jeremy

Yeah, absolutely. It was headed that way. Luckily, I'm here.

Scott

What would have been the correct way to get rid of that snake's head?

Jeremy

I grew up around snakes. I didn't want to kill the snake. I just wanted to move it, but I felt like my wife's life was in danger. The correct move would have been to dig a hole - it was a rock garden that we were working in - about a foot deep and bury the head immediately. That would have been the correct way instead of leaving it on the ground or trying to lose with a stick.

Scott

When you were trying to get rid of it, were you partly concerned if your dogs would find it?

Jeremy

I was very concerned. My dogs are very, very aware. They would have gone straight to that head. I've got a service dog and he would have just picked it up, defended me, and stood next to me, so I don't know if they could have survived it. Hopefully, it would have given me all the venom and they would have been fine. I was worried if one of them got bit and killed by it. So, as I reached down for that stick, you know - the stick was large - never in a million years, I would have figured that snake would have turned around and got me like that.

Scott

Especially when it was that far away from you.

Jeremy

We had met somebody before that had the same thing happen to him. He was carrying it with a shovel to the burn pile. It somehow slid down the handle and latched on to his hand. We talked to him quite a bit too and became friends as you never know what kind of things can happen.

Scott

What a weird thing to have in common with somebody.

Jeremy

Yep.

Scott

Is there any one factor you can think of that helped you survive this?

Jeremy

Just the love for life. I'm super positive. I'm a very good neighbor, friend, and family. I think I'm here for my wife. She and I have been bonded for 27 years now, so I definitely didn't want to leave her behind. I got 2 new grandbabies. I got purpose here to come back to.

Scott

You got a lot to live for.

Jeremy

Yeah, that's for sure.

Scott

That's great. Jeremy, I appreciate you coming on and telling your story. I'm glad things worked out the way they did.

Jeremy

Okay, thanks. I gotta appreciate it, man.

Scott

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