

What if he hadn't stopped?

Months after he helped a pregnant wreck victim, a Good Samaritan is haunted by the memory.

By LEE HILL KAVANAUGH
The Kansas City Star

He watches it in his mind, like a silent movie, again and again.

Driving on Interstate 35, between Gardner and Olathe. Rush-hour traffic before a winter dawn. An endless caravan of headlights throwing pools of light on dark road.

And then it happens.



Williams

Right in front of Clarence Williams, about 6:45, he sees a car's roof lift skyward.

His first thought — a convertible opening?

The tractor-trailer in front of the car seems to lurch. A puff of smoke. Flying debris. He swerves his car ... "And it shoots to my right like a silver missile," he remembers. No bright red brake lights. Just a blur, disappearing over the highway shoulder, swallowed by the night.

Williams blinks. Was that a car?

Nothing broke the relentless commuter rhythms. Even the tractor-trailer ahead kept going, a car's hood impaled on the bumper of its trailer.

No one seemed to notice.

The next decision Williams made is the reason that today one family is celebrating Mother's Day, quietly, privately and

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with gratitude especially to one man.

Their mother/wife is alive and so is their baby girl. Because, although other commuters that February morning saw the silver 2000 Hyundai sedan slam into the back of the truck, and at least two called in reports to 911, according to the Kansas Highway Patrol, only one person stopped.

Williams.

A Good Samaritan, who was already late for work.

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For five years, he had driven the same 25-mile stretch of road from his Gardner home to his job at the Johnson County Waste Water plant in Mission. The 48-year-old father of two had never seen anything like this. He pulled his Honda Accord far onto the shoulder, switching on his emergency flashers. Peering out across the field, Williams looked for the car.

Squinting through the dark, he spotted something in the weeds — ragged scrap metal — poking above tall grass. He had no flashlight. But he grabbed his cellphone.

He ran toward the spot and started praying. *If anyone is in the car, please God let them be OK. Please don't let it be full of people.*

He heard popping noises, like water droplets on a hot skillet. Steam hissed and the air had a burnt smell. Ahead was the outline of what used to be a car, smoke billowing from its undercarriage. With its hood gone, he could see a mangled engine block. The metal roof torqued to the rear.

Afraid, his eyes kept searching. *Please God, don't let me see something so gruesome I'll remember it forever.*

Then he saw blond hair.

The car door was gone. A young woman was lying almost horizontal in a broken car seat. It looked like she was sleeping, he would say later, "like an angel."

Her left hand was draped so casually, with a few cuts. At first, he couldn't make out any injuries. He listened to her breathing. Steady. In the darkness, he couldn't see any blood. Somehow, the ripped metal seemed to have skimmed right over her head and body.

Williams tried to calm himself.

"I needed to get everything exactly right when I called 911 because the lady needed help fast," he remembered. He was so nervous that his words rushed out the detailed information, twice.

When the dispatcher asked him again where he was, Williams felt anger rising. He ran back up to the interstate because he didn't want the unconscious lady to hear his panic. He read the roadway sign exactly to the dispatcher, the sign telling drivers that Lone Elm Road and 159th Street were 1 mile away.

Williams hiked back down, still talking with the dispatcher, to stay with the lady in the car. Her breathing was different now, more labored, and thready. Morning light was breaking. He could see a red stream of blood a quarter-inch thick, trickling down her face. It came from a deep gash along her neck and shoulder where something "zipped" her. He took her left hand gently, talking to her.

Breathe with me, lady. ... It'll be OK ... help is coming.

He was so worried she'd wake up, find herself in a field, in a wrecked car. "She'd see me, a black man, talking all calm to her, and she'd freak out," he says. "That wouldn't be good."

He watched her face as he talked to the dispatcher. Her breathing grew relaxed again, as if hearing his voice did help. He relaxed a little, until he saw something else that made him yell into his phone.

OH MY GOD! And she's also pregnant!

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Highway patrol. Ambulances. Tow trucks. Interstate 35 shut down. Across Kansas City, commuters, radio listeners and television viewers were learning about the traffic jam near Gardner, and a bad accident involving a pregnant woman. Troopers called a young husband. A husband called a best friend. A pastor canceled his appointments and rushed to a hospital. Even newscasters seemed to shudder reading the story on air.

At the scene, the ambulance carried away the blond-haired victim. A tow truck pulling the wrecked car out of the weeds became stuck in the mud. Williams gave his statements to the Highway Patrol, watching it all from the backseat of the patrol car.

And then he was done.

Walking slowly back to his Honda, its emergency flashers still on, he had one more question. He stopped a police officer. He asked where they were taking the lady.

Overland Park hospital, he heard. They're equipped to help the baby there. ... But that lady isn't gonna make it, the officer said.

Williams' stomach lurched.

Seeing his reaction, the officer softened his words.

Well, if she does make it, he went on, she'll have a really, really hard time. She's hurt bad.

The rest of his commute to work, and the rest of the day, and for days and nights afterward, Williams prayed for the blond-haired lady and her baby.

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Before the sun set that Feb. 8, trauma doctors performed a cesarean on Gardner resident Nikki McClure, who was 34 weeks pregnant. Her baby was a girl, Emily, who would stay in the neonatal unit for two weeks and then go home.

By the next day, the Kansas Highway Patrol found the truck's drivers in Des Moines. They were hauling 42,000 pounds of calcium carbonate. They had discovered their back bumper damaged but told investigators they hadn't felt any shock of a car rear-ending them — one of the truck's drivers had been sleeping at the time. They were not cited.

MCCLURE: Once again a doting mother to her children

For three days, Williams stopped by the hospital, to check on McClure. He saw the photos on the news of baby Emily. The third day he met Matt McClure, Nikki's husband. The two hugged and cried. No one knew how fast or how much Nikki would heal. She had a brain injury.

Williams couldn't sleep for weeks, suffering with what he calls his "what if" nightmares. What if he had not been late for work that day? What if her car had shot off toward his car? What if he hadn't stopped?

Retelling the accident, he starts to shake and whispers: "If that car seat hadn't broke she would have been decapitated. I have no doubt."

He's visited the site a couple times, in bright daylight. Again awed that her car careened off the highway, not where the embankment drops a steep three stories, or where trees rise tall next to a fence. But in the flattest, gentlest slope of interstate in the area.

And an area hidden from other drivers passing by.

Williams believes his life changed in the moment the accident began. Although he was a church-going Christian before, he cannot explain how Nikki McClure survived. Except to say — with no doubt in his eyes: "I know I witnessed a miracle."

The Sunday following the accident and each Sunday since, the sermons at his church seemed more poignant. The hymns more beautiful. His wife and children more precious.

A few weeks ago, Nikki McClure, now 34 and a nurse herself, was released from a rehabilitation hospital in Nebraska. She's in pain, often. She tires easily, and her sense of smell is weak. Pieces of glass are still shedding from her wrist and cheek. But she is also bubbly and smiley and is once again the doting Mommy to her three children. Three-month-old Emily is bright-eyed and thriving.



Clarence Williams Jr. recently revisited the scene where he stopped to help after a horrific looking car crash.

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McClure remembers nothing from the accident. She remembers she was pregnant and went to sleep the evening of Feb. 7, at home. She woke up March 3, in Nebraska, and met Emily.

Because of what he saw, Clarence Williams knows she and Emily are extraordinary people.

But there's one person, especially on this day, who believes Williams is the extraordinary one.

His mother, Carmen Williams, of Shawnee.

"He's not the kind of man who likes attention," she said. And when he told her about his nightmares, she knew just what to say to soothe her son.

"I told him, 'God had you there for a reason.' ... I'm so proud of him I could bust."

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