

# David Leask - Episode 835

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

firefighter, call, people, cancer, fire, work, chemotherapy, put, doctor, exposures, run, told, big, department, wife, remember, conversation, career, hockey, baseball

## SPEAKERS

David Leask, James Geering

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James Geering 00:00

This episode is sponsored by NuCalm. And as many of you know, I only bring sponsors onto the show whose products I truly swear by. Now we are an overworked and underslept population, especially those of us that wear a uniform for a living, and trying to reclaim some of the lost rest and recovery is imperative. Now, the application of this product is as simple as putting on headphones and asleep mask. As you listen to music on each of the programs, there is neuro acoustic software Beneath that is tapping into the actual frequencies of your brain, whether to up regulate your nervous system, or downregulate. Now for most of us that come off shift we are a exhausted and B do not want to bring what we've had to see and do back home to our loved ones. So one powerful application is using the program power nap, a 20 minute session that will not only feel like you've had two hours of sleep, but also downregulate from a hyper vigilant state, back into the role of mother or father, husband or wife. Now there are so many other applications and benefits from the software. So I urge you to go and listen to episode 806 with CEO Jim Paul, then download NuCalm and you see a LM from your app store and sign up for the seven day free trial. Not only will you have an understanding of the origin story and the four decades this science has spanned, but also see for yourself the incredible health impact of this life changing software. And you can find even more information on [new comm.com](http://newcomm.com)

Welcome to the behind the shield podcast. As always, my name is James Geering. And this week, it is my absolute honor to welcome on the show, firefighter and cancer survivor, David Leask. Now in this conversation, we discuss a host of topics from his own journey into the fire service, ice hockey, entering EMS, working in Compton during the LA riots, Korea fires, his cancer diagnosis, the financial impact, chemotherapy, returning to duty, mental health, and so much more. Now, before we get to this incredibly powerful and important conversation, as I say, every week, please just take a moment, go to whichever app you listen to this on, subscribe to the show, leave feedback and leave a rating. Every single five star rating truly does elevate this podcast, therefore making it easier for others to find. And this is a free library of well over 800 episodes now. So all I ask in return is that you help share these incredible men and women's stories. So I can get them to every single person on planet earth who needs to hear them. So that being said, I introduce to you, David Leask. Enjoy. David, I want to start by saying thank you so much for taking the time and coming on the behind the shield podcast today.

 David Leask 03:27

I really appreciate it. This is my second one that I've done. And it's guys like you and I was on multiple calls with a gentleman named Scott. And I said to Tim, and I'll tell you, I appreciate you doing this for the fire service and first responders and military community. It's really an honor to be a part of this. I've listened to your podcast, podcast, and your guests are just truly amazing people. So I'm honored to be here.

 James Geering 03:54

Yeah, well, again, this is about disseminating stories that need to be heard. And as people will hear yours is definitely going to be you know, just as valuable as the other ones that are already on there. So for people listening where on planet earth we finding you this afternoon,

 04:08

I'm originally from Temecula, California, that's where my residence is. But I happen to be up in the Yosemite area for a real brief vacation. But I'm originally from I live in Temecula, California.

 James Geering 04:20

And I'm familiar with that area. A lot of the Anaheim guys who used to work with live out there. So let's start at the very beginning of your timeline then so tell me where you were born. And tell me a little bit about your family dynamic what your parents did, how many siblings.

 04:34

I was born in Whittier, California, and I grew up in a city called Long run just right next door here. My dad was a truck driver for 20 years and then he actually ended up owning his own car parts car parts business, and he would sell car parts out of the shop for old cars like Chevy's Bill exports, all that stuff. My mom was a homemaker until I was probably I I think I was in sixth grade. And then she started to work for a physical therapist. Other than that I'm an only child. And, yeah, I grew up a pretty simple life as an only child, and people would say, I'll spoil but I don't believe so.

 James Geering 05:19

So talk to me about what you were playing as far as sports when you were young. So know that there was one sport in particular that you were very passionate about.

 05:26

I was started off and my parents believed that I should be in every sport. So I played everything Basketball baseball soccer football Those were like my my main ones When I

everything. Basketball, baseball, soccer, football. Those were like my, my main ones. When I was just very young. I got out of football, pretty young, basketball, I hung in there. I couldn't stand soccer. There's just too much running. But baseball, loved it. And so I played a majority of baseball until my dad's Canadian, and I didn't know this, but he always wanted me to play hockey. And when I was young, he was his, he would tell me, I want you to play hockey. I'm like, Dad, that's, I mean, California. That's a ridiculous sport. I don't know why it just doesn't seem right. And then I started playing ice hockey, and I really enjoyed it. And Mike said, My family's from Canada and, and one year I went back to Canada and and I played hockey on a frozen pond with my cousins. And I was I was sold. And so I came back and a little later start on hockey, I would say it was probably 12. When I started that I picked up on it real quick. And I became pretty decent. I ended up playing with a lot of higher caliber teams in Southern California, but Southern California at that time in the different world. It was we weren't as good. So later on, as I as I grew up, I Well, I was around 15 or 16, my dad decided I needed to live closer to Canada. And I kind of come to the point where I played baseball a lot. I was a pitcher, I throw out my arm. My arm was sore every time I threw and it got to be a grind. And it was I was probably one of those that needed surgery. But at that time, they didn't have a Tommy John or anything like that. So baseball became I didn't like it because it was just too painful. And so I focused on hockey. And at that point, it was 100% hockey, and I went up to Washington State, and we lived in Tacoma. And I tried out for a junior C team. They're called the Ironman. And when I tried out for the team, I didn't make it. And at that point, it was it was one of those points in your career where you're like, alright, it's, it's time to figure out my adult life and the kid games have to stop. And so at that point, I, I still played recreational hockey, I found a league and Tacoma played there, and went to high school. And at that point, I always wanted to be a firefighter. But I decided it's time to start pursuing the fireside. And so that's that's where I went.

 James Geering 07:59

I've had a lot of people on here that was successful in the athletic side. And it was the multi sport element that forged their success. And I think I forget if it's some was it Kobe I think it didn't play. Specifically basketball to the was quite old. Yeah. Talk to me about entering hockey at 12 years old. What was it that you saw that you brought to that game that allowed you to have such a quick improvement?

 08:25

I don't know. I think it was just a passion when you find a passion for something I really wasn't interested in was as a as a kid. It just didn't see. Now my friends did it. And so it was one of those things where it was it was known that my friends play baseball and go play baseball, and I go to practice. I know everyone. And then I got in to ice hockey and in Southern California rink is in my every block. And at that time, it was maybe 50 to 100 miles apart. So you're playing hockey with kids, you don't know. And so it was kind of hard to jump into that because you're an outsider at 12. But you soon become an insider and you create those bonds. And hockey had that bond it was you're all out there together. It's a team sport. There's a there's a lot of team dynamics, like like every sport, but it was just that that I loved it because it was it was very physical. It was the best shape I was ever in my life when I was when I was an ice hockey the. I remember when I first started they're like, you stay out there for 30 seconds you get off off the ice and I was like, Wow, man, that's like nothing. But when you skate hard for 30 seconds, you're like, Oh my God, give me half of this thing. So I really enjoyed the just the

physical part of it. The cardiovascular is just a great sport and the team dynamics. And then it was it was really neat. I got to travel a lot. At that time. I wasn't in trouble baseball, but hockey. Yeah. I played up in Canada, Surrey BC. We went all over British Columbia. We went all over Washington. It was it was a really neat experience. And something I thought was really unique about hockey when I started getting older is when when you play baseball, you just show up in you know, your, your uniform and hockey. We'd show up to get dressed in the locker room and yet you're my coach required us to wear a shirt and a tie. And it was like, Man, this is a weird dynamic, but it was it also instilled a lot of things into me as I got older just like almost maybe would you say professionalism, and, and pride and stuff. So I just really liked the sport and everything about it. So it really compelled me to do well. And it was really hard because learning I escaped. And then on top of that learning how to handle a POC and everything else. It was hard, but I quickly found the spot as a defenseman. So that was more about checking in. Not so much agility. So I, I think that was my spot.

 James Geering 10:54

I've had so many people on here that ended up being very high performers, especially to high school athletes. And there's a lot of common denominator, sports, wrestling, volleyball, ice hockey comes up. But never baseball. Some of them play baseball and never say that that was what prepared me baseball. And if you think about, like you said, not liking to run. There's no better sport not running than baseball or cricket, where you either get to choose sunflower seeds while you're playing, or you take a break and actually had tea like cricket so great games. And it's funny, because in my son's school, there's a lot of arrogance amongst that particular team and the players and I don't know why. But as far as you know, physicality, I mean, I think that they're wrestlers, for example, I think people can really understand what grind is. And so you've, you know, had another human being trying to slam you into the ground. And then the same with ice hockey, you know, I mean, the skill that you need with the park, but at the same time, the physicality and the contact. It's a pretty unique sport to and I think a good one prepare you for a career in uniform.

 11:54

Definitely, you know, and some of the things are the intimidation factors. I still remember a guy that broke my ribs on the ice thing was Jensen, check me on the boards, and I had an alpha that guy my whole my whole career in in hockey, and it wasn't had an alibi. I'm like, I gotta stay away from that guy. But I want to hit him too. And, and that was, like you said, there's there's a lot that goes into it.

 James Geering 12:20

Did you ever get him? I can't tell you. I don't think I did. You might be listening. I was terrified. All right. Well, you mentioned about always wanting to be a firefighter. So when you went through the school age, was that the career in mind? And if so, where did that desire come from?

 12:39

You know, this is gonna sound corny. There was a show called emergency squad 51. And I watched that as a kid, and I watched it. And I was like, that's a really cool job that in pattern 12. So I'm really I'm really old here. And I was like, oh, police officer chips, motorcycle cop. I like the public service aspect of it. And so I watched those shows. And there was always that that emergency. I didn't know if that was for me, because I looked at the medical side. And I was and I just didn't like it. It seemed I was I just didn't like the medical side. But I wanted to show and, and like I've said this before, that is probably one of the most realistic fire shows today about just showing the things that are done in the teamwork. So anyways, back to the story I once had as a kid, and through my whole life, it was kind of like, I don't want to be a firefighter or not. I think I do the public service is what I really like. And oddly enough when I worked at so I worked in a skating rink. I didn't say this in my story. But when I was 16 I moved to Tacoma, broke my jaw. And then I went back to California, my parents I moved out when I was 16. And I moved back to California and my goal was I'm gonna be a firefighter. I want to graduate with the kids I grew up with first. And then I want to be a firefighter in California. That's where my home was. So when I came back to California, and I had to get a job because I was paying rent with these people. They said, if you pay us \$100 A month and teach our kids to play hockey, you can stay up at our place for \$100 rent and it was right next to the high school I went to so done deal. But I had to have a job. And so I went to work at an ice skating rink, that ice skating rink. Two of the gentlemen that work there, they wanted to be firefighters. So we're at this ice skating rink and we're doing all of our staff and we're always talking about fire stuff and one of them went through the fire academy and he was an EMT, and the other one it was actually the guy's brother. He went to BMT but he never done anything. So I had all these stories about my friend that was an EMT, he he went on some pretty significant calls the word for all downloads call Adam's ambulance, and they went on the street of a plane crash. And I don't know if people are familiar with that, but it was it was one or two horrific event back in the 80s. I think it was 83. And he told me about it. And it was it was, well, it was one of those things again, where I was like, I don't know if I really want to see that kind of devastation. But as it got, as I got older, I just decided, You know what, I gotta, I gotta go to the path and firefighters it. And so long story short talking to those people started, I graduated high school, and I went the fire path. And I never looked back since.

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James Geering 15:28

How was it described that made you question your ability to deal with it? Because a lot of people will ask responders, what's the worst thing that you've seen? And that's, and that's the worst thing you can ask any of us. But at the same time, it's very hard for someone to describe what we see, you know, so you give them the kind of Disney fi cliffnotes of maybe, you know, a call. But was it portrayed in a way? Because I mean, it sounds like it was pretty colorful, if it elicited that response in your mind.

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15:57

Yeah, so just I am, for instance, my friend that went on the street of plane crash when he told me about the things that he encountered. I won't describe them because is, but that was one of those things where I was like, this is something that's going to take a toll on you over time. And I will probably get into this but I ended up working in Compton for four years. And I was just an EMT wasn't the firefighter sign. And I started my, my first day was a my first week or so half of training was the was the LA riots, and I was stationed in Compton. And I've said this before, to

other people is some of the things I witnessed there were tragic, you, you don't think a human being could do something to another human being. And, and you're there and you witness it. And so yeah, we could probably get more into that here in a second. But all those things really made me question my, my path and the Forest Service. And I don't know what made me decide to go with it. I think there was that that joke is like, do you want to be burned or shot? And I was like, I don't think I want to be shot. So I'll go that path.

 James Geering 17:18

It's an interesting insight, though, because I think a lot of us just go in naive. I know I did. And I didn't go in going, Oh, can I see horrible stuff. It just didn't really. It wasn't a thought that went through my mind. It was more like, am I going to be able to do this job? Am I good enough? Am I going to be able to pass these exams and all that kind of thing? And then you get on? You're like, wow, okay, well, I guess I can. But that would have been really shitty if I gone through all that. And I couldn't. But that's kind of an interesting foresight to be such a young man already be thinking about the possible mental health implications of that career.

 17:51

Yeah, I think that's actually done me. Well, that's been good for me. Because I remember taking an EMT class. And when I started, I went to MIT in 1992. And I remember the teacher telling us, there's a thing called gallows humor, and it's okay to have gallows humor. And, and I do remember, like, there was calls where my partners and I, we, we had gallows humor. And I think it did help. It's strangely enough, it was it was it was kind of sick and twisted, but for some reason, it helps you deal with it. And then at a point, it was like, No, you can't have gallows humor, because that's just that's not good. And so finding ways to deal with it after the fact is, has been interesting. And I've definitely noticed it, and I don't know if it's bad. But I do think it once I realized that the gallows humor was normal for a human being to do, I was a little more able to accept things.

 James Geering 18:57

I heard one person's one of my guests talk about it. And the kind of philosophy behind it is that when you laugh, you downregulates you're in that fight and flight, you've just seen some horrible stuff. That laughter is actually us just kind of bringing it down again, you know, so yeah, when you look at them the same even with infidelity, I've had another person say, you know, when, when, you know, you have intercourse, and there's a climax, physiologically, you wind down and we all know as men, it's easy to fall asleep soon after that. So when you look at it, from a physiological point of view, it doesn't make sense. Now, you know, we have to be careful who we have our gallows humor around. But, you know, I would argue that at times, it absolutely is an important tool for us.

 19:40

I agree. And, and, you know, it's just finding that fine balance, like you say, it's, it's one of those things, but, you know, as, as I progressed in my career, I've also noticed that, you know, back in the day talking about it wasn't wasn't that it was the right thing to do either and and and I

in the day talking about it wasn't wasn't that it was the right thing to do either and, and, and I was actually I've worked this, you know, 2025 30 years and this and when it first happened, you'd be like, I'm not talking about that that's not manly. And then over the years have grown through the briefings. I've also noticed over time, that's a good thing too. You just have to maybe embrace it a little bit.

 James Geering 20:18

So walk me through your journey into EMS and how you found yourself in Compton right before the LA riots.

 20:26

So when I when I got my EMT, I knew I was a firefighter. I was gonna be a firefighter. So I was going through the college Rio Hondo College, and I was taking fire science and EMT and there was two big companies it was called the AME and Adams and then there's this tiny little company called rescue one. And everyone wanted to everyone wanted to be a EMT firefighter, it was that there was just everyone was out there testing for UT and, and there's no spots at me or Adams where I wanted to work at Adams that was South Central LA and, and they had multiple places. And there's a small company rescue one, and they they ran Santa Fe springs, which is down in that area. And then Compton and they did some inner facility transfers. So they weren't as popular and so I got a job at this rescue one because they weren't as popular. And when I went there, I made it known that I wanted to run firewalls and I was lucky enough just through spots open and everything working out I was able to get in Contin and and the other thing I was really fortunate my partner and he's a captain with content fire now, he was reserved with content. And so I worked, I would say three years there with with a guy that was just all about the fire service and and taught me stuff. So that was a that was a great thing for me. I actually thought I was gonna be a competent firefighter. I went through their fire academy, our Center for their reserve program. And so my path into the fire service, I went into Destiny one worked in Compton, like said, the first week, I'm out of training, and all of a sudden we're we're doing I'm going on multiple shootings and and everything's on fire around me. And they're moving us out of our building because it's unsafe. And it was it was just a really weird experience. But on the same token, it almost made me enjoy the medical side because I was out helping people and I got to experience things that I wasn't sure I'd be able to handle. And I did experience him and I was like, okay, I can I can do this. And so I enjoy my whole time at Compton. And the only reason I stopped working in there is because I had to go to the Fire Academy. And at that time, the AMR metrans That time was taking over ambulance companies. And they took over my small little company, and I wanted to do the Fire Academy and they said, Well, you either work here full time, or you don't have a job here. So I went and found another ambulance company that would support me through the fire academy. And I sort of went to a place called emergency ambulance out in Brea, and worked there for a year and went through the fire academy. And then once I got through the fire academy, and so I'm kind of ahead of myself here. I I got married really young, I was married at 19. And when I was at rescue one working in content, I started working for the Orange County Fire Department at the time. They're now at Orange County Fire Authority as a paid call firefighter. And so I was married was was 21. My wife was 19. I started this paid call Fire Academy, I would say I was right around, right around 21. I think right after I got married, I started the Academy. And so I started becoming a paid call firefighter, and an EMT. And then I actually put myself through the fire academy. And so I spent six years with the Orange County Fire Authority and as a paid call

firefighter. After that, during that time I was it was that was where I really found my passion for the fire service because I was doing the EMT stuff. I was working at paid call firefighter. We do drills on Wednesdays, we do all the firefighter staff, it was it was a relatively slow station, but we were going to go and cover other stations throughout the county. So I got quite a bit experience there probably more than I should have. Because the peak call program at that time was a program where they staffed engineer or the whole financing with reserves, if you will. So we're sitting on pretty critical calls with three of us with very little experience are doing things sometimes there's four sometimes there's five, but I got a lot of experience out there because we're put right in the mix and arguably should have happened. I don't know that's, that's another story to be told. But I appreciated it. And so back to my path in the fire service. So I was doing that I got myself through a fire academy and When I decided the next path I needed to do was paramedic because that was just the way that wasn't the time. I went to Daniel Freeman, paramedic school. And I did that full time I actually had to quit my job and my in laws were nice enough to support us during that time, which was huge. I did my internship with LASD, which it was a great experience, I speak so highly of there. It was just a great place to work. It wasn't easy, there was a lot of difficulties. At that time, there was a lot of expectation by two preceptors were, I would say some of the best in the business. My my preceptor to this day, when I talked to him, we're still friends. And he'll tell me he's like, I've only passed like four people in my whole 30 year career and he passed me so it's kind of an honor to make it through him and know that I had the ability. So that was another thing. They gave me that that pride through my careers. I didn't think the medical side would be my thing. But I went through paramedic school, went through a tough program, went through a tough preceptor and I was able to be successful. So I felt really good about that. So at the conclusion of paramedic school, I met a friend in there and he was a Gardena firefighter. And I worked as a reserve for guardian of fire. So at one point, I was an EMT. I was a paid call firefighter and I was the reserve for Gardena Fire Department, I don't I don't think I saw my wife more than two days a week with all my, my my adventures in the fire service. But at that point, I was just I was in it to win it. There was a lot of competition. I was constantly testing and that for the first part is failing, failing, failing and then you get better and better and better. And finally you get the game and all of a sudden opportunities start to rise. And that's when I finally got a job with the Santee Fire Department.

 James Geering 26:52  
And what year was that?

 26:56  
September 20 1999 99. Okay,

 James Geering 26:58  
so that was because I got hired by Anaheim in 2005. And I talked about this, you know, once in a while on here, I tested against 1000 people like you that were already firefighters already EMTs and or paramedics that had time working in ambulances reserved firefighters, I mean, their resumes were stacked. And now fast forward to 2023. I hear from almost everyone, we

can't find people to work in the fire service. So you coming from probably even a tougher time to get hired than it was for me because I was six years after you in California specifically. Talk to me about your perspective of of that devolution. How have we got here?



27:42

Yeah, it's funny. I my son's actually trying to be a firefighter right now. And he's working for an ambulance company in Compton right now. So I'll get to that in a second. But I remember when I said I went to Rio Hondo College there was I was in fire science one on one I think it was considered intro to fire science. And my first day of the class, the instructor looks at the whole class and he's the old retired Chief from LA County and I remember his name and he's Oh, who do you think's gonna be a firefighter here and you know, now you've seen in the class, raise their hand, I'm gonna be a firefighter. I look around. All people, you know, of all sorts pretty much look like me, you know, pretty in shape. clean cut kids. We're all raising our hand and he goes, see the guy next to you. See you guys like the left you the right. He's probably not going to be a firefighter. Only one or two. You're going to be a firefighter through here. And that really hit home. And like you said, when I when I tested I went the furthest Sacramento to the for the South was Chula Vista. I was considering going to Nevada Arizona. Didn't make it that far yet. But I went out to Victorville and stuff. So that's that's pretty much if it California, it's central. The South California is where I was testing from the beach to the deserts. And it was like you said, I go to Long Beach and there was 5000 applications. They were only handing out 5000 applications. You had to spend the night in a parking lot to get the application and so to fast forward so I'm tasked with Santee fire departments, same thing. It's a little smaller department but they have a test and if I remember right, it was open to 1000 applicants and it wasn't paramedic, it was firefighter paramedic, referred. And I don't remember how many applying and I honestly was driving down and I was like alright, this one's practice. This isn't really gonna I'm not gonna give this one and it's the San Diego department and they like locals and it's just it's not going to work out for me and I'm gonna I'm gonna do it. And so I take the test and and I go through the process and I lost my best friend through this because this will show you how competitive it was back then. I have my oral interview scheduled and my my friends getting married on it Friday. And I was in his wedding. And so I called Santina and I said, I have to be on a wedding on Friday. can we reschedule this? Or other days? You're doing it? They're like, Nope, just one day, sorry, I might desert is there anything I can do the right, you can drop it out. And I really struggle, like, I'm probably not going to get hired here. But I decided to tell my friend, I'm going to do my interview. I'm sorry, I'm missing your wedding. And it was still a ways out, but not my friend. Right now. So I don't know was the decision, right? I hope so. But it's tough. So, now that to expand on your question, I worked in the fire service. And I've seen like, every year, it seems like less and less applicants, and more and more spots. And it's hard for me to comprehend, because I used to look at the Forest Service. And when I looked at I was like, Man, I just love that job. It's the camaraderie I grew up with sports. Everything about it was was everything I loved. I loved it, it was you're the jack of all trades, when somebody has a problem, you fix it. If it's a broken water pipe, if it's a medical issue, if it's a fire, you're the jack of all trades, and I really liked I really liked that. And so as time progressed, it was it was more and more like man, people aren't, aren't, we can't find people. And then sometimes, you know, you find a couple of people, but they really don't match the profile of a firefighter. And it's not that they're bad people. It's just they're maybe some of them aren't physical, or maybe some of them. You know, they didn't realize what they're getting into. There's like, a lot of times I've I've honestly ran into people were like, Man, I didn't know we had to get up in the middle of the

night in your head here. Like we asked, that's the job. And so I don't know what the what's happened over the years to make it the way it is. It's a really tough one. I can't answer that to show you.

J

James Geering 32:02

So some one of what I guess a couple of my observations and you please tell me what you think of this. And it's funny because when you said about the guy not realizing as I get up, my when I first got hired in Orange County, I was put in a very slow station and it was awful. I hate hate not running calls. I mean, don't get me wrong, I want to sleep at night, but during the day, let's get out there to school, you know, go do some good. So for six months, I was badgering RBC, and one of the guys who got hired with didn't realize that we had to clean toilets and mop floors. And, and so he was his dad was on the dealership, and he was like, I'm done. I'm leaving. So I managed to get his spot on a busy station. And that was it. But that was God. 2013 2013 Yeah. So no, no, I'm sorry, 2008. So still kind of when I went, it was kind of competitive. So that's kind of surprising. But the reason for this podcast, the reason that you and I are going to talk is that there is no question, in my opinion and yours that this is the greatest job in on the planet, hands down. And everyone will say that about their profession, but I loved everything I did. But we have a problem when it comes to the work environment. And I think what is happening now is you have certainly the technology and it just a number of things have contributed in a smaller pool of candidates. Because you know, just look at our school children these days, there are some phenomenal athletes, but a lot of them have, you know, deconditioned whether it's obese or just not moving as much not seeing daylight as much. So you've got a smaller amount to choose from. But then you've also got some very intelligent minds. They're like, okay, fire service, tell me about it. Tell me about the work week, tell me about this. Tell me about that. Tell me about the frequency of cancer, for example, which we're going to get to, and they lay it all out and they go, this doesn't sound as good as you know, the movies make it sound. So I think this is the other side is that we, as a profession have to finally band together and go, we've done more with less to the point where we've reached a critical mass. And this is it. We have to now change the way that we support our firefighters and give them a work week that allows them to thrive, because you just have to look at the stats, suicides, overdoses, cancer, heart disease. I mean, the list goes on and on and on. And it's not doom and gloom. But if we keep shoving it under a pillow, and beating our chests about leather helmets and pistol grips, we're never actually going to move the needle and one day we're not going to have enough firefighters and then what same as a law enforcement.

o

34:38

You know, it's interesting you talk about that because the one thing I do know that has surprised me is why the parser seal was accepted a jack of all trades we run medical aids remote run and in really over the years it's we run medical aids you're not the firefighter used to be in and I've seen it in my career. I would go to a I go to fires a lot more than I do now. And so it's more of medical aides and, and that does seem to beat people down, it seems like the medical aspect of the fire service. And it could be too, because of the, you know, the constant abusers, you end up going on on Cosworth, where you're like, wow, this person is abusing the system there. And, and I really do believe that's part of the psyche that affects people where they, they do over and over, you want to help people, and you're like, you can help yourself.

And I've seen that where it breaks people down, because you're just constantly going over the same person then. And you're helping a person that's abusing a system, while someone that really needs us over somewhere else doesn't get that that same care because the system is broke, if you will. And so that is one thing that I think affected people too. And just the the call volume, it changes like as as time goes on, or coffee volume just goes more and more and more. At our department, we've noticed I went from probably running 4000 calls a year with two station departments. And now we run over 10,500. So that's definitely aware on you. And like you said, like, we continue to do the same things we don't really add, we just continue to do that same grind. And so now, instead of you know, spacing things out and being more effective, we just, that's a perfect example. We do less with more. I've heard that my whole career. And it's, it's probably a time where we reevaluate that.

**J** James Geering 36:29

Yeah. I mean, this is the thing, if you look at statistically, just what's happening in the obesity epidemic, that one piece of the pie alone, it's getting worse and worse and worse. And obviously, that's going to translate into all these medical calls that we respond to now add in the mental health and the addiction element that we've got at the moment, you know, then there's homelessness, and then there's gang violence. And so it's, you know, this is how I've talked to a lot of the law enforcement guests. Yes, we need our officers to be in shape, there needs to be mandatory fitness requirements and needs to be you know, Jujitsu or whatever combination wrestling so that they can actually manhandle people. You know, there's all these things on the shoulders of law enforcement community, but let's talk about why there's so much crime in America. Why is it in Compton, that we have young men shooting each other over a color of their T shirt? Why are we not talking about it doesn't happen in Oslo doesn't happen in Lisbon, you know, we're not to anywhere near the magnitude that we see here. So this is the other thing is like, you can't ask the first responders to keep sticking their fingers in the holes in the dams. Because we've only got so many fucking fingers, you know, and at some point, someone's got to say, we need to stop pumping water in the first place. So to me, if we're not addressing the proactive side, there's, there's gonna be there's gonna be a failure. There's, you know, the people that are still here, they're just being asked to do more and more and more, and then we're seeing what we're seeing cancer, heart disease, suicide over those. So now the ones that are holding the line are getting beaten down physically and mentally, and we're losing more of them. And or they're just saying, fuck it, I'm done. They're retiring early, they're transitioning out whatever it is. And so that leaves even less people trying to plug the holes. Sure.

**i** 38:12

And you know, it's funny, because over the years, it's even. It used to be when you became a firefighter, the number one cause of death was heart attack, right? It was a heart attack and, and, and what did we do to solve that we started eating healthy at stations, I'm very proud of my department, we have a physical PT program, two hours a day is dedicated to physical fitness and everyone participates. So I'm very proud of that part. And you look at my department in general, and we're very fit department. So it's something really to be proud of. But I think like he says, as time progresses, we have these different things. So I think the fire service in general has done a couple good things over over their career, it's first of all, we improved our heart health there's there's a lot better healthy eating, there's but the other thing

is is fires fires have decreased because we've addressed that there's smoke detectors there's there's things that we do to prevent fires which makes it better but now we have these other animals we're dealing with like synthetic products fires with all kinds of things that we just have no idea we're exposing ourselves to you know some places physical fitness doesn't take a priority so they were they're still are getting the heart attack. You can get a heart attack even if you're physically fit but there's a lot of things are as time progresses that we have to deal with and and maybe we're not keeping up with it like we should.

 James Geering 39:36

Well, even this some innovation, I had a guest on a long time ago now but when COVID hit the red tape around e Med, you know virtual medicine, online medicine, whatever the term is, was loosened a lot to enable people to treat others from a distance which is you know, amazing in a lot of areas. And what that allowed certain companies to do and I'm trying to get one of them One as a sponsor, because it's something that I want to be on every episodes of people here it is, they integrate with the moment one system. So those frequent fliers whose calls are truly you know, Alpha Bravo, they omega, which is the worst one. They are educated like, okay, we can send rescue to you and send an ambulance to you. Or if you would like we can give you a virtual consultation with an ER physician, which would you prefer? Well, I want as my script refilled, all I wanna do is make sure that my two year old throughout once isn't going to die of dehydration. And so you start filtering a lot of those which benefits everyone, the child, for example, doesn't have to go to ER and be between a drunken, you know, the psych patient, the ER then keeps a bed open for the real serious calls, and EMS and fire and police whichever call it is, and don't have to run that particular call, that's one less call that they're running as well. So there's even technology out there to reduce the actual call volume. But again, you know, you don't you don't hear that really being discussed. So this is the thing, there are lots of things that we can do to improve that side. I mean, I flogger that flogged off the dead horse when it comes to the work week, we have to take step back and actually bring a firefighters work week down to what the civilian will be working not eight hour days, but the the amount of hours per week. But then address why people are calling 911. You know, and if they're using us, like you know, socialized medicine, then maybe we need to rethink the way that we do health care and actually have something that forges us to make the health of the nation healthier and address obesity and put PE back in schools and serve our kids real food rather than process shit. So that they can we can turn that kind of downward spiral the opposite way, which in turn will then be less calls for our first responders and less beds filled in our hospitals.

 41:54

Yeah, and it's funny, you mentioned that because that's we're actually in the process of looking into that. And it's a trial period. And I believe one of our neighboring departments is actually doing it where dispatch will will triage the call if you want if there's a possibility to put them online with a physician. They're starting to do that it doesn't happen often because we're still in that learning phase. But what it what a great thing that hopefully gets implemented across the United States because it it really, truly would help just something as simple as that.

 James Geering 42:23

Absolutely. Well, I want to go back to Compton, and then we'll walk our way through again. LA

riots First, we've all seen worst case videos, we all seen the truck driver pulled out and you know, and all the horrible things that were happening amidst all of that, through your eyes, because we we the media loves to paint certain groups as you know, evil and then put us into pigeon holes and and set us against each other. Did you have any moments of witnessing kindness and compassion amongst you know, that very, very sad event in US history?



43:00

That's a good question. How was a long time going in if anything really stood out to me, I'm not thinking of it. But I will say this when I worked in the area. I was a white teenager. And I never I probably was wrong and feeling this way but I never really felt threatened. And I thought was really interesting there that at some point, a lot of times first responders Believe it or not, God respect doesn't always happen. You always get that bad seed where somebody throws a rock at you shoots at the fire engine or something like that or does something but for the most part when I was in uniform, and people knew that we're there to help them there wasn't it wasn't like I was treated any different and and I think that's why I enjoyed it there so much is driving in I was a little uneasy and we always joke about it. You including the condom police officers, you'd come up to a stoplight, look to the left look to the right, boom, right through the red light just to get to your station. But once once you got that, that that uniform on it, it felt like maybe there was a little bit like this person is here to help me and your treat a little different. This I didn't really I can't think of any times where I witnessed something where I was like, oh, that's just extremely amazing. But it happened. Like people help people there all the time. It's just I was probably young and just didn't really stick with me where I really picked up on it. We're now I'm way more vigilant I noticed things a lot more than I used to as a kid I'll tell you that much.



James Geering 44:45

I remember driving with my medic partner in Orange County and there's a street OB t that was kind of our red light area and you know a lot of the the underworld was there and let's put it that way. And you know, two three in the morning were driving down and they would obviously scatter if PD came by. But when we were there, they would wave. And I just remember thinking, What a unique profession, how many people with, you know, on in the country with that kind of, you know, person at that moment in their life wave to you. But you know, when you take a step back when it all goes wrong, where it I mean, maybe sometimes people are screaming thinking that we took too long, but ultimately, it doesn't matter if you're, you know, a Crip, or a blood or, you know, you're homeless under a bridge, or you're a sex worker or whatever. We're and I don't mean this in a, in a self idolize idolizing way, but we're the kind of knights in white armor, even these people that have kind of been discarded by so many elements of society, when the fire engine and an ambulance or rescue shows up, you know, and obviously, PD depending on your situation, but a lot of times, you know, the people are not on the right side of the law at that point. You know, it's such a unique perspective. And it's sad that firefighters don't really have much of a voice in society, because what we see the lens that we have on society is so, so unique, and yet, you know, not that many of us want to be famous, but Name a famous firefighter named Jocko Willink at the fire service there isn't. And so the society is missing all these lessons. And as you said, when we make a TV show, it becomes a

fucking soap opera rather than a true gritty look at what we see and lessons learned. You know, so, yeah, it's it is interesting, being trusted by everyone from, you know, a billionaire through the, you know, amount of woman living under a bridge.



46:39

For sure, for sure. That's, that's the one thing that I've really enjoyed about my career. And, you know, we run calls with police officers all the time, we work with a San Diego Sheriff's Department, I have the highest respect for them. I worked with a group of individuals there, they're just amazing. And we go on calls and they'll even joke around like, oh, the heroes are here. And it's like, man, I'll tell you what, if anyone puts their life on the line, those people do it every day. And it's it's kind of a bummer to see. You know, a police officer who stand side by side for me and someone can sit there and hate them and like me, but you're right. It's it's a it's a really unique profession. And that's one thing is, you just don't want anyone to abuse it because it's, it's, we have such a good respect from the community. And we might not be the jack of all next, but I'll tell you why the kid still loves to come up and talk to a firefighter at the school. So that is the one thing that we have.



James Geering 47:34

Absolutely. And I just did a post today about law enforcement. I mean, it sickens me because you know, whether it was highly Anaheim, Orange County Sheriff's, the law enforcement groups that I've worked with, yes, I have interacted with cops that have fucking assholes, they exist, there's no question about that. But most of these men and women leave their families the same way as we do firefighters for 12 hours. But most people aren't trying to kill us there's a lot more people trying to kill them and the way that they're portrayed because of the you know, the actions of actions of the rotten few and also the products of some shitty leadership in departments that hasn't demanded high bar fitness standards, high level of training etc. is so unfair for all the men and women that put on their vest every morning or every evening and literally go out to protect everyone while the rest of them in their beds. So you know, I think it's up to us as in in fire and EMS to advocate for our law enforcement men or women as well.



48:34

Oh, totally. I just had a call the other day in sheriff's are just like us, they're they're understaffed sometimes and always ask the officer if they're gonna go into something. I don't have a gun, but I tell you, whatever radio and there's one Rihanna walked out into a homeless encampment by himself. I'm all in. I'm just gonna hang out here until this is done. Because this I'll get out of this together. And, and he was like, yeah, if you don't mind hanging out, that'd be great. And so yeah, we all have to work together.



James Geering 49:03

Absolutely. All right. So you find yourself in your career department. Now. We're going to get to 2015 Of course, but as you progress through what are some of the you know, what you term career calls that you had up to that point?



49:18

Some of my career calls, I would say the biggest one was the cedar fires in 2003. At that time, it was it was one of the largest fires in California. And it ran right, right, right through our area. And so some people aren't familiar. I was on a strike team, which is basically a group of fire engines that go to wildland fires. I was up in the northern San Diego County area, and at that time, the fire was on what's called the old fires in San Bernardino, and as firefighters, we want to get some and so I'm in this like fire camp that there's the fires out, we're just sitting around and this old fire I'm hearing of fire engines driving out of neighborhoods with their beds on fire. And just guys getting some, and I'm like, Oh man, why are we sitting here? Why are we doing this? And, and so I had a great strike team leader at the time, he was actually a sanity chief. His name was Jim Covington, this guy was amazing. It was it was a guy that just says, You challenge him and he's gonna take that challenge. And so I just remember in the middle of the night, he comes and gets us and he's like, Hey, we're heading back to San Diego. And I'm like, Oh, my God. Are you serious? The fires in San Bernardino. There's fire engines that are burning up, we can go up there. And he's, listen, this one's big in San Diego, we're leaving and the fire camp was like, No, you can't leave we have to do Mogi. That's a process where they go and they check your engine out. And right now they can't leave or did Moby and cuff, my chief said, we're out of here. See you later call me and, and we just started going down the freeway. And so um, I was an engineer at the time. And we're going down the 15th end in San Diego and the captain I was working with. We're looking at this header. And we're like, that is the biggest header I've ever seen in my entire life. And we rolled into town and the Chief orders it was first time I've ever been assigned. This was like, puts on now, man, I don't care where you go, just put some now. And so we're just rolling in these communities houses are on fire. You're like, I'm gonna I'm gonna save this one. This one's written off. And it was seven days of just putting out house fires, jumping from place to place. totally exhausted. We were we're going probably 36 hours straight. There was a point when I was the engineer. I just sat on the tail board. And I fell asleep on the tail board and they're calling for water and the firefighter runs by as your leaves turn on the water. I'm old sheet now wake up and turn on the water because it was just, it was just nonstop for hours. But it was something it was surreal. I remember there's an area called harvest and Canyon in San Diego. And there was a gentleman on our our strike teams I said it was five engines. It's mixed department and he was a captain in the Chula Vista. I don't remember his name, but he was a Vietnam veteran. And we're rolling through harvest. And Ken Kenyon he said that was the closest I've ever come to Vietnam was that that scene where we're just going through powerlines down, there's people walking in the middle of the street houses on fire people standing out in front of their houses burning. We were going through right after the head of the fire. So we're just coming in through you're trying to do any kind of saves or, or anything. And it was it was you're just seeing propane take slide off your houses it was I'll never forget that. And you also you just hear the ammunition from everyone's back in the backcountry everyone have guns in and there's constant ammunition propane tanks blowing it was it was it was a style I'll never forget.



James Geering 52:55

Well, obviously we just had the fires in Maui. And one of my friends who Joshua Jukes, who was a married firefighter. And he's not at the moment was saying that there's a huge underreporting of the amount of children are missing. And that fire, which is devastating. And I don't have the new specifically, but obviously our kind of social media feeds tend to indicate

what's going on in the world. And it seems like people have moved on a little bit. I don't know if I'm just naive, but I certainly haven't seen that amount of fatalities reported. You know that then it's important that after these fires, we evaluate and it's not there because the firefighters fault specifically, but as a community, like what do we do, right? What do we do wrong? How did we lose so many homes? You know, the structure protection and wildland interface mitigation with that fire specifically, do you remember a kind of the after action tailboard critique so that as a community and as a fire service, we could all learn from that.



53:57

The big tailboard critique on that one, it was one of the fire service. There was a huge problem with communications on that one. And I don't remember the exact thing I was an engineer at the time, I believe there was some VHF and some eight hundreds. And so different radios, communication was definitely an issue. I can't remember if some some towers went down, but the communication was a huge factor. And we did address a lot of that over the years. And like clarifiers, literally, I'd say five years after that. I was a probationary captain. We had another fire the Harris fire down there, which was which fire Harris fire was just another big big fire in San Diego. And the communication was completely changed. It was it was it was like a one ad if you will, it just you know, there's always problems but it seemed like things had cleaned up a little bit in there and obviously I was in the captain role. So I was more in tune with what was going on as far was communication and radio stuff and, and stuff but I do remember communication was a big issue for the shutter fire.



James Geering 55:06

Now what about exposures, carcinogens? Obviously we're going to get into your kind of cancer journey. But initially, you know, early in my career it was rarely talked about. And as we got into it became more of a conversation, decon, etc. And we're realizing, oh, maybe we should not be overhauling with no mask, you know, and then you progress through even more. But now we're realizing oh, shit, you know, the a triple F and even the the water resistant chemicals in our gear. I mean, there's so many carcinogens benzene from the station. When you look back, were there any significant exposures? Or do you think it was cumulative exposures?



55:45

I would say a couple of significant exposures but more cumulus when you when you really look back in it. And I remember and like what we'll get into the cancer thing, but how to do a deposition in front of an attorney. And any in a deposition, you have to plead your case, and I have cancer, obviously, we're going to find that out. And so I plead my case, and I spent an hour talking about the lifetime exposures of fire department and it goes deep, right. And so first of all, I grew up in an era where bas weren't acceptable and they were acceptable, like I didn't You didn't go on fire without a BA when it started. But I do remember in my internship LASD had this bulletin and it said, you can wear your ba on roofs and I remember guys going to have an opinion roof. Wow, that's like, that's cumbersome. I gotta get my PSA and X and that's Congress that i i can be quick and get off the roof and not wear my BA and and that was just a little one. And maybe it's just a point of view of so maybe others I wasn't a firefighter with LAPD so I don't know their whole culture there. But it was always like, oh, that's, that's kind of

interesting. And, you know, as you progress, your car fires, you know, you can knock the car fire out, and you don't have the trash fires. Same thing a lot of guys didn't were bas with transfers, car fires, trash fires are some of the worst things you can be exposed to some of the plastics on cars, you just touch them and you're gonna get cancer they're in with your time. And so through time, it's it. I've seen it where, okay, you wear your ba on car friends, we wear our bas on trash virus. But you still have those exposures over the years. So I had that. And I wouldn't say I had it a lot. But there was times where the trash tried to take the real line and spit it out real quick as small. But now it's like no, no, put your being on because there could be one thing in there. That's just not good. And so we have that exposure throughout my career. And then you also have just the diesel fumes over your lifetime you're going into as far as for wildland fires, you're going into camps full of fire engines. You have that diesel exposure, like you said that a triple F wet way and we never knew what it caused it and now we're finding out it's not good for you. Our turnouts, the P fasten or turnouts, I was in charge of our PPE for a while and finding out that your PPE causes it. So yeah, that going on. And then like just the other synthetic material that we're dealing with now, you know, the carpet catches on fire, you don't know what's in it, some batteries cast lithium ion batteries are catching on fire, we're dealing with all kinds of things that are definitely it's going to it's going to impact us in the future and, and hopefully there's stuff coming out. I know that we've been really proactive about decoding ourselves. But I'll tell you this, it doesn't happen all the time and not and I have a box on my fire engine. That's a decon box it has so it has a hose it has the coupling to put onto your fitting so the hose fits on there. So we can decon on fires and some guys are really great about doing it. And other people kind of blow it off in there. Like I wasn't that big of a fire. And that's another thing with my department. And I'm really big on this. Whenever we go on fires, I fall on the exposure report. And I actually make it from whole crew. And I'll walk over to him, I'll hand it to them. And I'll say, Here you go. And sometimes they still won't turn it in. But I've done my best to try to get that person to at least document that lifetime exposures, because we have a ton that we don't document so let's at least document the stuff that we can put a incident number a time and stuff on. So I'm a big fan of documenting our exposures.

 James Geering 59:26

What does your firefighter schedule what is your work week look like?

 59:30

We work out for six schedule. So it's on one day off one day, so 24 hours. So we work a four shift cycle on day off day and then we have four days off, come back for that force your cycle, and then we get six days off in a row.

 James Geering 59:45

That's exactly what I worked in Anaheim, so it's a 56 hour workweek. Greg. So when we have the cancer conversation the same way as when we have the mental health conversation, it's like oh, it's it's what you know, James or David saw That's why they're struggling. And we don't talk about sleep deprivation, we don't talk about childhood trauma. The same with the counselor conversation, we figured out all the dragons are at the castle wall, but we're not talking about the fact that we're knocking blocks out the castle and draining the moat, which is

sleep. So this is that the other side and needs to be in my opinion, this is why this whole presumption thing and you gonna have to do a, you know, sit with a lawyer for an hour to prove it should honestly because it's proven as a you know, carcinogen, which I believe the same level of smoking, if I'm not mistaken, but certainly up there on that table. Regardless, it should be like I worked the shifts for X amount of years, that's the conversation over I was exposed to some stuff, but that, that ability to, to, to deal with these carcinogens to not have a massive response has been diminished, because I haven't slept every third day and you know, a lot of cycles or every other day in that, that eight day span that you're working 24/24 I am awake for 24 hours or my one eye open. So this is the other part of the conversation. And it really irks me now when people are fighting these firefighters to prove or show me how you got cancer? Well, I will look at my as my shift schedule, see ABC, ABC, ABC, that's your fucking proof. But this is never in this cancer conversation. And it needs to be.



1:01:23

Well I'm gonna tell you right now I even use that headline, and it didn't go anywhere. And you know, the World Health order actually says that sleep disorder can cause cancer. So I agree with you 100%. That's definitely something and you know, something that's even more scary, and it's going to come to light? Well, it's hopefully it's too late now, but no one can or is doing anything about is the length of the year. So add on my on my retirement plan, I'm very fortunate California has a great return system, we get 3% of 50. For every year of service up to 50. Well just did a cost, we've changed it to 2.7 and 57. So I have to go to 50 to get mine, which is I think that's a lot better. But the kids getting hired now have to make it till they're 57 to get their full retirement benefits. And that's scary because some some people are starting their career at 26/39. Now you're making somebody work into their possibly 60s. And that's terrifying. Every new kid that I have come in, I tell him, man, I want you to put money aside right now. Whatever it is, whatever you can do, get some kind of financial advisor because you can't work till you're 57 this job does not allow you to work today 57 You will retire a broken person. And it scares me to see the future of what is going to happen.



James Geering 1:02:53

When it goes back to our recruitment question. So I've heard we have an amazing pension and benefits and health care show me Oh, actually, the health care's gone away, you get Cobra for 12 months, and then you're on your own? And oh, like you said, you know, yes, the guys that got hired in the 80s Retire with a great pension but obviously they didn't have the wellness education. So some of their their lifespans were still short. But now your research and and go, No, this isn't an amazing I know, you know, private businesses that have a much better benefits package than you guys have you believing, you know that what they got 50 years ago, and it's carried through today, you know, and obviously we don't enter this profession for the benefits, but they were for the longest time I remember in the fire service that Yeah, we don't get very well paid. But this is why when you retire, you get x. But that's not the case. So it's it's smoke and mirrors. And, you know, I don't think most people wake up wringing their hands going, I'm going to kill some firefighters today. But the number of people I've heard that have said, you know, especially in counties or excuse me states with presumption laws, that they will just string them along. And it's been said heard by people that I know, we just keep fighting them until they die. They've got cancer, they're gonna die, you know. So this is what we're up against. And this is why we have to advocate for our people.



1:04:10

You know, it's funny, you say that too, because you look at the presumptive laws, and California is a presumptive state. And I still had to fight my claim. And so that's exactly to your point.



James Geering 1:04:22

So let's get into that. Then you're progressing through your career. Tell me when you first you know, had any signs that made you concerned and send you down the medical route to find out what was going on?



1:04:37

Well, this is, you know, everyone has a weakness, right. And this was my weakness. I knew I was sick for a long time. And there was there's my wife didn't even know I was just to myself about it. And I knew I was sick. I didn't know what it was, but I knew I was sick. And so one of the thing I run a half marathon every year with my wife, we do it every year it's got to be probably 1519 times, ridden just this year, so I was probably around seven to 10 times at this time. And I ran the half marathon and I couldn't do it. I had to walk a lot. And and prior to that IPR I would do, I'm not I'm not like a super athlete. I'm not a super runner, but eight, I would run an eight minute mile and do this half marathon and feel good. And, and then I noticed when I was training for this other one that I get fatigued a lot. And so I come home, I'd have to nap. tired all the time. I went to work. I was tired all the time. And I was anemic, which I didn't know. But so at that time, I ran this half marathon, and I never call in sick at work, never called in sick after that half marathon because I was just, I couldn't go to work, I was fatigued, I was tired. I was just, I couldn't, I just blamed it on half marathon. Like I dehydrated myself, I took myself out. So at that point, I think my wife started to pick up that I was I was sick, and I kind of was telling her like, Yeah, I'm kind of feeling sick. And, and so she said, You need to go doctor. So this is February when I'm finally kind of admitting it. And then now we're talking. Probably June when I when I finally went to the doctor, and I didn't go to the doctor, I ended up having colon cancer. And this, oddly enough is the colonoscopy is the one thing where I was like, I don't want a colonoscopy, I'll die before I get a colonoscopy. I do not want that. And, and there was a point where I was like, did I wait just too long as it's just in my body? Do I just need to wait this out and die. And so June was the time where I was like, I had to go to the doctor and see just, I gotta fix this. This is bad. And so I went and the doctor, just, just to this day, my wife was to wring his neck, because I went into him. And I was like, Hey, Doc, I'm having some bowel issues. I read some blood and I'm a low grade. And so he kind of does not want to do a colonoscopy, but you know, I'm gonna send you for this cat scan. And so I get this CAT scan, and he comes back and he goes, Wow, it's it's, it's either a huge infection, or you got the biggest mass this guy's ever seen. It was I think it's diverticulitis. And I was like, okay. All right. You're the doctor. And I even mentioned to him Oh, hey, Doc. I'm a firefighter and we have a high incidence of cancer. Do you think this cancer they go, he told me this phrase, and I hate it is when you think you hear horses don't look for zebras. And I've heard a couple people say that it just drives me nuts this day, because that was the one where I was like, oh, okay, sounds good. You're the doctor. And so it gives me this medication, there's just an antibiotic and, and some steroids and actually felt a little better. So I was like, Oh, it was diverticulitis. So I took that and, and at that point, when I was finished it, then I got back again. And so I went back to

him, and augmenting and work alright, well, let's up the doses do this. I do it again, and still doesn't work. And, and so then I go back to him a third time. And I'm like, what's going on? Doc? Like, do I need to get more he goes, Well, what's your colonoscopy say? I'm, uh, you never scheduled it for me. And he goes, Well, I'm gonna I'm gonna have to go the GI so I finally in September, I got an appointment with the GI. So we're doing way before February. But February is when I started to accept it to September, where I finally get the GI appointment. And I went in and it was, it was my pre consult for a colonoscopy and the doctor I go in and lay down, he feels my stomach and I never felt this before of it. Like he felt my stomach any. His eyes changed. And he's like, you're coming back tomorrow for a colonoscopy. And I was like, I can't I have work tomorrow. You know, it's fire season. I can't be there. And he goes, No, you're you're calling me and security. You're coming back tomorrow. And I said, Okay, well, I'll see if I get a call. They can't cover my shift. I'll have to reschedule. And my wife was like, No, you're coming back tomorrow. And so, went back the next day, got my colonoscopy, and it was immediate, like he was like, I can't even I couldn't even get through like you're almost blocked. You have a tumor in there. That's just huge. He's in he's like, you definitely 100% of cancer. And I was still in denial. I was a member just zoning out by myself for a little bit and then and I was like, you don't know like, you haven't even done a biopsy. And he was like, I know I'm a doctor. I do this all the time. You have cancer. I'm scheduling you with a surgeon now to see my surgeon and I was lucky to get just a fantastic surgeon and he was he took me in and and right away he's like, Alright, you got scheduled surgery right away. And and that was the other thing is my insurance. At the time it was it was a good insurance, but he was like he's putting in for it. They're not approving it and he's telling me there's a point when I was scheduled for the surgery goes and it was a wow, I'd say it was maybe two weeks of see nm he was he told me he goes, if they are driven by Friday, you're going in the emergency room. And you're saying you have abdominal pain, and I'll meet you in the in the operating room, and we're gonna do emergency surgery. And so I was like, Okay, Doc, and so I find that kind of proves. But the whole price I was, I was just terrifying. Like, when you talk about cancer, the one of the things that I remember going to my surgeon, and thank God, I had my wife, I walk in, and he's like, Yeah, well, first of all, he was appalled that the doctor even let it get this far. And he even mentioned, he goes, That doctor that you went to should lose his job. And, and so but he was very aggressive with me and so aggressive that when I went to meet him, he's like, Okay, I'm on what's the plan, he's like, we'll take it out, you're gonna have a colonoscopy, or I mean, that'd be the name of callosity. You're gonna have a colostomy. And at first, I was just like, alright, Doc, I guess we're in it to win. It's saved my life. Let's do this. And my wife was like, whoa, whoa, wait a minute. So what's our other options? And so then, you know, through speaking with a GI specialist, and my surgeon, we came up with a thing where I didn't need it, thank God. And so I made it through the surgery. And it was it was, it was bad, like the the tumor was so big that it encroach on my bladder, and they had to remove part of my bladder, because this thing was so huge, and they're worried about the possibly spreading my bladders, they took an area out. And so yeah, that was that was my cancer journey. I could go on for hours about chemotherapy. And maybe we'll get into that and just the terrifying things that you have to go through. But it was, it was something else.

J

James Geering 1:11:48

Well, let's go into that. Because I want to get to obviously, the mental impact the emotional impact of this, you know, being this, this rescue others very fit, first responder who then the physicality is taken away, you know, the thought of even having to carry a colostomy bag with you. But get into the treatment options. So talk to me about that journey, because it seems to be like, well, let's just go go start pumping toxins through your body. I've heard some

encouraging things about amino acid amino immunotherapy. That's the world's biggest tongue twister for me today. Which makes more sense, you're not agent orange in the whole body. And then you know, fingers crossed, hopefully everything starts again. So I think that, you know, there are some much better options. You know, in the horizon, I'm hoping that a lot of people that have this diagnosis is going to have a much better outcome and a much better time. Talk to me about chemo because I haven't met a single person that didn't say it was absolutely brutal, physically and mentally.



1:12:46

Yeah, so I'll start off with just everything as far as your mental health. So even when I went into this surgery, the doctor told me, Hey, there's a chance you can still wake up with a colostomy. And I was terrifying. And so this is start off from there. It says we're talking about mental health, because I think this all had an effect on me. And it had an effect on my family, too. So I go under a wake up. And I remember I'm just in severe pain, they cut me from my belly button down. And it's just one huge fat in your stomach. And I remember going into the doctor's like, the anesthesiologist, she goes, Hey, this one is a painful one, I'm giving you Dilaudid he goes, Don't worry about getting addicted, you hit that every 15 minutes, or whatever you feel like it and you just take that and because this is this is going to be real. And I remember waking up and I was like, Oh, no shit. This is this is paying. And I remember I couldn't do anything except for raise my right hand and feel my sign. And I felt my signing. There's no class me and like no, we did without my home. So that was that was one of those like wins in the long run when I say thank you. But I'll never forget this. So my wife was allowed to come back and see me and I'm very close. My wife, we're gonna be on 30 years here in March. And she she comes in and she looks at me all in pain. And she's just a great soldier. And I remember her walking out, they're like, Okay, we're gonna take you to your room. And I'm like, Okay, and so they're like, you want to go ahead and she goes, she goes ahead. And literally two minutes later, I hear I hear code blue in the operating or the banner would pick you or whatever, basically where you get out of the operating room. And and I see everyone scramble towards where my wife went. And I'm like Code Blue. That's bad. Like, that's bad. So I like pretty much drove down from like, cold blue is that my wife Jill, and they're like, Don't worry, everything's okay. Everything's okay. And I'm like, What the hell and so Turns out my wife through like just seeing me in the state I was, she walked out. And when she walked out, she just been in slammed up against the law. It wasn't like the Code Blue, full rest, but it was the. So she ended up getting stitches from the ordeal. And so that whole thing was just like, talking about just hard to get through it, it plays a role in the whole outcome. So through that process, I actually had some really good news when I when I got my biopsy they I was when you know, you go through stages, and I was stage three C, I believe it was to see I can't remember anyways, it wasn't to see, I think it was and so there was actually some good news. And but what they're telling me is, they're like, you're gonna need radiation, you're gonna need chemotherapy. And I remember going, Wow, I really don't want either one of them. But from what I understand radiology is terrible, because it just briars, everything, and it kills everything, and you have problems afterwards. And like, even stuff, like just, I think it causes scar tissue in your intestines where you start to get blockages more more frequently. And, like, no, can we I don't want to do this radiation, for sure. I don't want to do chemotherapy, but radiation is terrible. And so I'm going through and they're like, Well, we're gonna have to do this. And they refer me and I go this, this oncologist and, and once again, not really happy with them. The way they dealt with us wasn't very good, though. My wife took it on her own to find a doctor for me at a hospital, UCSD ologists, which has been fantastic. He was just a great guy. And so something I haven't mentioned is during this process, there was another gentleman from my department that was fighting colon cancer also. And he

ended up passing away. Now, I don't remember the years, but it was probably in 2016 2017. And so I remember getting out of the hospital being fixed. And then he had been like, through the same path as me pretty much anyone to tell me about, like what he experienced. And so thank God, I didn't go with what this gentleman went through, because it terrified me. And that's what I've been really tried to not do is because everyone's everyone's journey is different. So I remember him telling me, okay, you're gonna get a port, you're gonna get chemotherapy, you're gonna get this you lay on these cocktails are usually what happens, here's what happened to me. And it sounded terrible. And it was it was terrible for him. And I did get kind of the same things. But it was I was just terrified the whole time knowing it. So first of all, he had mentioned I got a port. And when, when he goes to court, I think they may be kind of disruptive as far as that send them into an arrhythmia. So my go to my doctor, the one I finally get at UCSD, he's like, Alright, here's our path we're gonna do, we're gonna put a port view, and then we're gonna start chemotherapy. And I was like, no horse, or no, Doc, no, no port, I don't want to port. And he's like, No, you have to have a port, because this stuff that we're putting through your veins will just tear up your veins. So this goes into your your, your, your heart, and more diluted fashion, so you don't get messed up as bad. Now, like, That doesn't even make sense. So now I'm just, I'm just like direct injecting art with the stuff. But that's the technology at the time. And that's what we had to do. And I guess I'm still here. So I'm lucky about that. So I do get the port, and then we have to start that chemotherapy path. And that was, it was scary because you go in this room and you're you sit in this room, and you're with a bunch of people that look like they're not doing well. And I'm sorry, I didn't look like I was doing well either. And you watch a nurse and she puts on a hazmat suit to give you your medication. And you're like, Wait, you're wearing a hazmat suit, why are you putting that in my body and, and once again, I can't complain about my care, because I ended up finding a nurse. It just was fantastic. And she was my nurse through the whole journey. And she would explain things to me, but I still they put chemotherapy in me and so some of the things that had effect is to this day, I have some numbness in my fingers and my toes. There's times where I I would I couldn't drink cold or hot liquids after my chemotherapy because it could damage the my, I guess there's some kind of like nerve endings in your throat where it would actually arm them. And even if you would drink it would hurt. So there are very specific like, okay, when you get down with chemotherapy, don't grab anything cold. Don't drink anything cold. Don't drink anything hot. Don't do this. When you go to the bathroom, make sure you close the lid on your toilet because you flush it and the chemo stuff will go on the air and then your family will be exposed to it and I'm just like, Are you kidding me? Like you're putting this in my body this this doesn't seem right. And, and so I didn't go through that whole process and there was some side effects. And it wasn't an easy journey, I would say I probably had it easier than some people after hearing my friends journey, but it still sucked. And the more thing is, it's like, knowing what it's doing to your body and having that medical background. But I don't I don't know if this isn't right, we can't do this. But like I said, I'm here today and knock on when I'm healthy. So happy about that. I didn't need to get radiation. I talked to my doctor a lot. And I think he did initially want to do radiation, but I think he took a chance with me and just said, you know, we'll hold off on radiation. So I do believe, through this process, you also have to either have a strong person with you, or, or yourself have to have that ability to discuss things with your doctor, and also let them know, Hey, I'm willing to take this chance for this. And so luckily, with those few instances, it I think I had a positive outcome in the long term.

J

James Geering 1:20:59

Now, what about from a nutritional standpoint, were you given a specific kind of diet and told to do lifestyle changes?



1:21:10

Lifestyle changes, which were kind of interesting is basically like, isolate yourself, because you're working on Yeah, your immunity while that and your immunity is so decreased, because they just turn your body up. And the other thing was, is eat any kind of red meat that you can hide proteins, and it was more like, you need to get all the protein that you can get like it was I just remember, I don't remember now, but I was taking protein shakes at some point. It was just, I can't take them anymore. Because of that. I can't sell a flavor just because of that mental. But they're really big on making protein. And I'm a sugar freak. And it's funny because I would go in and I told the nurse once I'm like, I eat jelly beans and ice cream, I'm sorry. And she goes, Oh my god, don't do that. Your body like cancer, eat sugars. And I was like, Oh, no kidding. So I went to my doctor and I'm like, Hey, and Doc, like this whole shooter thing? Is that a deal with cancer and, and in his mind, which is he's a really sharp dude. He said, the amount that that does, like your body regulates your glucose. So it's not like you're getting spikes of sugar that's going to increase your cancer from all the jellybeans. So long story short, I could eat a jelly bean still and ice cream. But there was really no like change your lifestyle or eat this. They just wanted to make sure that I was getting enough protein and they want to see you gain weight. That's the thing they don't want. They don't want you to lose weight. So that was I remember that was the biggest factor in everything. And then staying away from everyone, which I ignored. My doctor and I still joke about this today, the next year. So I got my surgery in October. I was in chemotherapy. I started in sometime in January. And I told you the the Huntington Beach half marathon is in February, a Super Bowl Sunday. So I was like, Hey, Doc, I'm gonna run a half marathon. He goes, You can't you can't do it. Because you'll dehydrate yourself. You get blisters, you can get infection, it's a recipe for disaster, you can't do it. And I was like, I'm sorry, I'm gonna do it. And I didn't run it. I walked a mile and ran a mile walk tomorrow ran a mile. But I did it and I was exposed to people on spine. And the other thing is, you're an Amazon guy. I was big on Disneyland. My wife and I, we were our first date was at Disneyland and I was like, Disneyland passes. So you know what, we'll go to Disneyland every once in a while and he was like, I can tell I'm not going to stop you. But I'd prefer that you stay away from the crowd. So I'm like, Alright, sounds good. But I made it through just fine.



James Geering 1:23:46

Well, the reason I asked him and you've got colon cancer, so obviously the alimentary canal that everything that you eat and drink is going through. And so many times, you know, my wife lost one of her friends to cancer and it's actually the surgery that she died from one of her friends is going through it right now and there's only four and his friend group. But it's the chemo, it's the surgery, but it's not. Let's get your body as close to homeostasis as we can let's bolster your body's natural, you know, immunity because I mean, the body is an incredible thing and wants to heal. And I'm not saying that's all it takes. But that needs to be in the conversation. And so often, you know, I know people that are going through chemo and they're going out and you know, having their Marguerite is and and that nothing's changed. You know, it's like this lifestyle is why you got cancer, you know, I mean, ultimately your your defenses broke down and you had the exposures and this is where you're at, you know, the medication side as part of the conversation but the, you know, the holistic size needs to be the other and you know what you eat the quality of your sleep, you know, are you doing mindfulness? You never think about taking a vacation get away from stress and work and everything. But you don't you usually hear that with a lot of these, these cancer conversations there was like very

stoic, very matter of fact, you've got cancer, we're going to do chemo, we're going to chop this bit out, we're going to zap your radiation, you know, your hair's gonna fall out. And then, you know, fingers crossed. And I just think that's very irresponsible to not bring in, you know, not empower the human body to do its part as well.



1:25:22

Sure, yeah. I agree. 100%. And, and that was one thing that when you're going through the process, you're like, you don't know what to what to think. Because you can you can sit there and go by what's working now and taking a chance of what you don't know what's going to work. I agree that, like your body is an amazing thing. And I do think that there's, whenever I have something I'm like, I tried to look now on more of a holistic thing, like just as simple as like, an hour, you will take a an aloe Ranjan and rub it on you. And that's pretty amazing. And so I think there's a lot of stuff out there. And it's, it's a really tough thing to go through when, when you're the person going through, like, I want to live, what do I need to do to live in, and there's not enough? Maybe there's more information out now. But at the time, it just seemed like, I just got to do whatever I can to live?



James Geering 1:26:21

Well, it seems like maybe, I don't know, if it was still around when you had your diagnosis. But certainly, you know, 10 plus years ago, pretty much anything holistic was being ridiculed and posed and call, you know, fake news for, you know, it's like, okay, so we're back to chemo? Is that what you're telling me? So Jewson? You know, all these other things, like, for me, my philosophy, and my pre plan, is, I'm gonna go and, you know, I don't live life perfectly. So let me live life perfectly. And then see where that takes me. Let go, I'm gonna, you know, go to one of these retreats. Let me let me get to as close as baseline as you can. Now, will that include chemo or maybe immunotherapy by that point or surgery may be, but I think, you know, if your focus is firstly, alright, you know, I know I drink alcohol, and I drink coffee, and I do all these things. There's so much room for improvement, the stress that I have at the moment, I could get rid of that. What can I also do, as part of this pre plan here for the people that haven't been diagnosed or anything? Yeah. So that when you are literally terrified, because you've had that diagnosis, you're not just kind of paralyzed and listening to a doctor sending you down the path that if you'd had the time to think about it, maybe you wouldn't have gone down that path.



1:27:34

Very true. And here's the other thing is, doctors are? Well, I'd say they're a lot like firefighters, they have their path. And it's what works. So that path that works is the one they stick with. And so when you when you do have that different idea, there might not be so inclined to go for it. You know, the same thing as us like, you do this. And it works more often than not mice, I fix it, it works this way. And there's there's other stuff out there. And we've learned that in the fire service to where just when you when you, you can change your tactics and still be successful and be even more successful.



**J** James Geering 1:28:09

So you touched on the fact that you had to prove or try and prove to a lawyer, all these can compound elements that led to this or that weren't related. Walk me through your kind of mental health journey. And then how did the organizational element either contribute to stress or if you had a great experience, alleviate some stress on that path?

**i** 1:28:34

As far as the mental health I would say that, looking back at it, it, it definitely affected me. So I had to prove my case, which that's a long story in itself. But basically the fact of when I when I did do that deposition, I remember I was scheduled for one of my primary chemo therapies and my chemotherapy went by clockwork, it was like out every two weeks on this day, you get a pump on you, you get it pumped in you for 24 hours, then you take it off. And so my deposition was scheduled for a day I chemotherapy. And I mentioned to my lawyer, I was like, I can't make it have chemotherapy. And it was non negotiable. It was it was like, No, you have to be here and you're employed by this, this department. So we are telling you, you have to be here as you have to be here. And so I had to be there. So talk to my doctor, and we're able to figure everything out, but it wasn't easy. And so there's there's that aspect just right there alone where I was. I remember when I went into the deposition, I talked to my lawyer. I was like, Hey, I don't I don't I'm not in this. Like I'm not trying to get retired out. I'm not trying to get money. I'm just trying to like be taken care of and make sure that my family is taken care of, in case something happens to me. And he had mentioned you know what, this is just part of the thing that you have to go through and So I went through the deposition. And, and as far as mental health it was, you said, like the organizational. When I first got diagnosed with cancer, it was very touching I had I didn't want to talk to anyone. So I got the news. I didn't want to talk to anyone I call me desperately needs a battalion chief. And I said, John, I have cancer. I don't want anyone to know, I don't want anyone to call me. But if they want to text me, that's fine. I just can't talk to someone right now. And the funny thing is, I didn't know this. But everyone was kind of looking like what's going on at least he's calling in sick, he never calls in sick, I told you to never call in sick. People realize that. And so I had way over a Department of 48 people, and I would say 15 of them are like, what's going on? Right? At least call in sick. And, and so all of a sudden, I tell my friend, hey, Tyrone, I have cancer. They can text me if they want. And I would say out of 48 people, I probably had 40 People text me just say, Hey, hang in there, we got you all that stuff. Very touching it was it maybe it made me like, proud of where I worked. So I go on the other end. And the chief at the time, I'm not going to mention his name. But I was I was going through the process of calling in sick and my friend, the battalion chief, he goes to you prior, he knew kind of what was going on. And he goes, you probably should let the fire chief know what's going on. Because he called in sick four times, just let them know. And I said, Okay, so I call them and he's like, Oh, David, oh, man. Is there anything I can do for you? And and I mentioned now I just, I gotta get through this. And he and he said, You might if I call you back in a couple of days and check how you doing? I'm not sure if that actually mean a lot to me if he did that. Four months later, he called me back after he retires. And so I was like, okay. So, buddy. Yeah, so I guess he called me back. So I should be honored. But that really actually stung because those gentlemen then I've worked with for a long time, and it's done a little bit. So But back to the group that I worked with the group I worked with, as soon as I I announced I had cancer. They got together, they pulled some money, and they paid for a housecleaner to come and clean my house. Once a week, I live in Temecula Santis in San Diego about an hour away. And they had mentioned, they wanted my wife just to take care of me. So not to have to worry about the take care of the house. So they paid for her house cleaner. And I

can't tell you how long it was. But it is quite a bit, they all pull together and pay for a house cleaning, which is amazing. So I had that from them. And then later on down the road. So we talked. So I had these battles in I ended up being in court for five years battling my claim. And it's still not totally settled yet. There's still court dates. So that was 2015. And we're in 2023. But when I came back, I finally got back on the floor. And it wasn't a feel sorry for me. But I was telling that my engine company, I was like, Hey, guys, if you can save your sick leave, because times like this, I was off for a whole year. And I never dipped into it, I use my sick leave and my leave. And I was able to take the whole year off and not really have a cut and pay. And I said that the one thing you have to be ready for is, you know, we get used to overtime. And I didn't have overtime for a year. And the fact is you still have medical bills, and the medical bills were bigger than they used to be because of some PACs I had to take so I racked up some medical bills. And I was just telling him about hey guys, I was actually really lucky. I racked up about \$10,000 in medical bills. But can you imagine what would happen over you know, a year of this and if I had bigger expenses. So you know, as a father the advice just take care of yourself and make sure you keep yourself in check. Well, the firefighter at the time that was working with me, Adam, he took it upon himself to go to the department and do a GoFundMe and they raised \$10,000 to pay for my medical bills. And I didn't know and I believe it was Christmas time they presented me with a check for for \$10,000. And I'm not an emotional guy, but I just had to go back in my room and they hand that to me and just reset because it was it was an amazing thing. So the group of people I worked with were amazing. They they've always been caring and taking care of me. But there is that aspect where I felt like I fought for a long time. And there's some other things that happened in the department that are are off the counter thing but just things that probably I shouldn't talk about but it really when I came back to work. I was an angry person, not in We have people but the situation angry at life angry like why this happened to me? And, and I don't know if you remember this. But two years after I got diagnosed, my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. And so that just sent me down to a whole nother path of anger, like, Oh, my God, why does it happen to me? Why does it happen my wife, we're healthy people we don't we don't eat out, we rarely get fast food if ever. We, we make our own salad dressings, we, we cook our own food, we eat fish, we eat chicken, where we all drink alcohol. So that's my downfall. But other than that, we're relatively healthy. And I'm sitting there going, Man, my wife gets cancer, I get cancer, I have to do these battles. Some things at work that happened to me that were unfortunate, that made me angry. And I came back to work. And it was a struggle from day to day, and I'll be honest with you. And it wasn't day to day, it was years, I think, where I finally found peace was in COVID times. And it's funny that you mentioned it, I've never thought about it. But I wonder if the COVID times, things slowed down, the stations weren't busy. We were we were kind of isolated, we had a little more rest, it wasn't as hectic, there wasn't the daily grind. And I was home every other day because everyone had to show up for work unless they had COVID. But we'd show up we'd go home. And and it was a lot less stressful at that time. And that, at that time, I did listen to a lot of podcasts. I watched a couple of YouTube videos and read some books and all those things and, and listening to some some thoughts. And I remember one that I listened to this motivational speaker Eric Thomas, he said he had a thing about your values don't match your dreams and realizing that like, Man, I had a dream for something like this, but my values didn't match that and coming to terms with that and going, I'm gonna stay with my values. That was part of my mental health, coping, whereas like, that helped me out a lot. And so through just a bunch of, of just self reflection, that that really helped me out. But I struggled for a long time.

J

James Geering 1:37:22

It's interesting, because COVID Yeah, that moment, like you said, gave you probably a little bit

more rest and recovery, you know, which, which is, again, back to the cancer conversation, you know, if we're not sleeping every second day, third day, whatever it is, that's half of the mathematical equation right there. But the fact that you had a good experience is great, because I know a lot of people with the isolation but not be able to eat together, you know, all these things, it was very negative. So the, you know, the fact that you had such a nightmare before, but that period worked well for you. A is a great thing to hear. But B underlines again, the value of rest and recovery, if you're going to ask these men and women to do what they do on a daily basis.

 1:38:06

Yeah, so true. It I gotta go back on that. Yeah, COVID actually was really tough. And the fact of the fire station life of eating together, that was something I truly enjoy the camaraderie that was taken away from us. But some of the things that I reflect back on now was, I remember thinking this during the time, when it was like the first week of COVID news was just like, This is bad people are gonna die. We only send one person in the house, which I thought was ridiculous. I'm like, No, I'm a captain, I need to be there for safety. How can I how can I send my paramedic indoor evaluate, without me being in there with them. And there's just all these things that didn't make sense to me. But I remember staying at the back of the ambulance and looking at our two paramedics, and call me weird, but I was like, Man, this is this is true heroism because I watched two gentlemen walk into a house, I did a little different. I kept the doors open. And I stood in the doorway, so I can see everything that was going on. But I watched two gentlemen go into a house and do their job with something that's just unknown. We just didn't know. So it's like, Hey, you could get this and yeah, this mask works or it might not, you know, it's on your clothes. It's not on your clothes. And I watched guys every day go into this with with unknown consequences and do their job. And I was like, that part of my life where I was like, I'm working with two heroes. And it's not. It's not sanity, it's the United States. Anyone that's putting themselves in this position is the sheriff's officers, anyone that's doing this. It's true heroes, because they're they're doing so even the the hospital staff, it was so unknown, and they're willing to do that sacrifice that for people and it was an enlightening part for me, I think.

 James Geering 1:39:48

Well, you mentioned about this happening originally in 2015. We're in 2023. Now, eight years later, and the legal side is still not resolved. What takes eight years or Five years, whatever it was, from the initiation, to prove to an organization that a firefighter who clearly has cancer, hence the scans and operations that worked for X amount of years that had these exposures, what takes five years? Because I mean, to me, that's five years of unneeded stress for that responder when they're having to fight this kind of system as well.

 1:40:25

So I think the biggest thing that it was hard for me to understand, and it's still, I mean, it's not right. But I finally came to terms that I am a number. And it's not so So I work for a small city, but they employ a insurance company. And so they go on what the insurance companies base off of, and I'm sure there's different insurance companies, I'm sure cities can do things

different. I don't, I'm not going to even get behind that, because I don't know the nuts and bolts. But I can tell you my insurance that they had to go through with them, the workers comp insurance, decided that they were going to challenge it, which I think is kind of normal, some some places do some places don't that they're going to challenge it. And so at that point, you go to a physician. And I thought this was the weirdest thing, because when I was in my deposition, the attorney at one point said, All right, well, your claim is going to be denied. And you're gonna have to go see a physician. And then my lawyer was like, he told me, that's, that's normal, don't worry about it. But the conversation was like, the city attorney or the workers come up, he was like, I want to use this position. And my, my attorney is like, no chance, you're gonna use that position, we're gonna use this position. And then that attorney goes, there's no chance we're gonna use that position. So they have to find a physician that they both agree on. And so I went to this physician, they both agree on and I go through the process, and I'm sure he was a great guy. He was he was, he was, I would just say, I don't know if he should have been practicing medicine. He was kind of old. And and. And so I remember going through my first my first evaluation with him and the questions he was asking me, I'm like, This guy is setting me up for for a like, a claim that's not not worker's comp. He's like, Oh, Dee is round up. Of course, I use Roundup. Everyone uses Roundup. I use Roundup at work sometimes. Okay, well, do you do you cut your own mind? Do you do you, you know, do barbecue outside you? There's just, I don't even remember the questions. But you're just like, these are leading questions of like, okay, I get it, but and so with him, I was like, Yeah, I do barbecue. But here's what I also do. I work in a fire station with diesel fumes. I have my ice machines in a shop where they start diesel engines all the time. I, the doors don't close the plenum events, you know, you just go on and on. And honestly, when I first started the fire service, we washed our turnouts in the same washing machine that we washed our station clothes, we have additional just a regular Washington, seven extractor. So I'm saying all this stuff, and it seemed to go through deaf ears. And so at the point where I finally got the result, and so he has like, six months, I don't know what it was anymore. But he has a certain amount of time where he has to get back his report. And so he gives back his report. It's denied. He said there was genetic.

 James Geering 1:43:26

So he did. He did genome testing in that interview as well.

 1:43:30

He actually, let me let me back up. He said it was family history, or and I said, Well, my family doesn't have history of that. And so the interesting thing is, I was going to UCSD at this time, and they offered me genetic testing. And I said, and they give me two choices. They go, this one usually in the insurance takes and it's the cheap one. And it gives us a baseline. This one is a huge one that we don't even understand some of the findings. And usually insurances don't approve this. But which one do you want to do? And I said, Let's do the hardcore one. And I was lucky because my insurance cover and it came back and it said it was not genetic. It was that it wasn't hereditary. It wasn't genetic, that and the genetic person actually said is due to your lifetime exposures where you have this. So we give that information back to that doctor and you know what his response was? That test showed some inconclusive findings which we can either deny or except of not being genetic. And so now I wish that one with it's the cheap test because I'm like, I just stabbed myself in the foot. I thought this is better for me and my family. They're like, okay, let's let's get a foundation. And now it's okay. Well, yeah, there was an

inconclusive test because they don't even understand what it's about. But everything that this test for it says no. And there's some other things that I learned that they diagnosed me with. It was called pulposus. And you have a thing in the back I keep your eye, that's very, very common. I went to an eye doctor had a look, I guess you don't have it. And I can't remember the exact term. And so there was all these things. I'm like, You're saying I have this, here's the findings, it says, I don't have this. And it turned into, I'm sorry, it's delicate. And so it went all the way to it was gonna go to Superior Court. And then I had the, I had the California Professional Firefighters union, go to city council member and talk on my behalf, and more just more about cancer presumption in general, which spurred some, some conversation. And I was lucky enough at that point to, to have my claim accepted. And so I did get my claim accepted. And I don't know what the finding is now. But I was told to submit my medical bills. And so the one thing, and maybe this is a law thing, and maybe it's just they're fighting, but whenever you don't pay in a certain amount of time, like you're penalized. And my claim went over that. So I think that's what the description is nowadays. Like, alright, well, you didn't get your settlement when you were supposed to. So there's this kind of fine. And so now it's back and forth on on who's on the hook for that? Or if it's even if it's even possible. Like, it's just a law thing right now. And so, I mean, I did get it accepted. So I have to be thankful for that. And my city did support me that I think the verdict did come around five years after the fact of just constant evaluations, doctor's appointments, lawyers, remodeling arguments, and then the fact that it was gonna go to court and at that point, yeah. At one point, my lawyer said, he told me, he goes, you're going all the way to the top, because both sides, this is case law. This is gonna set case law. And I kind of regret that it didn't, because I think I could have won and it would have been nice to have the case line go for us. But in the long run my lawyers when it when it finally got accepted, he said, No, we have to do what's best for you. So accept the claim. We're good.

J

### James Geering 1:47:18

Totally different kind of level of health, we're about to say, but I tore my groin, in Orange County cilantro area, and I worked there. And the initial diagnosis was hernia. And I'm very lean. So when the guy looked at he just figured, okay, that kind of divot is some sort of prolapse. But it wasn't it was just my anatomy, ultimately. But anyway, I went in, to think it, was it a second opinion? Yeah. Because the first one I had it was, again, the person was just awful, like you said, just someone that you're like, how are you even practicing. So I had the second opinion, but again, it was chosen by them. It wasn't someone that I knew that I want to see this person, which is what I ended up doing with my knees. When I when I tore my meniscus, I'm like, we're not playing this. This is the person I want. And it was, you know, someone that I knew at my gym, and it was amazing. But I'll never forget this. I'm told to be at that, you know, let's say nine o'clock, whatever it was, and I get there. And it's in this kind of very weird looking building. And I go to the top, and I go open the door and it's locked. And I'm like, Well, what the hell's going on here? So anyway, I kind of sit there for about think I was a few minutes early. And so we're, let's say, five storeys up, looking down about three stories at the top of the parking garage. I see this car kind of flying up, this guy jumps out of his car throws on a white coat runs in this round, like, tell me it's not my fucking doctor. sure as shit opens it up, and it may as well be in a movie set because no one was in there. This dude comes in wax on a rubber glove, sticks his fingers in my junk, says yeah, it's not a hernia, and then leaves again. And this is the thing is like, there was some some of these physicians that worked for workman's comp they work for workman's comp. And was that ultimately was that diagnosis wrong? It wasn't but I wanted the MRI because I kept getting told, you know, this is a hernia. It's not a hernia, like okay, well, now we're playing fucking guessing games. Can you do some imaging so we can actually tell because I need to go back to work. But you know, that's and I

had to even when I hurt my back, I was sent to, you know, a local clinic and was basically ordered by this PA, you're going to take these meds and we're going to talk about surgery and I'm like the fuck we are. And so I ended up getting in a second person and then finding ultimately what was my my doctor and going down the PT route and never having surgery and not needing meds. It took a long freakin time and it sucked. But, you know, I took control of my own path of healing and ultimately that was right. But like we said before, we're all I groomed to listen to the person in the white coat with a stethoscope around their neck. But when you get into these situations, and you hear yours isn't so much a horror story, but I've heard horror stories, we have to be really careful who was put in front of us masquerading as a medical expert, because more often than not, if they are placed in front of us, they're probably not a medical expert. They're just the person that they wanted you to see.



1:50:28

Yeah, I can't agree more it's in, you know, through the whole path. You know, and I think it goes back to even when I was talking about it, like, being a strong advocate for yourself is what you have to be. And sometimes you have to fight, but there's some, you definitely have to research things. And I remember that was what I was so fortunate about is, I was out of the game, when, when I was going through everything my whole, my whole goal was I want to live. And I have two kids. They were their teenage my daughter was in college at the point and my son was young, he was probably 13 at the US Eighth grade. And my goal was like I can not leave now like this is this is I need to be here with my family. And the thought of not being with your family is just like, Doctor, do whatever you need to you're the expert to save my life. And I had my wife that was the same way. But she's like, oh, hold the horses like this. The see what else are the options, and she was able to really like slow things down. And man, if I didn't have that, I think I I mean, I was fortunate enough to have some good care, passing talking, there was times where she made where I'd have gone to UCSD. If I would have went that path with the other physician might not have such a happy story right now. And so I was very fortunate in that aspect. And, and luckily, maybe I wasn't the best advocate for myself, because I was just mentally not there. But I had someone there for you. And I couldn't have done it without



James Geering 1:51:56

you before. Well, when did you return back to work?



1:52:00

I believe so I believe I went back to work August 1 2016. So it wasn't quite a year I was off.



James Geering 1:52:10

There's a lot of people that when they get hurt, for example, they can racing back to work sometimes too soon. But on the flip side, there's also that mentality where, you know, like you said, there's almost a chasing of medical retirement. But I think, to be completely honest, as you said, some people get to sleep in their own bed every night next to their wife or husband with their kids. And they're like, Oh, this is actually really nice. I don't know, you know, so

there's there's kind of a chase in that way as well. But it's admirable people that had that that were home and then you know, determined to go back. So how were you received? And and what were the years after like that for you?



1:52:47

So it's funny you say that because I have to look back at that time off is one of the most horrific times in my life. But one of the best times in my life. I spent so much time with my family and never missed my son's baseball game. He is baseball guy. Yeah, his probably should have played hockey, but I'm just kidding. His mom didn't want him to play hockey. They she wanted him to keep keep his teeth. But he played baseball. And so I got to witness a lot of things in that time off. And so going back to work, I was a little concerned like, Man, this is this has been nice to be with my family and watch my son grow. I'll be there for my wife every day, even though she was more there for me than I was her. But I spent time with my family. It was really important to me. But I was really excited to go back to work because I really do love my job. And there's been times in my career where people might not realize it because I told you I did struggle. There were some times where I love my job, but I hated my job at the same time. And so it I came back from work and I was really excited. I was excited because I had the support of the people I worked with. Our zone is a great zone. We're very tight knit and so like Anaheim, you guys had your North net type area like and so we're called heartland and we had El Cajon, couple cities around the mesa, all that lakeside. And so when I came back, there was a zone of people and so back up a little bit when I got diagnosed for cancer. A week before I had surgery, there was a party that was out by up in Temecula. And everyone was just coming up to like, Hey, man, like we're here for you. It was at a bar and I remember this this was the coolest thing ever. It was it was Santi people that came up but my fire chief that retired these chief another department. The names chief Paul, he calls me up and he goes, Hey David, I'm coming to the thing. And I like to bring this other this other chief Ken Krasinski and in my mind these two are legends and San Diego County. They're just the the fire chief that everyone respects the guys that are just just solid And they'd been solid their whole lives. And they came up to visit me. And I thought it was really neat. So coming back to work, I had that support of not only like my group, but there was people around me that cared for me, there's departments when they found out I would get messages from them. And so when I came back, and we're training at the tower, for months, I got hugs from people just coming up going, oh, man, I'm so glad you're coming back. And it was truly an awesome experience. But the sad thing is, is there was also the experience where I came back is not so happy for everything that's happened. And so it was really a struggle, I came back and was alone sedated. Because, you know, you think you don't forget stuff. But I'm sitting there going, oh, man, if I'm going on wildland fire today, I've got to, I gotta get this radio channel. But this tone in this, this and I'm and so there's almost like panic, I need to be retrained when I come back to work. So there was that level. And my my disappointment and certain things that have happened. And then but there was also the joy of being back. And so one of my good friends, Aaron, when I came back, he didn't tell me but he set up a taco party. And so they had a person come into the fire station, and have tacos and all the families were invited. So my first day back at work, and my wife knew about this, and I did is I show up and we go down to one of our stations. And we've got people off duty families off duty, all over there for the taco party to welcome you back to work. And so stuff like that was just something I can never, I can never explain how happy it made me and how proud it made me to be with a group. And so there were there was it was it was good, and it was bad. I that's the best way I could I could put it.

 James Geering 1:56:45

So we're getting to two hours. Now I want to be mindful of your time before I let you go. Is there anything that you want to impart to, you know, obviously, a lot of firefighters, cops, paramedics, etc, listening to this, whether it's you know, something you've gleaned from this experience or warning signs or anything else that you want to tell them before we close up

 1:57:07

on big thing is, is no matter what you face, like if there's a battle to be had, face it early, I was older than that with my cancer, I didn't face it early. And that goes with everything in the fire service. If you have mental health issues, face it early, it's easier to fix it before it gets out of hand. I've kind of alluded to it I definitely had. So some mental things that went on when I came back to work. And I didn't face that either. And I never really got help, I wanted to get help. And then it just didn't work out because it was Hey, make an appointment, do this. And then COVID hit and then things were kind of off. And so in a way I have I hope I fixed myself. But it was a lot harder road fixing myself than to going and get help. So whenever you see a problem in any service you are, fix yourself and find it early. And we present to people like Bill how we got a person or nine one and like their blood pressure's to 10 over 180 Let's go fix it before you have a stroke. Well, same thing, fix yourself before it gets out of hand.

 James Geering 1:58:16

Well, like you said, You alluded to it just before I let you go, what was the darkest place you found yourself in. And then what have been some of the tools that have worked for you along this kind of long path of trying to figure out how to navigate that.

 1:58:31

My Darkest time was probably right, right before that before the case was was settled. I've been back to work for quite a while everything kind of returns back to normal. And there's still like, I'm still fighting this thing. I felt alone. I felt like nobody cared. And it was a real dark area for me. And I'm sure I showed it at work. Don't know if it was true. But I was told by some of my chief officers, like, people don't like working with you. I get complaints every day about you. No one ever told me that. But you know if it happened, I'm not here to say it didn't. And I did I wasn't a happy person. I love the job. I would do whatever I had to and and I felt like I was doing it but I think sometimes you don't realize what you're doing. So that was my my darkest time. And I think the thing that helped me out the most is just I think that that thing where I told you that sometimes your your dreams, your values, don't meet your dreams. And so that was one of the big things that stuck out to me my whole life is like, I'm gonna my dreams are one thing but my values are more important to me. So if I stick with my values, then off I'll find happiness and so they're doing that and like I said, I did a lot of self help books. I did a lot of things where it just it took me to do it and it took me longer and like I said probably the wrong path to go and I wish I would have saw Help out on this year?

 James Geering 2:00:02

Well, again, I appreciate not only your perspective on that particular topic, but you come in on telling your story. I mean, I've had people that have overcome cancer on here. And I had people like Amy who I interviewed, and six weeks later, she was dead. You know. So this is an extremely important conversation. As you mentioned, when we were earlier in our career, heart disease was the number one thing that killed us, then you start learning actually, the cancer is now here we are, and it's suicide, you know, doubling the line of duty death rates at the moment. So the bottom line is there's lots of things and I always say that nothing kills firefighters, it's everything that kills firefighters. So you know, the fact that we've got to hear your journey, the highs and lows, maybe learning some things you know about having the courage to face things early learning about finding your own, you know, medical professional that you trust, maybe anticipating some of the legal stuff. It's been an invaluable conversation. So I want to thank you so, so much for coming on the show today.



2:00:59

I appreciate it's my honor. Like I said, I've listened to your podcast, and you have high caliber guests. So to even be here speaking with you is truly an honor. And then the other thing is you're doing so much for all the communities. So thank you