

TULSA WORLD



Caroline Johnson: Rescued! Tulsa woman gets out of a tight place with the help of a lot of others

By Caroline Johnson

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My downhill foot hit nothing. Then I was tumbling.

Briefly, I had the sensation of being a kid rolling down gentler Oklahoma hills as I grabbed for vines or trees or anything to stop me.

A granite boulder did it with an almost audible smack.

Then I bounced into a shallow pool of Rose Creek rollicking along after a week of spring rain in the Shenandoah National Park.

My husband (Eagle Scout No. 1) soon appeared and tried to get me out of the water.

"I can't stand on this leg," I said, leaning against the bank.

He scrambled up 30 feet of rocky riverbank and hailed a couple of hikers who stopped to pick up my wind shirt. Without hesitation, the young man (Eagle Scout No. 2) followed Rusty down to the water's edge and the young woman set off up the trail to get help. Eagle Scout No. 2 stayed with us until help came.

Within 90 minutes, two park rangers arrived with search and rescue team medics.

Assessment began: Lots of bleeding from several head wounds, but no concussion, no apparent spinal injury, no obviously broken bones and amazingly, no pain ... so long as I kept my leg still.

Thus I turned my life over to the kindness and skill of strangers who would get me back to civilization.

"You are a hot mess," said another rescue team member who had just arrived with, ironically, a yellow space blanket to keep me warm. Her name is Katy, and she kept my spirits buoyed with wisecracks while we waited for the rescue team to assemble above.

Ranger Travis (Eagle Scout No. 3) kept me entertained, too. He practiced his campfire talk on black bears, then segued into stories of wolves, elk and moose in the parks out West.

I made myself comfortable as possible in a green cathedral of beech trees, watching yellow swallowtails float on the wind and thanking my lucky stars for these people I didn't know.

About five hours after my 45-degree tumble, I was being tucked into a litter that would be dragged up the riverbank.

"My name's Ben and we're going to get you out of here," said the guy in charge.

"Good omen," I said, "my son's name is Ben."

He climbed and guided the litter while several dozen volunteers on top hauled us up the 40-foot granite cliff using ropes, pulleys and belay devices.

As they pulled us steadily upward, I listened to birdcalls I could hear over the roaring of the creek and began to see clouds in the blue sky.

Thankfully, the predicted rain held off until we were on top where the litter was loaded onto a single-wheeled rescue gurney. With four volunteers on each side, we began the 1.6-mile trek through rough terrain and darkening skies, stopping only to rotate the team.

Nine hours after my fall, I was loaded into an ambulance. I would get four stitches in my forehead, X-rays revealing columnar fractures at the top of my tibia and an OK to travel with my leg in a stabilizer and me in a wheelchair.

I would meet more Eagle Scouts and angels along my long summer road to recovery, but now know firsthand that there really are a lot of good people out there to help you up.