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Metrolink Crash Survivor Says No Horror Movie Could Capture the Scene

- Metro employee aids two injured Metrolink crash survivors before emergency workers arrive
- [See myMetro.net report Sept. 15:](#) Metrolink Crash in Chatsworth Takes a Violent Toll on Metro Family

By NED RACINE, Editor
(Sept. 24, 2008) There was no warning at 4:23 p.m.

"It sounded like a bomb went off and the train stopped," recalled Jim Hugo, who was riding in the second car of Metrolink Ventura County Line 111. "And it stopped immediately. The G forces were tremendous."



Jim Hugo called his wife Lori repeatedly through the night of the Metrolink collision. They were finally reunited at 10:30 p.m. after he was cleared to leave the temporary medical station at Chatsworth High School.



On Sept. 12, as he did Tuesdays through Fridays, Hugo, a traction power inspector, sat in the second car of Metrolink Ventura County Line 111, which left Union Station at 3:35 p.m. that Friday. As were many of the passengers, he was headed home to the Simi Valley.

He sat on the top row, his back against the train bulkhead, facing toward the rear of the train. That choice might have saved his life. Hugo didn't move when the trains collided, and he attributes that to the bulkhead.

"The whole thing was over in the blink of an eye," he remembered. "I opened my eyes and I saw people flying around me. And I blinked again and there were people lying all around me. It was quiet except for the moaning and crying."

Hugo instantly realized what had happened. "I didn't know what we'd hit, but I knew we'd hit something." Despite his relative protection, "It still felt as if someone had hit me in the back of the head with a baseball bat."

He immediately saw others were more injured, even though the second car remained upright.

"Within a few seconds all the people who had been flying toward me had fallen," he explained. Hugo noticed a man wedged under a seat, at the bottom of a pile of humans. And he saw there was blood everywhere.

Hugo remembers he was calm, calm enough to call his wife Lori and tell her he was in a train crash. He told her he was OK, but he'd need a ride home. He

remembers she wept during that cell phone conversation and during every other telephone conversation they had that day.

Hugo began trying to wake the man wedged under the seat. Then he pulled the emergency window release lever, and Hugo threw his possessions out the open window to the ground below. "I knew I'd need both hands to get this man off the train, if I could wake him," Hugo explained.

Looking for an exit, Hugo checked the stairway nearest him and discovered the area was blocked by dead bodies. How did he know they were dead? "There was gray matter coming out of their heads."

Hugo managed to wake the unconscious passenger—he later learned the man's name was Frank—gathered the man's belongings and moved him toward the rear of the car, stepping over injured passengers and around broken seats and tables.

"Anyone who could move was off the train in a couple of seconds," Hugo explained. "There weren't many people uninjured on that train."

Someone helped Hugo get Frank to the ground near the right-of-way. Frank was bleeding from a vertical cut that began between his eyes and ended at the back of his head. Once they were sitting, Hugo noticed an injured woman beside him. Her shoulder was injured, and she was bleeding from several places. He discovered her name was Judy.

While Hugo watched over Frank and Judy, he realized residents who lived along the train tracks were on the scene, helping the injured. Hugo estimated they waited for an hour until the first emergency medical technician (EMT) approached the three.

"I imagine it was an ordeal for the EMTs as well," Hugo believes. Finally, EMTs put Frank on a back board and took him to a nearby park, now a temporary triage center. The EMTs walked Judy to the same center and put her on a back board.

That was the first time Hugo had a chance to check himself out. Besides a pounding headache, he was fine. He had a small amount of blood on his clothes, but it wasn't his.

Hugo made his way to the triage center and was taken by ambulance to Chatsworth High School at approximately 9:30 p.m., to be examined by doctors. His wife was waiting at the high school, but security wouldn't allow her into the auditorium where Hugo waited.

By 10:30 p.m., he was released. He had talked to his wife several times by then, as well as his mother and friends.

"When Lori and I were reunited at Chatsworth High School, we held each other longer, tighter and more intensely than we ever had in the 12 years we've known each other and the ten years we've been married," Hugo remembers.

But they couldn't leave for home just yet. Because his wife had arrived at the scene so quickly, her car was within the road block area and couldn't be moved. It took some cajoling to get the car released and the Hugos heading home.

In 20 minutes they were home and Hugo asked himself, "What the hell

happened today?" He felt thankful to be alive, thankful he wasn't injured more than he was and struck by what he had seen.

"What I saw was horrific," he said. "Horror films don't do it justice. I quit drinking five years ago, but I drank two beers that night."

Hugo, who has worked for Metro for six years, had a sore back and neck for a couple of days and a headache for a week, but now, fortunately, he has no residual pain.

The first Wednesday after the collision—his first day back to work—Hugo took the same Metrolink train he always takes. He insists he had no problem climbing on the train again. "If you get in a car wreck, you don't start walking," he said.

Looking back on the crash, Hugo believes better safety measures need to be pursued, particularly the technology to keep two trains from entering the same space. He also believes public transportation vehicles should be outfitted with seat belts, pointing to the number of people who were thrown from their seats by flying out of their seats or being hit by flying passengers and debris.

"Mine as well as Lori's thoughts and prayers go out to those who perished and those who lost friends and family," Hugo emphasized. "We wish for a speedy and healthy recovery for those who were injured."