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► [Employee Recognition](#)

► [Employee Activities](#)

► [Metro Projects](#)

► [Facts at a Glance](#)
(web)

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► [Bazaar](#)

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Metro Employee Riding in Metrolink's Third Car Awakens to Chaos

By NED RACINE, Editor

- Gary Katzman praises compassion of emergency workers

(Oct. 9, 2008) While Metrolink's Ventura County Line 111 rolled toward its collision with a Union Pacific freight train, [Donna Remata](#) sat in the first car and [Jim Hugo](#) sat in the second. Gary Katzman, senior contract administrator, sat in the third car. Dozing.

"Normally, I have the headset on, and I'm listening to talk radio," said Katzman, explaining that talk radio lulls him to sleep. He remembers the train leaving the Chatsworth station on Sept. 12 and then crossing Devonshire.

Then he dozed off.

When he opened his eyes, he heard someone yell, "Get off the train, the train's on fire!"

Katzman was at exactly the same position as when he dozed off, although injuries would later show he had been thrown about violently.

"I had a bad pain in my leg," Katzman said. "I thought, 'Where did that come from?'" He reached down to touch his knee and found his pants were now torn. When he brought his hand to his face, it was stained with blood.

"I saw the back door (at the rear of the train) and concentrated on that," said Katzman, although he did remember to grab the gift he was bringing home to his three-year-old granddaughter. Unknown to Katzman, people living near the accident were walking to the crash scene to offer help, bringing water and chairs with them.

One of those good Samaritans and a train passenger helped Katzman off the back of the train. Someone pointed him to a chair, where Katzman watched the initial arrival of emergency personnel and helicopters.

Like Hugo, Katzman called loved ones on his cell phone immediately after the accident. "I called my fiancée, my son and my daughter." Fortunately, he was able to speak with all three and tell them he would be late. "They told me later, they were already getting calls from people."

But neither his fiancée, Iris, nor his daughter or son knew details of the crash. They treated his call almost casually. "They said, 'OK. I'm glad you're OK. Thanks for calling,' " he remembers.



Gary Katzman, senior contract administrator, was dozing in the third car when the Sept. 12 Metrolink crash occurred.

Perhaps they were used to such calls from Katzman, who has worked for Metro for eight years. "I'd been on the train at least three times when it's hit a vehicle," he explained.

According to Katzman, his fiancée said, "Let me know where you are, and I'll come get you." She wouldn't be able to come and "get him" for almost 12 hours.

Katzman next remembers someone asking those injured who could walk to climb over the mound of earth supporting the railroad tracks. A triage center was being set up in a grassy area on the other side.

"I'm just in a kind of daze," Katzman remembers, but he was able to reach the triage area. Despite his daze, he immediately spotted the orange color scheme of the Union Pacific engine and saw flames rising from the Metrolink engine.

When triage personnel asked Katzman to recline on a blanket laid on the ground, Katzman discovered that he had injuries beside his knee. Just reclining shot pain through his back and ribs. Instead, Katzman sat in a chair and received a preliminary diagnosis of bruised ribs and back.

Still, Katzman wasn't complaining. "I realized I was in a lot better shape than the others."

While Katzman sat in his chair, the pain in his knee increasing, he remembers being approached several times by emergency personnel asking how he was.

With four other injured Metrolink passengers, Katzman was flown to Harbor-UCLA hospital. He was one of two who could sit up. The helicopter lifted off before sunset—Katzman estimated it was 6:30 p.m., two hours after the collision.

While at the hospital, hospital staff informed Katzman of the rising death toll in Chatsworth. He had blood on his scalp, but the doctors could not find a wound. His eye had turned black and blue, and his knee was complaining loudly.

After a series of x-rays, Katzman learned he had no fractures, although doctors confirmed his ribs and back were badly bruised. A doctor warned Katzman he would have pain in his legs for months because of the internal bleeding there.

With five stitches in his knee, Katzman and his fiancée left the hospital at 4:30 a.m. and made the long drive home to Thousand Oaks. Once at home, he discovered blood in his ear and a deep abrasion across his right cheek. With so many bruises, Katzman could find no position that would allow him to sleep.

The next day, Saturday, Katzman began to appreciate the range of his injuries. "My legs felt as if someone had whacked me with a two-by-four across my legs above the ankle. Both legs were completely black and blue to my feet."

Katzman returned to work part-time on Sept. 22, ten days after the collision. "I couldn't stand being at home," he explained. "I'd rather be here with my friends getting something done."

Although Katzman said he feels better every day, he has no memory of

how he was injured. He theorizes his bruised chest comes from hitting the table before him and his cut knee resulted from a bolt on the steel support under the table.

He believes his other injuries were caused by projectiles such as cell phones, briefcases, radios and other personal effects sent flying by the crash.

"I'm probably very lucky my legs weren't broken," Katzman said, adding that one of his acquaintances came away with a broken back.

He suggests, as did Hugo, that seatbelts would have reduced injuries. He also believes that overhead storage would have reduced the number of projectiles flying at passengers.

"I'm just happy to be coming back to the world of the living," said Katzman, who is once again a Metrolink rider. "I didn't want to take too much time off. I want to save vacation days for my honeymoon." He and Iris will be married in May and plan a Baltic cruise.

According to Katzman he can't say enough about the emergency workers and residents who aided the injured. "Everyone was so good. I have only compliments for the teams working." The emergency crews working in his area, he said, "were very well trained and compassionate."