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Nando Parrado speaks at civic center

Author of 2009 Common Reader, 'Miracle in the Andes,' recalls crash, survival

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Nando Parrado likens the variety of human experience to sweets.

"You know, life is like pulling candy from a sack," he said.

"Sometimes you put your hand in and get a beautiful piece. Other times, not so good."

And he would know. The internationally acclaimed speaker and 44 other passengers, including his mother and sister, were on board Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571 in 1972 headed to Chile for a rugby match when it crashed at 18,000 feet in the Andes Mountains. Had the crash been any different, all the passengers would have died. But with perfect trajectory, the plane skidded on the mountain much like a ski jumper, and lives were spared.

Of those on board, 29 people lived through the initial crash, but their survival came at a life-altering price.

Parrado spoke at the Amarillo Civic Center Tuesday night as part of Amarillo College's Common Reader program. His 2006 book, *Miracle in the Andes*, is the AC Common Reader selection this school year.

The Uruguayan author had participated in activities and interviews on campus Tuesday afternoon.

In the Heritage Room of the civic center, he recalled how the group of passengers endured 72 days in frigid conditions. Some had sustained serious injuries, such as broken limbs, in the crash. They had no source for heat and little food to ration. In order to prevent starving to death, the group fed on the deceased passengers whose bodies had been preserved by the snow.

Parrado called the mountains "the worst place where a human can survive on this planet."

He attributes their initial success after the crash to teamwork and simple survival instinct.

"We survived because we achieved excellence," he said. "Nobody thought; they immediately began to work."

Each day after the crash, the surviving members of the group expected to be rescued. They took solace in the thought that there were search crews out looking for them and that they soon would be reunited with their families.

Marcelo Perez, the 21-year-old rugby captain, encouraged them all to be optimistic.

"He didn't have a clue," Parrado said. "But he wanted to protect his team."

They held onto their hope, but none could have imagined the suffering they were about to experience. Parrado said he knew he was a different person.

"I told myself, 'Nando, this is not you. You are transformed.'"

After six days on the mountain, doubts about their rescue began to creep up in their thoughts and pangs of fear gripped their hearts. Their food supply consisted of chocolates and chocolate-covered peanuts, which they nibbled on for three days.

"There is nothing there to survive on. Only snow, ice, rocks. Nothing," Parrado said.

Dehydration set in, and the team tried to use the surrounding snow for water. But the pain from the icy meal was excruciating.

"It hurts, it bleeds," Parrado said. "Your lips crack, there is no Chapstick. The cold burns like acid."

The only warmth the group found was in their own breath.

After 10 days and no sign of a search party, the group gathered around a transistor radio to listen to the news from Chile. It was then that they learned the search had been abandoned.

Parrado's optimism dwindled.

"Something clicked inside my head," he said. "I don't know why, I'm not a shrink. I saw what was going to happen, and it was horrible ... now we were abandoned without hope. We didn't have food, water. And they weren't looking for us ... It was the slowest death you can imagine."

The group buried their deceased loved ones behind the cockpit of the shattered aircraft. They built a home in the fuselage and huddled together to share what little warmth there was. Their only tools were pieces of broken glass and a cigarette lighter. By now, their chocolate morsels were a distant memory. To prevent starving in the cruel mountain air, they each agreed to use their dead loved ones for survival.

"We made a pact: If we were going to survive, it would be by the bodies of our friends."

Parrado said that after some time, they all became desensitized to the horror they were living.

"Even when you think you have reached rock bottom, it can get worse," he said.

And it would get much worse. As the group lay sleeping in the broken aircraft, Parrado recalls a stir in the silence of the mountains. An avalanche barreled down on top of them, engulfing the inside of the plane with snow.

Immediately after the snow buried them alive inside the fuselage, they worked together as a team to dig everyone out.

Parrado was trapped under the snow for a minute and a half.

"My chest was exploding, and then someone scratched my face, and I felt a cold rush of air," he said.

The group was now trapped inside the plane, but their fight for survival wouldn't end there. They broke out a window in the front of the airplane and dug for two and half days to reach the surface of the snow. Once on the surface, the group pooled their resources together, and each person used whatever skill or expertise they had to make progress.

"Each person gave 100 percent of their knowledge and strength to survive," Parrado said.

They gathered copper wires and insulation from the plane and began to sew together a large sleeping bag capable of housing three people. A sheet of aluminum was rigged to catch sunlight and melt snow which was collected in empty wine bottles for drinking water. Most important, the group remained loyal to one another.

"Nobody would do anything that would jeopardize the others," Parrado said. "We took one little sip of water from the bottle at a time. No one tried for two sips."

Despite their efforts, the group was constantly growing weaker in the altitude.

"We were so afraid, a fear that would not go away," he said.

Parrado decided then that their only option was to leave the crash site and go in search of help. He chose a partner, Roberto Canessa, for the hike into the mountains.

"I told them, 'We have to go. Look at them, they are dead men walking.'"

On Dec. 12, they calculated their path and began trekking up the mountain toward a summit. It was a false summit, though, as was the second one they reached. When Nando reached a third summit, he expected to be met with green scenery and villages below. Instead, he saw only more of the Andes stretching into the distance. They weren't near Chile as they had expected but were instead in Argentina. The crash site was not where they had calculated, and they couldn't go back. Parrado's hope was lost.

"I decided the way I was going to die," he said. "I kept going forward. Every step I take will be closer to my father."

Sixty miles later and 90 pounds lighter, Parrado's rugby shoes began to fall apart.

"I thought, if my boots break, I am dead," he said.

But fortune would find them in the mountains. Parrado and Canessa spotted a man on a horse on the other side of a valley.

They called to him, and he waited. They slid down the side of the mountain. The man tossed a stone with a piece of paper and a pencil attached, and Parrado scribbled who they were and pleaded for help. He tossed it back, and the man disappeared.

Ten hours later, he returned with a search party. They flew in a helicopter to the crash site and rescued the 16 remaining survivors on Dec. 22.

After that, Parrado traveled home to his father, where he was met with a strange scene. All his belongings were gone, every remnant of his existence removed after his assumed death.

"I died. I resurrected. I came back to the world," he said. "You know what happens when you die? Nothing happens. The world keeps on going. The universe doesn't care."

The experience has recreated Nando Parrado.

"Everything changes: the way you think, the way you live and the way you decide," he said. "Every decision is determined in terms of life and death. Your life and your death. There are raw and unforgiving moments of truth."

He has a new appreciation for love in his life, love for his family and friends. Now a successful businessman, author and CEO of four companies, he lives his life as a projection of that love.

"You learn the meaning of love and the ones you love," he said.

"I've never been angry. We suffered too much; there's no room for anger. I try to give my best as my friends gave in the mountains."

In 2006, Parrado penned the memoir of his experiences titled *Miracle in the Andes*.

"I wrote that book thinking, 'What can I give my father?'" he said.

"It was a simple present ... to celebrate the life that we have had together."

Parrado said his father had few words and a warm embrace after he presented the finished book to him.

"My father was a pragmatic man. He said, 'This embrace is enough,'" he said.

Since the 72 days of turmoil in the Andes Mountains, Parrado has learned the importance of the people in his life, especially his wife and two daughters.

"A lot of human beings would not exist if we hadn't suffered," he said.

Each year on Dec. 22, the immediate families of the survivors gather to celebrate the day of the rescue, a day that paved the way for many of their lives to be possible.

After all he's experienced, Parrado hopes to encourage people to embrace their lives and loved ones and appreciate every moment they're alive.

Shawn Boyd, an advertising major, said he was intrigued by Parrado's story.

"I'm really impressed with him and his love for people and life," Boyd said. "I can recognize that his struggle made him a better person today."

Parrado's story of survival is a triumphant tale of what the human heart and body can endure. Even in the toughest situations when circumstances seem too bleak, Nando Parrado knows better than to give up. On his path from death to rebirth, he's learned one simple truth: "Life goes on," he said. "Never look back, look forward."

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