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Chance Encounters with Bob Flaherty: Trauma in the midst of strangers

HADLEY — The way this column generally works is that I ride around on my bicycle looking for interesting people to talk to. Since it's a year-round column, many of my victims, err, *subjects* will be encountered in dead of winter. **Norwottuck Rail Trail, Jan. 3, 28 degrees Fahrenheit**

I pass two bundled-up women happily chatting away but figure I'll circle back. I'd like to get a few miles in before dropping mittens and taking notes in the cold.

Little did I know that these women would soon play vital roles in my well-being.

For, the most interesting person I am to see this day is the one sprawled out on the blacktop just east of the Middle Street intersection, his downed bike beside him, sunglasses smashed, water bottles rolling away.

Oh, wait, I think this poor shmuck is me.

It happened snakebite fast! A patch of ice ahead. No big thing, just a craggy section of frozen snow, easy to get around, just as easy to go through.

Falling off a bike on ice is a unique thing. We're a hockey family, so falls are expected, but this — you can't see it coming! You are up-ended and pitched, as if the ice seeks to punish you for your arrogance. In a hundredth of a second your head and entire left side slams into pavement and you don't even have time to clench your teeth.

I struggled to my feet. My head, curiously, did not seem broken, but my left arm sure as hell did. It could not move. And I did not want it to move. Ever again. Content to live out my life as I was at this moment, pacing, sputtering, grasping my left arm with my right hand, as it precipitously hung, frozen in that crooked position of a western outlaw reaching for his gun.

This is when my first responders, Kathie Glime and Kelli Hurlburt, catch up with me.

"That's not good," gasps Hurlburt, who thought to herself: "His upper arm is almost cut in half."

"Yeah, it's bent pretty bad," Glime agrees, all ready to start summoning ambulances.

Incredibly, I was pushing them away. "No, don't worry, my wife'll come get me."

"We don't feel good about leaving you," says Hurlburt.

"Let's walk over to that bench and make a plan," Glime insists, as she picks up my bike from the ice and Hurlburt chases down my bottles. The duo, Hadley neighbors, now retired, often walk this path, a 4-



Kathie Glime, left, Bob Flaherty, center, and Kelli Hurlburt, right, at the Norwottuck Rail Trail, Friday in Hadley. Last month, Glime and Hurlburt helped Flaherty and called emergency services after he slipped on a patch of ice while riding his bike, breaking his arm. STAFF PHOTO/DANIEL JACOBI II

mile roundtrip from their adjacent homes to Damon Road and back. I am not the first to be urged to fly right by Kathie Glime. She and a friend came upon a young rollerblader in this very vicinity who'd fallen and broken his ankle. "He was in shock and shivering. We took our coats off and covered him up. He was trying to call a friend and his phone was dying. 'You need to go to the hospital,' I told him, and took out my phone. 'Don't do THAT!' he cried. 'I don't have insurance!' So I called his friend with my phone, and we helped him to a table by a restaurant and didn't feel good at all about leaving him."

She's sticking to her guns this time and calls 911 while I yawn and moan on the bench. The yawning, which can be a sign of something, makes my rescuers increasingly worried.

Hurlburt finds my glasses on the ground, the ones that I wear under my sunglasses. "I think you'll need these," she says, handing me the mangled but still functional specs.

Both women have been on the receiving end more than once of the call home following an accident. Kathie's teenage son sliced open his forehead in a freak skateboard accident in Northampton and the call came from a nurse who'd arrived on the scene. "His eyebrow was hanging," she recalled.

Kelli's cycling husband Chuck got car-doored in Amherst, went flying over the handlebars and paid dearly with his shoulder. That call home came from Cooley Dickinson Hospital.

Patrolman Harry Santiago of the Hadley Police Department pulls in from Depot Road. "Are you dizzy?" he asks me.

"No, not dizzy but I'm yawning like a damn dog."

He takes a look at my arm, gently pulls off my left mitten to enormous pain, and asks, "How much do you like this jacket?" "Well, my

wife just had the zipper fixed, so..."

Santiago does his best, through excruciating pain, to get my prized windbreaker off, the one I've worn since the infamous Boston Marathon of 2013. "I'm just gonna open this up big," he says, cutting through the ratty old sweater underneath with scissors. "I think ya got something going on with that elbow," he understates, as I involuntarily let out some F-laden combinations I'm embarrassed my new friends have to hear. I try not to peek at my bare arm, like looking away when you donate blood, but I am hearing gasps from Hurlburt and Glime that paint a pretty good picture. "Ooh, that really doesn't look good," said one.

The ambulance arrives minutes later, captained by Dominic and Ajax of Action EMS. The first question, which will be asked 100 times in the days to follow: "Name and date of birth?"

Kelli and Kathie wish me well as I'm loaded onto a stretcher. Santiago asks me if I'd like him to bring my bike back to the station for safekeeping and I moan sure and feebly flash a thumbs-up.

The pain is ridiculous as my EMT's stabilize my arm and haul my backpack and freshly-cracked helmet aboard. "Where shall we take you?" asks Dominic.

Morgue, I'm tempted to groan, but "Cooley Dick or Ho-lyoke Med," comes out of me.

"We're happy to take you to either," he says, "but you've got a serious injury, an obvious deformity. Might be better to take you to Baystate and the trauma unit there."

I wince as those ominous words sink in, wince audibly as we hit bumps, and apologize for being a baby. "Make all the noise you want," smiles Ajax.

We talk hockey, gymnastics and firefighting as we make our way to Springfield, the roar of the engine drowning out my whimpering.

Under the (gulp) knife.

There are many things about hospitals that suck, like being made to wear silly-looking clothing and having to learn, through trial and error, how that little urinal thingy works. But the people who take your blood pressure and bring you food and meds, and endlessly ask for your DOB, are very easy to get along with, none more than my day-time nurse-in-charge, Clare Stratton, who's only been on the job a few months, having graduated Elms College last year, her "true calling," she says.

When I tell her how I was looking for a story when I crashed, she cries, "I think you found it!"

Stratton frequently asks me to rate my pain level, with 10 being the highest. I find that as long as I keep the arm still I can manage the pain, and I bravely and steadfastly turn down any increase in painkillers. But Clare Stratton later advises me that the X-ray session to come will involve moving the arm like a queen waving from a coach. "We should get ahead of the pain," she says, and I nod agreeably.

But could it be any worse than the pain at the bike path? OK, taking the bike path as a 10, and cozy in my hospital bed is, say, a six, then the many-angled posing of my elbow in X-ray is an easy 23. Oh, the language.

I am to have surgery for the first time. Scalpel! I have sustained a "terrible triad injury" with bones and ligaments in disrepair, and I will end up with a shiny new radial head, which looks like a mini-gavel and which will eventually allow my arm to do arm-like things.

Clare Stratton stops to say goodbye after her shift ends. "I know you didn't want to be here," she says, "but you were a pleasure to work with."

I told her it was mutual, and to never become jaded over any questionable decision-making from above. "Jaded? In this job? Not happening." My brief sporadic dreams that night have people yelling "We're LOSING him!"

The two women wheeling me to the OR in the morning both laugh out loud when I ask them if they watch any medical shows. "They don't get anything right," scoffed one.

And now I'm in the same pristine arena I saw on "St. Elsewhere," under the probing overhead lamps. And now I'm asleep, and now I'm awake, and now I'm sent home to be looked after by the wonderfulness that is Annemarie. There are worse things.

In the end, this is nothing, really, a howling hurt that hopefully heals. But there are heartbroken high school athletes right now who'll miss their senior year in basketball with something like this, or highly-paid pitchers whose careers might be wrecked.

Me, I'll just plod along as always. By the time I get back on the bike there'll be no ice anywhere, and by the time Trump's out of office there may be no ice on the planet.

But know this; even in the screeching shrill that is our great national divide, there will always be someone who'll stop if they see you lying in the road, and insist that you make a plan.

Bob Flaherty, a longtime author, radio personality and former Gazette writer and columnist, writes a monthly column called "Chance Encounters" in which he writes about our neighbors going about their daily lives.

