

Episode 71: Deneen dodged a derailing train

Trains are a big part of American culture, because they are really fascinating in so many ways. If you stand next to one, you realize – they are just so BIG. And they have so much power, to be able to pull all that weight. And wow, are they LOUD. Not just the sound of the engine, and the steel wheels on the track, but that horn – you can hear it even if you're nowhere near the railroad tracks.

Kids and adults of all ages are fascinated by trains. And they are fun to watch, as they rumble by. Maybe you get a wave from the engineer. It's great entertainment, as long as everything works like it's supposed to work.

Deneen was with her two little girls one day, at a railroad crossing, watching the train go by just a few feet from the front of their car. Then she realized that something was very wrong, and that train was about to crash.

Scott

This happened in this little town Baltimore, Ohio. I actually grew up in Ohio and I'd never actually heard of this place, where is that?

Deneen

Baltimore is a tiny little town about 30 minutes east of Columbus, Ohio. It's really small and rural and only has about 3 stop lights. It was a tiny town built on the Ohio canal system. At one time they used the canal system and the train to bring in and out things from the paper mill that used to be there.

Scott

Is this a popular route for trains? Do you see a lot of trains coming through?

Deneen

Yes. There are a lot of trains that come through. It's very interesting because the town has numerous train crossings going through it to get to the town.

Scott

Do you remember where you were headed that day?

Deneen

It was Mother's Day and we were visiting my in-laws who live in Baltimore. My husband's family lives there and he grew up there. We went to church and then went for brunch afterwards, then we went back and visited. It was kind of a sad Mother's Day, not only because my husband couldn't be with us, but also because my sister-in-law's mother had passed away and this was her first Mother's Day without her mother. So it was quiet and a little bit sad.

My husband worked in IT back then and they would call him at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning to run a job. He was a really nice guy and when a female coworker was supposed to go in and run the job that day, he went and worked instead so she could be with her family. So it was just me and the girls that day.

I decided to leave and go back home to wait for my husband to get home. We had a little time to kill so I took the girls to the park.

Scott

How old were the girls at this time?

Deneen

Alyssa was 4 and Keke was 2.

Scott

So just real little kids then.

Deneen

They were very tiny. We went to the park and they played on the slides and swings. They have monkey bars that they really used to like that look like a spider too. After a while it was time to head home. I was trying to get them in the car, you know at 4 and 2 they don't want to listen to you. I bribed them and said, "Come on, let's go home and we'll watch a video."

It was a beautiful Mother's Day. The sun was shining and it was just really great. I got the kids put in the car seats and all buckled in, and you think you're good and safe with your kids. Then we started heading back home. We had to go back to the crossing to go back to the house. We lived at Fairfield Beach in Thornville. We went right past my in-laws again because we were taking a back way home.

We got to the train crossing and the gates had just started coming down. I was excited and said, "Oh this is fun girls! We can count the cars." Back then the lines at the crossing were pretty close, so if you were up there as the trains went by you could feel the vibrations in the car.

Scott

This train was carrying a very heavy load, correct?

Deneen

Yes. It was carrying coal.

Scott

Which is obviously extremely heavy and if it was a long train then yeah, I guess you could feel the vibration from the ground.

Deneen

The train was full too. I remember the train cars were red and you could actually see the coal up over the tops of them.

So it was fun. I remember telling the girls it was going to be fun and we were going to count together. For my 4 year old this was going to be a good counting experience for her, then the other little one, Keke, she was sitting there just kind of watching. We started the counting and Alyssa was counting. As she started I was looking at this thinking, "Wow. Those cars are going pretty quickly." She starts counting and she gets up to about 12. That's when I noticed something wasn't quite right.

It was strange. I was looking and all of the sudden I could see some gravel coming up. It looked like it was coming out of the ground. We were looking at the cars at first and not the wheels. So I looked down at the wheels and it was unbelievable to see that the train wheels were not on the track; they were off the track. Then all of the sudden there was gravel and dirt coming up. Then big pieces of asphalt started coming up and coming at us in the car. It was shocking to see what was happening.

I realized at that point that it was necessary to get out of the way. Unfortunately, when I pulled up, during the time that we had parked there another car had come up behind me and was right behind me.

Scott

So you were first in line?

Deneen

Correct, yes. I could see that the train was derailing and I couldn't go backwards or forwards and I couldn't turn in either direction. The only thing that I could really do was get on the horn and scream for the person behind me to move. It was sad because this was happening and I realized the severity of the situation. I was looking back in my rearview mirror at the car behind me because I was desperate for her to see me. She was in a little blue car.

I was screaming and I caught sight of my kids, and they were so little and so cute in their car seats just staring at me. Alyssa, being a little older, she definitely realized something was wrong and she was crying because I was screaming. Keke was just looking at me and her eyes were as wide as saucers, not understanding what was happening.

Scott

At this point in the story I wanted to get the perspective of Alyssa. She's an adult now but on that day she was just 4 years old. I asked her what she remembered.

Alyssa

I remember my mom screaming. I remember that pretty clearly. As a little kid it was not something I had heard before. I've heard her get mad or maybe yell down, "What are you guys doing down there?" Or something like that, but this was panicked and insane sounding screaming. It was just like nothing I had heard. I don't think it was the train that scared me as much as it was my mom. I was reacting to my mom screaming and it still sends chills down my spine when I think about it.

I also remember the noise. It's funny I didn't actually think about the noise until we had been discussing it more recently. I remember the screeching sound of metal on metal. I remember a tree coming down too. It looked like a big tree to me but then again I was 4 so who knows. I remember the tree coming down as the train hit the tree, and the tree came down.

The other thing I remember was when my mom moved the car. My mom was in the driver's seat and I was diagonally behind her on the right of the car. I looked to the right and I saw the lady's face as we reversed past her. I just remember thinking she looked shocked and frozen. That's the word I always use whenever I tell the story: she looked frozen.

Those are really the things I remember.

Deneen

I was fairly calm and I'm usually pretty good under pressure, so I'm pretty sure to hear me screaming like that was traumatic for them. I was so helpless. I couldn't do anything because there was nothing to do so all I could do was pray and hope to get out of the situation.

It was also kind of strange because, as I'm sitting there on the horn and screaming for the person behind me to move, there were all these big pieces of concrete that were kind of coming around the car. The front of the car got little pieces of gravel on it, but we were so lucky that the big pieces went around us and didn't hit the windshield. If something would have come through the windshield and hit me I would have let off the brakes and would have gone forward.

Bless her heart, the lady behind me finally realized what was happening and started to back up. I took the opportunity and started backing up. As I was I could see that these train cars were off the tracks and all over each other. They had derailed and looked kind of like an accordion. Then some of them were falling. There was a train car in front of us that was falling towards us as we were backing up and dumping all that coal where we just were. It was split seconds that we got out of that alive.

Scott

So it was just 2 cars there right? There wasn't anybody behind the other lady?

Deneen

Right.

Scott

So you were able to back up and right where you had been sitting was where that train car fell?

Deneen

Along with all the coal.

Scott

Right.

Deneen

When she realized what was happening she moved back quickly. Then I went back and we ended up being parallel because there was a bend in the road so you could only go so far back.

Just the enormity and the severity of the situation was shocking. I started to shake. I was in disbelief of what was happening. I believe that the lady who'd been behind me was probably in a similar state.

People started coming out of their houses. There was a house that had gotten some damage in the front. Once we started to realize that we were ok, we both left. I went back, because as I mentioned, my mother-in-law lived not even a quarter of a mile down the street. I couldn't cross the tracks to get home so I went back to her house. I knew I needed to do that because I was shook up.

They were outside and my mother-in-law, brother-in-law and sister-in-law were all outside because they were so close that they heard the crash and the commotion. It also took out some

of the power so they had no power. Everybody was coming out from the neighborhood to see what had happened.

I pulled into the driveway and they were shocked to see me. When I left they had no idea I went to the park, so they thought I was home and they were so confused as to why I was there. Once I got in the driveway and parked the car, then I lost it. I cried and lost it. I'm sure the girls saw that too. My brother-in-law helped get the girls out of their car seats and we all went in the house and talked about what happened.

We talked about it and my brother-in-law, who was of sound mind, said, "You know, you really need to go back and talk to the officers and firefighters who are going to be on the scene." I didn't want any part of that at all. I was done and I didn't want to go or take my girls back there. My sister-in-law and mother-in-law stayed back with the babies and I went back to the scene. My mother-in-law was calling my husband to come over and tell him what happened at this time too.

By that time the first responders and emergency people were there. I said to my brother-in-law, "There's nothing I can do Steve." Steve said, "No, we need to talk to the police and tell them." So I went up and I was trying to talk to the emergency personnel and I was explaining to them, "Hey I was here." They said, "We can't talk. There are some people that are buried under this coal." I said, "No there isn't." They said, "No, we have witnesses." They were just panicked because the witnesses had said that they knew that there were cars there.

I finally made myself heard enough. When I got his attention he really gave me his full attention and said, "I really need to know everything that is going on." So he interrogated me; rightly so. I explained it to him and he said, "How did you get out of that? There were witnesses. How did you even manage to get out of that?" The grace of God I guess because I have no idea, we were just lucky. He wanted to be sure so he wanted to know how many cars were there and if there was anybody on the other side, which there wasn't. He just kept saying, "I can't believe that you got out of that situation."

You know, when your babies are in the back you're going to do what you can do to get out of that situation. I'm just lucky that the lady behind me moved. To this day I have no idea who that was and I would just love to have met her and give her a hug and thank her. It was literally split seconds and that story could have had a very different ending.

Scott

I read some reports that the train, as it derailed, knocked a house off of its foundation. Was anyone injured in this whole thing?

Deneen

No. No one was injured. I believe there were 3 people in the house. The house lost the front of the porch and got knocked off of its foundation but it was fine. The biggest concern initially was that there was a gas leak. So there was concern of an explosion. Again, very lucky, there was no explosion, no one was hurt, and both of us with the cars got out of the way. It's pretty incredible, when I went back to that scene, to just see the carnage of what happened.

Scott

Yeah. I can imagine looking at that and thinking, "Where do you even start to clean this up?" There were 30 cars that derailed right?

Deneen

Mmhmm.

Scott

All of them were filled with 100 tons of coal each and it was just a big pile of metal.

Deneen

It was just a mess. That's why the first responders were so concerned, because they thought that there were people underneath there. I don't even want to think about what it would have been like if we hadn't gotten out of that. I doubt we would've survived it with that kind of weight. You think about it, 2 little girls back in their car seats, that would've been just horrifying. I can't imagine the conversation my husband would have had to have.

Scott

Of all days too, on Mother's Day.

Deneen

(laughs) Yeah but you know what? We were so blessed to get out of that it was like the best Mother's Day present we ever could have had.

Scott

Do you and your daughters talk about this now on each Mother's Day? Just kind of remember what happened that day?

Deneen

It's funny, we talk about it a lot when we come up to any sort of train crossing. We don't like them and if I'm the first person in line I leave a LOT of space in front of us. I'm pretty sure, now that my daughters drive, that they do the same. We talk about it a little bit on Mother's Day, but doing this interview we've really talked a lot about it. I mentioned to my daughter today that sometimes these things happen and they're life altering when they happen. Then time goes by and you forget exactly how lucky and blessed you are because it was literally a split second from having a very different ending.

Scott

Since that day, there have been several train derailments right there in that area of Ohio. What do you attribute that too?

Deneen

With this particular accident it's our understanding with Conrail that they had done some work and replacement and when they did the work it caused that derailment. Later on there was also a derailment in Columbus. It seemed like there was a flurry of them for a while, but not as much anymore. That particular crossing has always had a lot of problems. That was because for a long time there weren't crossing rails that came down.

Scott

So for a period of time people just had to realize that there may be a train coming and you had to check before you crossed the tracks?

Deneen

Correct, yes.

Scott

That seems so primitive now, you know?

Deneen

(laughs)

Scott

Anytime you see a railroad crossing there are the gates that come down and the lights flashing and all that. I guess it hasn't always been that way.

Deneen

No. This is a pretty rural area to start with and then this was not one of the main crossings. There were some state routes that did have the crossing guards but this was kind of a back road crossing. It was a shortcut (laughs)

When everything was over and done, we got the girls and my husband came to meet us and talk about it. We spent a little more time with our in-laws, and then we had to head home. I had the car seats in my car so I buckled the girls back up and we headed home. Of course we couldn't go through that crossing and then there was another crossing on the other side of town that we couldn't use. We had to go around. I can tell you that crossing the tracks to go home was not a very fun experience. We went home, spent some time as a family, then put the girls to bed.

The weird thing about all of that was that that night I actually dreamt about the accident. When everything is happening it's so fast, all I wanted to do was get out, make sure my girls were ok and survive. Then when I had the dream it was kind of slow motion and I saw the trains collapsing on each other and falling over. There was a tree that came down too and I didn't even remember that tree. It was very interesting to have the dream. I had the dream that night and never dreamt about it again. That was a strange experience though to be honest with you.

Scott

In real life was there a tree that was hit and fell down?

Deneen

Yes, absolutely.

Scott

And you didn't remember it but it came up in your dream?

Deneen

(laughs) Yes. That was so weird. As I'm telling the story again and thinking again about how we got out of that situation, I think about the asphalt and concrete and rocks flying around the car. It literally felt like it was going around the car, it was miraculous. Then those first responders were just shocked after the witnesses had said that they saw us.

Scott

I'm thinking the witnesses must have seen your car there and then later on they didn't see your car there so they assumed it was under that wreckage.

Deneen

Exactly, yes. Those poor first responders, they were beside themselves thinking that there was 1 possibly 2 cars at least, under all that rubble.

Scott

Unbelievable. Well, I'm glad you made it.

Deneen

I am too. I'm blessed with these daughters who are adults now. Every once in a while I look at them and think, only a few seconds difference. Had we not been counting those cars, if I had been looking at the radio or talking to them in the back seat, there were so many if's that could have made it so very different. Even the lady hearing me beeping the horn and screaming, that she moved just in time too. I wouldn't have my beautiful 27 and 25 year old daughters today.

Scott

Yeah, that's what I would think about. Think about from the day that happened to today, all of the family memories that you've created in that time period. None of them would even exist if that hadn't happened that way.

Deneen

Years and years of memories could have been completely changed in just a second or two. It's amazing when I think about it. You don't think about it everyday when this much time has gone by. Thinking about it now makes me really appreciate all the good times and even the bad times. It would have been such a different experience. I feel pretty blessed.

Scott

We'll have pictures of the crash scene in the show notes for this episode. Deneen, thanks for telling your story.

Deneen

Well again, thank you for having me. I'm just happy and blessed that everything turned out the way that it did.

That train crash was the front page story in the Columbus Dispatch newspaper, and you can see the picture of the train car pileup, as well as pictures of Deneen and her daughters – then and now – at WhatWasThatLike.com/71.

And one week from today, you'll see a new What Was That Like episode pop up on your podcast app, assuming you're subscribed to the podcast. You are subscribed, right? So you never miss an episode? Anyway, a week from now I'll be posting the Q&A episode, where a bunch of you called in or wrote in your questions, and I'll answer them in that episode.

And if you're thinking, "Oh, man, I meant to send in a question for that and I forgot to!" Well, don't worry, because at some point in the future we'll do another one of these. And I'm still thinking, it would be fun to do a Listener Zoom chat. Would you want to do that? If you're in the Facebook group I think I might do a poll and see what kind of interest there is for that. Hey, I know I'd like to do it, so even if it's just you and me, who cares, right? It'd still be fun.

So the Q&A episode is one week from today, and you know what else happens on that same Friday? The next Raw Audio episode will go live. That will be Raw Audio 11. Those bonus episodes are only available to patrons, but it's only \$5 a month to support the show and get those exclusive episodes. [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.whatwasthatlike.com/support)

And to close out today's show, we have a voicemail from Isabelle. She had some comments after listening to episode 30, which is titled Travis lost his son. If you haven't heard that one, I highly recommend it. It was a tough one to do, but very important, and you'll see why when you hear it.

Take care, stay safe, and I'll see you in one week with some questions and answers.

Isabelle

Hey Scott, my name is Isabelle and I'm calling from Ottawa, Canada. I have been binging your show for the last few days. The one episode that really got to me was "Travis lost his son." I don't know how you did it. I was bawling the whole way through, like ugly crying. It was absolutely amazing how calm and composed and compassionate you were. The compassion you showed in the show, I don't know how you do it. I'm actually studying to be a counselor myself and just, wow, you should be a counselor. You don't interrupt anyone and you ask the right questions. It's just absolutely beautiful.

I actually reached out to Brandon's mom on FaceBook and we chatted a bit and everything. She told me that her son Aaron surprises them everyday and that he is amazing. I didn't know who the FaceBook page belonged to so I spoke to the whole family. I thanked Travis for opening up and being vulnerable. Men don't often talk about their emotions, obviously. The fact that he spoke about how he had even gone to therapy even before Brandon passed away and that since this Aaron has been doing it too. I think it's absolutely crucial for all of that to happen.

Anyways, I love your show. A lot of them I really like, but I haven't listened to the foot one yet (laughs). Thanks so much for your show, it's great. I'm alone during the pandemic every second week when I don't have my daughter, and your voice is soothing and keeps a good noise in the house. Thanks so much, from Canada, we love you guys. Bye.

