

Waverly men receive awards for rescuing man from burning truck

BY SAM CRISLER
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WAVERLY – On his morning commute, Joe Cockerill usually drives through Eagle and takes Highway 63 to get to Interstate 80 and head east toward Omaha. But on a September morning, he couldn't have known that a trip into Waverly to pick up a pair of his daughter's forgotten volleyball shorts would lead to him saving a man's life.

After picking up the shorts, Cockerill turned east onto Highway 6 toward Omaha. He'd driven less than a mile past Waverly before he noticed a big rig pulling two rock-filled dump trailers careening onto the westbound shoulder at full speed.

"I was like, 'Ooh, this guy needs to wake up,'" Cockerill said. "As I passed him, he just kept going into the ditch."

He thought the driver must have been having a heart attack or some kind of medical episode, so he quickly made a U-turn and pulled up behind a woman who was outside of her car, calling 911.

Took off running

Cockerill got out of his car and took off running toward the truck cab. Another man was sprinting from across the road in the direction of the truck, which had coasted about 100 yards in the ditch before coming to a stop.

Cockerill reached the truck first, but when he got to the driver's side door, he froze.

"I was like 'What's going to be in this cab when we open the door?'" Cockerill said.

But a voice behind Cockerill shouted



HEROES: *Matt Verkamp and Joe Cockerill received the Waverly Heroes Award for saving a man from a burning truck on the morning of Sept. 23, 2021. They were recognized in front of the Waverly City Council at the March 8 and Feb. 22 meetings. (Photo by Sam Crisler, Wahoo Newspaper.) Reprinted by permission.*

at him to get inside. In the cabin was an unconscious man still sitting in the driver's seat, slumped over toward the passenger side. Flames began coming up through the floorboard as the second man climbed up to pull out the driver, whose foot had gotten lodged between the seat and the dash.

Needed second hand

The man needed a second hand to try to free the driver's foot and he called down to Cockerill to jump back up and work the foot free.

"I started tugging on his leg, and I couldn't get him free," Cockerill said, as he started to panic and flames began

to surround the passenger's side of the cab. The voice behind him called again: "Joe, we've got to get this dude out of here."

Longtime friend

Cockerill hadn't taken a look at the man's face yet, but he looked back to see who was shouting his name and saw his friend Matt Verkamp – whom he had known since they played fifth-grade basketball together – staring up at him.

"And I thought, 'Okay, I'm not going to die. He's going to yank me out if this truck starts to engulf in flames,'"

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Cockerill said. “Matt’s going to at least grab me, so I can just relax and figure out how to get (the driver’s) leg out.”

“I yanked as hard as I could and twisted and popped it free,” Cockerill said. “I remember we got him down and carried him down to the ditch and sat him down. As soon as we laid him down, that first tire exploded.”

Needed to move driver

The two friends decided they might need to move the driver a little farther away. Verkamp said the driver wasn’t a big guy, but he wasn’t small either. Still, they lifted him across the road and laid him in the grass next to the shoulder. Verkamp and Cockerill were relieved to hear the driver moan during the transport – neither was prepared to give life-saving CPR. The driver was still unconscious, but Verkamp and Cockerill could tell he was coming to.

Cockerill said it was less than five

minutes between when he left his car to when he and Verkamp could celebrate what they had just done.

“Best bro hug ever,” Cockerill said. “That was like every ounce of energy we had.”

“I just remember being gassed, like 100 percent gassed,” Verkamp said.

Both Verkamp and Cockerill carried on with their days like normal, but Verkamp said he took a photo of the burning truck to explain to his boss why he was going to be late for work.

Five months later

Five months later, Cockerill and Verkamp received the Citizen Certificate of Merit from the Lancaster County Sheriff’s Office on Feb. 15 and received the Waverly Heroes Award from Mayor Bill Gerdes in front of the Waverly City Council on Feb. 22.

The recognition is nice, they said. “But we didn’t do it for any awards,” Cockerill said. “If roles were reversed,

I’d hope people would stop and do the same thing for me.”

The truck driver called Cockerill and Verkamp later that week to express his gratitude.

‘Very thankful’

“He said after he saw his truck, he knew how serious it was just by seeing how bad his truck was,” Verkamp said. “He said he was very thankful.”

Cockerill and Verkamp said it dawned on them sometimes how coincidental the situation was. Cockerill wouldn’t have been leaving from Waverly if his daughter hadn’t forgotten her volleyball shorts the night before. Verkamp had only been driving to Omaha for work for about a week. And that night, Cockerill and Verkamp’s wife coached their daughters’ soccer team like nothing had happened.

“I’ll definitely remember this for the rest of my life,” Verkamp said. ■

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