Jon Tesseo is 17, the kind of boy parents look at and say, "Why can't you be like that?" Clean-cut yearbook photographer, a Boy Scout nine merit badges from Eagle. Just the kind of kid Lani Reynolds couldn't stand. On Saturday morning, he helped save her life.

Lani Reynolds is 15 and, in her father's words, "a mixed-up kid."

She moved to Westerly from Maine last fall. Settling in was difficult. There was trouble with drugs and friends her parents didn't approve of. Last Friday night, Lani went out jogging and didn't come home. It wasn't the first time. She says she slept in the woods.

At 8:30 Saturday morning, Jon Tesseo was at work at Toscano's Men's Shop on Canal Street. An hour later, still dressed in her jogging clothes, Lani stepped onto the train trestle that kids use as a shortcut between Westerly and Pawcatuck, Conn., and started walking across.

There is a walkway, but Lani didn't take it.

She hopped along the railroad ties, the west-bound track on one side, on the other a 60-foot drop to the swift Pawcatuck River.

At 9:35, the Colonial, an Amtrak train heading for Washington, rounded the curve past the Westerly depot and bore down on the trestle. In the engine compartment, the fireman pointed out the window. "Girl," he cried.

The engineer hit the brake and pulled the whistle. The maximum speed along that section of track is 92 to 100 miles an hour.

At that speed it takes almost two miles for a train to stop. Lani was a third of the way across when she heard the train.

She debated jumping into the river below her father says, but decided that would be dumb.
Instead she lay face down on the ties next to the rail and held on as tight as she could. "By rights," her father says, "she should have been safe."

But Otey Reynolds is an engineer at Electric Boat and he knows that an object moving at a high rate of speed creates a vacuum and as air rushes in to fill it, it makes a wind. "And the wind sucked her leg under the train," he said.

The train severed Lani Reynolds's right leg above the knee. As it passed, the wind it created picked Lani up and slammed her back down on the wooden ties facing the opposite way.

What was left of her leg landed 61.5 feet up the track. Jon Tesseo was on his way back from Fusaro's Tailors when two boys came running out of the parking lot beside the railroad tracks screaming for an ambulance.

"Take me there," Jon said.

Lani was sitting up on the trestle.

At first, Jon didn't see anything wrong.

"My leg hurts," the girl cried. And he saw the leg was gone.

One of Jon's 11 merit badges is in first aid. After he sent the boys to summon help everything he did was "all reflex," Jon — a tall, husky boy whose hair was neatly cut, his black shoes well-shined — said yesterday as he stacked shirts at Toscano's.

"Pretend you're in Bermuda," Jon told the girl.

"You're sitting on the beach soaking up the sun."

Gently, he raised Lani's mangled thigh and kept it raised to stem the flow of blood.

When Police Chief Nunzio Cimalore ran up on the trestle a few minutes later, Jon was still holding Lani's thigh up.

He was white-faced and sweating, the chief said.
"But he stayed right there.
He prevented her from bleeding to death and going into shock."

An ambulance arrived.

"Stay with me, please." Lani asked Jon.

He got in the ambulance and held her hand all the way to Westerly Memorial Hospital.

Yesterday afternoon, Otey and Cheryl Reynolds sat in the living room of their ranch house on Arlington Street.

A few hours before Lani had been moved out of intensive care.

"She's faced the reality her limb is gone."

They talked about their daughter – "sort of the rebel in the family" – and the modest boy who may have saved her life.

"He's a preppie. Everything Lani disliked," Mrs. Reynolds said.

"I asked Lani if her friends would have done what he did. 'They wouldn't know what to do,' she said."

After Lani Reynolds was taken away for surgery Saturday, Jon Tesseo called Paul Gencarella, the owner of the men's shop to ask for a few hours off.

He felt a little sick.

Jon left the hospital and walked to a friend's house nearby. Before he got there, he was sick in the street.

"He didn't get sick because of the gore," Gencarella said yesterday.

"An ambulance attendant had told him he didn't think the girl would make it. She'd lost a lot of blood. Jon said, 'I should have made a tourniquet.' What made him sick was the thought he didn't do enough."

(Adapted from notes in “Reporting and Writing: Basics for the 21st Century” by Christopher Scanlan.)