



Survival Factors- Crashworthiness Investigation Attachment

CTA Train Passenger Interviews

Chicago, IL

RRD24MR002

(38 pages)



NTSB RECORD OF CONVERSATION

Investigator name: Sheryl Harley, Investigator, Survival Factors-Crashworthiness Group
Mode: Rail

Date: March 29, 2024, 1:07 p.m. (Local time)
Called: Mr. Mohammed Manzoor- train passenger at [REDACTED]
NTSB Accident Number: RRD24MR002

Narrative: On Friday, March 29, 2024, at about 1:07 p.m., Investigator Harley called Mr. Mohammed Manzoor, and requested to interview him regarding the CTA accident that occurred on November 16, 2023. Mr. Manzoor agreed to the interview and to allow the investigator to take notes but not record the interview.

Mr. Mohammed Manzoor:

I was heading downtown. The train was a little late. I don't remember much because I believe I hit my head.

(Question: Investigator Harley: Where were you seated on the train?)

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: I was in the first car in the first seat. The conductor was on the right side, and I was in the first seat on the left side.

(Question: Investigator Harley: Do you remember if you had any indication that something was wrong?)

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: Just that the train was late and it seemed to take the conductor longer than normal to open the doors, but nothing else.

(Question: Investigator Harley: Do you remember the train braking or the activation of the emergency brake?)

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: No, I had my headphones in like I do every morning. I don't remember anything except waking up.

(Question: Investigator Harley: You stated that you "woke up", where were you when you did?)



NTSB RECORD OF CONVERSATION

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: I was sitting in my seat. The front of the train was dismantled, and the conductor was lying on the floor. He was hurt pretty bad. I had blood on my hand.

(Question: Investigator Harley: Do you remember how you got off the train?)

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: I was assisted by a paramedic who helped me climb down a ladder that was placed on the side of the train.

(Question: Investigator Harley: After you exited the train car, where did you go?)

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: I was standing on the side of the track, on the right side of the train. Then they walked me up a slope and placed me on a stretcher and put me in an ambulance.

(Question: Investigator Harley: While you were standing on the side of the track, were there medical personnel present, did you need or receive any medical intervention?)

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: There were medical personnel there, but I didn't get any treatment. I remember I asked for water several times. After going up the slope, I was laid down in a stretcher and checked a little bit. They then put me in an ambulance.

(Question: Investigator Harley: What injuries did you sustained in the accident?)

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: I had a concussion. It wasn't diagnosed. They didn't find anything on the CT scan, but the neurologist said that wasn't unusual. I had headaches a couple of times a week for several months. Now, I have the headaches around once a week. I had cuts on my hand and neck pain, like whiplash. I couldn't work and have trouble looking at computer screens. I also had an injury to my ankle.

(Question: Investigator Harley: Did you have any interaction with the train operator?)

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: Not really, no.

(Question: Investigator Harley: Do you remember seeing any other passengers in the train car that were around you and were seriously hurt?)

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: I remember that there were other passengers around. The conductor was seriously injured. Two young guys, who I believe to be students, asked if I was OK.

(Question: Investigator Harley: The two young guys that you identified as students, did they talk to you inside or outside of the train?)



NTSB RECORD OF CONVERSATION

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: Inside of the train.

Investigator Harley: I would like to go over what you have said, to see that I have got it correct.

You were seated in the first train car, in the first seat on the left side. You don't remember anything being wrong. You believe you hit your head and the next instance you recall is that you woke up, your hand was bleeding, but you were still in your seat. Is that correct?

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: Yep.

(Question: Investigator Harley: Is there anything else you think is significant, any question, anything that you think I should have asked and didn't?)

Answer: Mr. Manzoor: No, nothing comes to mind.

(Note: Investigator Harley explained the NTSB process and advised that a copy of Mr. Manzoor interview statement would be either mailed or emailed to him so that he could review it and make additions or corrections as he sees fit. Mr. Manzoor requested the statement be emailed to him and provided his email address; [REDACTED])

Interview concluded at 1:18 p.m. (local time)

.....

End of Summary

I have reviewed this document and found it true and accurate to the best of my knowledge.

Print



NTSB RECORD OF CONVERSATION

Signature [REDACTED] 4/12/2024
Date Date

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

* * * * *

Investigation of: *

CTA TRAIN COLLIDES WITH *

RAIL EQUIPMENT IN CHICAGO, *

ILLINOIS ON NOVEMBER 16, 2023 *

* * * * *

Accident No.: RRD24MR002

Interview of: STEPHEN HELMER, Passenger

via telephone

Tuesday,
April 9, 2024

APPEARANCES:

SHERYL HARLEY, Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

I N D E X

ITEM

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Interview of Stephen Helmer:

By Ms. Harley

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I N T E R V I E W

(12:33 p.m.)

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2
3 MS. HARLEY: So today's date is April the 9th of 2024. The
4 current time is 12:33 p.m. That's local time. I'm talking to
5 Mr. Stephen Helmer in regards to the Chicago CTA accident that
6 occurred on November the 16th of 2023. NTSB number is RRD24MR002.

7 And, Mr. Helmer, just for the record, will you confirm that
8 it's okay for me to record this interview.

9 MR. HELMER: Yes.

10 MS. HARLEY: Thank you very much, sir. So as I explained to
11 you before, the NTSB is actually investigating the events and the
12 circumstances surrounding the accident, and one of the things that
13 we're doing is reaching out to all of the passengers that were on
14 the train at the time.

INTERVIEW OF STEPHEN HELMER

15
16 BY MS. HARLEY:

17 Q. So to start, I guess I'm going to ask you if you can just
18 kind of sort walk me through what you remember of the day,
19 starting from the time you boarded the train.

20 A. Sure. My wife, Susan Helmer, and my daughter Margaret
21 Costello (ph), that's her married name -- we call her Meg -- and
22 our two two-year-old grandchildren, Joey Costello -- Joseph
23 Costello -- and Caroline Costello, the five of us boarded the
24 train at the Skokie/Oakton station. I think the train is called
25 the Skokie Swift. Our plan was to go to downtown Chicago. We

1 were going to meet a friend who was in Chicago as well from
2 Syracuse where we live, for lunch, and do some sightseeing once we
3 got downtown on the train.

4 We got into the first car. It was a two-train car train, and
5 we went to the back of the first train car and the five of us were
6 sitting together. The twins were in a stroller, a double
7 stroller, strapped into the stroller. I sat on -- if you face the
8 front of the train car, I was on the right side sitting across
9 from my daughter Meg, and my wife ^{Susan} ~~she~~ was more to the rear, and
10 the stroller was in between us in the aisle.

11 About ten minutes into the trip, there was a sudden explosion
12 type of event that threw us all in the air. I do not recall the
13 sounds of ^{braking} ~~breaking~~ or sirens or warnings. It just happened in a
14 very sudden fashion. I was thrown into a pole and a plexiglass
15 wall or shield to my right. My daughter Meg was thrown into a
16 plexiglass shield to her left. My wife Susan struck her face, was
17 thrown into a pole next to her position, and the stroller that the
18 twins were in went up in the air and flipped over. Fortunately,
19 the twins stayed in the stroller and weren't ejected.

20 From there, I can talk about what happened to us in the next
21 10, 15 minutes where we were still on the train if you want me to.

22 Q. Absolutely, sir. Go ahead.

23 A. All right. So I realized that I was injured. I was dazed.
24 I was bleeding from the head. I had a gash on my head. My
25 daughter and my wife attended to the children, who were confused

1 but relatively uninjured. They had some bumps and bruises later.

2 There was a lot of confusion and screaming and yelling on the
3 train. I remember looking to my right up towards the front of the
4 train, and there was an employee of the CTA struggling to get out
5 of some wreckage. I presume that that was the operator. He was
6 obviously in pain and screaming, and there were people on the
7 train (audio drop) ^{calling out for} someone to get a belt so they could put a
8 tourniquet on one of his legs.

9 I was a bit dazed and confused so I wasn't always cognizant
10 of everything, but I was trying to see what was going on and help
11 out with my family. There was a young college student who I later
12 learned was a DePaul University student from reading newspaper
13 articles, who was walking through calmly, checking everyone, said
14 something to me about the fact that, yes, my head was cut, but he
15 couldn't see my skull so I must have been okay, or at least he
16 thought I was, and I thanked him.

17 There was a businessman standing up -- a man who was dressed
18 like a businessman, I should say -- talking on his cellphone. I
19 think he was calling 911.

20 And then there was a period of time when there was no one on
21 the train for rescue purposes because I believe they were de-
22 electrifying the tracks, and that seemed like maybe 10 minutes
23 when we were there without EMTs, but once they got there, they
24 organized the passengers to get off of the train by virtue of a
25 ladder that was put against the side of the train car, and we all

1 lined up and were taken off the train. The twins, we handed down
2 to rescue personnel. We had the stroller -- we got the stroller
3 off. My wife and I and my daughter Meg were then instructed to go
4 to an area that was a wall next to the train tracks where we were
5 quickly identified by the people who were there. We gave them our
✓ 6 names and our phone numbers, and eventually they moved us across
7 the tracks to an area where there was a rocky embankment, and they
8 were doing the same with other people.

9 I was taking photographs as best I could of what was going
10 on. We saw at that point that the train car that we were in had
11 rear-ended a snowplow train that was on the same tracks for some
12 unknown reason.

13 From there, sitting at the bottom of the embankment, the
14 rescue personnel started taking people up the embankment,
15 including myself and my family, for triage purposes, and I was
16 triaged up there with a head wound, and I had complaints about the
17 right side of my body. My wife was clearly injured but was not
18 refusing, but wasn't necessarily seeking medical treatment, nor
19 was my daughter and the twins, but then they triaged us
20 individually. We went to three separate hospitals where we
21 received treatment.

22 Q. So I'm going to step back a little bit. So you boarded the
23 train, and at some particular point, you say that there was some
24 kind of an explosion. Can you explain that a little bit further?
25 What exactly was that?

1 A. Well, it was, obviously it was the contact between the two
2 train cars. There's a train car and the snowplow train. To me,
3 it felt like an explosion, it just was so sudden. I don't think
4 anything exploded in terms of an incendiary device or anything.
5 It was not that. It had that sort of suddenness, that boom.

6 Q. Gotcha. So immediately following the accident, did you
7 encounter any CTA employees? Did anyone board the train and
8 assist the passengers?

9 A. I can't tell you who they were for certain, but it appeared
10 to me that they were fire and rescue folks from the city of
11 Chicago. I don't remember anyone in what would be perhaps a CTA
12 uniform. Although I don't live in Chicago, but it seemed like the
13 folks that were ~~tending~~ ^{attending} to us belonged to the fire department and
14 the police department of the city of Chicago.

15 Q. Gotcha. Do you remember if while you were on the train and
16 waiting to be evacuated off if the lights were on or off?

17 A. I don't recall. It was a very bright sunny day, and I don't
18 remember either way whether there were interior lights on, on the
19 train.

20 Q. Okay. Did you hear any kind of like an announcement over the
21 PA after the accident, like giving instructions to the passengers?

22 A. I don't recall that.

23 Q. So once you were -- you said that the passengers lined up and
24 they were taken off the train via a ladder that was placed against
25 the side of the car. Once you got out of the train and you were

1 standing by that wall, what kind of medical assistance or any
2 assistance that you received from the first responders at that
3 location?

4 A. I don't believe we received any medical assistance there. I
5 was using some baby wipes that we had for the twins to sort of
6 staunch the bleeding from my head. I was doing that myself with
7 my wife helping me a little bit. We received treatment once we
8 got up from the embankment. On the other side of the tracks they
9 had a triage area at the top of the embankment.

10 Q. You said that you gave someone your name and your
11 information. Was that a police officer or was that somebody from
12 the fire department?

13 A. I believe it was a female police officer because, first of
14 all, that's what I believe her uniform said, and I received the
15 police report, the initial report from the Chicago Police
16 Department, and our names and numbers were on that report.

17 Q. Okay. And then you said that the emergency responders
18 assisted you up the hill to the triage area. When you arrived at
19 the triage area, were you attended to immediately?

20 A. Yes, I was. They were concerned that I had a head injury,
21 and they bandaged my wounds and they put me on a stretcher, and I
22 was promptly taken to an ambulance.

23 Q. And which hospital did you go to?

24 A. I have it here. Just hang on for a moment. If you can just
25 give me a moment, I can get that.

1 Q. Not a problem. Take your time.

2 A. All right. [REDACTED] I believe it was [REDACTED]

3 Q. Advocate? Okay.

4 A. Let me see if I have a better -- there might be more to that.
5 Let me just hang on for a second.

6 Q. Does the name [REDACTED] mean anything, or sentence
7 St. Francis?

8 A. Maybe. I'm looking at my bill from the -- it just said
9 Advocate, so maybe there's more to it. I'm not sure. I have
10 Advocate here. I have the ambulance bill. The ambulance took me
11 to -- oh, [REDACTED]

12 Q. Oh, [REDACTED] Gotcha.

13 A. Yeah. [REDACTED] Chicago.

14 Q. Got it. All right. So my next question is, is that after
15 the incident, to your knowledge, the only CTA employee you
16 remember seeing was the train operator, which was the injured
17 individual that was at the front of the train car?

18 A. That's correct. That's the only one I can identify as a CTA
19 employee. There were other folks up there, but I couldn't tell
20 you if they were employees or passengers.

21 Q. All right. Gotcha. And so to your knowledge, the only
22 instructions that you received were from the fire department or
23 police department; is that correct?

24 A. That's my recollection.

25 Q. Okay. When you exited the train, do you remember if the fire

1 department was working to extricate an individual from underneath
2 that snowplow or that snow vehicle?

3 A. I didn't see that. I read reports that may have happened,
4 but I don't recall seeing that. There were people on stretchers,
5 but I didn't see where they came from.

6 Q. Is there anything you think I should have asked you and I
7 failed to ask you about this incident?

8 A. I don't think so. That's a summary of what I recall. It was
9 obviously very traumatic for everyone who was involved. As I said
10 before, I did sustain a blow to the head, but I have some vivid
11 memories of what took place there and I think I summarized them
12 for you.

13 Q. Great. So just to kind of close up and give you an idea of
14 what happens from here is that this interview is going to be
15 transcribed, and then I would like to send it to you to review. I
16 like people to take a look at what they've told me, and if they
17 feel like they need to add something or --

18 (Audio interference)

19 Q. Can you hear me? Hello?

20 A. Are you there?

21 Q. Yeah. Are you there?

22 A. Oh, yes. I lost you for just a moment.

23 Q. Yeah, I thought so. So anyway, what I'm going to do, if you
24 like, I'm going to actually send this to you. If you like, I can
25 email it to you, and I just ask you to just review it, and if you

1 want to add something or you say, well, that's not really correct,
2 let me correct that, we would appreciate you doing that. Okay?

3 A. Of course. Glad to, yes.

4 Q. Okay. So would you rather me mail it to you or email it to
5 you?

6 A. I prefer email.

7 Q. And what's your email, sir?

8 A. All lower case, [REDACTED] at the name of the law firm
9 where I work, which is [REDACTED]
10 e-s dot com.

11 Q. Dot com. And all of that is lower case?

12 A. It's all lower case, correct.

13 Q. Got it. Great. Again, you have my number, and please feel
14 free to call me if there's anything else that you think of in the
15 meantime. And it will probably be about 20 days to get the
16 interview out and transcribed and back to you. Thank you very
17 much for participating in the interview, and I certainly
18 appreciate it.

19 I will end the interview at 12:52 p.m.

20 (Whereupon, at 12:52 p.m., the interview was concluded.)

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

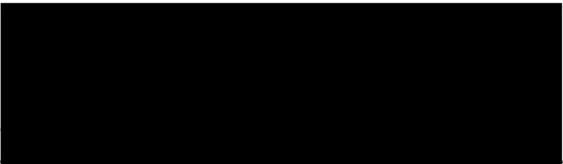
IN THE MATTER OF: CTA TRAIN COLLIDES WITH
RAIL EQUIPMENT IN CHICAGO,
ILLINOIS ON NOVEMBER 16, 2023
Interview of Stephen Helmer

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD24MR002

PLACE: via telephone

DATE: April 9, 2024

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.


Terri Trauth
Transcriber

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD

* * * * *

Investigation of: *

*

CTA TRAIN COLLIDES WITH *

RAIL EQUIPMENT IN CHICAGO, * Accident No.: RRD24MR002

ILLINOIS ON NOVEMBER 16, 2023 *

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Interview of: SUSAN HELMER, Passenger

via telephone

Tuesday,
April 9, 2024

APPEARANCES:

SHERYL HARLEY, Investigator
National Transportation Safety Board

I N D E X

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Interview of Susan Helmer:

By Ms. Harley

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I N T E R V I E W

(10:02 a.m.)

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2
3 MS. HARLEY: So good morning. My name is Cheryl Harley. I'm
4 an investigator with the National Transportation Safety Board.
5 Today is April the 10th of 2024, and it's 10:02 a.m. local time.
6 This interview is being conducted by telephone in regards to the
7 Chicago CTA accident that occurred on November the 16th of 2023,
8 at approximately 10:31 a.m. And on the phone with me, Ms. Helmer,
9 I'm going to ask you to officially identify yourself for the
10 recording.

11 MS. HELMER: Sure. My name is Susan Helmer, H-e-l-m-e-r.

12 MS. HARLEY: Thank you, ma'am.

INTERVIEW OF SUSAN HELMER

13
14 BY MS. HARLEY:

15 Q. And you were a passenger on the train so what I'm going to
16 ask you, if you don't mind, is just kind of walk me through what
17 you remember about that day.

18 A. Sure. We got -- we were in Skokie, so we -- I'm not a
19 native, but we went to the Skokie train entrance. We purchased
20 our tickets and we -- the train arrived and we opted to get in the
21 first car. And when we got on the car, it was my husband, myself,
22 our daughter, and two of her children who are under the age of
23 two, and we first were going to turn left and sit up front for the
24 twins for their first train ride, but opted to turn left -- no to
25 turn right because we realized we'd have a smaller space and

1 therefore probably be easier for us just to keep our commotion to
2 ourselves.

3 So we did. We sat down. My husband sat across from me. My
4 daughter was to my left. The twins, we decided to leave in their
5 stroller, strapped in their stroller, and I had a tight grip on
6 the stroller itself. Sorry.

7 Q. No problem.

8 A. And out of just -- we were all talking. We were excited, we
9 were going downtown for lunch. Only the little twin, [REDACTED] wanted
10 to get out of his stroller, and Steve, my husband, and daughter
11 thought, yes, let's get him out, and I just said no, let's keep
12 him strapped in, we're almost there. So we kept him strapped in.

13 And out of the blue, we just suddenly -- I went forward. I
14 thought I fainted. I thought this just happened to me. I went
15 forward, and my face broke my fall with one of the poles that you
16 use to stand up. So my face first broke the fall. I broke a
17 tooth. I knew I broke a tooth immediately; I could feel it in my
18 mouth. And my thigh was the next thing to stop my fall, and I
19 think I was still hanging onto the stroller, which probably
20 anchored it from going straight forward into the conductor's car
21 or his seat or the operator, because it is one of those very
22 expensive lightweight strollers and it really should have just
23 gone five feet forward and really would have been a horrible
24 situation. But I realized there was a bruise on my inner arm, and
25 I think I was still hanging onto the stroller, and that was the

1 third impact to the pole, which then it went up and came down.

2 And at that point, everything was still. I mean, everyone
3 was all over the place. The windows had blown out, and the doors
4 had blown out. I saw my husband and realized he was covered in
5 blood, so I -- Meggie -- one of the twins went face down, hit his
6 face on the way down. Even though he was strapped in, it was
7 still exposed. So she said, I've got to get him out. So she got
8 one out, and I said we're going to leave the other one because she
9 seems okay, and I didn't want a two year old running around in
10 that situation, and I wasn't sure what my ability was to keep up
11 with her and try to take care of my husband. I was just trying to
12 figure out where the blood was coming from. I thought it was his
13 eyes. So I had baby wipes because his whole face was covered with
14 blood, so I was kind of tending to him and having my daughter stay
15 calm, and the little girl, [REDACTED] the two year old, I was
16 trying to keep her calm by just singing nursery rhymes. Oh, dear.

17 And it just was a matter of time before the first responders
18 got there, and they did an unbelievable job keeping us calm and
19 one by one getting everyone down that ladder, handing the babies
20 over to them, and I said to Meg, you've got to go next, they've
21 got to see you on that ladder coming down too. And then the
22 triaging took place. And like I said, the fire department and the
23 first responders were just amazing.

24 How was that? It's awful. I can't talk about it without
25 getting emotional.

1 Q. Well, you know what, it is a traumatic experience and I'm not
2 going to take that away from you, and thank you very much for
3 agreeing to talk to me. It's very important, so I will thank you
4 again.

5 I'm going to go back -- yes?

6 A. I just wondered, have you seen the video?

7 Q. Yes, ma'am, I actually have.

8 A. Because I just -- it's one of those things where was I still
9 hanging onto that stroller is all I can -- that's all I want to
10 know. Was it -- oh, dear.

11 Q. Well, I will tell you that the stroller did not travel any
12 kind of significant distance in the train car, which kind of tells
13 me that somebody was, and the reason I'm going to say that is
14 because a lot of the people actually end up traveling a
15 significant distance that weren't anchored. So clearly something
16 kept the stroller from moving forward. As you know, it did, in
17 fact, tip over, but it did not move forward. So clearly you guys
18 were holding onto it.

19 A. All I kept thinking was this hematoma that was on my arm was,
20 you know, the size of a watermelon it seemed, and purple, and I
21 thought, what caused that? And that's when I said it must have
22 been the pole, and it was like the game Red Rover where the pole
23 didn't get through, I was still hanging onto the stroller. So I
24 feel like the stroller -- I anchored the stroller and the stroller
25 anchored me.

1 Q. That's absolutely possible. So I'm going to ask you a
2 question. You said that this suddenly occurred, but you said you
3 remember the -- you said the windows blew out and the doors blew
4 out. Can you explain that a little bit further for me?

5 A. I didn't know that until we were getting off, and that's when
6 I looked up and thought, oh, my gosh, where did that glass come
7 from? No, we -- you know, it's funny. I mean, I was paying more
8 attention to the people, and like I said, especially my husband,
9 and getting [REDACTED] that did have -- he did land on his face, or
10 maybe he hit the seat on the way down when the stroller flipped.
11 He was clearly upset.

12 Q. Yes, right.

13 A. And then I did have baby wipes, so there was some people that
14 were tending to themselves and the operator, and I just handed
15 them the baby wipes and I thought if these can help in any way.
16 And they were looking for belts to tourniquet the operator's --
17 well, there were quite a few people that really kind of were
18 heroes in this event that were fast acting, which in itself a
19 miracle.

20 Q. Um-hum. So after the accident, do you remember if the
21 interior lights in the train car were still on?

22 A. No, I wouldn't know. You know, it was a sunny day. It was
23 actually a very pretty day to go downtown. So that, no, I don't
24 have that memory.

25 Q. Okay.

1 A. The next memory is the ladder hitting, coming up one of the
2 door entrances, and a fireman appearing. And the decision is to
3 get the operator off first, and then he was trying to assess one
4 at a time, we just went down that ladder.

5 The car behind us did come into our car. I did -- I was kind
6 of squatting in front of the little ones, like on my hands, you
7 know, squatting down to be at the same level as my granddaughter
8 so I could just talk to her and keep her eyes focused on me so she
9 couldn't see her grandfather who was sitting there with blood.
10 And all of a sudden, I thought where did all these people come
11 from, because the car behind us apparently, there was -- I don't
12 know if it was starting to slip off the track and maybe could have
13 been a derailment, but they were -- someone advised them to move
14 to our car, which they did. So everyone went out the same door at
15 the end.

16 Q. So everybody went out the door in your car?

17 A. Yes. Yes, and that would have been the door on the right-
18 hand side.

19 Q. Got it.

20 A. We were heading -- I think we were heading south, right?
21 Chicago would be south of Skokie.

22 Q. Yeah.

23 A. So it would have been, yeah, so we were heading south and it
24 was the door on the right-hand side.

25 Q. All right. And after the accident, excluding the train

1 operator, did you ever see any CTA employees?

2 A. I did not. My daughter Meg said she thought she saw the
3 people -- that there were CTA people on the actual snowplow
4 because she saw someone getting taken away and she thought that
5 was the conductor or the operator until she realized, no, he was
6 the man that was right in front of us because they had to sprawl
7 him out on the actual floor of our car. And because of the people
8 coming from behind, the second car, we had to move forward, and
9 Meg had to move up. She was carrying, she was holding the two-
10 year-old boy, but he was so upset she was just holding him tight
11 to her chest, and I didn't move the little girl. I stayed in the
12 back of that car with the stroller because the stroller was just
13 going to take up space anyway.

14 Q. Right.

15 A. So everyone kind of walked around us. But that's when I
16 thought where are these people coming from? You know, you start
17 to think what is going on, and it took a little time for us to
18 realize I think this was a train crash. And you don't even know
19 you're hurt until later. You know, Steve said he was fine, and I
20 said, you're not fine. You've got to get to the hospital. I
21 didn't realize that I had, in hitting the pole, just split a
22 little side, just a little bit of my cheek. I ended up with a
23 very large hematoma, which I still have a small one from the bone
24 bruise, but it did cut the skin a little bit because all of a
25 sudden, Steve said, you've got blood on your face. And I thought,

1 oh, that must be from you, and I took a baby wipe, and I was like,
2 oh, no, I must have cut myself. And you don't feel it until
3 after, and then you're processing everything in the meantime.

4 Q. At any time after -- before or after the accident, did you
5 hear any kind of announcement coming over like the train car PA,
6 any kind of instructions to the passengers?

7 A. No, nothing.

8 Q. Okay. And the only people that actually came into the car
9 and assisted the passengers out were the emergency responders, it
10 wasn't CTA employees?

11 A. To my knowledge, yes, it was all first responders and
12 firemen.

13 Q. Okay. After you got off the train, what happened?

14 A. They lined us up. We were in a -- underneath a tunnel or a
15 bridge, and they just lined us up as we got off and asked us all
16 for our information, personal information: name, address, phone
17 number. And my husband was taken up front. He said, you know, we
18 need to stay as a family group, we're together. So I took -- and
19 we couldn't put the twins down at this point with the concern of
20 the electricity, so Meg was carrying one and I was carrying one.
21 That's when I did notice something's wrong with my arm as I was
22 trying to juggle an almost two-year-old toddler from one arm to
23 the other.

24 They were very organized, and after they got all our
25 information, they now were going to start the process of moving

1 across the series of tracks. And I knew I couldn't carry one of
2 the babies at this time. I didn't think Meg could either because
3 she hit her elbow and we were just emotionally not -- so a fireman
4 had one of the twins, and a fireman had my hand, and I was holding
5 the hand of the little twin just so she knew we're okay, we're
6 together, we're okay, because a total stranger is carrying you.
7 And every time that we had to cross over, I think four tracks, and
8 I stopped at every one and said to the fireman, is this safe, and
9 he said, yes, ma'am, it is. And then we'd get to the next track
10 and I said, is this safe. I almost felt like that's when I
11 started to have a little bit of going into a little bit of shock
12 wondering, you know, oh, my gosh, we're now on live wires.

13 We got across, and then they had us all sit down on the other
14 side on a hill, a rocky embankment. And again, the process was
15 once they got everyone over there, then they started the process
16 again of firemen walking you up the embankment, and that's when we
17 could see ambulances and fire trucks were lined up. And they had
18 three different triages. One was a red tarp, one was yellow. I'm
19 not sure what the last one was, but they took my husband to the
20 red. They put me on the yellow, and they took Meg to the other,
21 which I'm not even sure if it was a color.

22 And I realized she cannot stand there alone with those two,
23 so I did say I need to go help my daughter. And within minutes, I
24 saw her husband appear. Meg called him right away, and Meg knows
25 Chicago, and she said we're at the Howard Street bridge. So he

1 was there in no time, and as soon as that occurred, I went and sat
2 next to my husband to make sure he was okay, and that's when they
3 kind of -- I was tagged to be on the yellow, but I really just
4 kind of stayed on the red until I saw him go in an ambulance.

5 Then they took Meg and I and the twins to a bus, like a
6 triage bus, and to take our vitals. And they got us in there and
7 then they were going to separate us again, and I said I really
8 need to go with her, but there are rules to the ambulance, how
9 many passengers they could take, and the twins counted as one
10 each.

11 Q. Right.

12 A. And they could only take three. So they took Meg and the
13 twins together, and then I ended up in an ambulance with a DePaul
14 student and another young girl who was celebrating her 21st
15 birthday. So they were, you know, everybody was just kind of in
16 shock, but we just kind of hung out with -- we really kind of took
17 care of each other because we went to three different hospitals.
18 So I wanted to make sure my DePaul student and my birthday girl
19 were with me, and I saved them seats in the waiting room. We were
20 like, that's it, the survival instinct is stay with your people.

21 And my husband went to another hospital. We lost
22 communication with him because we just didn't -- he wasn't able to
23 text us, but I texted Meg, are you okay? She said, yes, Mike is
24 coming to the hospital to be with her and the twins, and they had
25 to check them out. And other than some bruising, they seemed

1 okay. Meg, they needed to do a few things. They wanted to do --
2 I think they did a CAT scan and X-rays. They did something to my
3 face, maybe something for a concussion. Maybe my leg. They did
4 something for my leg. So, yeah, I was probably the last one out
5 of the hospital at that point just due to the process of going
6 through the steps.

7 Q. Okay. I want to go back to the two young ladies you
8 befriended. So tell me about the DePaul student. Did she give
9 you a name, or can you describe her to me?

10 A. She did give me a name, but I can't remember it. Just a
11 first name. She was tall, very pretty, African American. I know
12 that she was local because her mother came to the hospital with
13 her laptop. She had a paper to finish, and she needed to get that
14 paper into her professor. I remember saying, I think your
15 professor will understand what's going on here.

16 And then the other girl, it was her 21st birthday. The next
17 day was her 21st, so the accident was on the 16th or 17th. When
18 was the accident?

19 Q. It was the 16th was the accident.

20 A. 16th. So her birthday was the 17th. So somewhere in the
21 records, you would have her birthday. It would pop up that
22 somebody turned 21.

23 Q. Okay.

24 A. So that was the only identification I had for her, but I wish
25 I did exchange more information because I would have loved to have

1 seen how they are and how they dealt with it all.

2 Q. Were these two girls in your train car, do you know?

3 A. No, I don't think they were. I think they were part of the
4 crowd that came from the second car.

5 Q. Okay. Do you remember any other passengers or any other
6 occupants of the cars that were seriously injured? You talked
7 about the train operator and someone trying to get a tourniquet
8 for him. Did you see anyone else that was seriously injured?

9 A. Yes. There was a woman who may be between 65 and 70, Asian,
10 she had a slash to her leg, I think. And then there was a
11 gentleman that had a head injury, and I remember he wore glasses.
12 Was he the one with the book? Yeah, he was reading a book. So he
13 still had his book.

14 It's amazing that the first thing I noticed were the contents
15 of my purse all over, and I saw my license on the floor and that's
16 when I -- and I was like there's my license, and that's when I
17 thought where are the twins, and then we uprighted them and the
18 contents of the stroller went all over. So, yeah, I saw the man
19 had his book and I thought, well, he got his book back.

20 Yeah, there were definitely -- everyone had -- a lot of the
21 people had some sort of an injury that had blood because I was
22 giving them the baby wipes, anyone I saw that needed baby wipes.

23 Q. And you saw the train operator?

24 A. Oh, yeah, but I just couldn't look. And I said to Meg, don't
25 look. Just keep your eyes closed until we are all off this train,

1 until we get the help. And he had -- he was in terrible pain,
2 clearly in terrible pain. And then he was silent, and I thought
3 he actually passed away. So my thought is that God can give you
4 enough shock to take the pain away because he must have just gone
5 into shock or passed out, but I did think he passed right in front
6 of us.

7 Q. Oh, I see. I'm sorry about that. So that was the only
8 contact you had with the train operator? You didn't see the train
9 operator prior to that --

10 A. No. You know, I may have seen him walk by, but you know when
11 you have two two-year-olds, you're kind of focusing on them and
12 keeping, you know, them out of the way and safe. We just had that
13 little back to ourselves, so we just kind of stayed, spoke with
14 each other, so if he did walk past me, he may have, but I didn't
15 take it into consideration. I didn't really register it.

16 Q. Okay. Great. So I guess my last question to you is, is
17 there anything you think I should have asked you but failed to
18 about this incident?

19 A. Well, you know, we were all curious about any communication
20 to the operator from the CTA in regards to what was in front of
21 us, and I know there's black boxes on trains, and was there
22 anything on the black box to warn us?

23 Q. So I can tell you that that's part of the investigation.
24 We're trying to determine when the operator was made aware of the
25 stopped equipment in front of him, and that is actually part of

1 the ongoing investigation, and determine whether or not he was
2 notified in an adequate enough time to actually stop.

3 A. Anyway, I think he was still sitting in his seat, so he
4 didn't have time to get out of his seat.

5 Q. Do you remember seeing the damage to the train cars?

6 A. Oh, yes, when we got out because we had to cross over -- we
7 crossed in front of it. So in between the snow plow equipment and
8 our actual train, I think they wanted -- there was a concern about
9 that second car derailing, so they wanted to get everybody
10 forward, and when we crossed the four tracks to get to the other
11 side, it was in front of the train, and that's when we really
12 couldn't get over how anyone would have survived that crash. And
13 then we questioned what happened to the workers on the snowplow.

14 Q. And you didn't see any of those guys afterward?

15 A. I didn't. I don't know if you've spoken to my daughter.

16 Q. Not yet. She's next on my list.

17 A. Because I didn't see -- she seems to have memory of the
18 conductor or operator trying to get out of his seat. It was like
19 in a split second she realized he's trying to get out of his seat,
20 and that's when we hit. She saw him in that panic mode. She also
21 thought she saw someone on the snowplow, because at that point
22 she -- yeah, right. I'm trying to put this together. I'm saying
23 good-bye to my husband --

24 Q. Oh, okay.

25 A. Wait, I have to get something out of his glove compartment.

1 Q. Okay.

2 MS. HELMER: I have a birthday card in the glove compartment
3 I need to mail. Will get that out? It's right in your glove
4 compartment. It should be in a bag.

5 MR. HELMER: Tend to that business --

6 MS. HELMER: All right. I'll get another one. Oh, it might
7 be in there? Thank you.

8 Okay. Sorry about that.

9 MS. HARLEY: Not a problem.

10 BY MS. HARLEY:

11 Q. So I will tell you that I have to reach out to your daughter
12 next. She's in the next group of passengers. So I was actually
13 wondering would it be better for you to provide my information to
14 your daughter rather than me cold calling her? Whichever one
15 would make her feel better, I guess would be the proper way of
16 saying it.

17 A. Yeah, she coaches college lacrosse. So I know she's in the
18 midst of her season, so I'm not sure what her schedule is as far
19 as a practice goes. Typically they're in the afternoons.

20 Q. Okay. So --

21 A. Should I give her your number?

22 Q. Yes, ma'am, and ask her to please give me a call, and that
23 would be better. That way she's calling when she's available.

24 A. Exactly. And the best time is when the twins take a nap, and
25 then that's usually about 1 to 3:30 that she can get them down.

1 Yes, I will give her that information. I will give her your name
2 and your phone number.

3 Q. Okay.

4 A. She may take a day. She's worse than me with emotions.

5 Q. Not a --

6 A. She needs to just digest what she has to do, but then she
7 will do it and she will contact you.

8 Q. Yes, ma'am. That I think would be best. Thank you.

9 So again, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to
10 me. It's really helpful for us to kind of get a sense of what
11 happened inside of the train car and to the occupants inside the
12 train car. If you have any questions or any concerns, you do have
13 my number. Please feel free to reach out. And at this time,
14 unless you have any other further questions or concerns, I think
15 we can end the interview. And again, I appreciate all your help.

16 A. Well, thank you. Thank you, Sheryl, very much. Enjoy the
17 rest of your day, and I will get Meggie -- contact Meg right now
18 and let her know that this needs to get taken care of, and she'll
19 get to it. She'll call you.

20 Q. Thank you very much, ma'am. Have a good day. Bye-bye.

21 A. You too. Bye-bye.

22 MS. HARLEY: Interview terminated at 10:29 a.m.

23 (Whereupon, at 10:29 a.m., the interview was concluded.)
24
25

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the attached proceeding before the
NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD


IN THE MATTER OF: CTA TRAIN COLLIDES WITH
RAIL EQUIPMENT IN CHICAGO,
ILLINOIS ON NOVEMBER 16, 2023
Interview of Susan Helmer

ACCIDENT NO.: RRD24MR002

PLACE: via telephone

DATE: April 9, 2024

was held according to the record, and that this is the original,
complete, true and accurate transcript which has been transcribed
to the best of my skill and ability.


Terri Trauth
Transcriber