THE CROSSING By Kevin Vaughan Photos by Chris Schneider Rocky Mountain News



No problems: Alan Stromberger, who grows corn, alfalfa, kidney beans and wheat on his farm near Iliff, survived the train-bus collision of Dec. 14, 1961. Despite suffering a broken back in the crash, he has no physical ailments related to the accident and doesn't feel it profoundly affected him.

CHAPTER 25: MOVING ON

Sometimes the most surprising thing about a tragedy is not what it does to people, but what it doesn't do to them.

For three kids pummeled inside only child in the very back of the carrying Christmas paper to wrap passenger train in 1961, the legacy almost died and suffered through lar, even though their injuries the others, went on to live a full were decidedly different.

more than a lost boot, some bruis- about that day, they are comes and scrapes. Another suffered a posed. They don't cry. broken back, but it hasn't slowed him down a bit.

miraculously, the



Geisick

Stromberge

their school bus by a high-speed bus who survived the collision — a gift he had made in class. of the accident is remarkably simi- an excruciating recovery, but, like mains of the bus, his left boot unscathed.

didn't dramatically alter their day, they are philosophical. No Union Pacific train sat idling lives. One came away with little bad feelings come. When they talk down the tracks.

Jumbled memories

Randy Geisick wanted to do

something special Twentymin utes earlier, the 8-vear-old had climbed onto

Stromberger school

Debbi

He woke up in the shattered regone, his foot freezing. As he worked his way free and stepped It happened. They recovered. It When they think about that out into the chaotic scene, a

Someone — he is not sure who stood on one of the rails, balancing. Randy was worried about him

"You'd better get off the track," Randy told him. "There's a train coming

Much of the rest of the day is a jumble of memories. A woman helping him into the back of Joe Brantner's station wagon. His dad and his grandpa meeting him his at the hospital.

bus,

home a few hours later, virtually

His real concern in the immediate aftermath: He had lost his wrappingpaper.

Don't worry about it, his relieved mother told him.

who had lived through the Depressicks didn't talk much about bad dy's mind as he grewup. things that happened.

When young Randy asked his aboutit,"he says. parents about the accident, he got a simple answer:

A train hit the bus. One day at his cousin Ronald's to California in 1983.

home, the boys got into a closet and found a newspaper with pho- Grove, a few miles south of Sacra-Someone washing his dirty face tographs of many of the kids who mento, with his wife, Dottie. He is

with a dripping wet washcloth. had been on the bus. Randy's pic-His mom crying when he got ture was there, but he was misidentified as "Ronald Geisick."

"Look," his cousin said, "there's mvname

Just then, Randy's mother appeared

"Put that back." she said

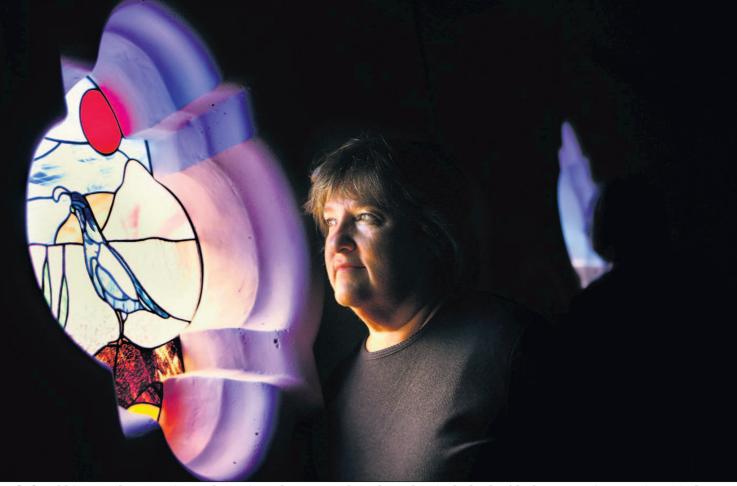
As with many of the generation No burning questions

With little conversation about sion and World War II, the Gei- the tragedy, it rarely entered Ran-

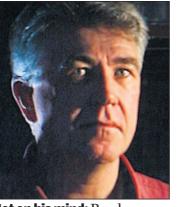
"I don't remember thinking

After high school, he farmed for a time, worked for a construction company and eventually headed

Since 1994, he has lived in Elk



Healed: Debbie Stromberger Kaiser, at her Arizona home, was the only student in the back of the bus to survive. Despite critical injuries, she is physically well today. "I really don't have anything that I could say is because of that," she says.



Not on his mind: Randy Geisick was virtually unscathed and doesn't think a lot about

a project manager for a company that makes fixtures for retail stores

At 53, he is a soft-spoken thoughtful man with dark hair tinged gray. He still doesn't know much about the accident. In the past 10 years, he has poked around a little bit on the Internet to see what he could find

But he's not haunted by any burning questions.

It just didn't affect him that much.

He saw a much greater impact bus, when Dec. 14 rolls around. on his parents, who grew more And vet, like Randy Geisick, he cautious, so protective he someis not fixated on it. times felt smothered.

He remembers the admonitions. Don't get too close to the along the tracks, he does not re- and she'd scream some more. ditch. Be careful. Don't do this. Don't do that.

the train-bus accident.

When his mother could see him, sees little impact on his life he didn't dare go high in the air on a swing and jump off, the way his friends did.

As he talks, the unmistakable the distance, coming from the tracks that run a couple blocks away. It doesn't bother him. "I kinda like it," he says.

Happy to be alive

that wintry December day when her shoes. he took a seat near the front of the hus

He awoke on the ground, crawling among the scattered papers and debris, unable to walk because his back was broken.

A county dump-truck driver picked him up and put him in the front seat of his rig, by the heater, so he could warm up.

The next thing he knew, he was in someone's car, racing to the hospital.

He spent a month there recovering from several broken verte-

Today, he is a 56-year-old farmer, living in Iliff, about 10 miles from where school bus driver Duane Harms grew up.

Alan thinks about the accident children stepping onto a school

member it. He considers himself When she finally got home in

"I feel like it really hasn't affect ed me that much," he says.

His back injury was serious, to be sure. But it was nothing comshriek of a train whistle rises in pared with what his little sister wentthrough

Screaming in pain

Seven-year-old Debbie Stromberger, Alan's sister, hurried to a seat in the very back of the bus Alan Stromberger was 11 on and slipped her galoshes on over

Less than 20 minutes later, she was in a fight for her life.

When the fast-moving train plowed into the bus, it sheared off the last few feet, taking four seats with it and the children who sat in them

Debbie was the only one of those children who survived.

But it was close.

She suffered a severe concussion and a broken leg and hand. Her spleen ruptured. She stopped breathing, and doctors had to perform a tracheotomy to keep her

She endured a grueling recovery, beginning with 10 days in a coma. Doctors weren't sure she would ever get better. She spent a month in the hospital, her leg in once in a while — when he sees traction, and pain clawed at her constantly. It was so bad she'd iust scream.

She'd lie in bed and hear the X-ray machine clattering down He considers himself fortunate the hall toward her, and she knew -if he saw anything gory that day it meant they'd have to move her,

lucky to be alive. Beyond that, he mid-January, in a body cast, a pin

through her leg, she was greeted by the Christmas tree, all dried and shriveled.

She spent the rest of that school vear at home. learning from a tutor, feeling overwhelmed by all the gifts and cards that came.

And she got better.

Today, Debbie Stromberger Keiser lives in Wickenburg, Ariz., on a small acreage with her husband, Dale. He is a consultant, specializing in hospital laboratory equipment. She helps with the business

She is scarred physically — on her throat where doctors inserted the tracheotomytube, and on her leg

People see the scars and ask her what happened.

"Then I'll explain the whole sto-' she says, "and they'll say, 'That's a really tragic thing.' '

But she has no physical hangover from all the injuries.

"I really don't," she says. "I'm very fortunate. I was so young. hopefully things will hold together pretty good. I really don't have anything that I could say is because of that.'

The accident was, she believes. just something that happened not the bus driver's fault, not anybody's fault

"It's not something that really hangs with me, I guess," she says. "I just kind of have gone on."

Finding peace

Three people, all with a tranquility about a tragic day in their lives. But for some, peace never came.

WEDNESDAY: Heartbreak

About this series

In just seconds, 20 childrer died, and a community was devastated

At 7:59 a.m. on Dec. 14, 1961, a high-speed passenger train smashed into a school bus carrying 36 students in the farn country of Weld County. It was the worst traffic accident in Colorado history. Only 16 children and the bus driver survived.

We cannot know how today's tragedies – Columbine, Oklahoma City, Sept. 11 - wil ripple over a lifetime.

But 45 years after that bitter morning outside Greeley, we car see - if not fully understand how a single moment has the power to uncoil through decades, shaping people for the rest of their lives.

Online

at RockyMountainNews.com



Slide show: Portraits from then and now

Discuss: Share your thought on the series and read others' comments at RockyTalk Live. Sources: Read an annotated version of the story with sources of information listed. Earlier chapters: See previous nstallments in the 33-part series.

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Public forum at 7 p.m. Wednesday in Greeley: Reporte Kevin Vaughan, photographei Chris Schneider, multi-media producer Tim Skillern and projects editor Carol Hanner wil discuss the Crossing series at the

Union Colony Civic Center, 701 10th Ave., Greeley.

The event, sponsored by the City of Greeley Museums, is free, but advanced tickets can be picked up at the Civic Center box office. Tickets at the door available at 6 p.m. Wednesday; theater opens at 6:30 p.m. Information: 1-970-350-9220 1-970-356-5000 or 1-800-315-2787