

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Remembering the I-35 Bridge Collapse: One survivor shares her story
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CATHY WURZER: 15 years ago, today, an unbelievable thing happened. I bet you remember where you were on this very date. The 35W bridge in Minneapolis collapsed into the Mississippi River, during the evening rush hour. The collapse was completely unexpected. 13 people died. Several people were rescued from the river, including Lindsay Walz. Lindsay was in her car, on her way home from work. Her story of survival is remarkable. I recently met Lindsay at the 35W Remembrance Garden, near the bridge, to talk about how she's made it through.

Gosh, it's been 15 years. Do you remember what you were doing in the hours before everything happened?

LINDSAY WALZ: Yeah. I worked at a group home with adolescents. And I was the independent living skills coordinator. And so that particular day, Wednesdays, we always had an ILS group. And it was actually a really good group. Everyone was in a good mood. I left a little bit later than I usually do, and then started my drive home.

CATHY And you were on the bridge? Remember what you were thinking or feeling in those moments?

WURZER:

LINDSAY WALZ: Yeah. Traffic came to a stop. I was going southbound. And traffic was stop and go, starting about the quarry. And that alone was weird, not a typical day at all. And so I almost got off at the University exit, right before the bridge, decided against it, for various reasons, got to the middle of the bridge, when it actually collapsed. I heard a big clank, is what I call it, which I think was probably a beam snapping. And it was pretty much immediate, that my car started to freefall into the river.

CATHY I just can't even imagine what you were thinking and feeling.

WURZER:

LINDSAY WALZ: Lots of swear words. [LAUGHS] And then, my only rational thought was, I'm driving on concrete, so I'm going to land on the concrete. And I just assumed that my body would be done, as soon as it landed. And I didn't really conceptualize falling into the river, and then what that would have in store for me.

CATHY I don't remember, were you conscious at that point?

WURZER:

LINDSAY WALZ: Yeah. So I stayed conscious the whole time. My car immediately filled with water. And so I had to find my way out through murky water. And everything was closed up. All the windows were still intact, that I had felt. And it really was some kind of miracle, I guess, that something gave way, at some point, in my search for a way out. I kind of stopped looking for a way out, and started to just move into accepting that this was it, and this was where I would die. And then, I started to float, and floated beyond the confines of my car.

I have a mermaid on my arm because that's-- their magical. And that's the best that I can come up with, for how I got out of my car that day, was magic. And so I swam to the surface, hoped I was still alive. At that point, I didn't really know. I was like, maybe I'm dead, and I'm just having some afterlife experience. And luckily, when I got to the surface, one of the construction workers, who had fallen with the bridge as well, he saw me, and encouraged me over to the concrete, and pulled me out of the water.

CATHY And you were severely hurt.

WURZER:

LINDSAY WALZ: Yes. So I had a broken back. The swim, everything that I did afterwards was pure adrenaline. I didn't feel anything. And then, as I started to sit on the bridge, waiting for help, my back started to really get painful. And so that kept me in the hospital for five days. And then, my PTSD was definitely my biggest injury, the most invisible, but the most significant for me.

CATHY And to that, I'd like to apologize to you, to actually bring up some of these memories. Because I know that it's
WURZER: painful.

LINDSAY WALZ: On the subject of memories and stuff, I think it can be painful. But it's always with me. So it's not like bringing it up changes that fact. And for me, one of the things that I've noticed, especially in the last five-ish years, is that there's occasions where I go, maybe I don't have PTSD anymore. And then, something happens. The universe reminds me, [LAUGHS] reminds me invariably, that I do. And that can be just like sitting in at a cafe, and the movement of a stage that's a little rocky or whatever, my body goes into high alert. And just different things like that come up day to day that I have to attend to.

CATHY How do you do that?

WURZER:

LINDSAY WALZ: How do I do that? That's a really good question. A lot of the time, it's about reminding myself that I am safe. Like that time that I was sitting on this little rickety stage at a cafe, I thought, for the first moment, that it was an earthquake, that the ground was shaking. And I was like, oh my gosh, there's an earthquake happening. Nobody else was responding or reacting. So I was about to grab my stuff and get out of the building. And then, I realized that the person next to me was nodding their head. And so that simple, just like minute movement of the body, and that person, shook the ground enough for my hypervigilance to go into high alert.

And so I had to, like, OK, that's not an actual threat. I'm not in danger, and then calm my body back down, and just remind myself again and again that I was OK. And sometimes it's required strategies that are a little kooky. Like when I drive over bridges, sometimes, I still put my finger on the window. So that if it falls, I'll be able to get out, like I've just got my game plan. [LAUGHS] So it's really about that, day to day. It's like, is this a real threat? Is this something that I have to pay attention to and keep myself safe? Or is this just life, and my body is freaking out right now, and I have to calm it down?

CATHY Well, you've had to learn how to live life as a survivor.

WURZER:

LINDSAY WALZ: Yeah, I mean, just a couple of months after, I remember saying things like, oh, I'm going to be good. I'm fine, I want-- and I, I was just a shell of a human being at that time. I wasn't feeling anything. I wasn't feeling joy. I wasn't feeling sadness. I was just existing, breathing, eating, but not much else. And I didn't really unpack, and grieve, and really feel the emotional impact until five years after the collapse. And I really believe that it was when my body was able to, that my body could finally do that, and process it in a way that wasn't so enormous.

CATHY How does it feel to be here, right now, today?

WURZER:

LINDSAY WALZ: It's OK. I really wanted there to be a memorial, as a person who didn't lose a loved one. I don't have a place to go, in the same way somebody might have a gravesite or another memorial for their loved one. I didn't have a place. And so, having this here is just a nice place for me to feel connected and to feel like I can grieve in that way, in this ambiguous loss kind of stuff.

CATHY You obviously, as a survivor, have a second lease on life, right? What have you done with that?

WURZER:

LINDSAY WALZ: [SIGHS] Second lease on life is right. I really did think I should have died that day. And so it really felt like I had to do the most with my life. And part of that is survivor's guilt. I've had to deal with a whole heck of a lot of survivor's guilt, like feeling like I had to prove that I was worthy of still being here.

But I had this dream of opening a youth center. And I really wanted to do that. And that day, when I was sitting on the concrete, waiting for help, I thought about that place. And I thought about making that happen. And I did, five years later, on the 5th anniversary of the collapse, I launched that organization, which was called Courageous Hearts. It didn't survive the pandemic. So I've had to grieve that. But it was really an important place for me to create space for conversation about the hard things of life. And we used creativity to do that. It was a really special place.

And I also just do trainings and bring people into conversation about trauma. I think that my experience is unique, and that it's public, and it's concrete, like literally concrete, and figuratively concrete. And it's easy for people to access the understanding of, oh wow, that would be really traumatic. And I try to use it to help others see within themselves, the spaces where they've maybe had pain and hurt and trauma.

CATHY So, we are looking at a 15-year anniversary, today. I can't believe it's been 15 years. I'm sure you can't either, in a sense. What do you want people to remember on this day?

LINDSAY WALZ: I think the thing that's always been really important to me, about telling my story, or just sharing, is making sure the story remains human, that it's a human story. For so many years afterwards, it became a brick and mortar story. It became about building bridges or making sure infrastructure is in place. And yes, 100% really important. And I just hope people take-- I know a lot of people who drive over and still say a prayer for people who were impacted that day. And I think just remaining a presence among people, and in their hearts, is just the only thing I could really ask for.

CATHY That was my conversation with Lindsay Walz. Lindsay was on the 35W bridge in Minneapolis, when it fell, 15 years ago, today. She and I talked, 15 years ago, as she was recovering from her injuries. We met at the 35W Bridge Remembrance Garden in downtown Minneapolis.

WURZER: