

RESOURCES

Activity 1

Late-Blooming Courage

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It was a cold, mid-January day in Washington, D.C. The year was 1982. Lenny Skutnik, a clerk in one of the Capitol's many government offices, was driving home in the icy rain near the 14th Street Bridge to his apartment in a nearby suburb. His thoughts of his wife and two young children and their recent Christmas were interrupted by a loud droning overhead. It was a plane, a commercial jet, and it was in trouble.

What Lenny saw was witnessed by two or three thousand other homeward-bound travelers. It was Florida Air Flight 90, a Boeing 737, which had just taken off from National Airport (now Reagan International) two miles to the south. Ice had built up on the wings, and as the plane struggled to gain altitude, it began to stall. Lenny and the others were transfixed as they witnessed the huge aircraft hang in the air and then settle a few hundred yards from the K Street Bridge in the middle of the ice-strewn Potomac River. They watched silently for several minutes before helicopters from the airfield arrived. Then the doors of the plane opened and passengers struggled out on the wings, many slipping into the frigid river. Because of the terrible weather and the number of people involved, the helicopter crews could do little.

Before their eyes, the stunned spectators looked on as people began to sink in the freezing water. A large crowd gathered at the river's edge and watched the tragedy, which eventually took 74 lives, unfold. Lenny focused particularly on one woman, a flight attendant, who had slipped off the plane and was too weak to swim. Startled out of the trance-like state that he and the other spectators were in, Lenny threw off his heavy coat and jumped into the river. Later Lenny reported that when he jumped he wasn't sure he could swim. While the other spectators watched, he made his way out toward the floundering woman and grabbed her just as she was sinking. Seeing this, the stunned crowd reacted, and many others did what Lenny had done—jumping in the water and attempting to save drowning passengers. Not only did Lenny's courageous act save the flight attendant's life, but his example also led to the rescue of several other passengers.

A few weeks later, at the annual State of the Union address before Congress and the rest of the nation on television, President Reagan stopped in mid-speech and turned to the gallery. Seated next to his wife, Nancy, was Lenny Skutnik. The president spoke movingly of Lenny's courage being in the nation's highest tradition.

In an interview shortly afterward, Lenny was asked what he was thinking about before he jumped into the Potomac. He said that, out of the blue, he remembered being on the track team in high school. He was the anchor in a four-man, 2-mile relay race. When he got the baton for the last leg of the race, his team was ahead. Halfway through his final lap, he was totally exhausted and stopped running. He remembered that his furious track coach had run up to him and yelled, "Skutnik, you're a quitter and you're gonna be a quitter all your life!" Lenny decided to change that, and he jumped in.

