

# Ben Davis - Episode 815

Mon, Sep 04, 2023 4:49PM 1:23:52

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, veterans, kayak, good, find, outdoor recreation, lives, seal, military, pretty, tons, vogue, blacksburg, war, years, transition, conversation, experience, parents, great

## SPEAKERS

Ben Davis, James Geering

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**J** James Geering 00:00

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**B** Ben Davis 03:28

Yeah, thanks for having me. I'm a fan have fallen along for probably two years. So really, it's yeah, thanks for having me.

**J** James Geering 03:36

Beautiful. Well, where on planet earth we finally you this afternoon.

**B** Ben Davis 03:40

I am in Golden Colorado. Maybe 20 minutes west of Denver. So I'd

**J** James Geering 03:49

love to start at the very beginning of your actual timeline. So tell me where you were born. And tell me a little bit about your family dynamic. what your parents did? How many siblings?

**B** 03:58

Yes, I was born in Winchester, Virginia, which is North Central Virginia and my father owned a apple orchard. And my mother taught elementary school. And then around the third grade, my dad started to pursue a PhD in horticulture at Virginia Tech and got hired on I think as an adjunct faculty member. So we moved to Blacksburg which is southwest Virginia. And that's where I grew up basically from there until I left for undergrad. I have a sister who's younger than I am, four years younger than I am and she lives in DC. And yeah, my mom is still in, in early childhood education. And it was great. It was it was it was fairly normal middle class upbringing. But it's Blacksburg sort of a unique place and that almost everyone that lives there works for the university. So you have, you know, a really tight group of you know, income earners in the town, there's only you know, everyone's employed at the same place. Everyone sort of in the same circumstances when it comes to their home life and it was awesome. The school at that time and I'm sure still attracted a ton of outdoor motivate motivated athletes. So you had, you know, mountain bikers that were winning in the world tour and winning national championships that were going to school. They're a ton of really talented kayakers all kinds of stuff. And blah, Blacksburg so I was exposed to non ball sports pretty early. I mean, I was sort of privy to the fact that you could you know, there was with climbing and you know, tons of cycling and all this kind of stuff. So, yeah, it was it was great. It was a great place to grow up. It was a really good place to grow. And then my my father's brother, stepbrother was an alternate kayaker in the Olympics. In Atlanta, I think it was 1984. And so I got really interested in kayaking early and the Olympic Training Center was at the Ikoyi in Chattanooga, Tennessee. So I decided to go to undergrad at the University of Tennessee. Chattanooga, because I thought it would be the best place to I could spend the most time kayaking. Basically.



06:54

Not, you know, academics and the caliber of education was not, not at the top of the list. relative to how many days a week I could kayak with ease. So



07:10

yeah, that's That's it. As far as from from zero to adult, I guess.



James Geering 07:18

Well, with the town that you grew up in with everyone having the same employer. Firstly, was there a kind of class system based on what they were teaching? And then secondly, what were the pros and cons of that kind of dynamic in that very unusual community that you are part of?



07:37

Yes. So I'm not really as far as the caste system. No, I don't, I don't really recall. I mean, we wouldn't know that some people's folks were, you know, like, hi, you know, Assistant Dean of this college or, I mean, there was a little bit of different stature in terms of your employment, aborigine tech, but not really, I mean, everyone's I mean, I think it's pretty marginal relative to like, you know, the difference between what you'd find in a major city, you know, between the richest, and the lowest centers, and the highest earner. So, you know, I think the pros were sort of a unified, you know, there was sort of a collective trust by the parents when we were growing up, that you could kind of roam in these other families in these other places that you would want your kid would want to ram to look just like, home, you know, where I live in Denver now and while living golden, but when he when I, we lived downtown for a little bit, and it just isn't. I mean, I think there's just a lot more risk of being the got from the wealthiest people to, you know, homelessness, and you know, there's a whole world out there. So in Blacksburg growing up, we would basically just run around from when you woke up to when you went to bed and I don't I think because it was all sort of economically uniform. If that not a little bit of like, what's my kid gonna get into growing up? And then I guess the downside, you know, it's not diverse at all, really. In terms of socio economic. So I remember getting to Chattanooga, and I mean, thinking just people were, you know, seeing for the first time I had to completely, you know, a broad spectrum of different socio economic classes. Cultural I mean, everything just doesn't exist really in Blacksburg. Which isn't good, I guess, you know, just with some respect. It's not. I don't, I wouldn't encourage I'm a parent now and I wouldn't I don't hope that my daughters, you know, first run with a diverse societies once they're 18. But you know, hopefully, yeah, turned out all right?



James Geering 10:18

Well, you said about your dad owning an orchard too. We are now in a culture where a lot of lot of especially younger people really don't even know what some of the vegetables and products in their food even look like I grew up on a farm, we had an orchard on the farm, what was your exposure to the holistic side of nutrition when you were growing up?

 10:39

Well, so this would have been previous to the third grade, so I don't have a ton of memory of it. One memory I do have was the the damage that deer would do to the fruit. And I remember my father and his partner trying to eliminate the threat of deer. And my my dad suggesting that I could go along. And my you know, that being a big point of contention and really, really want to go home. But these apples generally were produced into Apple products, the apples you find on like, in the grocery store on the rack, and being only one of them. So you'd have like, these apples would go to make apple juice and applesauce and apple pie and Apple, whatever anything you can think of, and they wouldn't be sold as apples alone. But yeah, I don't know, I don't remember a whole lot. I mean, I remember a lot of conversation and dialogue around what we would eat, you know, my, we would have these kind of tomatoes, or that and then my dad would kind of go into this explanation of this is and you know what, this is also two types of cucumbers. But in reality, they're very different. I didn't really become interested in that kind of stuff until like, I was until you know, maybe 10 years ago, but um, I do sort of remember it. But yeah, once he got to Virginia Tech, he got into, like non fruit bearing education, more plants and grass and forestry and all this kind of stuff. And so yeah, he's still a wealth of knowledge. I mean, any, he'll come visit, you know, visit us and look at the grass and just, you know, say like, oh, the nitrogen is not, you need this, you know, he can just look at the coloring or something, or the little bit messed up. But yeah, unfortunately, I wish I had a more interesting story about a organic eating or healthy eating as a young kid, but there isn't one really.

 James Geering 13:07

Yeah, well, no problem. The other thing that I know you're exposed to in Colorado, but we have a lot, you know, all over the country as wildfires has he ever with the forestry background discussed that element?

 13:19

Yeah, he does. He doesn't we there's a lot of work in insect damage, which contributes a lot to the fires here in Colorado. You know, a lot of people think of the trees, you know, just if you think of a fire spreading left to right, in each tree that stands becomes ablaze but the impact and the you know, the the velocity and intensity of the fire has a lot to do with what lays on the ground. So if the rate of if you have a beetle or some sort of species that's taken down Pines, you know, even at 101% speed that would take place, you know, without this, if there's any sort of trees falling at an abnormally high rate, that area is going to be very, you know, highly, highly subject to fire. So he lives in, he teaches at West Virginia University now, they don't have any fires. So I wouldn't say it's like a thing, but it's a topic of conversation here all the time. I mean, it's, you know, just 30 minutes north, there's that big boulder fire and then we'll have maybe twice a year we'll have a they call them like pre evacuation warnings, which isn't evacuation but it's sort of like you should think about if we asked you to evacuate in the next two hours, where you're gonna go and what you're gonna bring, when maybe have one year it's been a it's rained a lot this year relative to the years that I've lived here, which is for I think this has been the wettest, the most, most precipitation and the most snow. So I know we've got some fires and Crested Butte and other places Canada, obviously. But so far, so good. August is really the, I think August in early September is really the, if you're gonna get it, that's when it starts. So

 James Geering 15:30

well speaking of the outdoors, you talked about mountain biking and kayaking, when I was younger, I play football, but I didn't have a football team. And I was really into the martial arts. And so there was an element of being a weirdo if you didn't play the sports that quote unquote men or boys are supposed to play. Did you have any element of that as you started finding some of these more extreme sports yourself?

 15:53

A little bit. I was a wrestler in high school, and it was really

 16:01

intense, you know, given I think if you looked at all the wrestling programs in the country, in this part of the state was really involved, we have some of the best wrestlers, and wrestling coaches and some of these young men start at age two, and they wrestle all the way through college. And so I sort of got looped into that. And then I really wanted to pursue my outdoor sports, I started rock climbing and kayaking, probably in ninth grade. But I had to. I also wrestled all the way through, and there was definitely days that I wanted to quit wrestling and thought, like, oh, I'll just pursue this. It's a little bit hard, you know, it's challenging as a high schooler. First, you don't get your license till you're 16. And then, you know, these a lot of these things, you need a partner. You know, to climb, you need two people, it's just not really, I don't think it's super common that two high schoolers, you know, own all the climbing gear and their parents are gonna let them drive out to this cliff and whatnot. And so even if you're into it, you know, you need to have what, you know, super helpful if your parents are intuit or someone in your family that could take you. Yeah, I remember, like trying to fix up this bike that was like \$400, and like, converted into a mountain bike and stuff. I mean, it was just challenging, I think. But as far as like social pressure, no, I mean, I remember my parents really wanted me to stay involved with wrestling, because you had to get, you had to have a C average to stay on the team. And that's it. That was like the minimum that I was willing to put forth. And it was structured, and it was, you know, the coaches were really hard on the guys in terms of grades and being on time and being disciplined and eating healthy. And they knew, you know, aside from the physical, you know, endurance, you know, the cardiovascular and the strength aspect, this, this is probably better than what Ben's gonna get into, on his own. If he, you know, told us, he's gonna just kayak every day, which is what I ultimately did in college was like, just got away and kayak way more than I should have.

 James Geering 18:30

What were you dreaming of career aspirations wise, when you were in high school and college?

 18:38

That's a that's, you know, sort of fundamental to my story. I think I didn't. I didn't have any. And

That's a that's, you know, sort of fundamental to my story. I think I didn't, I didn't have any. And I was a little bit you know, I was looking around at that people who did and I thought that maybe something was off, or I was a little bit confused as to all these other people that wanted to who could really put their finger on, like, when I grew up on Rubia. XYZ, I mean, some things like a firefighter or an astronaut, or, you know, these kind of like I would call it a cliché, but sort of, um, you know, common aspirations. I was like, oh, yeah, that sounds fun. I mean, I would do that. And, but when I got to undergrad, you know, people said, like, Oh, I really want to work in banking, or, you know, oh, my roommate graduated last year, and he got a job in insurance, and I'm going to try to do that. And I remember being concerned, like, Why have I don't care? I don't, that sounds so, so bad. I don't want to do any of that. And then as college went on, it got more and more stressful because the question is more and more relevant, you know, to it's no longer like what do you want to be when you grow up? It's like, what do you want to what are you going to do and 24 months or or 18 months. So I studied political science I think because I I just sort of like a history, really like a history interested person, which I still am, you know, I love reading books about wars and, you know, debates and shifts in the clip political climate 80 years ago and stuff like that. And so it just sort of seem like political science, I would have to learn about all this history stuff. But even that, I mean, you could have someone could have convinced me to study something else in like, five minutes, I had no, I was basically just in college because it was the norm. And it was an expectation of my friends. And my parents really. And it didn't, it was a good deal. I mean, I got to kayak all the time. And, like, drink beer, and I mean, it's, it seemed like a small price to pay for, like having to go to classes, like small price to pay for, you know, the rest of things that people do in college. So.

J

James Geering 21:15

So when did this shift become to join the military? When was that shift?

i

21:20

So I was out here. I 2008 I think the summer 2008 And I dislocated my shoulder kayaking here in Colorado, and it was sort of a it was a major pain in the ass, I had a couple dislocations, and then I had to get surgery, it was like, you know, you don't need surgery this week. But you need, you're never going to be you're never going to be going where you want to go or kayaking at the level you want to cut, you're basically just going to have repetitive dislocations. And so I decided to have the surgery. And I was recovering from that. And the orthopedist was basically, like, we got to this point where he said, Well, you know, you don't have to be dormant, you can run if you want or find an exercise bike or hike on the Stairmaster or anything really, you just can't use your arm. And he certainly can't kayak. So I was maintaining relationships with the folks at the Naval Academy who had gone to my high school, and they had gone on to play, you know, to participate in, in college athletics at Navy. And I, you know, I sort of thought these guys at first, you know, when they first when I first got to undergrad, and they first got to undergrad, I you know, it was like, I had the upper hand, I had all the freedom, I could do whatever they want. And then these guys were like, you know, in boot camp style, freshmen, you know, they don't have any privileges whatsoever. And so as as school went on, it seemed like the table started to turn where it was kind of like, okay, well, these guys have a ton of direction. They're driven, they're, you know, they're healthy in shape, they kind of have a clear path on where they're going. And I was like, not going to graduate. In under in four years, I had a broken arm, I couldn't kayak anymore. And I was like, Man, I maybe I should have done that whole Naval Academy thing. At this time, the war in Afghanistan, and Iraq was sort of it

was on the news every day, obviously, it was 2007 2008. So it was the height of the war and sort of this premise or the strategy that we could do. Maybe we could be more effective and reduce casualties on the US side with more specialized small units was getting a ton of popularity. So I knew what a seal was. And I knew you know, probably since I was a little kid what it was, but it was really starting to these guys was really starting to be in the news and everything. And so these bodies of the academy were like, man, it's not too late. We're gonna go and try to become these Navy SEALs. And you can do it too. You don't have to have gone to the Naval Academy. And yeah, I thought it was crazy. I mean, I was having a till I was kind of lightly breaking it to my parents. I'm not going to graduate on time and all this and so anyway, all this lines up same time the orthopedist is like you can do anything you want but kayak and I got so I was so tired of being on the couch, that I got really into running and I started doing it marathons. And that turned into triathlons. And then simultaneously, I'm, you know, reading all these books every book I can on how to become a Navy Seal and all and what it is and all this stuff. So that you can see where, where the story goes. But eventually I just dropped out and joined the Navy.

J

James Geering 25:27

So, a question that I always like to ask people who were deployed into combat and the reason I asked this question is back home, I would argue people get a very polarized view on war. It's either the very pro war stalking bodies that God sought them out the very anti war there or baby killers, and in the middle of the men and women, arguably children that we send off to fight with our flag on their shoulder. So first part of the question, regardless of the politics that sent you to where you were deployed, was there a moment where in that land, you realize maybe, you know, atrocities, whatever was going on? That there were some some horrific people that did need to be taken care of? Yeah, absolutely.

i

26:07

Absolutely. And one of the, you know, the one of the privileges, I think that special operations and units like seals, and Green Berets and Rangers and all this stuff are afforded is that they, the leadership applies them, where where they're needed, obviously, but I think, more frequently than in other units. It's where the bad is taking place. And so a lot of the stuff Fortunately, for myself, you know, I was sort of, I was sort of relieved of this burden of moral, moral struggle, which I know, other other veterans deal with, you know, quite frequently, if not all the time, and that that's, you know, as you move away from combat, you know, days, weeks, months, years later, that's always can play a role, you know, as the what was the purpose that we were there? And what was the you know, was it more really just? And I wouldn't, I would never say that special operators don't have to deal with that question at all. But I think disproportionately to conventional forces, we're, you know, we're assigned to things that is pretty, pretty black and white. Or else you just wouldn't, it would just wouldn't come across your scope of work really. Now, that's not to say, you know, there's really bad, some some intense evil that's taking place here. And when you get there, there's some more ambiguous or gray situations that have to be navigated on the sides. Of course, that happens, but generally speaking. Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. We saw some what I would consider a true true evil. I mean, that's even, you know, to the point of, can open up some spiritual

navigation as to why that amount of evil, you know, would even exist or how, how someone could get so derailed in their upbringing or in their circumstances to where that would be, you know, they would find themselves in that position in life. Does that answer your?

**J** James Geering 28:49

No, no, it does. Everyone has a different answer. And that that's exactly I think, I think, you know, people understanding that, you know, as you said, there are different people with different perspectives that, say, a good example, post Iraq, there was no WMDs. And the question, you know, why are we there, and but then there's obviously the good that they did while they stood on the ground that there were some extremists there. And so it's kind of, you know, telling telling the whole story. The other side of that, that we also don't get really in the press is the kindness and compassion that comes out of these these combat zones. And, you know, we tar an entire nation with a brush, I would argue we're doing it right now with China with Russia. You know, we're at war with insert Country X, when actually, most people in most countries are good people trying to get on with their day, and there's some extremists or some, you know, fascists or tyrants that are, you know, making their lives miserable. So what about kindness and compassion, whether it is our allies, the people in the countries or the people that you are serving next to?

**o** 29:49

Oh, yeah. I couldn't agree more. I couldn't agree more. I wish I remember. I remember before I deployed, you know, you hear so stories passed down from your colleagues that went before you. And it's sort of you just want to get this picture, like you're gonna land on this plane. And when you get off the plane or the helicopter, like, it'll be like a war, you know, there'll be a, you know, people shooting at you, and you'll be, you know, all kinds of stuff, you know, sort of like a video game type scenario. And then yeah, you get, you get there, and there's tons of monotony, and tons of every day human activities going on people looking to get food for their kids and water and run a business and sell shoes. And, you know, it's not, you know, this is my experience, obviously, if you were in Fallujah at the right, in the right years, that's not the case. But in my experience, yeah, even in the places where the, you know, the heart of the eye of the storm of evil. I think there's some really human you know, compassion and the, you know, the, the drive for parents to parent and look after their children, you know, by any means necessary, and protect them and feed them. And that's going on everywhere I ever went, that was going on, and it was going on. Much more of the days than the bullets were flying, for sure. But, you know, I think the US foreign policy strategy and those with especially those that, you know, the programs and the the deployments that where they want to involve seals are, are in places where, you know, you have a sizable country, community, society, religious group, you name it, that is being, you know, their freedoms, or their livelihoods are being threatened by a smaller group. You know, for example, we wouldn't try to think of a good example. But now and 2023, I guess, with all the lessons learned, I think we'd like to think we don't just go find places that we don't agree with the you know, everyone in the everyone in this country is loves being there, and everyone's happy, but we don't. And so we just go in, it's usually a place where the majority is being threatened by a very violent minority. And so, yeah, it wasn't uncommon at all to find anything, weddings, birthday parties, religious ceremonies, I mean, just tons and tons of really great, you know, the best of the human experience, you know, a couple months down the street from from the worst. Yeah, that kind of stuff is interesting to think about.



 J

James Geering 33:29

Well, you talked earlier about being passionate about history and political science. I've asked a few people this recently, because it still baffles me. And you know, when there's this push to maybe sweep a lot of our history under the rug, because we're ashamed of it, whatever it is, that seems to only make the problem worse, and one would argue war could even be a deliberate attempt. But when you look at history, over and over again, there's, as you said, a small group of tyrannical, greedy, hateful individuals that seem to oppress the masses. And you can apply this everywhere from World War Two to slavery. I mean, you name it, there's this, you know, this facade, as I said, paint everyone with the brush, like, for example, all white people benefit from slavery. Well, if you actually understand history, that's not the case. And there's a lot of people that were extremely poor while slavery was going on. So why is it as a species that we keep allowing this to happen over and over again, when by numbers, we have the ability to actually snuff out these people before they get too powerful?

 i

34:38

You know, I don't know. I don't have the answer. I think one recurring theme that I see there is power vacuums or absence of stability. Often, you know is going to often you know, that inspires competition. And competition for control of people usually gets pretty violent. You know, if you look at Germany after World War One, if you look at, you know, if we look at the war in Iraq, where we sort of have the end of Saddam, and then we have a long, long reign of sort of US occupation, and then that ramps down, and then in into a absence of power, and then we see Islamist state, Iraq and Syria, ISIS stands up, you know, countries like Somalia are really devoid of any anything. And so, while I don't know have the answer to your question, I think if you, if you wanted to be pre emptive, and you wanted to be proactive, I think addressing, or identifying places where control or stability or rule of law is very ambiguous and not clearly defined or is being being, you know, fought out between three or four different groups. I mean, those are definitely the places that this is going to happen. And these are the places that we end up sending troops to, and trying to, you know, put out some, some war I mean, that, you know, the, where, where I think you'll get in trouble with that, obviously, is like, you know, that we're really welcome there, you know, or, or do we just become another competitor for, for control? Amongst the other two or three? And is that any better or worse, and, well, I think we've learned in the last two decades is like, the exit the entry, and the initial grab is very easy. It's doable. The exit is where, you know, what takes real, leadership, real strategy and all this stuff? And it's not been easy. And, you know, I don't even know if trying to think of some examples that where it's been done. I mean, there's plenty of examples where it's not been done, or not been done very well. But yeah, so I think you got to have a, you've got to have a really clear transition plan? And if the answer is that there's no transition plan, or it's not possible, I think you you're in for, you're in for a long ride, and it's going to cost cost a lot of lives probably.

 J

James Geering 37:58

Well, I think even domestically, just observing, because I mean, I don't hail from any political party personally, because I'm still waiting for a good human being to show up as a leader, regardless of the color of that eye. But watching the division, and I think, you know, the, the

pandemic really showed how easily people are divided whatever their beliefs, I think there were a lot of good people in the middle. But there was a lot of people that were forced into one trench or the other friendships, you know, families torn apart. And, you know, when you paint the boogeyman as the other guys, now you're breaking down a country, and now the more fragmented we are, the more the less able we are to communicate with each other and stop oppression. Yeah, now, you know, I would say the last two people that we've had in the White House personally, James Geering opinion, are fucking awful. And we keep hearing the same thing, choosing from the lesser of two evils Well, out of 350 million people. That's a disgrace. So to me, if we're not careful, our country's going to head down that road, if we don't open up our eyes, change the system and actually select good human beings to be at the helm. You know, so that we can be that beacon of light for other countries.



39:09

I couldn't agree more. I mean, the talent that exist in this country is a it's amazing. I mean, all day, every day, almost you come read an article or listen to a podcast or you know, like, Tao li these people are, it's, it's humbling. And then when you look at, you know, the next race, you know, who do we have lined up, it's it's grim, or, you know, it seems like every cycle there is, you know, promising person who you sort of show interest in and then there's some sort of logistical is not the right word, but there's some sort of nuanced way that the system works at all. It just isn't practical for that person to to make it so I couldn't agree more, man. I couldn't agree more the way It just gets so binary, you know, all the time is like we're gonna get every topic or person or even, you know, newspaper podcast is a very binary like, Oh, this is a is this of our team has this of the other team. And if it's, if we decide it's of the other team, you know, it just, you know, is might as well be the, it's like, if you've assimilate with it now, you've, we're going to just pair you with the other things that that team assimilates with, you know what I mean? And it's like, well, how did we get? How do we get from like, I like this movie to now. I'm a, you know, you fill in the blank. You know, and it's, people don't, I think, nuanced, requires, like, a lot of bright, you know, requires, like, 10x brain space that a black and white binary judgment takes, you know,



James Geering 41:10

yeah, whatever you need, you need the capacity to think and when you're being bombarded with professional sports, and, you know, social media and all the white noise that we have, and you can't even sit in a restaurant anymore without 1000 TVs being in your peripheral, and that's keeping you busy. And I don't think it's people again, waking up deciding how they're going to fragment the US, but I think we've just devolved. And if we're not careful, and don't catch ourselves, you know, as I had a bedroom Schooley on a few years ago, and he's like, one of the saddest things that people know the stats of all their favorite football players, but they don't even know their own body composition. Yeah, that's a great analogy. You know, we just know about other people, rather than actually looking in our own home, and figuring out how we can improve that first step outside our front door and then affect our community.



41:59

Yeah, yeah. That's great. That's great. Totally, I could probably do. Do more of that myself.

 James Geering 42:07

Yep, think we all could. Well, I want to go through your transition. But just before we do, you were going to talk obviously, about, you know, veterans mental health and what you're doing now. When you look back, whether it was pre military, whether it was during military, did you have any of your own struggles?

 42:25

I did, I did. About 18 months post transition, I had you know, start back in the service, I think I kind of came in on the heels of some really.

 42:43

This year SEAL teams have been really well employed and had really done a lot in the decade before. I got there, and they in the decade that I was in the SEAL teams, we they did a lot too, and they still do a lot. But um, you know, the my sort of mentors and whatnot had been in repetitive back to back Iraq, Afghanistan deployments and each one. Maybe not everyone, but more likely than not, you know, not everyone came home from those deployments. And there was a lot of loss and a lot of hardship and whatnot in mental health issues. And, you know, the conversation around mental health was starting to open up and broad and become more popular in the middle of my career, and there was sort of a, at this time, being a young guy, there was sort of a understanding or sort of like, an unspoken message that I subscribe to that was sort of like, well, even if you have these thoughts, or emotions or feelings, you know, there, let's compare to some of these other guys. They must have 10x, you know, because they did more, they're there. They're likely feeling more, and I don't really, I think a lot of my generation, and in this case, didn't really feel entitled to, you know, a lot of mental health navigation. I know, I certainly didn't. And I had had a pretty significant head injury. About two years before I got out, and so I didn't. I sort of dealt with that, like, in real time, and I was, I was in the hospital for a couple of days. And then I was, you know, sort of in that post concussion fog for maybe two months and then life went on and whatnot. And anyway, I got out of the military and moved here to Denver number was really, really focused on me on my vocational transition, I had a I had a daughter, and I'm married. And, you know, I just thought like, I really need to get my family here and become a civilian with a stable paycheck and get a house and I'll be fine. I mean, that's what the last thing you want to do is like, have to get back in the Navy because you can't find a job. And you're kind of, you know, and that's, that's not unheard of. And so I remember being just, you know, I was probably, when I thought about leaving the military, I thought, you know, 99% of my bandwidth was focused on like vocational transition and income. And that went, Well, I did a, you know, not to, you know, I transitioned fine. I got a good job. And I am. Oh, that went well. And then around the 18 month, Mark,

 46:00

I think some of the, you know, some of the non work stuff started to catch up to me a little bit I had

 46:15

you know, I was, I was identified as a seal, I guess, for 1010 years. Not, I guess, I mean, I did. And when I got out, I kind of still did, I mean, people would introduce me as like, Hey, this is Ben, he was a seal. And I just, you know, it wasn't time to shed that. And then eventually, it sort of dawns on you that it is it's like that you haven't been in the military for a long time. And you're not a seal anymore. And I was really trying to fill that up with backcountry skiing and bike racing. And my wife was pregnant with our second daughter, and it just, it all kind of came to a head I didn't, you know, I wasn't going to be able to replace the endorphin rush and the adrenaline and the, you just can't replace being a seal with anything in the civilian world and trying to do it with sports is I think healthy and healthy at the right dose, but the dose I was doing, it was not and COVID the heat of COVID really put, you know, a lot of stuff got canceled, and I was home all the time, working from home. And, yeah, I think all of this is in retrospect, but at the time, it just was like, Man, I don't know who I am really, I don't, you know, I'm not. I'm really apathetic towards my job, I don't really have been lying to myself that I care. I do care about my job, I do. feel lucky to have it, but the content of it, you know, the actual subject matter. I was like, oh, yeah, I am into this. And then it's, you know, I think you you know, come to the point where you're like, am I? And so, yes, so I got, you know, I talk to a lot of people that are, you know, were really generous with their time and got some help. And, yeah, I mean, nothing. It just, it really, I just realized it was time to build and invest in the knew what the post military May was, and not worry about becoming the equivalent of a Navy SEAL in the civilian world with skiing, or whatever the case may be. And it just this say, Hey, I'm not that and I have, I'm only 33 years old, has a lot more years to go and you better you can either look in the rearview and where you can try to build the best life for the next. You know, the best life, the best career the best, whatever going forward. And it's not, you know, it's not like I realized that on Wednesday, and it was like, Okay, I mean, it's, it's still hard. But now that I just have a sort of habit framed, and I'm sort of aware of the the dynamics and I've talked to other guys who have similar experiences, it's helpful when all this kind of happened. I didn't even really, I didn't even really, I was just kind of like, Man, I'm not really happy and I don't really care that much about any of the stuff I'm doing Hmm. That was kind of long winded but know what

 James Geering 50:04

I was that was good. And it's the transition and the identity piece and the loss of tribe and the loss of purpose. I mean, these are all important parts of the conversation, I heard you on the Choose the hard, choose the hard way podcast, and you touched on something with the host. And I wanted to kind of circle back with you, you were talking about chasing, you know, that next thing the little bit more extreme, a little bit further, a little bit higher, whatever the event was, and it's something I've saw in myself is something I've seen in a lot of my peers in the fire service, too. And, you know, the military friends that I've I've begun to, you know, accumulate as it were. The irony is 10 years in the SEAL teams, you know, 1520 years as a firefighter, we are so be up by that point that I've kind of turned a corner on myself at 49. Now, where it's gone from, you know, trying to squeak out as high performance as I can to just simply fixing some things, taking the time to address muscle imbalances, and, you know, do the things that you're already when you were a Navy Seal, you're a firefighter or a police officer, if you took your training seriously, then you're already at an incredible place. And rather than chasing the next shiny object, the carrot on the stick until you're broken, taking that pause, and just

enjoying sports, but not trying to be the best at everything, but actually investing in your body and your sleep and nutrition and your mobility and everything else. So that when you wake up, you feel awesome, instead of a bag of shit. But you know, a gold award winning bag of shit.



51:41

Yeah. Yeah, this is a, this is a, this is something I think about almost every day. Now it's like, because you know, there's a balance, there's a, there's a place where this line crosses into unhealthy. And it's not always unhealthy, there is value in that voice that says, I can do better and I can create, I can establish this goal. And in the, in order to achieve the goal, though, have to be some changes within me. And those changes will be beneficial. And there'll be good and I'll have to work hard. I mean, that voice has gotten me where I am in life today, not just in sports, or in the military, but in school and all kinds of stuff, I don't think you want to eliminate that completely. You know, when the alarm goes off at five o'clock in the morning, you have to have that voice really, if you just lay there and thought like, well, I'm fine. I'm a fine person. And I'm, uh, I'm as you know, whatever. I mean, I would just lay there all day on it, you know, you don't, I don't think Speaking for myself, like, I want that I think we're where I got off the rails and where I see a lot of people like in an endurance sport is this like I will affirm myself as a competent or a good or a great or a respectable athlete. You know, academic seal, whatever the case may be when I get to that, when I crossed this next finish line. And even though they've shown themselves that left, after they've done, they've participated in that cycle 10 times, they just still don't. And so that, for me, I think attributed to a lot of the issues that I was having. I think I started to I started to understand that once I get to the top of this mountain, I'll just have to pick another one. And that's sort of depressing when you've been living in a world where like climbing to the top of the mountain is what keeps you going. And so now, what I've tried to do is



54:30

give the element of, of joy and blissful enjoyment, fun, a little bit more respect. And if something so hard and so grueling. I understand how people think that's fun. I have done stuff like that in my life. And I admit that it's fun. I don't really know how or the psychology behind wearing yourself out for 30 hours other than calling it fun, but I get it. But if it's all of that, and it's no blissful joy, I think you really need to ask yourself, Am I doing this? Am I doing this B? Because I need to prove to myself that I can do it, or prove to other people that I can do it or prove to my Instagram followers that I can do it? Or is it really something that I want to do? And that I'll enjoy doing? And if it's both of those things, that that's great. That's nothing wrong with that. Nothing wrong with doing hard things. But if it's all hard, and it's not, you can't look in the mirror and honestly say this will be fun. Or you know, it'll be it'll put a smile on my face, then it I think, then you need to ask the question like, Well, is it? Is this just a proving opportunity? Because you can't prove you can't, you'll just want to do it again. I mean, you'll just once Yeah, maybe you'll prove it and you're posted on your Instagram, or you all your friends will acknowledge how fast you got to the top of this mountain or skied this one mountain. But after a week of that, it'll wear off and you'll be looking for that. Feeling again, I think



James Geering 56:31

that's There's a great documentary, the weight of gold. And it's a lot of the most elite American

athletes talking about, you know, standing on the Olympic podium, best in the entire planet. And then a few minutes later, they're like I said, Yeah, you know, and I think that's the thing is that if you want to be the best at a thing, and that is your singular focus, and like you said, you're enjoying the journey, that's a different conversation. But I've watched just perfect example, my son, I've watched him, he runs for his school, he does well academically, he is in the JROTC program, you know, he's got a friend group and that I just told him today, like, that is so much more important than being that wrestler, since you were two years old. To me, personally, as a parent, I like the fact that you're good at a lot of things far outweighs being the best, one singular thing, because that does set you up for failure.

 57:28

Yeah. Yeah, and it's a lot of risk. You know, like, if you break your legs or something, your, your whole ego and your whole, you know, you're gonna be really crushed if you're consumed by one singular, physical,

 57:47

physical thing. So it's all been a learning process for me, man, it's been not

 57:54

all of this is stuff that I've thought about, you know, within the last two or three years before I didn't, you know, wouldn't even cross my mind it just, whatever. Whatever it is. It's

 James Geering 58:03

a it's an evolution there.

 58:05

Yeah, that's right. That's right.

 James Geering 58:08

Well, you mentioned transition. So let's get to voc. Tell me obviously, it's not the Madonna Vogue. So you know, tell me that the title and then the genesis of the story.

 58:18

Yeah. So it's veterans outdoor advocacy, advocacy group, not like Vogue, the magazine vo AG. And Vogue is a 501 C three and C four focused on advocating for the use of outdoor recreation therapy for vets, you know, specifically via the VA hospital. So, you know, a perfect end state

for us would be a veteran is seeing a care provider at the VA or even in town and on va coverage and they are navigating their mental health and in addition to pharmaceuticals and what currently exists at these care providers. You know, list of available treatments would be funding and access to outdoor recreation. So this this young man or woman could get participate in. You name it fly fishing, hunting, skiing, running paddleboarding, kayaking, cycling anything and have that be part of their covered care. This is an idea that started in around 2017. Some legislation was put forth and the nonprofit was basically built around that to drive it and be sort of the leading voice for pushing it through. Previous to that we did outdoor recreation therapy as a facilitator just as a, you know, people, people believe They donate money and we take veterans outside. Fortunately, that there's an abundance of players in that space today with tons and tons of I mean, if you Googled like veteran fly fishing or El Condor, something like that, you probably come up with 3030 different organizations. So we've tried to really focus on the, the advocacy part and pushing the conversation in DC. In 2020, the compact Act was passed, which basically assigned the VA to hold a 24 month Task Force and study the efficacy of outdoor recreation therapy, and come up with some recommendations for delivery. And you know, not unlike what a task force is tasked to do with anything like this in healthcare, but we Vogue is on the task force, and we meet every 60 days. And, yeah, there's folks from with, you know, psychology, psychiatry, the national parks, Health and Human Services, nonprofits like ourselves, VSOs. All kinds of Team Red, White, and Blue, Disabled Veterans of America, all kinds of great folks who have a vested interest in broadening the list of prescribe herbal treatments for veteran mental health. So if it's going really well, it's going really, really well, I think we're sort of down into the how I think the why is generally been endorsed, and now sort of the how, how are we going to ensure that quality exists? How are we going to ensure that there's no fraud and that their safety and all of this stuff? And so hopefully, you know, our, our dream is that you know, first and foremost is that the list of treatments that are available is is just broad and diversified, doesn't have to be outdoor recreation. I mean, if it was extended to our yoga, psychedelics, fly fishing, I think any, any expansion of what currently exists is a wind, we just, you know, we've we've been witness to the benefits of the outdoors. And so that's sort of our main driving focus. But it's, you know, I think it's a time I think we're sort of not only in a time of mental health, reckoning, where more people than ever are sort of having that conversation with themselves. But I think the the, the methods at which we navigate our mental health and the ways we the different ways that we approach mental health is as diverse as ever. I mean, I think that the, the doors definitely open for, hey, this is this group, this community of Iraq veterans participates in Acts, and it's really helping and I think the medical community is is willing to listen and validate that those testimonies were decades ago, or maybe even a decade ago. I mean, I think it was a lot more scrutinized, like you might see in oncology or something where you have a hypothesis, you test it, you know, if we can can we see this in a lab or a, you know, randomized control trials, yes or no, and then whatever, you know, I think there's a lot more like, Hey, we're, I started I took up backpacking, or I took up the sport and I feel a lot better. You know, obviously, there's some physiological change and probably some physiological stuff with all you know, with an exposure to the outdoors and all that stuff, too, which is worth looking at clinically. But also, you know, just sort of the lived experience piece of veterans saying, you know, I was drinking six days a week and now I'm going to run club or, you know, I'm doing a triathlon or Um, I went on a, whatever the case may be, I took up fly fishing, and now I gotta wake up early and do that. Now I don't. It's super, super tangible. And it's something that we've seen have a huge impact on, guys. So hopefully, it'll become covered by the VA and others.

I've had so many people on here, obviously, I'm not a member of the military, myself, but the VA experience has almost been identical for almost every war fighters come on. And it was always, you know, prescribed psychiatric meds, the tour therapy, and then when you hear people talking about the actual, you know, the the annotated results of some of these meds, psychiatric meds, they're not very reliable at all, they're not very effective at all. And yet, when you take a step back as a layman and go, Okay, so you get some veterans together, you get a pack back on their back, maybe your bow or a gun in their hand, again, they're a tribe, they have a sense of purpose that climbing there and outdoors, maybe they're camping, that's probably going to replicate somewhat, the parts that they enjoyed in the military, for some groups of people, this is probably going to be very healing, that doesn't take a lot of imagination to see the parallel why that would work. What has been the resistance to some of these? I mean, they use the word alternative, I'd argue the drugs are alternative, and these are common sense. But these modalities that weren't in the toolbox for so long through the VA.



1:06:39

Not as much as you think. I mean, I, we feel really blessed to you know, we're we're a group that can go on Capitol Hill and walk down the aisle of lawmaker offices, and really, you know, do we notice if the person is a Republican or a Democrat before the meeting? Of course, we know but, you know, we're not, we're one of the few groups that doesn't do all all GOP meetings on one day, and then all, you know, meetings with Democrats the other day, it's, it's, it's well received. And I think both parties and people, whether veterans or not have some sort of aha moment or experience in their own life where they participated in some outdoor recreation and they were like, you know, I do, I do feel better I do. I know what you mean, and we'd love to see it. VA healthcare and VA reliance on the private sector or the nonprofit sector or the education sector to deliver health care is something that has been not without fraud. You look at the money that comes out of the GI bill for education, you look at all the benefit programs that exist, there's bad actors in the world that know how to position themselves or create companies that will become recipients of this money where the veterans well, is not the priority. It's sort of a convenient way to access funding. So if there is, if there is resistance, it's in. You know, we don't really we we need to be convinced that the program will be executed properly and not be subjected to tons and tons of thieves. You know, we can't write a check to Joe schmoe's whitetail deer outfitter that opened up yesterday you know, we have to ensure credibility and understand that these veterans will receive not only not only the experience that they're paying for but that it's quality and backed with real psychotherapy experts and to call something therapy and to call something care and and whatnot as a you know, you want to have a level of of standard there so anyway, long winded way of saying the how has been there's been some questions and some pushback on the how the efficacy and the is it a II even a real thing? Very little. Very, very little pushback on that. Because you know, the other thing thing about that is, it's occurring so much already in the general, you know, in the donor generosity, space, it's like everything is already happening. It's just the wrong source of it's just the wrong source of funding. So you can, I mean, we can already point to the hundreds of organizations that are taking out 1000s and 1000s of Afghanistan, Iraq veterans, and then collecting their own data, collecting their own testimonials, seeing lives transformed from, you know, suicide risk to, you know, what you might consider healthy. And I mean, this is not a some fringe, you know, hey, this lab and way off in the mountains, we've discovered, you know, it's not a it's not unheard of at all. So, yeah, it really is just coming down to like the, you know, this is a pretty robust idea with a lot of players, a lot of different organizations that would carry out the care. We need to make sure that it's not mishandled.



**J** James Geering 1:11:15

So for people listening, where can they learn more about Vogan? Where can they donate?

 1:11:20

Yeah, it's V oag.org. And, yeah, all the information is on there. We have Instagram, think it's a Vogue underscore official, on Instagram. But yes, it's exciting. It's been a privilege to be a part of it really has a really good team. And the community of this community of people that are interested in taking veterans in the outdoors are really selfless. Passionate, good people, almost exclusively. So it's been a lot of fun. For me, it's been it's been good for my own experience. And that's awesome.

**J** James Geering 1:12:06

Beautiful weather this throw some closing questions at you before you go. If you've got time. You're the first one I love to ask, is there a book or other books that you love to recommend? It can be related to our discussion today will completely unrelated?

 1:12:23

Yeah, ah, let me think. What would I recommend? You know, I think for veteran transition I've read when I was going through that experience that I talked about is a Man's Search for Meaning that's a really cliché, book recommendation, I think is helped. You know, how we've been recommended by 1000s of podcast guests. It's pretty cliché, but um, yeah, it really helped me re redesign a lot of the questions that I was asking myself when I transitioned and his experience. I don't want to speak for your whole audience. But generally speaking, is more severe than mine, or any of our own ever. And so the way he's able to frame his outlook and his perspective, I mean, you get a real sense of like, man, if he can do it, I can do it. And it really, really helped me. It really helped me reframe the way I was sort of thinking about some things, so I would probably I think that's what I would recommend, as

**J** James Geering 1:13:53

people tend to compare trauma and downplay their own compared to person acts, and obviously Viktor Frankl was in Auschwitz. So pretty horrific and even within Auschwitz, his experiences were horrendous. But the flip side of that conversation is, well, if you look at someone with comparatively worse trauma, if that's what you're buying into, then read what they're saying. Because what they're saying is they were able to get through that. So if they can get through that what you believe is worse than now it's becomes a message of hope, because your seemingly less worse trauma is, you know, surmountable because Viktor Frankl, Dr. Edith Eger, all these, you know, these people have had on Ishmael Bay, these routes through worst case scenarios, these incredible humans were able to grow from this trauma, so if they can, you can, so I think that becomes a message of hope rather than not validating your own trauma.

 1:14:49

I couldn't agree more. Yeah. Yeah. And I think there's you know, I think the last thing you want to tell people dealing with depression or PTSD So here's like that there's a little bit of narcissism to it. But I think that book helped me examine that, like how much of you know, maybe part of this is just too much inward? Thinking, which I don't think is a bad thing, but outward thinking can certainly help you and like, sort of looking at others. And where maybe the point of all of it is, the benefit that you're going to bring to someone else is was really helpful for me. I think you can really distract yourself and life and find happiness, meaning purpose, much more easily if you're focused externally, and on others, or other programs or other projects or other relationships. And the long stints of inward can get kind of cynical and multiply your at least for me, you know, when I felt the most, I've had the most depressive episodes are really, when I had a lot of time to just think about myself, really, in some phases of life, I'm really focused on what I'm doing. And the net sort of the, the outcome of it is happiness, really, I think you're lacking depression, because I'm not really. I see myself as an agent for something else, and not so focused on, you know, I think if you sit around and think about, like, if anything in your body is in pain, it's just think about it long enough, you'll think like, yeah, you know, I think my back is a little tight, you know, and then you're like, God, damn, I have a hurt back. But then it's, you know, you just distraction is helpful. And then that's how that book really speaks to that.

 James Geering 1:17:09

Well, I've heard this over and over again, obviously, you've got to get through, especially if you're in crisis. I mean, that's not when you start a nonprofit, when you just, you know, the day after you had a gun in your hand. However, once people are able to navigate their own trauma, that selflessness that purpose becomes as healing to the individual as it does to the people that they're helping as well. So it's kind of the gift that keeps on giving.

 1:17:33

Absolutely, and I am a with Vogue, and everything, I'm definitely a been subjected to that. And UBC, you know, you'd be surprised how many inquiries we get to help, you know, we get almost as many inquiries as we get for, I want to participate. And I need help we get it maybe equal amount as I want to help other veterans. You know, I want to be on the I'm gonna sit on the providing side of the table. And that's great. We love that. And I think that that speaks to what you're saying is like there's it's cathartic to where it's healing through yourself to help others for sure.

 James Geering 1:18:18

Absolutely. Well, what about we talked about books, what about films and documentaries, any of those that you love?

 1:18:26

So one thing we didn't talk about is, like I in order to sort of broaden my focus away from identifying as like an athlete, I, I, I've tried to get really into writing and, uh, you and I are talking about your books.



1:18:43

And so yeah, I spent a lot of time in the last few years like trying to



1:18:52

indulge in the cognitive areas of life that I enjoy music and writing and whatnot. And so what I saw today, I saw last week is just short story by Hemingway called Big two hearted river. And that's about a guy comes home from World War One. And he goes to, on a fishing trip by himself. And he sort of navigates his PTSD on this trip. And it's the town has changed since he left years ago. And he sort of talks about it, but it's not explicitly stated. It's not even explicitly stated that it's in what post World War One, but it's 100 years old this month, and I was like, Callias it's amazing. Because it's a lot of Vokes sort of mission and sort of core belief is this experience in nature that has healing effects from war, and people should give that a read. It only takes about 25 minutes, the short story



J James Geering 1:19:58

beautiful, thanks. Whew, all right. Well, speaking of amazing people, is there a person that you'd recommend to come on this podcast as a guest, to speak to the first responders, military and associated professionals of the world?



1:20:11

Yeah, there's a guy, Judd Kaufman. And I can, I can introduce you on email. And this is a guy who was also a seal. And then he was an entrepreneur, a serial entrepreneur. And speaks to his he speaks to the identity piece really, really well from being you know, someone who was a seal to a CEO to a father. And the ability to not have any identity that's not wrapped up in anything except for you that your identity is your first and last name. And avoiding us associating your identity too closely with any one thing like a job or a title or athlete or whatever. And it's really powerful. It really has helped me. And, yeah, that'd be that'd be a good guest, I think for you, and I can introduce you.



J James Geering 1:21:12

That would be amazing. Thank you. Well, then the last question before we make sure everyone knows where to find you. What do you do to decompress?



1:21:21

Ah, right, my mountain bikes and run. I live. Luckily, I live right by the trails here. And so it's pretty easy. And I got I got pretty into mountain biking when I moved here. And so I'll ride three or four days a week. And I do some running. And right, which is sort of a new, new. New hobby for me. So yeah, there's two things.

 James Geering 1:21:46

And then with writing, are we expecting a book at some point?

 1:21:50

Yeah, at some point, I'm often doing like articles and interviews, sort of short stories on substack. I can send you the link. And then I'm hoping it sort of all comes together in in a novel. Yeah. Non or a fiction novel is what is the end goal?

 James Geering 1:22:12

Beautiful. All right. Well, then you said Vogue, was vo ag.org? Are there any places on online or social media to find you specifically?

 1:22:20

Yeah, my Instagram is at BL Davis three. And then my substack is the transition.substack.com.

 James Geering 1:22:35

Beautiful. Well, Ben, I want to say thank you so much. It's been an amazing conversation, a very unique perspective, because as you said, you know, you're not the one, taking the vets out fishing or climbing, you're actually advocating them, which I just had a guest on call Lyle, who's doing something similar, just more from from the overall VA perspective. But I'm an equally important part of the conversation. Because if we're not the conduit between the lawmakers and the men and women in uniform, then we're missing this big piece, but to have this toolbox grow and grow and grow to find the right fit for each individual, you know, whether it's EMDR and psychedelics, and, you know, rucking or whether it's some you know, the new calm that I just told you about a minute ago, and you know, equine therapy. So I want to thank you so much for being so generous with your time and coming on the behind shield podcast today.

 1:23:27

Yeah, thank you, James. I've learned a lot from your, from you and your guests, and it's a it's a real pleasure. I want to see what you're doing helps as well.

