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'HE SAVED MY LIFE'

Leno's friend Dave Killackey pulled him out from under the burning car. "But Jay really helped save himself," Killackey says.

With his collection of 204 cars and 168 motorcycles—and countless hours of repairing and restoring under his tool belt—it's safe to say Jay Leno is an automotive expert. But while he was working on one of his vintage vehicles at his Burbank garage on Nov. 12, the former *Tonight Show* host was caught by surprise when a freak fire erupted, spraying him with flaming gasoline. "When you work with cars, you have a lot of accidents," says Leno, 72, who suffered severe second-degree burns on his face, neck, chest, left arm and hands. "But this is bigger than most."

After multiple skin grafts and a 10-day stint at L.A.'s Grossman Burn Center, and with the steadfast support of Mavis, his wife of 42 years, Leno has healed remarkably—and remains characteristically droll about the incident. "I know how bad it could have been," says the comedian, who was pulled out from underneath the car by his close friend Dave Killackey. "But I'm okay. And I'm sure I'll continue to do the same stupid things I've always done. Just may be a little bit more careful!"

On the day of the accident, Leno, who visits his 140,000-sq.-ft. garage nearly every day ("This is my Malibu beach house," he says), was inspecting a clogged fuel line in the undercarriage of a 1907 White Steam Car. "With a steam car, you have gasoline, but you also have a vaporizer, which is heated by a pilot light to turn water into steam," he explains. Once a little air was pushed into the line in an attempt to unclog it, "I got a face full of gasoline. I knew how close I was to the pilot light, and I thought 'Uh-oh.'"

Instantly a spark reacted with the gas and set the comedian's face aflame. "It felt exactly like my face was on fire," he says. "Maybe like the most intense sunburn you've ever had—that'd be fair to say." Armed with knowledge of how to react in that

'HAVE I LEARNED ANYTHING? NO, YOU CAN'T TEACH MEN AFTER 40'

ALL ABOUT HIS BURN TREATMENT

When Leno was admitted to the Grossman Burn Center at West Hills Hospital, "his burns were deeper than I anticipated," recalls his surgeon Dr. Peter Grossman. By the next day, he continues, "the viability of his skin, particularly on his face and hands, was questionable. Functionally and cosmetically, I had concerns." In the first of two skin-grafting surgeries, explains Grossman, "we shaved ultrathin slices of the burn off his face and then put human cadaver skin on him as a temporary biological bandage. It tricks the skin to increase blood flow and help the healing process." During the second surgery, they used pig intestine from the lab as another biological skin substitute, creating a "closed protective environment" for the skin to heal. Within a week of his discharge, Leno's body had shed the pig intestine, leaving him with his own regenerated tissue. Says Grossman: "I wasn't expecting him to heal as quickly as he has so far."



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ASSESSING INJURIES

"His burns were very severe," says his surgeon Dr. Grossman (with Leno on Nov. 21). "But Jay is not a complainer."



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HEALTHY AND HEALING

"He's on a good path," says Grossman of Leno (leaving the center on Nov. 21).

LEFT FROM CENTER: JIM MORRIS/GROSSMAN BURN CENTER; CENTER: COURTESY GROSSMAN BURN CENTER



type of emergency situation, Leno shut his eyes and held his breath. “I’m not a panicky guy, but I knew if I breathed in, I could scorch my lungs,” he says. “I was under the car maybe 10 seconds before Dave pulled me out. Any longer than that I could have lost my eye.”

Killackey, owner of a repair shop specializing in modern trucks and Leno’s pal of 25 years, acted fast. “I heard Jay yell, ‘I’m on fire!’” he says. “And when he came out from under the car, I couldn’t even see his face. He was completely engulfed in flames. Five more seconds under the car, I don’t know if he could have been saved.”

After Leno smothered his face into Dave’s shirt (with a gasoline fire, the flames aren’t easily extinguished and need to burn out), “I looked in the mirror and my face was really red,” the comedian recalls. Paramedics arrived within minutes to take him to the hospital, and after being treated there,

LASTING LOVE

“She was concerned, but she’s used to these sorts of things,” says Leno of Mavis, his wife of 42 years (with him in his ’57 Buick Roadmaster). “I’m not a daredevil. I’m just an idiot.”

Leno checked into the Grossman Center, where he remained for the next nine days. (Surprisingly, his hair and eyebrows were mostly unharmed.)

On Nov. 14 and 17, he underwent one-hour-long skin-grafting procedures during which burned skin was replaced with biological tissue in order to jump-start skin regeneration (see sidebar). “I tried to get the Clooney face, but that wasn’t available,” Leno jokes. “But I didn’t make my money being handsome, so it’s not a deal breaker for me.”

During his recovery famous friends like John Travolta, Russell Crowe and Tom Selleck reached out with well-wishes, while Mavis slept alongside him for the duration of his stay at the Grossman Center. “I wasn’t surprised,” says Mavis, 76, of her initial response to learning about her husband’s accident. (Leno drove himself home from the hospital before checking into the Grossman Center, so he could tell her in person.) “There’s no use worrying. People love what they love, and that’s just part of Jay’s makeup.”



Even before becoming an Emmy-winning comic, Leno had a passion for cars. “When I was 7 years old my dad bought a Chrysler, and I remember sitting in his lap holding the wheel,” recalls the former *Tonight Show* host, who was raised in Andover, Mass. “I remember thinking, ‘This is just the greatest thing.’” As his career took off, Leno’s car collection grew. Since leaving *The Tonight Show* in 2014 after 22 years, his focus outside of stand-up has remained in the automotive world, and in 2015 he launched his television and Web series *Jay Leno’s Garage*. “I appreciate show business, and I enjoy working on my cars,” he says. “I just like being busy. The heart is happiest when the head and the hand work together.”

On Nov. 27, six days after he checked out of the Grossman Center and just two weeks after the incident, Leno was back onstage, performing for a packed house at the Comedy & Magic Club in Hermosa Beach, Calif. “It kind of gave my career a shot in the arm because it’s like, ‘Let’s go see him before he burns up again,’” jokes Leno, who also returned to the garage soon after. “It was really fun to be back at work again.”

Content with work and at home, Leno, who won’t take pain medication during his recovery (“The pain is the reminder that I’m an idiot,” he says), insists that he doesn’t want friends and fans to worry about him. He’ll be just fine. “I’m never going to be some whiny celebrity,” he says with a laugh. “But I’ve been in this business a long time, and to feel that love from people after this happened—that’s been really touching.” ●