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Lack of severe weather shelter discussed

In light of the recent snowstorm, Mayor Jim Ferrell brought together nonprofits, churches and city officials to discuss the need for a concrete shelter.

By HALEY DONWERTH
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Nearly 70 members of local nonprofits and churches met with city officials on March 27 to discuss the need for homeless

sheltering in the event of another severe weather emergency.

The city's need for a concrete homeless sheltering response in the case of inclement weather became apparent during February's snowstorm that ravaged

western Washington.

At the time, Federal Way did not have a system in place to get people off the street overnight during such dangerous conditions.

The Federal Way Community

Center was opened as a warming center during the storm, but was only in operation during daylight hours and closed at 5 p.m., sending people back onto the street

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Motorcycle crash miracle

His body has forever been changed, but faith and support are helping him and his family through

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He's probably not going to survive. That's what Bernardo Barco's doctors said to his wife after a motorcycle crash on Interstate 5 left him without his right arm and left leg and several injuries to his stomach and face on Dec. 21, 2018.

That's what witnesses thought who aided him at the scene.

But he believes it was the right people on the scene of his accident at the right moment — and the hand of God — who saved his life.

The crash

Earlier that day, Bernardo Barco, 44, decided to start the day off with a haircut. There was a barber in his neighborhood he liked to go to.

He drove his blue Suzuki SV650 Sport motorcycle to run his errands that day.

His wife, Rocio Barco, went hiking with her brother. Her phone died during their outing, so she used her brother's phone to text her husband.

After his haircut, Bernardo Barco drove to Federal Way and stopped at Costco to pick something up. At around 4:15 p.m. he



The Barco family returns to their Des Moines home for the first time since Bernardo, front, lost his left leg and right arm in a motorcycle crash along Interstate 5 in December 2018. Haley Donwerth/staff photo

texted his wife that he was on his way back to their Des Moines home, and headed back up I-5 North.

A silver car got too close to him, he lost control of his bike, swerved into the guardrail and was ejected from his motorcycle. He can't recall anything else about his accident.

But his wife remembers every detail.

She got the call from Harborview Medical Center at 5:48 p.m. "They informed me that my husband was in a motorcycle

accident," she said. "That's when I realized the motorcycle wasn't home."

She remembered how calm she was, even when doctors said her husband had lost his right arm.

Her first thought was to hit her knees and start praying.

"Please be there with him, please be part of all the surgeries, and I prayed for the doctors," Rocio Barco recalled. "I just breathed and pretended like nothing was happening because I didn't want to let [our family] know."

She couldn't find her purse, so she waited for her sister to pick her up and take her to the hospital. Once they arrived, her husband's doctor had more news for them. Not only had he lost his right arm, but his left leg had to be amputated as well. He also had several injuries to his stomach.

Despite the severity of the crash and his injuries, Rocio Barco said before she was able to see her husband, she never felt like he was going to die.

"I even said to him, 'I never felt like you were gonna die. I just

More information

For more information, contact SKFR Public Information Officer Lt. Brad Chaney at Brad.Chaney@southkingfire.org, or visit www.gofundme.com/uniendo-corazon-por-nuestro-hermano-bernardo.

knew you were badly injured."

When she first saw him after the accident, it was a difficult sight for Rocio to take in but she remained strong for her family and in her faith.

"Honey, God is with you, you have the strength, we're gonna get through this," was the first thing she said to him.

She remembered him moving his head and blinking. That was her sign that, as broken as his body might have been at the time, her husband was still there.

Despite that comfort, seeing him missing two of his limbs in a hospital bed was difficult.

To get herself and their family through it, Rocio kept telling them, "He's still alive, he's still alive."

The scene of the accident

Michael White and his fiancée, Kaitlyn Benson, had just picked up his parents, Larry and Teri White, from Sea-Tac Airport in the late afternoon of Friday, Dec. 21, 2018.

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Miracle: Reunion planned with those who helped save him

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As the family drove southbound on Interstate 5 on the way to dinner, Benson recalls seeing a large airborne object and thinking it was going to hit their car.

"I think something is flying through the air ... I think it's a body," she said.

Bernardo Barco had landed in the grass median between the freeway approximately 1,000 feet south of the 272nd Street exit on I-5. He had a pulse, a mangled left leg, a missing right arm, a large laceration on his stomach, and he was unconscious.

Michael White, 38, immediately pulled over after his fiancée's observation and jumped out of the car, running toward the man in the median as Benson, 27, dialed 911 at 4:38 p.m.

"When I got to him, he had his right arm missing and he wasn't breathing," said Michael White, a registered nurse in the emergency room at St. Anthony Hospital in Gig Harbor, with a military infantry background.

Bernardo Barco's arm was found several feet away on the freeway near his crashed motorcycle.

Michael White checked for a pulse, which he said the man miraculously had, then worked to stabilize his breathing using a jaw thrust.

That's when Bernardo Barco took his first breath, he said.

"When I first ran up to him ... Just cause of all the training I have in the ER, people that fly through the air at 70 miles an hour off of a motorcycle, they're often not alive ... he's pretty lucky," Michael White said.

His fiancée Benson, who is an EMT and an emergency room tech at St. Anthony Hospital, said "it restored my faith in humanity" to see the amount of random drivers who pulled over to offer assistance before first responders arrived.

"If something were to happen to me, there are good people out there who will actually stop and help out," she said.

Along with Michael White and Benson, several other people driving home that day who witnessed the accident also happened to be medical professionals.

Anthony Guynes, an emergency physician at Northwest Hospital, was on his way home from his last shift of the year at Providence Centralia when he noticed the accident.

"I suppose we were all on our way home from work," Guynes noted of the serendipitous timing the medical professionals all had being on the road at the exact right moment.

Guynes was second on scene and ran over to find Bernardo laying on his back, head facing down the side of the median, being held in jaw thrust by a man who identified himself as an ER nurse — White.



Bernardo Barco and his wife, Rocio, speak about positivity and recovery in their Des Moines home in March 2019. Photo courtesy of Evergreen Media Production



Michael White happened to be driving by at the time of Barco's crash and took action to save his life. Photo courtesy of Evergreen Media Production

The two assessed injuries as other bystanders arrived at the scene. Michael White had a medical equipment bag in his car, which his father, Larry White, retrieved and brought to the scene in the median.

"One person brought a medical kit that had combat gauze," Guynes said. "We stuffed it in the abdominal wound and began cutting off his clothes to identify any other life threatening injuries."

Guynes, other medical professionals who happened to pull over to help and a bystander, applied a combat application tourniquet to Bernardo Barco's right arm, writing the current time on it with a Sharpie, and another tactical tourniquet to his left leg.

Larry White removed one of his layers, placing his shirt on the unconscious man to warm him in the December evening.

"It was truly remarkable to watch a bunch of strangers work together to try and save Bernardo's life," Guynes said. "I think most of us, including myself, assumed he would not make it to Harborview. I remember one gentleman say, 'I hope he goes peacefully,' as we walked back to our cars."

South King Fire and Rescue crews were dispatched at 4:40 p.m. SKFR aid car 64, Engine 62,

Medic 8, MSO 1 and Battalion 61 responded, arriving on scene within eight minutes, according to SKFR public information officer Lt. Brad Chaney.

Bernardo Barco was then transported to Harborview Medical Center where he underwent a multitude of surgeries. In February, the remainder of his left leg was amputated above the knee. He remained in the hospital until March 8.

According to the Washington State Patrol report of investigation, the collision was caused by speed too fast for conditions.

"The unknown [white/silver] vehicle made a quick lane change into lane 5 [HOV lane] to avoid a slower moving car," the report continues. "Barco also attempted to quickly change lanes into lane 5 but lost control. Barco struck a metal WSDOT guardrail on the left side of the freeway and was ejected off the motorcycle."

Michael White received a call later in the evening after the crash from a Washington State Patrol trooper who told him the man had survived.

"One of the things that was really surprising to me was afterwards talking to my dad about it ... He said, 'I've never seen anything like that in my life,'" Michael White said. "And that



Barco's right arm was amputated amid his motorcycle crash. His arm landed several feet away from his body on Interstate 5. Photo courtesy of Washington State Patrol

kind of hit me hard because my dad's been to Vietnam, he's done a lot of interesting things in his life ..."

He noted the best people to be at the scene of an emergency are paramedics and first responders, and said how incredible it was that he was on scene at the right time.

He knew the man needed help quickly.

"If you work in an ER, you're very, very used to like, you get a patient, you treat a patient, then they're gone," Michael White said. "... Most of the time you never hear back what happens."

But you still have the thoughts of what happened, he said.

Michael White didn't hesitate for a second before making the decision to help this stranger in an emergency.

"If something like that happens and you don't pull over, what are you going to think later? Especially if you have the ability to help somebody," he said.

Anyone who knows Michael White also knows he would do that a thousand times over, Benson said.

"Because that's just the type of person that he is," she said. "He's so selfless and helpful ... I don't think he would consider stopping [as] anything above and beyond his normal daily job or normal anything ... He just feels like that's his duty to help out."

"I think something is flying through the air ... I think it's a body."

Kaitlyn Benson,

recalling seeing a large airborne object and thinking it was going to hit their car

Faith and beauty through the wreckage

On a recent afternoon, SKFR Lt. Chaney and Rocio Barco picked up Bernardo Barco in his wheelchair to help him over the steps into their Des Moines home. It was the couple's first time back at their house since the crash.

Bernardo Barco, who previously worked as a union ironworker, still has a long path to recovery ahead as he and his wife figure out how to financially support their 9-year-old daughter and pay for medical expenses. The couple also has two adult children.

Now, the couple is searching for a wheelchair-accessible house in Federal Way where they can be closer to family.

It's still difficult for them to realize how much this accident has changed their lives, but their faith and the support system they have through their family and church has helped them get through each obstacle.

Bernardo Barco said all the events that played out the day he survived his horrifying accident still amaze him to think about.

"A person driving from northbound, going southbound saw a body flying in the air ... the person who came to give me a hand, right there, right in that moment, he knew what to do," Bernardo Barco said. "He knew how to handle a lost arm and a lost leg."

Father Steve Woodland, a priest at the family's church Saint Philomena in Des Moines, sat at the couple's home with them as they recalled the accident. Woodland said he gave Bernardo Barco and his wife a silent blessing the day of the accident, and waited to visit them at the hospital because he didn't want to interrupt and make it seem like he was the one there to do God's work for Bernardo Barco.

"No, no, no, we let the doctors do the work of God."

Woodland went to visit Barco again a few days later, and between laughs he said that time so many friends were in his hospital room the charge nurse kicked them all out.

Since he's known Barco, Woodland said he's always been the type of person to do anything he could for the people in his life.

"There wasn't anything that he

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wouldn't do, from the great to the small," he said.

Bernardo Barco said they don't hold any ill will toward the person driving the silver car that day. Rather, they want peace for them.

In fact, after he was released from the hospital, the first thing he and his family did was gather together and pray for the driver.

"We told our Lord that 'we gotta forgive [them]... we're not gonna judge [them]," Barco said. "And we prayed for them to be peaceful... and if at any point [they] decide to turn in [themselves] it will be a blessing as well. But we keep them in our prayers."

They also want to use this accident to teach others how dangerous distracted driving can be.

"That little look, that little view to the side makes a difference," he said.

"There can be devastating consequences."

Rocio Barco said that while this has been a "really bad experience" for their family, it has also been "the most spiritual, beautiful



Rocio Barco (left) and SKFR PIO Brad Chaney lift Bernardo Barco in his wheelchair into their non-wheelchair-accessible Des Moines home after his December 2018 motorcycle accident left him without a right arm and left leg. Haley Donwerth/ staff photo.

experience that I've had in my life."

She can't believe how strong her husband is, from waking up in the hospital missing an arm and a leg, to re-learning how to live now.

"He always told me, whatever happens to our lives... whenever we have hard times, we will figure it out," she said. "God will give us the strength to go through this."

Reunion and SKFR recognition

In mid-March, Michael White heard from South King Fire and Rescue officials that the man he helped save was awake, talking with visitors, and cognitively sound, which he said was "such a big moment for me."

"It's just so lucky that they get their husband, or their dad, or their friend back," Benson said.

Larry White also struggled with closure after the incident, constantly wondering if the man from the motorcycle crash was OK, Michael White said.

"Because all I knew prior to that was, 'Yeah, he's alive, he's in the ICU,'" he said. "... There is a part of you that wonders what is this guy's quality of life going to be?"

On April 18, Michael White and Bernardo Barco



Father Steve Woodland, the Barcos' priest at St. Philomena Church, is pictured with Rocio and Bernardo in their Des Moines home. Haley Donwerth/staff photo

will have the chance to reunite for the first time since the motorcycle crash at an open house event at 1 p.m. Thursday, April 18, at SKFR Station 62, at 31617 1st Ave. S. in Federal Way. The reunion is open to the public.

During the event, SKFR officials will also recognize Michael White, his fiancée Benson and his parents Larry and Teri White for their heroic efforts.

Michael White is looking forward to the reunion.

"I am excited to see him because the last time I saw him, I didn't get to talk to him," he said. "I actually am excited to see my dad get

the chance to meet him, because I think that it'll mean a lot to him probably to see 'Hey, somebody can go through that whole thing and still have a positive outcome afterwards.'"

Bernardo Barco is also excited to be able to thank Michael White and his family in person.

He said he learned after the accident that Michael White knew how to move his jaw so he could start breathing on his own again, and kept him breathing until aid arrived.

"There is no words to explain that... nothing I can say except my Lord was watching over me."

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