

Chris Macklin - Episode 764

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SPEAKERS

James Geering



James Geering 00:00

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every single person on planet earth who needs to hear them. So that being said, I introduce to you Chris Macklin enjoy Well, Chris, I want to start by saying thank you so much for taking the time and coming on the behind

 03:36

the show podcast today. Thanks for having me.

 James Geering 03:39

So where on planet earth we finally you this afternoon?

 03:43

I am in a suburb of Denver, Colorado in unincorporated Douglas County, just south of Denver.

 James Geering 03:50


Beautiful. Well, I know that that's been your place of work for a long time now. So tell me where you were born. And tell me a little bit about your family dynamic what your parents did and how many siblings

 04:01

so I was born in Austin, Texas. Well, my father was going to college there. My my we my my father was a career. Military. He was in the Air Force. He retired a colonel in about 2001 Right before 911 So obviously as a small child, we moved around quite a bit. We were in Grand Forks, North Dakota my at the time my father was a young missile silo Lieutenant. And at that time, my parents got divorced and we moved back to Denver where my mom was originally fun from when I was about five years old. And so I've really resided in the Denver metropolitan area go ahead,

 James Geering 04:44

I was gonna take a breath you can see it. Um, I was just gonna say with with someone in charge of missiles talking about 2030 years ago. Did he have any kind of experience as far as the whole Star Wars you know, missile crisis that we He kind of experienced when we were young.

 05:02

I think as a young man he did, right. He watched he watched that happen on and materialized his. My My paternal grandfather was also a career in the military. He started in the Army Air

Corps right before World War Two. And then also retired a colonel. In fact, you know, my dad was born in Washington, DC. Before it was the Pentagon, it was called The War Department. And so my dad was born there. At the very end of World War Two, yeah. So he had those experiences. And in fact, when you when you bring that up, he spent the rest of his career in the intelligence agency within the Air Force. And so yeah, for sure, in that space, and when the Iron Curtain was up a lot of surveillance of the Soviet Union, right.

 James Geering 05:43

So with that, you've got two generations of military, multi generational trauma, I think is one of the least discussed elements of addiction and some of the things that we see today. Were there any elements of either of their service that now with this mental health lens that you have looking back, you saw any kind of side effects of their service?

 06:04

I don't think so. From my, my father's perspective. You know, he did you know, he was when NATO was bombed bombing Bosnia Herzegovina, he was in theater and an intelligence officer and that mission, but never in theater in a different way, where my grandfather was during World War Two. And so for sure, I think what I saw in my grandfather was that stoicism and and I have an interesting story. So my grandfather was in New Fallon before, before the US entered World War Two. So we were doing surveillance in the North Atlantic, part of the Lend Lease program that was going on, and there was a meeting at sea that was supposed to be secret, and no, no photographers. And so my grandfather's surveillance unit, without to see delivered a young lieutenant who was part of his team, and then returned and the English had brought cameras. And so they asked my grandfather to return to deliver cameras so they could document the event. And in that event, because we this is why I go, so my grandmother never shared his stories about World War Two. And when he moved from Fort Worth, Texas to San Antonio, in his 80s, my father found his Foot Locker, and we found these pictures. And one of the first most remarkable pictures was my, my grandfather, as a young lieutenant colonel standing between Winston Churchill and FDR, on that ship. And so today, that's our we call that the Macklin big three, picture, a picture that we cherish. But it speaks to that, that stoicism of that generation and never never talking about what they saw and experienced. And so it wasn't until he was in his 80s and 90s, he lived to be 96, that he finally shared his his experiences from that time in his life.

 James Geering 07:52

And if you're okay, revealing that, like what was some of the things that he was finally able to talk to about men 70 plus years later,

 08:00

mostly, it was really, you know, he never got he was never He wasn't dark, and he still private, but at least sharing those experiences, though, you know, telling us about his career because I didn't know any of those things. And so being able to walk through being a young Army Air


Corps Lieutenant with a new commission, before the war flying for Pan Am from Miami to Rio, his bombing missions in North Africa. And I remember one of the things that he shared, he was going to be he was offered to be the commander of the 29th bombing wing, which was bombing Europe at the time. And I know remember, this is this is a, I don't remember exactly what he said at this time. But he said, he was going to be, let's say, the 12th, commander of that unit that year, because they had been shot down. And so he had that option or an option to come back to Washington, DC and work at the War Department. And in that, he admitted that he chose he chose his wife and returned back and that's, that's when he started his family.

 James Geering 08:57

Beautiful. This is so sad, for two reasons, firstly, that so many of these men and women felt like they couldn't open up whatever, you know, the generational kind of culture then was that that, you know, rolled up your sleeves and you know, just got back to work. But you know, you look back now it's these multi generational elements. And a lot of times when I hear what granddad was like, it's not what we carry out Gomez caricature as the greatest generation, this stoic man that was absolutely fine and just got on with it. They were hurting a lot of them, you know. And then the other side is that they weren't able to really tell the stories of what they did for this country, you know, and that was truly fighting for freedom. Like no one can argue that and especially being being from England myself. I mean, that was 100%. I speak English because of the courage of the allied nations. So the inability to offload the triune even even I think there's a misunderstanding that every World War Two, warfighter came back to a ticker tape parade and a lot of them didn't. And so it didn't have that kind of transitional period. And I think a lot, a lot more struggled than we give credit for.

 10:08

Right? Yeah, no, I would agree with that.

 James Geering 10:10

So what about your mom?

 10:12

So my mother, she was, She's bright, I want to say maybe 667 years younger than my father. They eloped. I think she had just graduated from high school and he was at the air Academy down in Colorado Springs, and they eloped to get married, then that's what ended up driving them to Texas for where he where he where he went to the University of Texas. I met you know, my mom, my mom was an artist, very creative. It's funny, my wife just asked me this the other day, we were talking about some things and she asked if my if my you know, if, if my mother was comforting to me, or if my mother was loving to me. And it's funny, because you don't think about those things as a man, I think in particular, right? She was my mother. So there were I had two siblings, one older one younger, we grew up in a small one bedroom house, in the foothills here, just outside of Denver, and one bedroom, one bathroom for people. So you can imagine that and my mom was about taking care of her three children. She she was

a secretary, her entire career, she worked for the United States federal government and their Geological Survey, a secretary to about 12 different scientists doing research, you know, and that was a different generation. Right? And but her her focus and primary goal was just making sure that we had food on the table, and that we could participate in sports and play instruments and what have you. And she spent her whole life just worrying and caring about our children. But it's funny, you know, when my wife asked me that it was just a week or two ago, and I never I've no one's ever asked me that before. And when you think back of it back on it, you know, she wasn't well, she cared for us so deeply and made sure we were provided for, you know, she, she wasn't comforting the way that you, you you think and I think that's, you know, her father. So the my so my maternal grandfather joined the United States Marine Corps at 18. And we're here so in they had buddy investments, I'm sure you're familiar with that. And so, so eight of his friends here. So he was, he was born on a farm, moved to Colorado, still lived on a farm out out in the country, and eight of his friends enlisted together, and three, three came home, then they all went to the Pacific. And so I think that in he, he was a bit of a drinker. And he was incredibly private, too. And so I think that was it. And my mother lost her, her, her siblings, so she had a young sister named Nancy, who was hit and killed by a car in kindergarten. And she was hit and killed in front of my grandmother led out on the wrong side of the car across the street, the other vehicle didn't see her hit and killed her. And so again, you go back in time, my grandmother wasn't treated with modern, you know, psychological efforts. And so she was, she was hospitalized for 30 days and went on underwent shock therapy. So that's the household my mom was raised. And so to backtrack all that way, just like you said, that's now I know why my mom was the way she was because she didn't have those type of experience from her parents, right?

J

James Geering 13:24

It's interesting, my both of my grandparents, my dad on my mom's side, neither of them. So it was my grandmother's neither are more maternal. And again, you don't think of that when you're a kid as your grandma. But actually, now when I look back, they were very stern, cold women, both of them, you know, and I now look at the impact of that on my parents. So my mom is very loving affectionately, physically, but there definitely is some some side effects and how she was raised. And the same with my dad. So yeah, it's, it's only when you've really kind of unraveled this whole thing. And I know you've been doing this a lot longer than I have, but you start to look at the world was such a different view. And the phrase that really rings true to me, that I've heard other people use is, when you look at someone we used to say, What's wrong with that person? Now you say, what happened to that person? That totally changes your perspective.

i

14:16

I agree with that. We talked, I don't know if I shared this with you previously, was one of our union leaders, you know, for about six to eight years. And so you represent folks and discipline, you know, you you navigate you help folks navigate those difficult experiences. And one of one of my, one of my best friends at the fire department, who was on the union executive board with me always, always said that, that everyone has a storm. Right. And but that storm could have been like you like we talked about, it could have been in their childhood, it could have


been their upbringing and how that storm always affects their current circumstances. Right. So whether it's poor performance at work or trouble at home or trouble, how all those things are intertwined together.

 James Geering 14:57

Absolutely. Well, you talked about your mom I'm helping you with the sports side. So what were you playing when you were young?

 15:04

Well, I love so we were we because we were strapped financially. When at my age growing up, soccer was inexpensive, right? Because back then it was a pair of boots and shorts. And you didn't have to buy a football helmet or pads or a baseball mitt. And so it was affordable for us. And so and then having an older brother who started to play, I think as soon as we moved back to Colorado, so he was four years older than me. And being a single mom, my mother used my older brother's soccer practices to babysit me. So I was just dropped off. And that's and so I just watched that and enjoyed it and and when you play with boys, they're a few years older than you you get you know, you do better in your own age group. And that's really what I always love to do. So to I'm 53 today and I'm playing in my old man Sunday League, you know, still so that's where I find my you know, I'm sure you've seen these there's these memes maybe on Instagram, but there's one in particular that always draws me in which is it's a soccer meme and it's a it's the noise of the city and the bustle and voices in your head and it's just all you see is a player running out on the pitch with the ball in front of them and then all the sound goes away and the focus is right there and I'll be candid that's that that's what that does for me. So not only the enjoyment of playing but you know I get quiet and just enjoy being present.

 James Geering 16:36

So it's interesting to say that as well I've had this conversation with many people on the show some were high level athletes as children some are coaches but when I came here from the UK where football and soccer is our you know primary sport really you come to the US you see baseball and football especially where these kids become incredible athletes but then there's a steep drop off at graduation whether it's they're burned out they're hurt you know combination of whatever it is and then you go from elite athletes in high school college to a lot of the what are called Uncle Rico stories where I could have should have been and now they're very deconditioned and obese and it's very sad and this is purely an observation that breaks my heart when I look at a lot of other countries specially the game of football soccer the you play it through school I mean you talked about inexpensive all we have was the sweatshirts that we wore that became goalposts and a ball that's all you needed you know you could do it barefoot sneakers whatever. Yeah, and so we played and yes there are some elite football players in the UK but most high school kids are playing you know they're playing other schools and stuff but that's it they're not doing you know Soccer Camps and drills at home and you know all this stuff at but then when people graduate they keep playing football and it carries on like you said publiques weekend leagues you know whatever what is it that allowed you to carry on playing when you personally got past college and I mean certainly high school and or college



18:09

No, it was just truly that that pure enjoyment of doing it and staying connected with me know mostly men but and some some women I went to high school with that can you know stayed in the area and continued to play that was just something that you know, you connection and you're passionate about? And today honestly what keep what Well, what I learned in Denver Denver's a there's there's a lot of foreigners right in Denver. Right. And so we have from from around the world, right and so there was a park in Denver called Washington Park and I think I was about 20 When I started playing there. And they there was a Tuesday night and a Thursday night pickup league there. And that pickup was predominantly you know, men and women from from other places in the world. And so I really started to enjoy that experience as well. Right so like today the team I play on I think that we have three to four we have four men on my team that are that are US born right the rest we've got five or six Chileans and a couple, you know, we've got a Colombian and in Portuguese and it's it's fun, right, a couple a couple of Brazilians and it's a it's a fun mix, right? Yeah, and I'm sure you appreciate those experience of not only diversity of thought and experience, but all of it together right down to your viewer around the table for the same reason.



James Geering 19:37

Well, I think that's what's so great about the World Cup, especially the last one Qatar It was amazing to see patriotism, not nationalism, but also the world coming together and supporting you know, I forget the countries now there was some Morocco, you know, one of the some of the smaller you know, and people that behind them, doesn't matter where they come on, that's the underdog. Let's get you up there. So I I love that game because it truly is a world sport. We have the World Series, you know, in baseball that I think just America is invited to, and then we, the super, you know what I mean? So it's a true international game where, you know, you could be kicking around a ball in bare feet in the streets of Africa somewhere, or South America, and still ultimately compete against, you know, affluent nations, and you know, people of all colors and creeds.



20:25

Yeah. No, I would agree with that. It's, it's, it is right. It's to that, you know, is the beautiful game, right? It's called that for a reason, right? I believe that and it's a funny anecdote from this World Cup final is a for sure you, you know, the experiences, and I'm sure you get ribbed about I got ribbed about soccer my whole life, right. And especially, you know, in the US, and then of course, in the fire service even more so. Right, you work with, with men that played division one football or men that played professionally played in the NFL. And, you know, it's always that other sport. And so one of the gentlemen that really used to give me a hard time very close friend of mine, going through a very difficult time in his life through adult child, he and his spouse drift apart. And, you know, she's, you know, so now they're going through their divorce. And I spent a lot of time with him and on the phone with him and talking through him and once on one call, and he was telling me like, how much he appreciated my help this, that and the other and he asked me what he could do for me, and it was funny, it was I said, you're going to come to the World Cup final with me, we're gonna go, we're gonna go to the bar, and you're gonna want it's at eight in the morning, because of the time change here in Denver, I said, you're gonna be there at 745 You're gonna sit and you're gonna watch that with me, and

you're gonna have this experience in a bar with people. And he one of the funnest times he said he ever had in his life, because of the community at the event and so sort of a full circle thing for me in that moment to write and I got a ton of enjoyment out of being with him and watching him have that experience. So

 James Geering 22:00

I watched it on a cruise ship I happen to go on a cruise in the Caribbean. And so there was a lot of you know, people from out of there will Argentinian but a lot of people identifying as Argentinian that day. Right? But so we watched the first half in a bar. And you know, when when Argentina scored it, everyone just lost their minds. And then the second half and that why don't we just go outside and wash it on the pool deck. So then we sat at the very back and there's the same thing, you're in the middle of Atlantic on the ship, and you know, probably 50 plus percent of the passengers are up on the deck. Just cheering so it was Yeah, absolutely phenomenal to watch.

 22:33

Yeah, knows. It's fun. Yeah, no, great, great fun. So and I share this because, again, because of my passion for it, and my best friends since we were 13, who I played to, you know, though, it's an old right Oh, you don't have sweepers anymore. But I was a sweeper. And my best friend was our was our was my keeper. From 13. On to today. He's an anesthesiologist today. But right before COVID in January of 20, we went to we went to London. And we why we went I've always felt that Tottenham since I was a kid, we used to get a newspaper called The World Soccer news here in the US black and white newspaper. And for some reason, that white Tottenham uniform with the logo stuck out to me as a kid. And so I that's, that's, you know, it's like you just pick you don't know why you pick something to follow, but that's why I did and so we had a we had a great experience we went to we went to see full on play. We went to Crystal Palace, we went to Tottenham, and then we went out to Westham and a period of eight days. But as a what a wonderful trip,

 James Geering 23:33

right? Beautiful here when I grew up, it was when all the violence was happening. So it kind of soured me to the game a little bit and I never had a team quote unquote. I think that's the thing is like football here maybe when everyone else is doing it, sometimes you kind of push against it. So I did combat sports instead. But um, but when it comes to the national team, so you know, the Euro Cup and the World Cup, um, you know, I'm out there every single game watching it, because it's, it's a whole different community then.

 24:00

All right, you have hurricanes, your top goalscorer in history? Yes, right.

 James Geering 24:06

James Geering 24:16

I'm working on trying to get him on. He's actually affiliated with a charity that I'm helping with another project that I do. And, yeah, because I'm gonna see if I can get Harry on. It seems like an incredible human being.



24:18

He does. And you know, there's a little bit more behind him here in the US because of his relationship with Tom Brady and his he's been interviewed a few times, and he has interest in becoming a place kicker in the NFL when he retires from from from football. Oh, really? So there's a little bit of activity and narrative around him here. That's outside of what he's doing over there. But a



James Geering 24:41

hurry uncle for their alternate scramble to get him on that show. All right. Well, then speaking of your career aspirations, I know you entered EMS initially, when you were in high school, was that the field you were dreaming of? Is there something else?



24:55

I had no idea what I wanted to do or what I wanted to be at all, I spent right after high school, I went to a college here in Denver called Metropolitan State University. I was I had, I had picked up snowboarding when I was 15. And so between playing, you know, in the soccer league, and then snowboarding, I really became attracted to snowboarding to the point where I thought maybe I could make something out of snowboarding. And so I started snowboarding during the day and taking night classes. still living at home, I was the last one to leave my house still living at home with my mom. And so I drive up to the mountains three or four days a week and snowboard. And I truthfully, I did that for almost two years, and taking night classes. And finally I came home I don't I came home on one Saturday or Sunday afternoon. And my mother handed me a class application for EMT school at a hospital at Lutheran hospital here in Colorado. And she said, I think you should do this because it's time for you to basically get your act together. And so I took my mother's advice, I took that class and no, I really truthfully had no I know awareness what that field was no awareness what it would lead to. But I think what I learned quickly I got went to EMT school I got hired at a private ambulance company called Reed ambulance was like a, you know, back then that environment, lots of small, private ambulance companies all around the US Mom and Pop type businesses. And what I think what I was attracted to right away was that sense of community, right like that, you know, the same, the same reason why I think I like soccer so much it was team, and it was same mission, you know, really, mostly you're working with men and women that have similar values and goals, and you're working towards a, you know, an end goal. And and that's I think that's what really attracted attracted me. And I think I had a couple those, you know, I think we all do we all have those. So I'm 21. When I do that, when I get my first job, I just turned 21. And I quickly said, Well, if I find any empty, I should become a paramedic. So I went to paramedic school at 22. And, and then here in the Denver metropolitan region, if you're thinking just about that single resource of being a paramedic, Denver, the Denver paramedics was always attractive to be a DG paramedic was sort of the pinnacle in the area. And so I pursued that and by found that I had the, the appetite for what we see. And do. You know, it didn't it didn't it didn't derail me, I

think I had to ability to always rationalize what I what I saw and did most you know most of the time and but really what, what I loved was the camaraderie and the men and women that I worked with. And that's truthfully what led me no all the way to south metro fire was men that preceded me. So men that had a similar path, they worked at Reed ambulance, they worked at Denver, general, they came to south metro fire and they said, Hey, you should come to south metro fire with us. And I followed those folks because of how, how tight I was with them and how highly respected they were in my in my in my view. So yeah, so it's always funny when I'm not one of those kids that saw a fire truck and ran down the street or had a helmet or that wasn't my path to this field at all.

J James Geering 28:21

So with the Denver general, dynamic, were you working as the 911 Ambulance in response with the fire side? Or what what was your role there?

 28:31

Correct. So Denver paramedics is a third, third service. So fire police and paramedics are separate entities all publicly employed, but yeah, separate. So Denver fire I don't know if they do today, but it's never had paramedics or ambulances. And so we provided that service for all of the city and county of Denver.

J James Geering 28:50

So, tragically, I know you were a part of the response to Columbine. So prior to that, what, if any, was there? Excuse me, let me say it again. Was there if any preparation, discussion training or anything that would anticipate what would we really view as the very first mass shooting that we had in modern time?

 29:13

Not not here. We Denver has still does But had we have gang activity we had shootings, I had been on a shooting on Cinco Demayo near Mile High Stadium where six people were shot like that's the first you know, so those ideas of having multiple casualties at one call was certainly not foreign to us. And certainly we were always I think we were all we always felt like we were well prepared for those kinds of events in grass egress how we manage the scene and but for sure, other than a one on you know, then a one you know, a teenager shot or you know those other sting you know, sent no singular events. For sure. Never, never thought that you would You would respond to something like Columbine High School.

J James Geering 30:04

So if you wouldn't mind kind of lead me through the day through your eyes.




30:11

So I at that time I worked a. So in Denver paramedics, we worked 10 hour shifts, we were four tents. And we had, you know, the shift started as early as 530. In the morning, the day shifts and through 11 In the morning, and then the afternoon ones picked up from 1:30pm through the night. And so that that particular day, I was working in ambulance, it started at 11. So I had just, we had just come on duty, we drove to our first post post location. And in Denver, the driver, you always had your channel, your radio channel, on the police channel, whatever police district you were driving through, you changed your channel so you could hear the police activity, while the attendant always had the radio on the ambulance channel. And when we parked at that post, I switched my channel to police district four, which is where we're going and I honestly what I thought I was hearing was a training ton of activity, you know, you we know those sounds right chaos, a lot, a ton of activity, a ton of language around victims and shooting and I really thought it was a training and then and then we were told on that channel, they moved all the radio traffic to their backup channel. So the regular district channel got moved at that exact same time. A dispatcher called us we had hard mounted cell phones at the time and a dispatcher called us on that cell phone and told us to respond to Columbine High School on the phone not over the air, and said there was an active shooting there. And so we still had no idea what was going on. So we just started responding there. In fact, we got on the highway followed a Colorado State Patrol officer and it was a it was a weird circumstances that day. The the dispatcher at the time was also one of our paramedics so he worked one day a week up in the dispatch center and so I knew I knew him really well and so he counseled us over the radio he said the number 11 Cancel your response and then the phone rang right away and he said don't cancel keep going you know what those experiences you're what what do I do in this moment we responded like we like anyways and and by then we started we really recognized what was going on we were hearing the ambulances leaving Columbine High School transporting with with with victims at that time. That trap and other radio traffic started to pick up around setting up triage and, and all of those staging areas and when we first arrived, I don't know if you we had a reputation as Denver paramedics of being a bit cowboy, and Cavalier. And I for surely I certainly embrace that, at that time. And when we pulled up they had me they had us park across the street from the school of the apartment complex in a roundabout space. And then when we were pulling in with a bunch of private private ambulances, but at the very front of the the row of ambulances in the staging for transport. There were two Denver paramedic ambulances at the very front and I knew one of the gentlemen that was up there. And I decided that that's where I was gonna go because that's that's what I've been trained to do. And that's what that's what we did well. So I did I drove I drove past, the police officer said no, I'm going to park up there, which is what I did. And then we spent so at that point, I think maybe the last victim was was leaving the scene, the last known victim at the time was leaving the scene. And I spent the next because we had no we didn't have cell phones. We had the hard mounted ambulance phones, I spent the next until almost a little bit before three in the afternoon. We just triaged kids as the SWAT teams removed him from the school. So as they would just bring, you know, kids in groups of 10s and 20s. To us we'd lift their shirts, we'd look for injuries, with between the four or five ambulances there at the front, we let them in the back. We told them they'd have 10 or 15 seconds to call their parents and then we'd they'd go further down and get on the bus and they went to an elementary school to be reunited with their parents. So like I said, I did that for two or three hours. And then right around three o'clock in the afternoon, they they grabbed the first five ambulances. They paired us up with a police officer. We drove around behind the school across the baseball field. So we could come up and we could see the the North man door to the library. And then what was happening concurrently one of my co workers Troy layman, this is how unprepared we were not not training right he a Jefferson County Sheriff's SWAT officer

recognizes him from college and says hey Troy, come with us. So the paramedic that goes in with the SWAT team at Columbine High School goes in because they're college friends not because we trained together. So but because of that we listened to Troy on the radio and so we knew what they he was he was really active on the radio letting As know, when he was encountering, and he came across Dave Saunders, who was a teacher that had been shot in the library, or sorry, in the hallway in the school. And, you know, we're looking at 333 15 in the afternoon and Dave Saunders was agonal at three 315 in the afternoon. So we know what that means, right? So we know that he, he had he had injuries that he could have survived. So so we're hearing that and it was sort of heartbreaking to hear Troy in that moment, because Troy's asking for, you know, an ambulance crew to come in with the scoop stretcher and, and get him out. But the are the his partner, Rob Montoya was in the command center, managing the radio and Rob saying, Hey, Troy, this is this is an MCI and this is triage, and you because you have to leave him there. So I just remember, that's what I'm hearing as we drive around the ball field. And so we don't hear from him again. The next thing that we see is we we staged outside the library doors, the door swings open, and they, they tell us all to come in. So we leave prams behind we go in and our groups and our pairs, and there was one victim still alive in the library. So she and she had been I think a lot of people know that story. And she had been pretending to be dead. And so everybody runs to her. But what I'm taught, you know, you're taught how to manage those calls. And so my partner, a gentleman named Todd Burnie and I, we walked the library. And we checked for signs of life of all the all the kids that were in the library. So that's, that was, that's all I did at Columbine. And I what I've shared with folks about how that experience affected me. It wasn't just like, I think we all appreciate that when we've done these things for a living is that isn't what that isn't what stuck with me now for sure. I've never seen anything like that before. Right? I didn't. And so that was a it was odd. And I remember a friend of mine, when we came back to the triage area saying I seemed a little bit off, like distant. I didn't feel that. But they made us they made us. They made us go to a debriefing from there. So about an hour later, we left the triage area, they sent us to do a formal debriefing. And at that debriefing, they let anyone that was anyone be there. So I see about 10 of my peers that responded to Columbine, some guys that I didn't hadn't seen but had transported victims off. But then they let the emergency room staff, other folks from the hospital system and then this group that ran that debriefing were people I didn't know at all. And I just started to tell the story just like I did with you. They you know, they went around the room and this virus remember this, this woman started crying. And it actually upset me. It made me mad. Were you where do you you know, you know, those moments? You're like, what are you crying about? Like you weren't there? You don't? And I laugh. So two things happened to me. That's right. That's where I'll share what what how Columbine affected me and changed how I looked at how we care for each other is. I left, I went home, I went straight home. I was single at the time. My i i lived it I was roommates with another paramedic who she was pursuing her failing Captain license in the Caribbean. So I had no one at home with me. I was dating that, you know, my girlfriend came over at about 10 o'clock that night. But what I did was watching the news. And what I didn't know happened is all my peers. They walked down to the creek and they shared a few beers and they talked about what they did. I didn't have that opportunity to diffuse and talk through it with my peers because of how that debriefing went and I watched the news and what hit me. What was the hardest for me was there was a young young black boy killed in that school in the library Isaiah shoals. Well, he was the only black victim I touched him in that library. So I know I knew he was deceased. And watching the news his father was a with a preacher in the in the Denver area. He was at that elementary school Leawood elementary school on the news as late as 11 o'clock at night, knowing his son's alive waiting to be reunited with his son. And I can just remember really yelling at the TV and saying with someone tell him that his son is dead because I you know, because I know that I know what happened. And so that was disruptive for me for maybe the next couple of weeks, but nothing, I didn't. I didn't drink myself sick. I didn't,


you know, I didn't I didn't have suicidality. I didn't have any of those experience. But I could never really reconcile how, I guess how I wasn't taken care of and how I didn't have those opportunities to commiserate with my peers and diffuse and that's, that's just an example of why, like what's led me to coordinating peer support and my role as a health and wellness director and why why I care so deeply about what we do and how we take care of each other is I never wanted anyone to have a similar experience like I did.

 James Geering 40:01

Now when we think of that incident, and again, it's easy to Monday morning quarterback, especially when it was the very first incident of that magnitude of that, you know, horror that we'd seen in American history for a long, long time. But there is that discussion, as you talked about with the teacher of the extended staging period, which sadly, we just saw recently in Ivaldi. Again, right, what from the ground, you know, from literally your own peers in your interaction with the department at the time? What was the the after action discussion, like days and weeks after before it, you know, got an analyze for decades after that?

 40:38

Yeah, for sure. There was a bunch of disruption. And and then just like you would expect, there was conflict between the different agencies, right, though, you know, Littleton fire department was the first responding agency. Because of the location of Columbine High School, it was still close to the boundaries of the city of Denver. And so those first those police officers you saw in civilian clothes that actually exchanged gunfire with those assailants were off duty Denver Police officers whose kids attended the school. And so there we had all these conversations going on around. So there was a lot of drama, I guess, the best way to say it about and so then there was a lot of exclusion in any sort of organized after action activity. So the the sheriff's department and the first responding fire departments really led that work. And so organizations like mine, Denver, Denver, put, you know, started Denver paramedics and Denver fire and Denver Police Force, we're sort of pushed away out of those formal, thoughtful stuff. And so we were really so I think it was sort of like a double hit for us is, well, hey, we went and we transported, and hey, we went down there and did this work. But we were really excluded from, from that, that work of of really evaluating what happened. So there was a lot of, like I said, there was a lot of animosity between some of those agencies, and I for sure, experience some of that.

 James Geering 41:56

Now, what about the relationship prior, I had several guests on that were at the post incident, which is on my doorstep here in Orlando, I've had some incredible interviews around the Parkland incident, including a firefighter friend of mine, his daughter was in the school when he responded. And one of the things that I've seen in four departments is you, the good departments have good working relationships with PD, their own PD, the neighboring city or county. And what people out in the public don't understand is that when there is poor leadership and egos in some of those positions, there's no communication. And then when

something like this happens, where everyone's got to work together, and they've never even talked, no matter trained, that's where you see problems. Were there any elements of that prior to this incident happening in Columbine?



42:43

You Yeah, I would say so. I think that we so the Denver paramedics had some adversarial relationships with some of those suburban fire departments. Absolutely. So yeah, just like you said, ego and that sort of thing. We had a Denver paramedics in the Denver Police Department were incredibly tight. So super healthy, tight relationship there. But yeah, for sure, straight in then those, you know, like, let's say the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department, we had no relationship with, right, there was no reason to have a relationship with we weren't. We didn't work together that way. And just like you least, like, you know, like it would would evolved a little bit in Denver was Denver created a condoms team. So an unarmed EMS that that paired with Denver Swat. That was that was sort of an outcome of Columbine. And so mitigate. I think it was thought it was a thoughtful approach at trying to address those things. But it was still it wasn't it wasn't the right solution. We started to train together, we started, you know, like everybody did, we started to have regional trainings. The ICS system became mandatory. Everybody started to learn that language. You understood what a unified command finally met, you know, he had PD on this side fire on this side. And so we finally we all embrace and start to train that way. And then and then I think like where I work today at south metro, I had a little bit more mature approach about integrating paramedics, with law enforcement. And so we have a SWAT medic program today. And so our two large sheriff's departments that we that we serve with, we have embedded SWAT paramedics on those teams that are armed and I spent, I can't remember the exact years but I spent I spent about three years 2006 through 2009 on the Arapahoe County Sheriff's SWAT team as an armed paramedic because of again, those experiences and wanting to to do better, right.



James Geering 44:45

Well, that program is an interesting area of discussion as well. There are SWAT medic programs out there where as you said, the medics are armed. They're not first through the door, of course, but they're acting more like a marine corpsman. They're not going in with nothing And then you have, you know, the SWAT medic program where you're really just tagging on at the end, you're unarmed. And then you have what I was experienced most of the time in Orange County here in Orlando, where, where there wasn't a SWAT medic program, we were just turned out, we'll be right behind the Bearcat and say up the street, you know, now you're completely unprepared with no equipment. And then God forbid, if the shit hits the fan, you just hopefully run in and, you know, are able to affect so there's a large spectrum. Personally, I'm, I'm a fan of if you're gonna go into a fire, I want the SCBA mask, tools, I want everything. So if I'm going to be a SWAT medic, I want to at least have something to protect myself with, God forbid, this person makes it through these tiers of protection ahead of me. So what you know, what was Where were you on that as far as when you served? And what's your philosophy on that concept?



45:49

I believe that they should be embedded in the team, I think that you should be armed to

protect yourself to protect your team. I, you know, are our members today. I wasn't during my time. But today, they go through the full post certification course. They come offline, they go through that entire law enforcement course my, during my time, we just went through the post firearms class. And then SWAT academies and other info and then like all the, you know, the casualty combat care courses and all the other courses that are available. But where I go is I think what there's a there's a philosophical challenge in leadership of why you're there. Right. And so we can always appreciate the victim in the house. Right. But Well, we I think we're where leadership struggles is that philosophical debate of who's responsible for that first police officer through the door. So sometimes fire leadership will say, Well, that's the police department's responsibility, they should be paying for the this part of it, right. So we get lost in some of that minutia. But what you know to be true is which I what I know to be true is if I'm a block down the street, and that officer is shot in his neck, and I can't apply direct pressure, and I can't control his airway, and the moment that that happens, his outcome is going to be poor, we know that if I can't, those things, we know combat, you know, if I can't intubate them, control their bleeding decompressed their chest, when it happens, that officer most likely won't survive. And so philosophically, I that's what I believe. And I think that's the right thing. And so, somehow, all of these leadership entities need to wrap their head around that, that that's, that's the other reason why, why we're there. We're not just there for the victim in the house, we're there for that officer in front of us or behind us. And that's it. I think that you know, we always talk about it and and maybe you feel similarly is, you know, once we mature to leadership roles, we start to answer some of these questions that we haven't been able to, because we've we've had the firsthand experience of doing it where, you know, you know, I can look up and let's say 10 years ago, my fire chief never my wasn't a paramedic, was a he he had previously been in the fire marshal's office, so not even responding the way we did, but he knows but he's making those leadership decisions. So you I think that once you're you hope that as we mature, and our leadership, men and women of our generation get to those roles, we start to answer some of these these philosophical challenges that I think we have today.

J

James Geering 48:14

It's a very dangerous environment, my I would argue my, my best department as far as just the number of people that high bottoms and probation and training out west Anaheim, they, you know, everyone that was all the way up the chain had been a firefighter, and or a paramedic listing, and firefighter EMT, but they'd all been in most of the positions. The last place I was at the Fire Chief Chief come up through fire prevention. So, you know, checking sprinklers and extinguishers. And the operations chief was a dispatcher. So you think about how dangerous that is with those egos that have never ever done the job and you're trying as a proactive, passionate firefighter and or paramedic to say, Look, these are some areas where people are gonna get hurt or die if we don't address these and you're told to shut up, you know, you're just a firefighter, go go back to where you came from. So having worked under some great leadership in the past it I mean, I ended up transitioning out because of that fire department ultimately to carry on doing this, but it was like five years of banging my head against a brick wall. And this, this department protects one of the biggest target houses on planet Earth is theme park, series of theme parks. So when it happens, it's going to be huge. And the after action is going to basically gut this entire department if you don't address this for us. So just to kind of tack on to your point. No one should really be in my opinion in a fire leadership or police leadership role without at least spending a decent amount of time actually doing the job.

 49:48

Yeah, I think that's that's solid. I think it's rare that that someone possesses that ability to have not been in the seat and have and have that awareness and recognition of what's required. For sure. I I agree with that 100%. And I think we're, we're blessed today to have a leader that who comes from the same space. But also, what I really appreciate is the ability to task, right? And promote leading from from, you know, leading up. And it's created a pretty it's, for me, it's created a wonderful environment, which is, truthfully, why we have the programs that we have in place here at south metro.

 James Geering 50:28

Well, let's talk about that, then. So you're a veteran paramedic, 10 years, you transition into the fire service, talk to me about, you know, what made you suddenly pull the trigger after not dreaming of being a fireman when you were younger? And then what was your onramp experience in south metro?

 50:45

I mean, really, from the moment that, you know, academies and Academy, right, we all have those experiences. But what again, what I was uncertain, right, I was, like I said, I was recruited from men that that came here, first ahead of me, and that, oh, you have to come here. And but they also were like, from really sound reasons, you know, like, hey, they, they, they pay for our continuing education, they they pay us a bit more of paramedics, they respect what we do, they're trying to put two paramedics on every ambulance and so there's that draw, you know, there's and then, and then there's the curiosity of, Can I Can I, can I go in a fire? Can I wear an SCBA? Can I climb 100 foot aerial? Can I do I have the physical ability to do those things. And so there was that, that that curiosity, and you know, that, that desire to test yourself a bit. And knowing that, you know, like, how I felt I was very confident, I was very confident as a paramedic, and my skill set and, and what you know, in my clinical practice, and so, yeah, it was super exciting. And then I like, I like what I really found right away, my fire academy was a collaborative Academy at the time. So we had four jurisdictions that at the same training center, the same academy at the same time, so you had recruit training officers from those various, those various departments, but quickly assimilated right, and became a really a cohesive team, for sure, you know, you have one or two outliers in that Academy, but we really came together. And so I was all in from the Academy point forward, when, you know, knowing that I could do the things that were asked of me and that I enjoyed them. But then also, the, just the, the camaraderie, just I think we all have those experiences, where there's, there's men and women in our academies that become some of our best friends. And those same kinds of friendships, like I have with my friend, Mike from 13, that, you know, I run into an academy, you know, those are, that's 21 years ago, and I run into an academy made, and it feels like yesterday, right? Like, there's no in no time loss between us. And, again, that that, that, that that community that we've created, and is really what, why I knew I made the right choice.

 James Geering 53:04

When you look back now with the physical fitness standards, and then the PT, culture, once you got in the profession, was it like at the beginning of your career?

 53:18

It was we were a bit, we had, we have probably had to two cultures going in at the same time is what I noticed, from my perspective as a new firefighter, is we had, we had a group that believed in fitness. And we're working at it, but they were really, they were sort of working alone independently, right? They there wasn't a ton at that time of department support, there wasn't policy, for sure, there was funding for, you know, cable machines, and, you know, whatever. I'm trying to think there was a program if you're familiar with it called flame that came out of Portland that came out of a physician Portland fire reached out to this physician and he created I don't know what the acronym stands for. But that was happening at the station at the time. And, and it was really promoting a healthy, healthy diet, but the lifestyle change diet, and I can remember there were these foam, apples and oranges and bananas in the station that were just used as projectiles, right? Nobody was taking it seriously. And then the other spectrum of which I think we all combat is there. I think that old mentality of you come out of the academy, you get your badge and you take your oath, and you're good for 25 years. And so some of that and and I got sucked into the culture at that time a little bit. The you know, when we're not busy, what do we do, right? We, hey, can you eat the 20 The 2020 stack of pancakes for for \$10 in a minute? Well, we do those right. We were doing those kinds of things when I was new and you want to you want to be a part of the team. You don't want to be the person that says no or doesn't participate. So but I would say that we that timing for us, what from sorry, from my entry to the department was, we had those two things running parallel with each other, those two cultures. Right, when I think the Zone Diet started to become popular, and CrossFit was emerging, and so my station in particular, I had been at that station for two or three years, we embraced, those are the two things we embraced right away, just as this is our small team, we embrace the Zone diet in CrossFit, and we were all you know, we were all losing body fat, and, you know, getting strong and and we did that I think we did that for a few years truthfully, that as a as a team and at that station, and for sure that that that's what sort of saturated our organization for a while. Was that approach? So but still no policy? No. And and what was running get concurrently was an occupational medicine program that was not supervised vendor relationships, checking the box, hey, we need to Aki this is what we need done. And so really a big gap between the intimacy of having a program and then over here you have this, you know, this, you know, independent fitness track, and then people in the middle that don't want to do anything, and yeah, so I don't I'm sure you had that. I don't know why I don't know where your experience is with that. But

 James Geering 56:22

very similar. Actually, there was never any real organized. PT. I mean, it was very much the, as you said, there were the guys that worked out in the guys who didn't male and female. And for me, I got exposed to CrossFit. And it was, oh, oh, 607. And that was mind blowing, you know, really was and I've been doing it ever since I still coach now and still do it. But I've added strongman style training as well as a supplement to it some other things. But I was blown away. Having been an athlete my whole life, how well that did transfer to the fire ground. Do you remember any kind of like aha moments where you saw that specific addition of that style of training, you know, represented in gear?

 57:04

11 37:07

I think what I Yeah, well, I think a lot of the takeaways for me was a good example, let's say a Turkish getup, right? Like who, who learns that as a young man playing, playing sports or in a, you know, high school or collegiate environment, but what that but how many times in a real real life situation on a call Have you been in a in a position where you can't really you don't have leverage, right or moving patients, I always talk about patients, I think that that's one of the most difficult things we do is moving people in and out of their homes, right and evacuating people from vehicles, and we're always in awkward, uncomfortable positions, right. And I think that's one of the things that we're I felt like I embraced CrossFit, to a certain extent was, CrossFit did a lot of that for us, right? It put us in some of these positions where, you know, if you're an Olympic weightlifter, you're never going to be you know, not, you're never not going to have your stable base. And in the real world, we know exactly that, you're not going to have a stable base, you're gonna have an uneven uneven floor, a wet roof, you know, a narrow staircase, two storeys, carrying somebody that only two of you can, can touch at the time, because there's no space for four of you. And we've thought we've done all those things, right. And that's where I think that's where I think I really enjoyed an embrace CrossFit was because of those experiences.

J James Geering 58:20

So then walk me through the journey that you took from there not being any structure as as far as strength and conditioning on the on the physical side, to where you are today.

o 58:33

So we had in, in 2012, so our operator who's our fire chief today, Bob Baker, was our operations chief, in 2012. And he he was already trying to promote that, you know, policies and standards, you know, gently, you know, like, hey, we want you to work out, hey, officers, please, you know, commit two hours every day for your crew to workout, you know, but really never, it never quite been that at that time never came to being mandatory. The same time we're running a incumbent physical ability tests, so an iPad, which is you know, that, you know, five or six stations fireground simulation that was timed. And then over here, we had that occupational medicine like I described and 2012 sort of became a perfect storm for us. The first ton of dissatisfaction with occupational medicine, we were having to do these stress 12 lead tests that because I'm in the union, I'm completely aware of the circumstances we had 14 members have false false positives, and had to go pay out of their own pocket for stress echocardiogram. So these, these, these, these, they were all men, all of these men had to go pay \$750 for a stress echocardiogram out of their own pocket, and it couldn't work until it was completed. So there's that question will work wants me to do it shouldn't work pay for it. So that's happening at the same time. And then our iPad we had. So we're running it. And it wasn't. We weren't being thoughtful like we should have been. We were running that iPad, a bit like an assembly line, you know, the battalion chiefs want to get everybody through, they'd like to get them through as many shifts as they can, or as few shifts as they can. The paramedics on the ambulances are not only doing the medical surveillance, they're also taking a test, you know, so I can remember that going down early, take my test, and then I'm doing the, you know, check in people in and out all day. And so in 2012, we had a 41 year old firefighter go into cardiac arrest, when he got back to the station after his iPad. And he was a fit, cross fit, healthy diet, he had a blood clot, he didn't have, you know, in his left coronary descending artery, and then he, he was resuscitated for two hours. So he was in and out of cardiac arrest

for two hours, he was what we know to be true as you as a civilian, you don't go to the cath lab and cardiac arrest. But because he was a firefighter, he went to the cath lab and cardiac arrest. And he survived. And he's been back at work for ever, you know, he's been back at work for over 10 years. So we, that sentinel event, we had the next day, we had two other medical emergencies, we had a 50 year old lieutenant who had, who had an MI had to have a stent placed, leak directly transported from the iPad. And then we had another hypertension crisis. And so those things all coming together at the same time, where the momentum for us to take a step back and really talk about what we were doing. And so So Chief Baker, the three of us that run the US executive board, discussed it and said, Hey, we want to please suspend this iPad, until we can have a more thoughtful approach at medical surveillance and, and some standards and what what is in his iPad safe or not, you know, because we weren't, we weren't, we weren't worried about whether that, you know, in particular, this firefighter, we didn't, we didn't care if he ran calls the night before. We didn't know if he ran a call on the way there. We don't know if he slept it the night before. We didn't care about the ambient air temperature. We didn't we weren't we didn't make sure he was hydrated before he did the iPad, we were just trying to get it done. And it really no one's fault. We're all in it together. Right. And, but that's really what led us to this. And so lots of conversations back and forth. We are human resources director and one of my peers on the union, a company officer in a fire light, a firefighter who is really active in our pure fitness team. They went out west, they went to Phoenix, they went to Orange County, California, they visited different fire departments on the west coast to see what other folks were doing and came back and we sat down and started talking about it. And they the chief baker asked one of the three of us on the executive board to come offline and and build a wellness program. And we all said no, because who wants to come offline and, and work in the office. And this was 2013. This was due right after the summer of 2013 after they had returned from their trip. And I I tore my ACL playing soccer. And so I volunteered for that assignment. And that's, that's really how we got started in the first place was just that sentinel event. And that really that collaboration between labor and management.

 James Geering 1:03:18

So we talked the other day, obviously setting this up. And one of the observations that I've got to make because I've worked for multiple departments East Coast and West Coast is when there is okay now we're going to create a peer fitness kind of philosophy or culture here. When I come from a background as an athlete, as a coach and a very, very low level coach, I'm done it in full time, but an understanding of what strength conditioning coaching experience should look like. And then in the fire service, we have a tendency to send people away for a weekend, maybe five days and then they come back as your expert, your guru in mental health and physical health. Talk to me about how you were able to start bringing true experts in their field and add them as members of your team in your fire department.

 1:04:08

So the very first hire and I will give him a ton of credit because it was his not only his credential and his experience but truly his vision to have what he saw when he when we came and so I hired and I didn't know who to hire, right. I'm a I'm a firefighter paramedic, I don't know who to hire and so I interviewed strengthening auditioning coach, athletic trainers, exercise physiologist, physical therapists, and really like who's the right fit? I ended up interviewing 12 people but this gentleman Vince Garcia was the first assistant at the Denver Broncos the athletic athletic

trainer in from our first call he really talked about like that role of medical surveillance of a population and how you resource it and how when returned to So right away returned to work for me and then talking about how you have a weakness you get injured, how do we not only repair your injury? But how do we repair the weakness? Right? How do we provide symmetry and strength, you know, all of those things at the same time. And so that that was easy that for me that was, well, this, he knows what he's talking about. And this is going to be the right fit. And what I learned quickly was he also brought his relationships with him, he brought orthopedic surgeons, you know, that were on the sideline, that they gave us a path between the general population and that professional athlete to get into the O R, and get in and get some of those those things done. And at the same time, we had a pure fitness team, that was primarily CrossFit. And so there for sure was some there was conflict, right? Anytime, and, and I can remember the two of the guys that really led the effort, and they still are great, great peers and great leaders in that space. I remember talking to both of them out at the training center one day of because we were talking about hiring that very first strength conditioning coach. And I asked them, Do you want do you want this job? Like do you or do you want to stay in the firehouse and they both would prefer to stay in the firehouse? Right and but once once people started to see the proof, and how Vince took care of people, and then the you know, the first coach comes in, and people start to see that that professionalism and that experience. And you know, when you when you you know, that is when you start to hire the right people that can assimilate into the fire culture. You just start to see this thing flourish and grow that. And, unfortunately, events. Unfortunately for events, unfortunately for us, the Denver Broncos hired events back when their head athletic trainer retired. And so he's been back there for the past few years. But that really is what set us set us up for this success. And so where we had small wins, we were able to capitalize so for instance, when you look at the nuts and bolts of the the finance side of it, right, you know, traditional occupational medicine base in a traditional employer, if you you hurt your knee, they want you to go do physical therapy first, six to eight weeks before you get an MRI. Well, we embrace that the opposite, right, more of that sports medicine approach, which was let's get the MRI first, let's know what's wrong first. And what that's allowed us to do is, was it was attack last time at the front of the injury. So you know, we know tissue heals and bone heals only as quickly as it can. But if you get that diagnosis, that rapid treatment, then we've reduced last time at the front end of the injury instead of that, right. And so that was a win financially, which then propels us to hiring more staff. Right. So as we can start to prove some of that worth. We're really led us into this space where we are today, which is I think I've shared this with you before we have three full time strength conditioning coaches, they all came from the collegiate or so one had spent some time with us the Olympics with karate, and Taekwondo, but they all come from the collegiate space division one football, soccer and lacrosse, women's basketball, so they have a myriad of experience. Our athletic trainers, we have four full time athletic trainers, again, from from the NFL, from collegiate basketball, football, US figure skating. So really great experience again there. We've hired a full time physician recently, so she another unicorn for us, she was a fire EMS medical director and in Flagstaff, Arizona for some time and moved to Colorado and had started to dabble in the occupational medicine space. And we stumbled on her through another relationship. And we brought her in and so she understands our culture. So well being you know, being a medical director, and now she cares for now she cares for us. And then we have a couple of ancillary positions, the wellness navigator, so when one of our members is injured, that employee takes them from A to Z through all of the internal processes right on boards, then walks them through it. You know, and then and then under that same umbrella, basically, those are those things I shared before. My experience from Columbine, you know, in about 2010, I started coordinating our peer support team and in 2012 HR let us take over our EAP programs, so they let us pick who our clinical psychologists were. So we were immediately able to vet culturally competent trauma trained clinicians, we expanded from that one clinic

where you might go to get care and there's 40 police officer candidates, they're taking their psych psychological tests while you're there in crisis. So we were able to expand that network to six different practices. Our members have access to about 35 different clinicians. We just like I said it just in It's all through these conversations, James and, and navigating and looking over the fence and seeing what other folks are doing. We learned about EMDR. And we told all of our EAP providers, you have to have a provider that does EMDR or we won't do business with you. We've we found Neurofeedback in 2018 and brought that clinician into our headquarters building in 2020. And I've been running a Neurofeedback clinic out of out of our headquarters since then. So we just have an incredible, I'm blessed, I have a fire chief that that supports us in this effort and listens, and lets us proof of concepts and pilots study things. And when we prove it, he allows us to continue with it. And let me let me back all the way down because I know this is something we wanted to talk about. Why do we have what we have our skin in the game as the firefighters to have this robust wellness program and medical surveillance program. At the end of the day all said and done with the salaries and benefits and program design and expense, we're talking about a \$4 million a year program to serve 620 line firefighters, we have about 810 total employees. Our skin in the game as firefighters is having a fitness test. So we're back we go back in 2012 when we parked that incumbent physical ability tests, and even back then that was a punitive test, you had a time limit. And if you if you didn't pass, you had a year of rehab under that policy to pass and come back online. Today we use a vo two max test. So on a on a treadmill with a with a cardio coach, we are shooting we convert that vo to two mats because of the standards and in NFPA 1582. And our goal is to get to that 12 Met Standard right we know that's the average metabolic expense of the fire ground. And so that's that's what Chief Baker's clearly articulated to us, I will continue to support this robust wellness program. But my expectations are that you have a you have a mandatory fitness test. And for that to happen.

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James Geering 1:12:06

Well, firstly, I love everything that you guys are doing. And we'll get to the mental health side in a second. But not only having the true experts of the world. And it's funny because I had a guest on recently who had recently become exposed to first responders and he said, I know division three teams that get better strength conditioning nutrition than professional firefighters and law enforcement officers. And he goes that that's disgusting to me. So having figured that out in your department is phenomenal. And it's this is why I'm so glad that we get to talk about this. This is never a show about bitching about the problems is that, hey, here's a glaring issue with a lot of fire departments. But look over here, south metro is doing it right look over there, you know, Norway's doing it right for this thing. There, we do not have to reinvent the wheel. But as we talked about cities and counties and police departments and fire departments not talking to each other, we're so siloed we're so fragmented as a profession. And you know, like you were on the union board, like, I'll be very transparent. I was a union member, my whole 14 years, never saw the work, we get changed and never saw real strength and conditioning initiatives that we're talking about. Now, the mental health model, one facility up in the top of the corner of this country, I don't think is a great solution either. So, you know, I'm just kind of pulling out everything from the shadows showing, hey, this can be so much better. And look over here, this departments figured it out. So I think it's phenomenal. Talk to me about the financial savings that you've projected saving, because this is the thing for men and women in uniform that put their lives on the line for other people, I would argue that they understand the value of service and selflessness and you know, the human component of what we do, by the time it gets to whether it's achieved level administrator, you know, even maybe some union members, they that seems to be lost. And so now they're like, well, I need to see

the figures which you shouldn't need to this is the wellness of your people. But regarding take that out the equation for a moment, when we talked before, one of the big things that I was talking to you about was the workweek and how we work our men and women these crazy hours and we would save a huge amount of money. If we added a fourth platoon and therefore more time more rest and recovery. We wouldn't have as many workman's comp claims, injuries, etc. The same thing I get with the wellness people that have initiative initiated a good wellness program, there's a visible financial savings. So that's a great selling point for that chief to go to their counter. You'll see. So you've got a pretty longitudinal study now 10 plus years of this, what what have you seen as far as the reduction in injury rates, the increase in performance and then the fiscal savings?



1:14:55

I think so those concrete things like reducing lost time at the front On site of an injury, right that's, we we I'm sure it's more than this today. But we talked about it cost us \$1,000 A day of firefighters to not work in overtime, right to backfill them. So right away, we've had some wonderful cases were wonderful for the member but injured on a Saturday or Sunday, they have their MRI on a Monday, they see the surgeon Monday or Tuesday and then the O R on a Thursday, right? Those are really easy to articulate and show what that timeline looks like on the front end. And and then are we do the rehab, we do all physical rehab on site in our in our program. And so today, I would tell you that with the exception of a unique double knee replacement, or a cardiac rehab, everything 100% are happening in our in our training room at south metro. And so and whether that's work related or non work related, so if a member tore their ACL skiing, so those are savings on the benefit plan, too. So not only in the Workers Compensation side, but also the benefit plan. And so those are, now we have the salary benefits, right. So you're if you're looking at the offset, and when things I've always articulated, which I think it's lost sometimes is the value of embedded staff that buy into the culture, that that believe in service that believe in the mission that believe that their role is keeping the men and women that serve safe is as valuable as those dollars. And so those dollars would be spent anyways, and probably spent, we would spend more dollars, right, and we'd have an increase in lost time. So I think it's always hard to have these conversations without really speaking to the value of having embedded staff that are committed to the mission as much as the men and women that serve on on that on the you know, at the station level. But But let me back up a little bit. So when we talk about rehab, specifically, in a traditional benefit plan design, if you tear your ACL, you get certified for 20 rehabilitation minutes in a physical therapy clinic. And if you've done any rehab in those, those environments, you get 30 minutes with the clinician. So in an hour appointment, usually go ride a bike for 10 minutes by yourself, you get 30 minutes with the clinician, and then they they have you do some self work while they start their next patient. And in our our program, our men and women are getting two to three hours of physical therapy with our athletic training group right there. And they're going from different modalities, their name we may have, we have a one of our clinician does dry needling where one doesn't. And so that employee will bounce between the different clinicians in the clinic, and they're getting that quality time and they're getting now they're getting 6070 sessions at sessions. They're coming in four days a week. Again, that's, that's it's more care than they would get outside. But it's it's higher quality care, right. And at the same time things that we've done is is that those set so because it's on site, it's in our headquarters building. And so if it's in that workers compensation environment, and even if it's a personal injury, when they're on a mod and they're in a modified duty position, so we have a modified duty project manager. So we have an employee that just manages modified duty, so they solicit the entity for programs, and they pair firefighters and paramedics with that work. But what we really what we've been able

to do at south metro is we've let everyone know that that injured firefighter paramedic can only do about four hours of work out of an eight hour workday, because the rest of that work day is in healing is in rehab is in and rehab could be going to EAP right it could be in neurofeedback. And so, those of the other things that we do is you may have a you may have torn rotator cuff but we're going to make sure that we introduce you to Neurofeedback while you're in the building, and we're going to encourage you to do Neurofeedback in addition to your physical rehab, in addition to those three or four hours a day, you might work in that modified duty position. Again, those are there's no hard to equate dollars right with with a lot of these things, but for sure its value in quality and proof that that the organization cares about our you know, the our priority, which is the men and women that's are. But what I will tell you is if you attach to a rate to all of those visits, now we're nearing \$800,000 a year in in physical therapy that we do in house. And then when we look at our workers compensation, our I think I shared this with you before we're we've grown over time when when not all of all of these things happened in 2012. We were about 298 300 employees today like I shared we're 620 firefighters and 800 and about 110 total employees. We don't pay any more for our workers compensation insurance than we did in 2012. So it's exactly the same. That's I think that's proof that's for sure a proof in the value of what we're doing as well. So but that's a it's And maybe if you appreciate this is, again, I'll speak to it. I'm a firefighter paramedic, and I'm in it, I'm in, I'm in the role I'm in today because I truly care about the men and women that serve and and want to make it better. And so I'm not a statistician, I'm not, I'm not, I'm not that person. And we're growing up. And we're maturing, and we're, we're creating systems and processes and medical record keeping and, and all of those things that we're going to be able to produce that thing much more materially in the future, capture it and capture it better. But I think that, you know, it's also a our Chief Baker believes that, and us being an employer of choice. And that's, and this is proof, right? This is you put this out there, and we regularly hear this from our recruits, we haven't had any, any problem in recruiting and filling our academies and we hear you know, quite frequently that they're here because of our wellness program and how the organization cares about them.

J

James Geering 1:21:02

See, and that's so good to hear. Because I've talked about this with my experiences in these two diverse departments the best and the worst, in my opinion, my experience but the Anaheim I mean, we have people lining I tested against the 1000 certified firefighter, EMT and or medics, most of their resumes were ambulance operator, wildland fire, I mean, volunteer, all these kinds of things. And people flocked to that department because it was notorious for how hard it was to get hired and then notorious for their department, their probation 25% Didn't make it every single time. And I don't know if that still there if the virus slipped a little bit, but when I was there, that was clearly you know, evident that yeah, if you are a good department and you value your people and you keep that standard high, you're going to attract people if you do this 18 In a heartbeat mentality, there's some people falsely think is going to help with staffing. You become a revolving door department, they'll get their certs and then they'll walk out the bag. So listening, you know, as I've heard, so many people say they're in a hiring crisis. Now, this is exactly what I'm talking about. You are respected, you know, you you have these fitness standards, you hold your people accountable. And then and you are experiencing a great recruitment process still.

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1:22:18

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. When we last year, we did our first true lateral. There's always talk

about doing laterals in in our array we don't we always think that I know this way we are my academy is better than your academy. James, you don't you don't do it. You don't pull hose away, we pull hose right, all of those you don't know how to hit a hydrant. We look at all of that nonsense, right. And we finally really had a lateral Academy, just five weeks, it wasn't 16 weeks. And we didn't we didn't treat them like rookies. Right. And, and we treated them like adults, we treated them like adults in the academy. And, and, and what a home run and all of them came because of our because of our reputation and our program. That's why they came they left their career departments in in the same region. And we're talking three and five year, you know, tenured employees that couldn't wait to get here. And though that is in we're still hearing it from them, right, you know, a young woman that was down in the training room today, who fell during the academy and injured her patellar tendon just finally had that repaired. And that's she was, again, reiterating like this is why she came, you know, she came from a neighboring department, and she came for this and like how blessed she feels because she said that this morning, she said, if I was still there, I'd still be waiting for health care, I'd still be waiting for for treatment. And it's awesome to hear, right. That's why we're doing it.

J

James Geering 1:23:42

Well tacking on to what you said about Chief Baker stance as well. I couldn't agree more with a punitive fitness standard. If you look at so many other professions that we admire, whether it's ocean lifeguards or special operations, they have the same thing, you know, where it's performance driven, maybe it may not be a standardized test, but, you know, with with the ocean life, guys, it is you know, and I was from the lifeguard community before, not ocean, but you know, I had to recertify if I couldn't swim, and tow and do all these things, and I didn't get my piece of paper. And then you look at our profession. And the irony is you talked about, you know, you come out of the academy, and that's the best you're ever going to be in Florida. Our Academy is called minimum standards. So they've labeled that that is the most shittier version of yourself, you should ever be in your career. So yeah, but it blew me away. But there wasn't. And I've heard people say, Well, you know, you've truly got that culture, right if you don't need it. And absolutely, as you said, I was one of those ones that was in the weight room or in a running or whatever. But that's not everyone, especially not today. So talk to me about you know, the, because you told me this before the few few few number of people that you've actually let go with that because I think there's this misunderstanding and sadly, I think, you know, certain union members perpetuate this myth or they're trying to take our jobs. Well, if you look at a fitness standard, you're asking Two things, I want my people to be able to do what they're paid to do, and actually a fit, you know, facilitate a rescue, whether it's 20 floors up in a high rise, whether it's you know, down the hallway in a school, and then also I want them to retire and have a long healthy retirement, those that there's no downside to a fitness side, unless you are just not willing to put in the work in which case, this is the wrong job for you anyway. So talk to me about you know, outside all this fear mongering, what has been the the attrition rate of holding that standard in your department?

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1:25:34

Yeah, with with, you know, we're really with all integrity, I can tell you that we've had we had two members retire because of the because of the VO two max test in our in our in our population. And so we, we, again, want to make sure it's super clear that this is this was a collaboration with labor and management. I was on the union's executive board, when we,

when we started this thing, and we agreed to it and but we ramped it up we gave we two years before the rubber hit the road, we introduced the tests, we took the test. So we understood it before before we had to. And then as we merged with the other departments, we gave them that same grace period before the rubber hit the road and with the way this policy is it's meant to be rehabilitative, right? It's it. So in that first pass, if you if you if you have to come offline, because you can't meet the standard. You're placed in modified duty. And you're, you're like I talked about before, hey, if your tear your ACL, three or four hours is rehab, the rest is your workday. If you if you don't pass the VO to test the you're just doing, you're doing physical rehab, you're working with the strength coaches, you're put on a program, and then we test you every 30 days to see right until you until you get to the level we expect you to be at. And so that's the first year and so you get, you get 90 days. And if you're showing thoughtful progress, you get extended another 90 days. So you can spend up to six months or longer into into this program in this program offline in the first instance. And then that second, that second year, if that happens, you get paid while you're there doing the rehab, while you're doing the physical program, but you have to you don't longer get the modified duty opportunity. You have to burn your own sick or vacation time to make up your workweek. And then the third instance, is where you would be vulnerable, right, based on your your circumstances and how close you were in still, but still not a hard line, right, but still want to give people the opportunity and you know, to move that needle. And what I will tell you is that the member, the first member to choose to retire, retired, coming up on his third failure. In fact, he didn't even take his third test. Right. He it was it was transparent to the rest of us. He you know, he gained a lot of weight that year after you know, after he returned the second time, it was clear that he wasn't going to he wasn't going to take that path. So he self selected he made a decision. But I think I shared with you before. This is a 30 year employee. So this wasn't a this wasn't a 40 year old, right. Or this was somebody who had who had served a long time that he put his time in and made a thoughtful decision to not not take that that test. And then we had another member. The other member that retired he again retired before he took the second test had also been had to come offline twice at two training events. So wasn't able to complete the two training events. So moving two and a half inside a commercial structure was had to take remove his equipment and be be treated and come offline for a while. So again, somebody that thoughtfully chose, I'm not going to take this test again. So we've we've we've never hit that that benchmark of that third year failure where Chief Baker has had to make that firm decision. But we've laid the policy and foundation out there. And he continues to hold that that line that way with that perspective.

J

James Geering 1:29:01

Yeah. Well, I mean, I think it's it's so important that you've got that structure because that you said if you got 30 years, then that was simply there to show you okay, you know, it is time to pull the trigger on retirement and you're not able to because imagine if you were sent to respond to an incident and someone died and you knew damn well, that they died because you couldn't, you know, climb those stairs, you couldn't mask up or whatever it was at that point. And I think this discussion is misunderstood by a lot of people with this whole you're taking my jobs and I want to give kudos to your union. The again there are great unions out there I just where I've worked, there's been a lot of self serving unions that have opposed any sort of fitness standards, which I think is nauseating and shame on you. But um, people, you know, lives are at stake. So never are you going to you know, never would anyone recommend introducing some sort of standard and from day one, if you don't pass it, you're fired. There needs to be an on ramp, you know, an escalation. And but you've also got to hold people accountable. Because, as you know, I one of the phrases that I like to use is how would you feel

if your family died because the responder hadn't trained? We're not plumbers, we're not carpenters. We're not musicians, we're firefighters. And so we have a physical responsibility. And no one can say it's not fair. Because in the Fire Academy, were you allowed to just skip out PT? Were you allowed to just walk? You know, to halfway up the building? No. So you can't tell me Oh, it's not fair. When when you went through the fucking fire academy, you knew exactly what the expectation was for your entire career. So yeah, I'm so glad that you guys were able to really navigate this and put that bar back where it belongs. Because the pussyfooting around this topic is nausea. It's like the fat shaming thing. Yeah, let's just keep letting people die of morbid obesity, you know, and half of their lifespan because we're afraid of hurt and feelings. This is the fire service, we ask that you can perform at a high level paramount to the tactical, you know, the Special Operations and some of these elite, tactical athletes that were held to the same standard by them. I agree that a lot of the environments that we work in, set us up for failure, we don't have strength conditioning coaches, our work weeks are absolutely horrendous at the moment. So we need to fix those. But that ownership element has to exist, our unions have to fight for for these types of standards, they have to fight for the equipment, they have to fight for the the instruction, they said the real experts to come in. And then we have to, you know all, embrace the fact that we should be held to the same if not higher standard than when we were first in the Academy because I'm about to turn 50 Next year, if I can still do that shit, and I'm not even paid to do it anymore, then everyone in uniform should also be able to do that.



1:31:48

Yeah, I agree with that completely. And Chief Baker takes the he takes the VO to test every year as well. In fact, members on the executive team, he's asked to take it that that don't come from our, our space, right. So I have the experience to appreciate what we're asking our men and women online to do. And I think another thing that I think that's important to point out here at south metro is that our program exists because that's our skin in the game. That's the test. Because we really believe in it. Right? The other piece of it is the is the reward. And the other the other reward isn't just our robust wellness program, but it's also our firefighters, the highest paid firefighters in Colorado, they're paid at the 100th percentile. And so you know, and so he's putting his money where his mouth is, the chief is and our board of directors are and they're, they're telling we're going to reward you for this we're paying, we're going to pay you for the risk. And we're gonna reward you for that higher expectations. And give you this program. And like I share, like you we've already talked about it is well, I've watched that that's why people are coming to work work with us. And for us, it's because of all of those things together. And you'll see the unique experience just happen. I think since between the last time you and I talked is Chief was invited to speak on a conference call with United Arab Emirates, and a sheikh from Abu Dhabi, who's looking at looking at the US to see and specifically around wellness fitness initiative and what we do to take care of firefighters. And as you can expect, we were the only department on that conference call that's doing what we're doing. And so he's really proud of that, you know, and I'm proud of these opportunities to tell our story. And for sure, like, you know, I'm not so naive that I wouldn't tell Chief Baker that that I was going to be on this, this call with you today and talk about these things. Right. And, and he, he wants us to continue to tell that story. And, and I think they, I believe this just like we talked about as leadership evolves and matures. So as we work together, and we get to those leadership positions where you mature and evolve and address issues that we had a hard time wrestling with before, I think this is going to be similar for us as a field as our entire occupation in the US. I believe that in a generation, we're not going to be talking about this anymore, because there's going to be an expectation that that men and women are going to embrace that, that that we

do sign up for the risk. And we do but we're also willing to put to put in the work to do that. And you know, there's always this conversation of what we know we know that we're because of wearing bunker gear and going in a heated environment we know that we're in a higher we risk these hyper coagulative states right we risk having a blood clot but the risk is more so and having an underlying cardiovascular disease right and having metabolic syndrome having high cholesterol and so that's the other piece I think that gets lost a little bit of a fitness standard is the fitness standards is moving us towards good health. It's not just any do this today. It's this lifelong career progress. of staying in a healthy space and, and preventing the disease that you can prevent, so that you are equipped to do the job when you're called on to do it. But also, like you said, you said it, and what Chief Baker likes to say here is the round trip ticket, right? He wants everyone to have a round trip ticket, and he wants you to come in and do the job and go home. And he means that all the way to retirement, like I want to see, I want to you we all want to see people financially secure, mentally fit, and physically fit when they leave when they leave the organization to go and enjoy the risk that they absorbed that whether that and the exposure to trauma, the exposure to chemicals, the exposure to all of it, you want people to leave healthy and happy and look back on it on a life well served. Right. That's that's also I think that gets lost and a little bit of why that standards there too, is because that's what we want to drive to.


 James Geering 1:35:53


Yeah, well, I think it's amazing. I know, we touched on this, when we spoke, I just love to kind of open Pandora's box on this for a moment. For six and a half years now the length of this podcast, I've been questioning our work weeks of which that I was a part of for 14 years, most of my career was a 56 hour week 2448, then you have all the mandatories that I experienced in both of those departments, you know so much. And that was really one of the reasons why I transitioned to my last one was I was a single father and I couldn't have anyone say you can't go home today, because there was a small child waiting for me. But when we talk about all these tools, and you speak to the sporting world, and you speak to the wellness gurus that work with, you know, tier one operations, the absolute foundation of that asleep, and if you're not getting sleep, then you're not repairing from great strength conditioning, you're not you know, your brain isn't processing the trauma that you saw in Columbine or a valley. So talk to me about what you guys are working now. And then which is the kind of the work week that you would hopefully add to this incredible toolbox that you've always got already got of longevity for your people.


 1:37:03

I think if I had if I had the my hands on the purse, string of the taxpayer, I we'd go to a fourth, we'd go to a fourth shift right overnight. That's a that's like 2472. Right. That's, that's easy. And then you when you and then you know as well as I do when you sprinkle in vacation, on that schedule A you can really reduce that workweek to 40, let's say 42 hours, I think that's that's probably where everybody wants to wants to get where we're a 56 hour workweek, we've, we've been able we work a 4896. But we've been able to, we started to talk about shift schedule change, we looked at a similar Seattle model where you could slowly add in more, so you finally get that full force shift. But we did we were able to sprinkle in more vacation. So but it's that 48 hour block of time. That's that's super concerning, right and how we how we break that up and what I know to be true, and I was similar. We really love our four days off, right?

And I appreciated them too. You know, you you can go you can go take a mini vacation, you can go camp, you can go fish, you can take care of what you need to at home, and but what gets lost is that expense on the other side. And that like what you talked about the exposure and lack of sleep and the inability to recover. You know, I think I shared this with you before as well, one of the one of those researchers that's working really hard in the sleep space from Emory riddle. We know when you're when you you you've you've had a busy 48 And you're coming home and and you just didn't work out on your 48. And so you're you've got this, this decision tree in front of you of I'm so tired and we will sleep but should I work out you should always sleep every single time you should sleep right? Because you know as well as I do, there's no value in that workout. You're exhausted, you need to sleep and I think but that really is just a great thing to hold on to is like how valuable sleep is to us and how how we you know we you hear it too? How many times have you heard in the firehouse? Well, I'll sleep when I'm dead. Right? And like what, uh, that could be true.

 James Geering 1:39:07
Sooner than you realize.

 1:39:09
Yeah. So that sort of for sure. The pie in the sky is that full full force battalion, right? And so how do we get there? And, and that's where all of the that's where all the juggling comes in the air? Right? You know, it's easy to say, well, we pay you for 56 hours today. If you go to 42 We're gonna cut your pay what how do we navigate those conversations? Right. And I think we have to be more adult about it. Right. And, and it's honestly, I think it's a burden that that we have to bear is no, no, we need to address it. And we need to keep pay where it is. But we also need to reduce the workweek at the same time and concurrently. So how to how do we make that happen? Well, it's

 James Geering 1:39:48
interesting because that's the exact knee jerk reaction you get again that that unfounded fear from the membership and I get it, you know, that's kind of what they think. But then, when you go to that model If I were we when you go to training, when you become the wellness director, you're working 40 hours a day cutting your pay. No, you still getting your salary, it's just your hourly rate on a piece of paper is now slightly different. But again, the proactive savings that you've made with all the things we've discussed today, when you look at the negative impacts of sleeping, I've had, you know, researchers from the Army, the Navy and and you name it every sporting every one. And they all align 100% Like you are mentally and physically destroying your, your first responders the way that you're working them. And if you're understaffed, which you I'm assuming are not with the hiring that you have. So many of us are like my, where I live now, the fire department, which I actually volunteered with for literally a heartbeat like a few months. They've just had two suicides within three weeks of each other. They're sick in four years and not a big County at all rural county. But they are working fifth to sixth, no Kelly and mandatories, like almost every other week. So that's an 80 hour work week, every other week. So we have this and we talked about this before this facade, I work one day on two days off, no, you work three days on one day off, three, eight hour days crammed

together with a day off, you know, because the second day you work eight before you went home, and then a day off, and then you're back at it again. I work 10 days a month now you work 30 days a month. So we got to stop telling ourselves this, I got to ask the question, why are the people that are driving lights and sirens and jumping into burning buildings and cutting people from cars and working out pediatric mega codes codes, we're fine with being chronically overwork. But the person who makes you a cup of coffee, and Starbucks taps out for 40 hours, it makes no sense. So understanding the huge financial impact of the physical and mental ill health of our people on the back end with workman's comp and medical retirements and mistakes that we make the lawsuits applied to that that's where our money is. But just like you guys have done with the other areas, the fire service has to understand we gotta invest in our people. And we keep talking about oh, you know, we're a business, you know, business model, okay, well, then I disagree. But if you want to look at the fire service as a business, then don't choose, you know, this Chinese ally company, choose Google choose virgin choose these other business companies that invest in that people, you know, so it's, we've devolved, like, our CRUD calls have gone through the roof. And we've kept the workweek the same as when we were smoking, cigars, playing cards, and patented Dalmatian. So we have to take a step back and look at the EMS fire world that we live in now, and the 911 abuse, and realize that we have to work as you said, I mean, that to me, the 2472 should be the gold standard across the country, if someone doesn't work as much good for them. You know, I tell people the security guard in your apartment complex? Do you expect them to be fighting the bad guys the whole time that you're living there now that you know if you need them when you need them, and they shouldn't have to justify some downtime?

 1:42:50

It's a hard it's a hard path to walk from the perspective to have. You know, like I just talked about how really embracing that four day off, right? And so going even to 48 Hour Workweek, right 24 On a 48 off, I still think that would be progress in the right direction, right? We've reduced the workweek from 56 to 48. And I think when you look at that on, on paper, longitudinal over a 20 year career as the 56 hour employee, you compare that to a 48 hour work week, that's 17 years, that's three years less of exposure, that's three years less of bad sleep, that's three, you know, when you look at it over time, and I think it's a it's a bridge to getting where we want to go, but it's a hard, it's definitely a hurdle, right is losing that those consist consecutive days off. And so it's a it's a it's a conundrum, right? It's a puzzle, and but someplace where we have to meet in the middle, and I appreciate labor and and men or women's perspective of, well, how are we going to get and what are you going to give me to get me there and, and those kinds of things. But I think at some point, they're no different than our than our program, that collaboration has to come back of labor and management agreeing, not just the Hey, tomorrow, let's go to this schedule. But what are we going to do in 25, and 26 and 27? To make sure that this this 2472 can happen? What how are we going to what does this progress going to ensure that fourth battalion is, is put in place?

 James Geering 1:44:18

Absolutely. Yeah, cuz I mean, that's the thing that the piecemeal isn't going to Well, I work 2448 with a Kelly in my last place. And it's just as brutal. It's a 56 hour work week until you hit that caddy day, every three weeks apart from that they get your ass handed to you, and then again with the mandatories. And now it's 4824 You know, and now you're so dangerous. Being

on the road is so dangerous, having a drug key in your hand, because you're cross I don't even know what you're doing. So, all right, well, then I want to hit one more topic before I let you go. You talked about the peer support and the mental health model and I love the fact that you've got EAP with you know, only with culturally competent clinicians. I've heard so many horror stories of the Russian Roulette That is the EAP system sprinkled in there is some good providers. But there's so many, so many stories. I've heard of the, you know, the worst case where they the counselor has cried the counselor has told him to get out. But then the most heartbreaking thing is how many stories will I never hear? Because that was the final nail in the coffin for someone in crisis. So just talk to me about you know, you've touched on that a little bit about the toolbox for someone in south metro from the mental health perspective



1:45:28

is that the first piece is that right is expanding that EAP network. And we had some momentum back in 2019. Before COVID of of men and women being vulnerable, standing up in front of in company meetings and telling, telling their story and telling their story of treatment and success. I think I shared with this with you before Chief Baker and our former operations chief Troy Jackson being present and telling everyone there that if they raise their hand and ask for help, they're not in trouble, that we're going to take care of them. So that's the first piece right is his leadership saying we have this and the other piece, in that you know, that we're really trying to pivot a little bit here to from behavioral health to mental fitness. And so looking at it from another lens of just just addition to physical fitness, there's mental fitness and if you get a physical injury, you get this other injury, but you can recover from it right in progress and get back to that whole health. And so when we look at our modified duty program, so we have modified duty for mental fitness, right, so suicidality, true post traumatic stress, injury, you know, going through a divorce, like I can't just I just can't focus at work and I need, we've created this space and opportunity on that side, too. So not just the physical injury, and a little bit more grace to do true case management, hey, what do you really need? Like, what do you really need in this moment, and like what we talked about with sleep, I've watched it over and over again, of men and women that have come offline. And not on that, that 4896 schedule, and they've embraced their sleep, they're able, you know, so we get them in neurofeedback, which helps them right, get that brainwave activity, activity set settled from arousal to sleep and sleep to arousal, and they're able to sleep again at night. And they're creating a regular pattern and routine. So they're, they're able to recover, just like we talked about, we know that science of just the ability to sleep is going to sometimes take you off that cliff of despair, right. And so just getting a good night's sleep, right, and how much that helps. And, yeah, and again, you know, having a chief that supports us in that space and work. And then, you know, obviously, like so many departments, we have a we have a robust peer support team, you know, I think our roster is around 30 to 40 members today. And you know, men and women similarly situated that that do the same thing for a living that have had divorce bankruptcy, critical calls, you know, that network of peers that that no one you know that no one else that's that if they haven't been in your shoes, they can't, they don't have that shared experience. We don't listen to them, right. And so we want it that's, that's what we want to have and see available. And we've really been trying to raise the bar in that group from just answering the phone to starting to develop, give them skill sets that they can share, you know, from, you know, using a stress continuum, you know, that that that military model of stress continuum, and creating a language around things like that. Simple things that we've done. We have dogs, we have three, we have three service dogs, so we call them emergency responder service dogs, and these are just comfort dogs at the end of the day. And you know, what a great a great anecdote on that one in particular was the stem shooting here in Colorado at that at that

our STEM High School, it would, again was that was in our jurisdiction. And as that call was happening, and our dispatchers were taking calls from parents and kids at that scene, one of the members on our team who was one of the dog handlers, the dog's name is champ he, he came by the dispatch center, and he let his dog in the dispatch center in the middle of that call. And he just sat in the corner and watch the dog work. And he watched dispatchers with high anxiety. And everybody's escalated on their calls, and pet that dog and come down a little bit. So some of these, it seems so simple, right? But to sort of see things like that be successful, and again, have achieved that. But if you want to buy a dog, don't be wrong. It wasn't that simple conversation by his 20 bucks. Yeah. But but to put to say yes to things like that and be inquisitive. And let us let us explore things like that. And then I think I shared this with you before and I think that you had a, you did an interview recently. They talked about some some people that are now here at south metro. And so the other piece of that was we started looking at that and that's where I think I go with more of the mental fitness approaches cognitive performance. And so we were introduced to a gentleman down at in Fort Carson in Colorado Springs embedded in a special forces group, who was a sports performance psychologist, right The cognitive performance specialist and that deployed with those soldiers of special forces group. And once we were introduced to him, we asked him that question is what you do down there? Can you do that up here with us at the fire department. And so we brought him up as a contractor for a couple of years. And he learned our culture, he wrote with all of our battalion chiefs started writing with crews, and we were able to hire him in February of 21. And so adding that other piece, all those things that we know that that, you know, you know, that mental Rolodex, that ability to plan for plan A through through D on any in any given scenario, prepare people, you know, that that that same idea of training, training, like you fight, and so how can we bring that to the fire service? How can we get new company officers in a training environment, heart rate to 140, in the same old burn building, they go in all the time, right? So that so that when that when that new company officer that very first call at three in the morning, that's a party's trapped fire, when their heart rate goes to one 150, well, we've already, let's already put them there in the training environment. And let's get let's get men and women equipped. And again, it goes, it all dovetails together, right with a fitness standard. Because if I'm conditioned, and then I train like I fight, then I'm prepared when things go wrong, right. And that's it. That's just how it all comes together. And then we also know that if we give men and women skill sets to control, their breathing, visualization, and all of these other skills, we know they're going to be a bit more resilient in everyday life as well. Right? We know that when they do see, and so you create this environment of peers that are being willing to be vulnerable and tell stories. And so you know, if you see something or feel something, you could, you can tell somebody, right, you know, I mean, I never, I never would have thought in 100 years that I would talk about Columbine High School on a, you know, like with, with with, and I don't feel like we're strangers, but you know, those, I just don't think that you would share. I when I went through my divorce, being I went through a divorce because I couldn't assimilate. When I got home, I had all these things I bundled up, I didn't know how to talk about at home. And so like all of us, your hyper vigilant, you hold all those things, and it led to disruption in my marriage, and, but the ability to go through that, learn from it, and then share it with my peers, right? Why it's so important to diffuse why it's so important to share your experiences, why it's important to tell your spouse what you do, and how your spouse what you feel. Give your spouse a language to ask you questions. I get this is all for me. It just all comes together. Right? And but I guess I would think back to that, were you started when you asked about my grandfather's and these two, you know, stoic men, and they were both six foot three and they were these giants of men that I look up to, but they because they were so strong and quiet and but I think what I'm starting to recognize and maybe you are as well, is that, that we are men

and and it's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay to share our stories and because that that's really that's courage, right. That's what being courageous is is, is not keeping it all in but but but share our stories. So

 James Geering 1:53:06

I couldn't agree more. Well, that's a beautiful place to kind of wrap this all up. So I'm sure people are fascinated, I'm sure there's a lot of people that I hope this conversation has brought solutions to a lot of the problems that they've experienced, and I certainly did in the departments that I worked for. So where are the best places for people to find you and reach out to you personally?

 1:53:26

Oh, my for sure. LinkedIn, I'm on LinkedIn. So you can just you can find me on LinkedIn easily. I was pretty oblivious to what LinkedIn really is. Right? And now that I'm on it, and the connections that are there, and the people that are collaborating in the same space, I think so I would encourage people to get on there if they're interested in the being in these spaces, right? Because you're you're seeing the science come out firsthand. You're connecting with the researchers you're connecting with, with men and women like us that are trying to make it better for for folks around us. And then people can email me directly. It's Chris dot Macklin at South metro.org. And I'll yeah, I we just like you, James I talked to I talked to people from around the country, once or twice a week that are that are interested in doing what we're doing. And it's all about, it's all about making it better for everybody around us. And I don't have any we don't have any secrets. And we're and we're we want to share whatever we can do. And we want to learn like I shared with you before we look over the fence all the time, we've looked at health care, we've looked at the military, we look at what other folks are doing as well, because we know we don't always have the answers in our own right in our own backyard. So

 James Geering 1:54:36

Well Chris, I want to say thank you. I mean, thank you to you and your department and everyone that's going to forge this incredible, you know, organization that you've got now one that people are lining out to be a part of one that people that are having long, healthy careers in. But as you said there's so many solutions that you guys have found from other people as well that are, you know, off fixing issues that we all suffer from and of course The Financial element, you know, and so, oh, well, it's different over there. Yeah, I get it, you know, but we can still pull ideas from these different departments. You might be rural, they might be urban, but we can still knowledge share, we can still have some sort of kind of transfer and some ideas, even if you can apply it in your own way. So I just want to thank you so much for being so generous with your time today.

 1:55:20

Yeah, I appreciate it. Thank you, Jim.

