

# Roadside Rescue

An information security analyst for Life Care Centers of America says God's timing put him at the scene of an accident to help pull a woman from a burning automobile and certain death. Leif Buckner, who works in Life Care's information systems department at the Campbell Center in Cleveland, said he was taking his seven-year-old daughter, Haley, to North Lee School on Friday, January 21, when events began that he won't ever forget.

It was about 7:10 a.m., and the Buckners were riding along APD 40 bypass near the Applegate Inn when "I saw a car on fire. It had rolled down an embankment into a chain link fence in the edge of a wooded area. No one else was around."

Buckner hurriedly parked his car and ran down the hill to investigate. "I tried to get the door open, and it was pretty scary. I thought the car might blow up at any time. But the door was jammed, and it wouldn't open."

A Bradley County Sheriff's Department deputy, Robert Hancock, quickly arrived at the scene, and he tried to open the door, to no avail. Buckner ran back to his car to get a flashlight to use to break the car window to permit entry. He handed it to the deputy, who broke the flashlight trying to smash the window, and then had to use his baton to get it open. Both men were able to pull the driver from the car just in time as the interior of the car burst into flames.

The woman, Buckner said, "was like a rag doll when we pulled her out. I thought she was dead." She was airlifted to Erlanger Hospital in Chattanooga, where today she is listed in critical but stable condition.

"The smoke was bad," Buckner said. "I came to work, coughing all morning, and finally realized it must be because of the smoke that got into my lungs."

What Buckner didn't know was that he and Deputy Hancock had just rescued one of the most beloved people in Bradley County. Mrs. Thelma Gilbert, the victim, and her family have operated Town House and Village Bake Shops in Cleveland for decades. Their businesses are popular spots for doughnuts, cakes and assorted breads and pastries.

Her grandson, Kevin Gilbert, reported Monday that Mrs. Gilbert, still in the intensive care unit of the hospital, sustained broken ribs on her left side, a collapsed lung, and her upper left arm was broken, possibly in the rescue. "But she is doing much better today. Her vital signs look good," Kevin Gilbert said. "We are grateful to Deputy Hancock and Leif Buckner for what they did, and we thank everyone for praying for her."

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"I'm glad she is doing better," Buckner said. "It's a good feeling knowing she's alive."

How does it feel to be a good Samaritan? Buckner was asked.

"It's what anybody would have done," he said. "They would have done it for me."

Buckner said he is a Christian, and he believes in God's providence. "When it happened, it was like, 'Okay, God, so this is what You had in store for me today!' I don't understand all of His mysteries, but it was sure fortunate that we were there. It definitely took two people to get her out. If someone had been a minute or two later, she might have been dead."

As for Haley -- "I think she understood what was going on. We've talked about it. I think she is proud of what happened. For my birthday, she bought me a flashlight to replace the one that was broken."

In a twist of irony, Buckner was involved in a crash Monday morning on his way to work. It happened about 7:50 a.m. on Henderson Avenue behind the Gondolier Restaurant when another vehicle "ran across in front of me, knocked my truck off the road and totaled it," he said. Buckner wasn't injured, "but I had that truck since 1988, and I hated to lose it."

--Beecher Hunter