

# Luis Nevarez - Episode 791

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## SPEAKERS

Luis Nevarez, James Geering

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James Geering 00:00

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welcome to the behind the shield podcast. And secondly, thank you so much to Lionel Krauser, our mutual friend for connecting us today. So as an opening kind of icebreaker, I guess, talk to me about Lando and how you guys first met.

 Luis Nevarez 03:39

I met Lionel through the Phoenix burn society as a firefighter burn survivor. I attended one of the world burn Congress. I believe we were in Texas that year. And at that time, Lionel, I believe he was collaborating with Washington DC firefighters burn foundation. Jason woods and in Charlie, Jason's a president. At that time they were they were putting a program together to for actually for for firefighter burn survivors. They wanted to they wanted to put a program together to be able to take us out to Colorado, the Adaptive Sports Center. So I think Lionel was already connected with them. And one of Lionel's job or assignment was to find the firefighter burn survivors throughout the United States, including Canada. And so we can start this program. So I met liner was one of the firefighter burn survivors. You know, they gathered 10 firefighters throughout the United States and Canada and we attended a a week at the Adaptive Sports Center in Colorado. And that's really where our friendship began. Uh, you know, because we all pretty much work had some type of relation to our trauma and our, you know, our fire or fire service culture. So that's where we met and from there line on like, connected. And we've been great buddies since then, you know, we've, he's always been there for me and he's someone that can relate to me, you know, through through our good times and bad times, and he's always been a friend that that I can call at any time and I think he feels the same way. We have a lot in common as far as reaching out and helping others being able to relate to other firefighters that that are facing some type of some type of trauma or, or just, you know, men need some mental wellness talk or get together I think, you know, that's, that's what we're able to provide for one another. So, so Lionel and I, I've met his family and they've been out to Winnipeg, and spent some time out there and visit Lionel and he's been out here at my place. And so we become really close friends. We depend on each other when we need each other.

 James Geering 06:07

Beautiful was another mutual friend as well. My guest for Episode One. We're almost 800 episodes now Episode One was Mitch Dreyer, who I met in the Edo putao workshop in Colorado, and just was blown away by this brother firefighter that was doing all the things that we were struggling to do on rings with two arms with with one arm. So did you meet Mitch during that Colorado retreat as well?

 06:30

Yes, I did. And Mitch is another close friend of mine. We all became really close friends. You know, we, you know, there's, you know, we've met several several firefighters throughout the 10 years, we've been doing 1011 years we've been doing this. We've met but there's a group of us that have kept in touch with one another and, and Mitch is one of them. And Mitch and Lionel, you know, we've kept in contact and we bonded pretty well. So yeah, I spent you know, some time I go there and visit Mitch and go skiing over there with him in the in Crested Butte. So Mitch, and I kind of put a lot of humor together when we're when we're together, you know,


he's missing his, his right arm, I'm missing my left arm. So, you know, we'll I'll stand behind Mitch and, and he'll raise up his left arm and then I'll raise up my right arm and I'm hiding behind Mitch and we'll just flex or clap. And, you know, and it's funny because we walked we walked up to people to give them a hug, and they don't see me behind and they're not really thinking and Mitch is hugging them with two arms. So, you know, we usually we tell each other Hey, I bought some gloves. Make sure you give me the right glove, and I'll give you the left glove, you know, so we've we've had a really good, good communication and good relationship with Mitch and his family. But yeah, they're both awesome. Awesome. Firefighters.

 James Geering 07:53

Beautiful. Well, firstly, for people listening where on planet earth are we finding you sitting today?

 08:00

I'm sitting in Visalia central that's in central California, right in the center of California. I'm at home this morning. This is where I've lived here for over 30 years, 32 years. This is where my kids were. were raised in Visalia, California. So that's that's a lot of people. I worked for the city of Tulare, which is next door to Visalia, we're 10 minutes away from each other. People usually ask me where's Tulare? At? Tell me, Tim between Well, Larry three, Larry. So they don't forget how to pronounce it. But yeah, I'm in Visalia, California. That's, that's, that's where I'm at now.

 James Geering 08:49

Brilliant. Well, I would love to start at the very beginning of your journey. So tell me where you were born. And tell me a little bit about your family dynamic, what your parents did and how many siblings

 08:59

I was born in the city of Los Angeles. Born there in Kazan Hollywood, with either my parents, both both are born in Mexico. So at that time, I my dad was a cook. And he worked his way up to be a chef. He was a chef for over 25 years. But that was his that was his insurance Kaiser at the time, I guess because all all that we were all born there, myself and my other two siblings. So we pretty much were born in the in. We pretty much were raised in Los Angeles or whole life. You know, I didn't move out of there till I became a till I got hired with the fire service, which was, you know, after high school at 19 years old. I got hired with Cal fire which back then it was CDA of California Department of Forestry. I applied as a seasonal firefighter. And what happened I was You know, where I was brought up in a, in a community there in Los Angeles in the Northeast Los Angeles area, and, you know, growing up, it was a lower middle class area, a lot of kids in on the block on the, in the streets here, so I was a pretty active child growing up had a lot of fun out till till sundown, you know, once you get to school, it's it's there's so many kids out there to be playing with but you know, that's that's really where I spend my most of my time. There was a lot of a lot of as I grew up with a lot of gang activity going on. You know, during that during those years, in the late 70s, early 80s. So it was pretty, pretty rough. You

know, again, like I tell people that it's a beautiful neighborhood. But for some reason the pizza wouldn't deliver down our street. But, but it was a beautiful neighborhood, everybody knows, everybody knew everybody in that neighborhood. But again, there was not too many positive role models there for us. You know, there was a couple of couple, a couple, I would say some of my friends, parents, that that became our coach, one of them became our soccer coach, and one of them was our baseball little league coach, he recruited the kids on the block there and you know, that's probably one of the one of the My Favorite or best moments that being able to have that experience because my parents were working, you know, working all the time. So so they you know, that that kind of kept kept me busy.

 James Geering 11:48

So with that, I lived in LA for a little while, I started in Burbank and then moved out of LA to Huntington Beach, because I worked for Anaheim fire at the time. And you know, you obviously see that sprawling urban jungle that is Los Angeles. And there are some communities where the environment is set up for the kids to succeed. And there's other communities where you would argue the environment is set up for the kids to fail. And as an Anaheim firefighter, I got to see a lot of the gangs in that area that kind of bled out into Orange County as well. Your parents are working hard, like so many, you know, first generation immigrants do in this country? What was the pull towards the wrong path? And you know, was it the sports coaches, and obviously, your parents that kept you from finding yourself down that road that maybe some of your peers did?

 12:38

Well, I think I did. I did follow the bad path for a while, you know, there was a time where, you know, I grew up with a lot of older, I have some some family that lived there. And so I grew up with a lot of the older, older guys, and his buddies and so far has been around my, my generation or my age of kids, I was pretty advanced. Because I was growing up with a lot of older, older guys that were involved with, you know, street stuff streets, what's going on out there. But you know, I just got to the point where, you know, I was always a worker, because that's what my dad taught us. He was a worker, he's a workaholic, and he had picked up, you know, his work ethics. And I think that's really what, what made me who I am today, because he had a project every day or every weekend, you know, he was always working the rentals or there was always something to do at the house or at one of his rentals and a little bit of everything. He was a handyman, he did everything. You know, like you said it's a first first first generation of immigrants so they come in hungry and and that's their lifestyle. So that's one thing I can say is picked up his work ethics and, and he taught us a lot of our values of respect, respecting others, respecting your elders, and so on. So that that I think those values really helped me through the fire service because those are the standard the basic values of the fire service, you know, having respect and loyalty, you know, discipline and we can go on with the values that are expected in the fire service. So I came in with those values already. But again, there was a there was a lot of influence. They're out in front of in front of our house. I mean, there was a lot of influence. negative influence I should say that I was I think I was attracted to and, and I was one of those kids that you You know, when the ice cream truck came, and people were buying ice cream, I would sit in the back bumper and, and let it take me for a ride all the way up the street and just, you know, that was one of those kids that was always looking for a challenge or a risk. That's, that's really, you know, that's, I was very, very active, I should

say, I don't know if I was pretty hyper kid, because I always needed to stay busy. So I think that's, you know, that's and again, the sports, you know, the sports, you know, taught me a lot of the teamwork. And all that comes to the, to the fire service. I think, later on in life, it all connects. But there was a time, you know, there was also that dark side growing up in LA where, where I experienced a lot of the individuals that are friends that I grew up with, that I played sports with, you know, getting shot or killed and going to prison. I seen all that happen in front of my face, or so I experienced all that lifestyle. And I thank God every day that I'm still here that, you know, because a lot of my friends didn't didn't didn't make it that far. You know, they had that at that time. And during those years in the 80s people were getting killed it 1617 years old, you know, that was the lifestyle, the gang life back then changes. Can you hear me? Well, because there's the neighborhood, there's cutting grass or doing some yard work? No,

 James Geering 16:31

I can't hear them. It's okay. So so

 16:33

so there was that side of it. Also, James, you know that, you know that, you know, for us, like you mentioned, there was certain areas in Los Angeles that didn't have all the programs. And that was one of ours in our neighborhood, we had little league or boxing, we had a boxing gym. But most of it, I did it on my I would say on my own, you know, my parents were working so much that I don't you know, I don't recall my dad ever taking me to practice or to watching my game, my baseball game, you know. So I would go to the, to the boxing gym on my own. And during the summertime, when me and a couple other kids on the block, we take the RTD the bus back then take one bus and this is um, it says, you know, eight, 910 11 years old. I'm a child. You know, you don't really see that nowadays. You know, we walked to school back then as elementary school, you walk you walk home, you walk to junior high you want we always walked, you know, but again, my parents were working. Nowadays, I don't think my kids ever walk to school in their lifetime. You know, we have we know they're expecting for you to take them to school. But But yeah, that that also helped. They've been part of some type of sports program where we didn't have all the Pop Warner Football we didn't have, you know, a why. So we didn't have all the the swimming, wrestling, we didn't have those programs there. It took somebody to take you outside of the city, you know, to if you're going to be playing those types of sports. And again, I'm grateful that there was this this older man, Mr. Harmer Irish man, the he recruited like six or seven of us on the street for a soccer team for a while so but he would drive us he would drive us out of the city to over to Glendale Burbank area, that's where we would play a wire. So and again, we were active kids coming from that neighborhood, you know, he had to stay there referee, after the game, he really volunteer as a coach. And we would be up there at the schools on the roof and just we call it let's go explore or exploring. But but we you know, we won the championship two years in a row. So, you know, and again, there was another another gentleman as well another parent, I should say that he recruited us for baseball Little League. And, you know, so that also helped that helped a lot just getting to, to learn that teamwork that discipline. But other than that there wasn't too many other programs, you know, basketball, there was really no organized programs besides Little League.

 James Geering 19:26

Well, I got one more question for you before we progress into your journey into the fire service. Oh, my observation as an English farm boy that moved to the States became a firefighter and then got to work in some pretty poor areas in some of the cities in the US East Coast and West was the impact of drug prohibition on the empowerment of gangs and you know, the prostitution and the homelessness and then the the the violence at the border as well. My personal opinion is that the prohibition of drugs has created so much doubt Mitch, so much violence, so much poverty, so many broken homes. When you know, you're talking about coming from UCLA, and then you wore a uniform for a long time. And then fast forward to the last few years, there's this rhetoric about building walls to stop Mexicans from coming into the US. My perspective is we're what have we done to the to Mexico to create that kind of violence that people are fleeing in the first place. And again, you look at the prohibition of drugs, we are the consumer and the bad people in countries south of us are creating a lot of trouble and crime and violence in their countries that people are trying to get away from. That is James Geering. His perspective, with your view on the streets that you grew up in with your view of what you've seen in uniform, with the the discussion over immigration, especially from Mexico, what is your perception of the impact of drugs, the prohibition of drugs on some of the things that you've seen with your own eyes in your career?



21:01

Well, I believe the the impact on community is it really it ruins it ruins a, it ruins the community. Okay, that's, that's one thing. Because I've seen a lot of, you know, people growing up that were either athletes, or, you know, solid people. And as soon as they get involved with any type of drugs, it just changes the person individually. So I believe that a lot of the drugs that are coming into the United States, it's it's ruining ruining the community, it's ruining the state. It's a, I mean, that that's, that's, I think, the number one denominator of changing a community changing individuals. I think it has a large impact. I mean, I've seen it growing up, I've seen it, you know, in uniform that, you know, I again, again, James, you know, I grew up in that environment, but I was never one to get addicted to drugs. I seen it, I was exposed to it all around me. But for some reason I had, I was I became an individual where I didn't allow anybody to really push me or tell me, you know, take some drugs or do this, I think, I think growing up with this older generation as a, as a young kid, I had this the value or that courage that, you know, you may have even sensed somebody telling me, or pushing me to drink, or do drugs. I would call him on it, like, Hey, I told you once, don't offer it to me again, then I would be like, are we going to I'm going to fight with you. So they understood that a you are the offer at once. But I seen a lot of people that were top athletes, baseball, football, growing up with them, I seen them go down the wrong path. As soon as they got addicted to drugs, they some of them became homeless. And these in these individuals that I grew up with, or like top athletes, they were going to play semi pro. And as soon as they got involved with drugs, some of them became homeless. So that's the impact that there's so many homeless now. And people really don't understand a lot of the individuals in uniform. I see homeless, I've always been the type of person if I see somebody that's, you know, if I can help them, I can feed them. I usually I carry in my in my car. during the wintertime, I carry a sweatshirt and a beanie. I had several sets of them. And if I see somebody I can, you know, hey, I'm gonna give that to someone. Nobody needs to be cold. Nobody, I mean sneakers because they're all good stuff. I don't like to just throw away but I understand coming from that background that some of these individuals just got connected with the wrong people wrong path got on drugs, but they people don't really understand who were they before? Why did they get like that? So I think I still have that that that the heart to help others when I see them. So I think that impact with the drugs

really just ruins the ruins of communities ruins the state ruins everybody. I mean, there's people that like I mentioned that were so solid. Nowadays you can't trust as soon as someone's on drugs. You can't trust these individuals anymore. They become a totally different person. I've have family, kids, young kids that were grew up their parents moved them out of the out of the neighborhood bought a nice house out and in a nice community. Oh, waiting arose Hills up there. For some reason these individuals were spoiled growing up and they came back got connected with drugs. It's Start, you know, doing bad things and change them, they come and go to jail for the President. And I think that's just part of the system now. You know, it's a revolving door becomes a revolving door. So I think the drugs coming into the United States has a huge impact on individuals on the way our system works on our economy, on everything.

 James Geering 25:24

Yeah, well, then, the ripple effect of that what I saw was, you know, the gangs, the trouble at the borders, if you didn't have a prohibition, because obviously, as a mental health crisis, that's why these people are taking these drugs. They're trying to escape the same way people do with food and social media and gambling, and every other alcohol, the, you know, the totally legal, socially acceptable negative coping mechanism. But the what I saw with my eyes is I don't think there would be many gangs, if you didn't have the ability to slink out, how are you going to make your money that a lot of people that like you said, we're athletes would probably stay athletes, they wouldn't have people on their corner, you know, constantly offering it to them. So taking the addicts and making them medical patients rather than criminals, to me is the way that we solve it, you cut the head off the snake, you take away the demand for illegal drugs, you would have an positive impact on the country of Mexico, you'd have less people trying to flee their country, and you certainly would have a hugely diminished gang activity, in my opinion, because if you can't make money selling dope, then you know, money equals power.

 26:31

Right? No, I agree with you. I agree. That's, that's so true. But yeah, it has a huge impact on everything gangs, money, like you said, you know, and that's, that's, that's something that's, we have no control of,

 James Geering 26:48

yeah, well, I plan on being part of the solution. Because I'm, you know, as you see, I mean, the number of teenagers that I've pulled a yellow sheet over, you know, that died for their apartment complex. It's, you know, those are made. Yeah, no, absolutely.

 27:01

And I do a lot of mentoring James also for, for, at risk youth, you know, I've mentored a lot of these youth, I can relate to them. So they come to me, and I feed them nothing but positive information or try to keep them on the positive path, they explain, I break it down to them. And, you know, they can relate to me. So they get connected with me, and I have one individual



right now that I've been mentoring. And he was really going down the wrong path. And now he's about to graduate next this month, and I will be there to attend his graduation, he has two jobs, I mean, and he was really going down the wrong path. And, and that, you know, I feel good that I'm able to tell him, you're the one doing, I'm not doing anything, you're the one doing I give you the guidance, you know, what you should be doing? And, but yeah, and I wish there would be more, because, yes, you have to, you have to reach out to them, while they're really young. And I feel that, you know, there has to be programs, there has to be activities. For them. At one point, I was thinking about opening up my own business, and it was going to be called Sweet, loose, tough love camp. And, and it was not for, you know, grown adults, it was just going to be for maybe between 10 and 16 or anywhere 12. And I just wanted to show them basic household skills, basic essentials, certain values, and I guarantee you, there's so many because people would want to come drop off, you know, family would want to drop off their, their nephews or nieces, you know, this summer with me, because I'm putting them to work, you know, I'm failing them to learn something. I'm not you know, and I guarantee you, you know, they they don't have that once they get that type of guidance, get them program that way. It changed an individual I think that's one way that we can help society is having those type of mentors, having those type of role models and guidance a lot of that's what we're missing. I mean, we're talking about the drug some of these individuals come out you know, they're single, they haven't a single parents are they're working, you know, and the kids looking for some type of activity to stay busy. And and that's what I think that's what we're lacking in we're lacking leadership in America in general. We're lacking leadership. But just like you said, James, you know, you try to do the best that you can and I do the best that I can. You don't know how many individuals call me and I go out of my way for them just to help them in every which way I can. Sometimes it's overwhelming where people got to tell me you need to learn to say no And then well, it's hard for me to say no to people, especially if it's a it's a youth that's reaching out. Now he's reaching out for a reason he's seeking and knocking for a reason. And that's what I believe that you know, I'm here for that reason that that believe I still believe God still has me here for a reason. You know, he took one hand away from me, I think he said, I just got to slow his cat down and take one hand away. But I still can use them off here.

### J James Geering 30:28

Well, it mirrors one of my friends, I talk about this a lot on the show, because it's, it's amazing. But he started a mentorship program. He's a firefighter here in Ocala. And he started a mentorship program where all these kids have to do is physically show up to the central fire station, they will provide the gear, the training, there are scholarships for our local fire academy in our we're lucky our State Academy is here in our town, there are departments on the other side of that Academy begging for new recruits. But what he did is you remove that barrier to entry, he went into these underserved communities and said, Look, here's what we do, you physically just have to show up and we will guide you through and what I love about that when you hear the diversity conversation. They're a great approaches to it, which I would argue this isn't there are terrible ones, which is go out and get me 40 English people, we don't have enough English people, we need to fill the English quarter. You know what I mean? And you end up with 40 people, some might be rockstars. Some might be awful firefighters. So I love this idea of mentorship not only to firstly find the great candidates. Secondly, the other candidates go oh, okay, I thought I wanted to be a firefighter. But actually, I don't like this very much strike it off my list, another win. But thirdly to to empower children in areas that maybe never thought about the fire service before. And they see someone maybe it's the same color or same gender or whatever it is, and go Well, I can do this. And all of a sudden, that person that was trying to lead them down the bad path that's countered with someone from police fire,



you know, whatever it is in this mentorship program, that empowers them to realize that they can actually control their own destiny and go into a profession that they will be proud to be wearing the uniform for.



32:14

You know, I think that's a that's pretty much where when I became the ran the Explorer program, James I did it for 10 years, and the discipline that they learned the self esteem, their self confidence. I mean, just watching these individuals grow, they would come in, you know, of course, their mom or somebody was there looking for their kid to do something, but they brought on by the fire station, and myself and another individual serger we decided to run this program, but I wouldn't just sit there and talk about the firefighting essentials, I would explain to them so many other teach them so many other values, that if they become a different person, I would prepare them for interviews for the for the summer job, you know, so I'd have an opening statement closing statement. I mean, everything's related to the fire service but but at the same time, the these individuals will come in they don't know how to look at you in the face when they shake your hand and looking down at it go hey, look up at me how was pretty hard. I was pretty hardcore, real people Normal School and but these individuals loved love the they love what they got out of the program. We're still this day, people are still asking, Hey, do you guys still do you still have that explorer program, when these individuals were going out to an interview with they were applying, you know, once they were 18 years old 19. And they were applying that at of some of the neighboring agencies. During their interview, they would state that, you know, they've they're part of my my explorer program. So not to brag or anything, but they know that I was teaching them discipline. I was probably one of the biggest advocates for training in my department. So I have videos, I have so many videos and pictures of me training these, these explorers. And I was pretty hard on them. But it became pretty much a recruit for all the other agencies, you know, because I was I was doing it on my own time. I never really got paid for it. I wasn't asking for any money, but it got to the point where anybody else that would want to help everybody wants to get paid now, you know, overtime hours and so on. But they became it became more of a recruiting square all the other agencies were hiring these individuals from from our program, because in our department, you know, you're required to be a paramedic, firefighter paramedic to get hired. So these other neighboring agencies that don't require you to be a paramedic was just recruiting recruiting from our Explorer Program. And I mean, that's good. I mean, I tell them, hey, that's your goal is to get on with a fire department. That's that's the whole principle of it. But I see some of these individuals. I mean, they've invited me to their, you know, their graduation, whatever agency they hired, they've asked me to pin pin their badge for them. So obviously, that worked. Obviously, whatever I was doing worked, I would tell them, Listen, you guys, you're you're required to do so many ride alongs here, when you come here, you're helping wash the fire engines, you're helping throw the trash away clean the restaurants, all the basic duties of a firefighter, correct? Yes. Why aren't you doing that at home for your parents. So next week, each one of you is going to share a story that you've done at home for your parents without them asking you to do it, wash their car, they bring you to the meetings, right? Yes, wash the car. Okay, throw the trash away, load the dishwasher unload, it takes what 234 minutes to do something like that. So do it at home. And each one of you, which is going to share every week, when we have our meetings, what you did at home for your parents, you know, that's what I was, you know, teaching these individuals is, is those type of values, though, that type of respect, you know, and preparing them for the future, preparing them for their interviews. And, you know, of course, they're so scared and shy to get up there in front. But when they left the program, you can see the difference on these individuals. You know, even some of the young

girls that joined the program, you can see their self esteem has changed. I mean, they were walking around the station now, you know, proud and with a uniform on and you know what, that's I did everything I can. So I feel like I'm doing my part, I need you to do your part.

J

James Geering 36:52

Love that leaving with you said with the eye contact. You know, it was actually one of my dad's best friends wives that taught me how to shake a hand properly. And she was saying, No, you squeezed you know, you're not trying to win the grip contest, but it's not like a wet fish, she's got to look me in the eyes. And that's what we've got to understand this whole kids today participation trophy, all this kind of negative rhetoric that's thrown around, usually by guys that aren't in great shape, and are probably turds in the fire ground. You know that that's not raising someone up. You know, we think about this, we have kids that graduated high school during COVID. That came into an environment where there was zero jobs, and you were given handouts. And now we're trying to educate and pull these kids back into momentum to start enter a profession. They're they their world has been a device. I mean, a lot of these parents are cringe when you see these, like infants with with tablets strapped to their, their baby carriage. And now you're asking them to look me in the eyes and communicate, you know, so unless we show them how to do it, someone showed me how to strip a chain. So I grew up on a farm, I wasn't familiar with a source specifically, someone showed me how to do that, you know, someone showed me how to, you know, start a K 12. And, you know, the right way and the wrong way. Right, you know, but

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38:06

you're right. But nobody's doing that, you know, outside of the fire service, you know, nobody's spending that kind of time I've set tools on the table. And I have them name every tool. I mean, these individuals don't know even now I've seen some, some firefighters that we've hired James, and they don't know how to swing a sledgehammer. I've watched an individual tell me no. And on Sundays, we, you know, we mow the lawn out front. And I was watching this individual and he was walking around the lawn more like he didn't know where to start it how to start the lawn more and it's not his fault. He's never been taught, you know, either been taught to do that. So, you know, it's like he said, it's there. They're born, they're attached to their tablets, their phones and their video games. And I tell them, hey, there's nothing wrong with learning that but they're not managing it. They're just, they're addicted. They because it's an addiction. And they don't realize that it that is an addiction. But, you know, like I said, James, I tried to do my part. I know, some some some of the younger generation. You know, my son, my son was, he was one of our explorers. And when he was like, 15, I signed them up and, and I said, tell my guys, hey, get on him. I mean, you get on and I want you know, he because he played football, my son, you know, he's used to being coached, he wrestled and so on. And, you know, he played Pop Warner since he was a kid he went on to play at USC but but when he was a joined our Explorer program, you know, we were on his butt. I remember when he got hired already In and Out Burger. You know, when he was, you know, going to college and he had that part time job. He was in there and he would be calling off the number and he's screaming at all Little bravado. They had to tell me tone it down. So they put him out of town why he goes, because that's what you guys taught us to speak loud and, you know, as explorers, and so honestly, Yeah, but you're scaring the people away. But But yeah, that's, you know, that's

that's what you know, we, we want to do for the for the young generation. I mean, some of them it's a little too late because they grew up with that, yeah, if I can catch them young and they're willing to work hard, and I'm there for them.

J

James Geering 40:32

You will tie in that all into your journey. Again, you're, you know, this young schoolboy in East LA, and you're getting pulled one direction. Firstly, what was your? What was your patient? Were you dreaming of becoming? And if that wasn't the fire service, what was the influence that took you into uniform?

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40:53

You know, I mentioned earlier as in, you know, I learned to work very young. You know, again, my parents, my dad, he didn't throw anything away. You know, he had a coffee can with nails that were and that my job was to straighten them out. You know, I don't know how many times you bang your thumb and so on. Now's when I wish I probably had the prosthetic to hold the nail, you know, because I hit my thumb so many times. But you know, we didn't waste anything. And so I started working really young. As soon as I was able to I was I was not even in high school yet. It was a summer going into high school. I remember I went and tried to get a work permit because they said you need a work permit to have a part time job. Thinking I was 14, you were able to get a work permit. But I found a job right there down and you know, in the neighborhood at a at a at a wood shop. And they pretty much it had me blowing all the sod does when they were all done for the day. You know, did that. And then that was a bad grub bagging at the grocery store. While take it further back. I did the newspaper realm. And that must have been maybe 10 years old. It was the Herald Examiner in Los Angeles. And you know, they were dropped off the newspapers and you follow me put the rubber band on there, I had the bags on the on the bike. And you know, so that's that's how far back I remember that job. But again, going back when I was in high school, I was a bagging at the grocery store, I was a bagger. And it was at a grocery store where where it was really busy was one of those grocery stores where everybody comes for the produce, because it's cheaper there. And but I worked there and and I did carpet cleaning, I was a helper for one of my buddies and I did that after school because he worked from four to midnight. So I was always working. But working at the at the grocery store is where i is where I met the firefighters. I think that's what introduced me to the job. You know, watching the program emergency back in the day, there was two firefighter program Fire Service Program, a police Adam 12 emergency and they were back to back. So I think watching the emergency was one of the one of the series that inspired me, you know, the job, the action that was going on, I think that was kind of connected with the action that was going on in our neighborhood. But I think I didn't really have nothing. I didn't grow up with parents that were already in the fire service or first responders. We didn't have that, you know, growing up, so you know, no guidance on how to go about getting a job like that. So I think when I built the courage to ask the firefighters coming through my line as I bagged groceries, you know, that was probably my first step to, you know, joining the fire service, they asked me to come to the firehouse and the firehouse was right around the corner from there, station 50 in Los Angeles, and went over to visit the firehouse and first thing you know, they said is you need a high school diploma. That's all you really need, you know, to apply. So that was my first goal is to get that high school diploma. And it was rough. You know, I was a very, in school. I was very knowledgeable. My teachers really, really enjoyed me in class because I

was I would do my homework before I leave the class just because I knew I would be on the streets after class. I don't have time to do homework. So I would do the homework real quick and but I was really active there was always fighting going on in school. I mean, that was to me. To me, that was no big thing. Fighting with someone was not a big thing because I used to balk. So I didn't really mind it. But it wasn't good for for my resume, I should say. But, but oh, you know, I was really well respected there because I went to class. Never miss class. So my teachers always supportive as far as that goes. But I think that's where I first got introduced to, to the fire service is, is working at the grocery store and watching the firefighters come in, you know, buy their groceries, and I finally had the courage to, to ask them, you know, what do I have to do? Or how do I get into the forest service. And then when visit the firehouse, and they pretty much laid some guidelines down for me.

 James Geering 45:28

Well, that speaks a lot about the particular crew that you interacted with, as well, that we have the power to inspire a future generation, or we completely, you know, act like horrible firefighters and dissuade someone from going on a route and you never would have had this amazing career had the first firefighters that you met being a bunch of dicks.

 45:48

You're right, because a lot of times they stereotype individuals, you know, I can tell you at the at the firehouse that we had when I was there a fire station or wealth thing or sell firefighter. There was an individual that moved, moved to one of the moved over here, and then he was going to school at one of the local schools there. And then he went to his counselor into his car, she wants to be in the fire department wants to work as a firefighter. Well, they sent him to the fire station. And whoever he made contact with pretty much stereotyped him and said, all you need to come by when Lewis is here and talk to him. Just fly by, you know, so by the way, he loved her dress, and he came by and talked to me. And I had a long talk with him. And I, I mean, I can relate to the individual. I told him I'm not I'm not telling you how to dress as him but I'm going to tell you, you know, Perception is everything and, and I just ran it down to him. I said, I've never had that type of guidance. I learned the hard way. So I'm going to run it down to you. And you know what this guy's life that turned around. He was still in high school. I signed them up at the community college, he completed his EMT. While he was still in high school senior. I mean, he would come and show me his grades. I set him up with the interview with CalFire. I loaned him some, you know, shirt and tie and clothes eating that much. He moved up here because his girlfriend's family lived here and so on. You can tell you grew up in the streets down in Los Angeles. But you know, and then when he left back, he called me and texted me called me and said, you know, he's at the Rio Hondo Fire Academy. And he's working for UPS. You know, so you know, so like I said, there's some times you know, it said, you might come to the fire station, and there might be some guys that just stereotype someone and and brush him off. Because they've done that to me as an individual, you know, stopping by asking if they're hiring, they would tell me they're not hiring at the time, and they find out later, they're hiring, you know, and so, you know, I can relate to that, to all the adversity James. I've dealt with adversity all my life.

 James Geering 48:04

Absolutely. That's an important takeaway for all of us. You know, you never know who you're going to inspire. We talked about Rio Hondo, your journey. Did it begin with a fire academy or you hired as a non CERT program?



48:15

No, I so I'll tell you how my journey began. So, you know, I find out I talked to the firefighters they tell me all you need is a high school diploma. Cool, thank you. Okay, high school diploma. That's all I need. Okay, I'll get my high school diploma. I apply for LA City Fire Department. And the bad thing Oh, it's always a long process for big cities. But I attended my first fire science class at East Los Angeles College on Eastern at LA County's district upon on Eastern, they got their their station up there. So I was my first fire science class. And during that time, when I was attending the class, I went in the break room. And I seen the flyer they had up there you know how to become a seasonal firefighter with begin back then California Department of Forestry. So that interests me okay, let me see how can I apply for this? And I applied at about six different counties. Riverside, San Bernardino. Then I started heading up north a little bit, you know, Fresno, Tulare, didn't even know where this were Tulare was out of Humboldt County. I went way up north. I just applied and all these different counties. So there I go, James, to my interview that I got my my interview date, I went to Riverside when he made that interview, went to San Bernardino and you know, hit all the hard hit all the all the counties. And I went to Humboldt County. I took the Greyhound from well, I mean, 19 years On the Teaneck team, I took the Greyhound bus took me like 16 hours to get to Eureka or Fortuna somewhere up there all by myself, you know, and I get to to Eureka and I go into a Denny's I walk from the bus station over to the Denny's and go inside the Denny's and and change when the restaurant it's like seven in the morning or eight in the morning. I go in there and change clean up shirt and tie short hair can call for a taxi. I'm thinking big city, I call for a taxi taxi picks me up and takes me down the street and they walk inside there is pretty much the locals, local zero candidates, you know, jeans, boots, Western shirt, you know, they're waiting for the interview. And here I come in with a suit and tie and flat top haircut. And so I sit down and you know, the interviewing the panel after a couple you know, after a while they came out and said hey everybody, you know we're gonna go to lunch. So we'll see you after lunch and so on. I had to actually walk up to them and tell them hey, listen, my bus leaves in an hour. Oh, okay. You're the kid that I'm from filling California. Come on in. Let's interview you. So they interviewed me 20 minute interview. I'm back on the on the Greyhound 16 hours back. And then I arrived and so on about I don't know, maybe two weeks. Three weeks later. They they sent me the letter they call me. I scored a 100 with Riversides interview. You know, I scored high. I'm thinking for sure Riverside's gonna pick me up I scored a 100 Anyhow, they never call me for the job who calls me for the job Humboldt County. So they call it on Thursday. And they said if you want the job be here on Monday for the Academy. So there I go. James 16 hours back to went to a little place called Garberville. That's where they have their Academy. And from there, you know, I was fortunate that they assigned me to Crescent City Fire Station station one right on the Oregon border. I was fortunate that they they assigned me to a captain Captain Prouty. And he had just finished working at the get the fire camp inmate fire camp. So they assigned me to him and you know, he actually didn't have a vehicle. So he actually drove me all the way up to Crescent City. So we got to know each other pretty well. I think he can relate to me at that time. Coming from Los Angeles and him working in the camps, I think he was able to relate with, you know, to my lifestyle at the time, and we hit it off really well. And they lived at the fire station, you know, pretty much in our car. So I my days off, I would take a walk, go to the gym, work out you know, just stay busy trying to leave the fire station for the day come back and

then you know later on in the evening, it's right on the coastline there. And then so I got to know some of the guys that I was spending the night at their, at their house and so on. The guys loved me up to they want me to come back the following season while I was up there. Tulare County called me for the job. I felt that was already stable. I didn't want to make the move. I finished off my season and from there I went to the Allan Hancock Fire Academy in Santa Maria after the season ended, I was I ended up going to the academy in Santa Maria Allan Hancock College again 32 students I was probably the only viral Latino Mexican American whatever you want to call it in the class all white students you know so i i stood out but I knew how to work they cannot work me James You know I they cannot work me but I can tell by the end everybody all the individuals they already have family in the fire service. So it was pretty rough. I you know, at that time because I was living with a friend that you know, like I grew up with He's much older like I said I grew up with older individuals but he was much older and he had an apartment there in Santa Maria so I lived with him during my my academy time. You know, graduated from the academy and came back following season with Tulare County and and worked with CalFire, you know, or CDF back then and I put three seasons in, over here in Tulare County, I was still testing everywhere. You know, everywhere, LA City, you know, Santa Monica Burbank, everyone that was hiring, I was testing and you know, back then, it was so competitive, you had to wait in line overnight, because they would only hand out applications to the first 200 applicants. So I would wait overnight, on the sidewalk or whatever it took to be one of the two hundreds to get an application. I went through all the written exams, physical agilities. past all that I always made it to the interview portion. I don't think maybe back then I didn't have much, much experience. I only had the EMT firefighter one Academy. That's all I had under my belt. But I was young no and and Telerik Tulare city, I was hiring when I was working as a seasonal. And I applied with them. They called me for the job. Maybe about a year and a half later. I just got back from an interview with Santa Monica at the time, but they called me for the job and I you know, I they asked me if I'm still interested in the job says yes, I mean to me that's my goal is to become a full time career firefighter I was a seasonal so so I got hired with with Tulare city and, and the rest was history there. You know, I put 30 years in there.



56:32

And it was it was a great, great career, great job, I was able to raise my kids here. You know, and they have no when I first came up here, I was just grateful for all the programs they have in this area. I mean, anything you can think of they have it, whether it was wrestling, or swimming, you know, Pop Warner Football in JV because I put my kids through all those sports and I coached the majority of the time. So everything you know, I was just I remember just when I was in high return every city when I was new, I would see all the individuals at lunchtime walking around to the across the street to the to the fast food places or places to eat. I would ask the guys Why is everybody out of school all you can walk and go get lunch I'm like really? Where I come from? You know it's you gotta jump the fence and make an escape and go get something to eat and get lucky you don't get you know, you're lucky you don't get caught picked up by the police department so on. Now here, it's all open camp is on my Wow. I'm sure that's going to change someday. As you know, everything has changed by now but but I was really just amazed on the what they had in the programs and everything that they had for individuals here. So so this is where I stayed. I applied for LA City. You know, later on when I was a firefighter and I scored a 100 went through the whole process psych test. You know, I scored a 100 on their interview. But they were asking for residency proof of residency at that time. And I use my mom's address to apply. But I when I got to the interview, I told him I work for a city of Tulare. I said and that's where I also reside. And I'm not going to lie through the



process. That was that and I think it was just meant for me to stay here. Because you know, we've done great we've done a great job here and you know had a lot a lot had a lot to offer here.

**J** James Geering 58:40

Well firstly, I mean this this sort of an amazing story and introduction the fire service like yourself, I had no first responder a military family. Yeah, my my granddad and my great uncle were in World War Two. But I mean, aside from that, I went through blind, you know what I mean? So it is a kind of interesting journey of discovery like oh, you know, you clean toilets and you know, you wash your eggs because you go to the Fire Academy and my fire academy itself didn't really lay out what it was. Luckily my first apartment Hialeah gave us a great kind of orientation on here's what you'll actually be doing. It's not ladder 49 You know, there's more stuff to it than that. But it is interesting because you do I mean you're just totally going in blind and you learning on the fly and even my fire academy in Florida. I work for hire Leo, which is Miami area and then barely a year, not quite a year I go to Anaheim, California, and I'm hired and kind of like yourself I totally relate to your story because I flew two and a half 1000 miles to test two and a half 1000 miles do the physical test two and a half 1000 miles to do the interview there and back and you know so I'm sure they looked at and go Well, this guy's definitely committed. He's got that in his favorite true squad. But then you go and it's like West Coast, West Coast Lauder throws and I'm my learning curve is like Like a vertical line, and if I don't get this, I'm gonna get cut super fast. So yeah, it's interesting, when you have that connection from the beginning and the fire service, you're and a lot of people, you know, you should be well prepared. But for all of us that don't have that kind of generational fire service in our family, it's quite the journey of exploration for a young candidate.

**i** 1:00:23

Yes. And that's, I think that's, that's what I try to, to provide that for individuals, you know, especially even now, when I'm teaching the intro class, I teach a introduction to the Forest Service at the college it's a different zillo different generation. Now there, they don't have, I would say, the majority of them do not have the drive to or they're not hungry, James. There's just a if it comes, it comes if it's doesn't, it doesn't. But I remember when I first got hired up there in Crescent City as a seasonal now I now I can recall what they were doing. But they said, they asked me, you know, we're going to plant with it, install a generator, and they took me behind the station. So I need you to dig a hole to buy to buy to throw in drop the generator in there. Not a problem. I dug it up, James, I don't know, it was pretty quick. I measured it with the measuring tape, I think I I surprised them or what's the word I'm looking for? They were just surprised that, that maybe they didn't think that I know how to work with tools, you know, coming from the streets of Los Angeles, they probably think this individual probably never held a shovel before a hammer. So I think when I dug it up and told them back then said it's ready to go. And they may have had the measuring tape in my hand, got to measure it for them. And, you know, I think I earned my respect with with all the captains, they're everywhere that I've worked, you know, due to the respect and the work ethics and so on, I was one of the only individuals that was going out there after five o'clock and going in the garage and, and working out with whatever weights we had there. But I would jog with a big area with jog around the, you know, around the station there. I think that was already I was already programmed that way, I had that as self discipline to do that. So So I think, you know, that's to me, that's, that's



why I love to, to sit with some of the youth and give them that guidance that they need. Because nobody else is going to do that anymore. You know, nobody really has the time to do anything for free. Nobody wants to do anything for free anymore. You know, even in the fire department nowadays, I you know, I would hang out over there and train, you know, if I hear that they're doing a training drill on my day off, I'm there. You know, now it's different. It's nobody's there for unless again, paid overtime, or whatever reason it is. You know, I recall, you know, after when you're getting off of work, you sit there and have a cup of coffee with the guy who probably sit there another half hour just talking. And now I recall individuals putting in for overtime. 15 Minutes Overtime, because they were waiting for the relief to come from the other station, and then putting them for their 15 minutes of overtime. And by now I'm the chief officer and I said, Hey, I had a talk with him. I'm good with it. That's your right. I'll give you the 15 minutes of overtime. But from now on. You have to stay here till eight o'clock. Don't leave at 715 or leave at 730 You have to stay here till eight o'clock because we're paying so it's what what do you want to play? You let me know, I'm willing to go. You're right. I'm willing to do that. But you stay. Oh, well, that change really quick. You know, it's like, Come on, guys. Really, you're waiting for your other guy to get here from another station across town. You're putting in for 15 You were here 10 minutes, but you weren't put in for 15 minutes of overtime. You know, that's just the different mentality nowadays. And it's changed so much you know that James, you would sit around the fire station and watch a watch TV or watch a TV program or series and everybody's in there. Now you walk into any station or anywhere and every individual is on their phone. You know, everyone's isolating themselves and so on. That's just the way society has made it for everybody. But so it's it's totally changed now. It's it's different, you know, everywhere nationwide, not just the far Our service just in general, I think it's changed.

J

### James Geering 1:05:03

Well, this is a conversation I have, I always throw the American fire helmet in as a sacrificial lamb in this conversation, because if you hear people talking about that, it's like, oh, it's tradition. That's like, no, that's not tradition. That's history. That is a helmet that arguably we should have really progressed away from by now. But we're hanging on to it because we have wet dreams about Kurt Russell and Backdraft. That's the real reason. But tradition is the firehouse kitchen table. Tradition is all hands on the rig, the tradition is playing a sport or working out to get those a tradition as you know, selflessness, and family and tribe and service. And one of the things that I loved about Anaheim when I was there, and they, again, that was back when you had to fight for a position I tested when I flew all that way, against 1000 candidates, all that were certified firefighters, EMTs and or paramedics, history, ambulance operators, volunteer firefighter, I mean, you name it, their resume was stacked and you're you're competing against these incredible men and women, then their probation was a year, and usually through attrition, they would lose 25% of each new hire class. So they weren't afraid to let you go if you didn't reach that bar. So by the time you get through that year, you're kind of welcomed. And you've gone through this crucible, you had some pretty phenomenal human beings from firefight through the chief and everywhere in between. And that old school mentality was there, that tradition was there. And one of the things I loved and it's contrast against where I've worked recently, you would show up, take their gear off the rig, put your gear on, check everything out, because you knew that they got their ass handed to them, and you let them sleep. Contrary to that, my last place, lights would come on, no one gave a shit whether you'd been up all night, because you had to physically come out and take your gear off to I mean, a slight difference, but a massive difference when you look at it. One is a guy coming in early, making sure that that person they're leaving doesn't get hit with that call 30 minutes

before they're supposed to go home to their kids. The other one is the piece of shit that sits in the carpark till one minute before their quote unquote, shift change. And then that fucker walks in. So



1:07:20

yeah, I dealt with all that James, I mean that you know that we all relate to that. But again, I was I was always like, 100% 100%, dedicated and loyal to my department. That's just, you know, it, you don't it's rare. Now, like I said, it's very, there's only certain individuals and it's, it's sad sucks. It sucks. It makes me sad now doesn't even make me doesn't even pissed me off anymore. The story that I'm hearing now just makes me sad about what I hear now. You know, and but yeah, it'll we have people that show up their whole career a minute before eight o'clock. And we're what's wrong with this picture here? You know, that's not what you said, when you We interviewed you. You know, and, um, but, you know, there's so many REITs nowadays, you know, everybody's so cautious about it. But yeah, it's, it's changed a lot. And, and I'm fortunate, I'm grateful that I grew up in that era. I'm really, you know, you know, some people Yeah, you're old school with it, old school gets the job done. I'll tell you right now. You know, it's, it's, it's unfortunate. And I'm grateful for it, you know, that, that I was brought up in that era, and, and learned what I had to learn. But, uh, you know, and now, like I said, Now, I'm willing to, to help out these individuals. And I'll share a couple stories later on about individual that I'm, I'm still helping now. That's it, that's not going to end. You know, I think that's, that's who I am. And I'm gonna, I'm gonna do whatever I can to help other individuals that are willing to help themselves and that make it clear with them. So maybe I can do it for you, I can guide you and help you but you got to put the work in, said, I still get up. I've been retired. I don't think I've slept in yet. James and I still get up and I go to the gym, you know, 536 o'clock in the morning. That's just my lifestyle now, and I want to keep it that way. So that I got to take care of me, not just physically but it helps me mentally. That's the one thing I gotta tell you. I'm not here to I'm not trying to be a bodybuilder during any of that stuff. But it helps me mentally that's my one of my outlets. You know, self care. That's one of my outlets for is working out. You know, it's, you know, it's one thing that helps me, everybody has their own outlet and that's fine. I got a friend of mine that we retired together and, you know, I go to his house. He doesn't answer his phone. It's like 730 And he's like, Hey, Hey today with Tandy retirees waker he said don't call me till after nine o'clock I'm like, how many dry with a cup of coffee at 730? Open you Come on have a cup of coffee with me. You know, I said, everybody knows I've always been that way. I'm the first one up last one down James That's how this way I've always been, you know, even as a captain as a captain for 1012 years and, and, you know, I didn't, I'm the last one down, I do my walk around with my guys make sure everybody's down. And that's just who I've always been. But I'm still I'm still still hooking it up, as I call it still hooking it up.



James Geering 1:10:41

Well, speaking of that, so I mean, we've spent over an hour just talking about mentorship and tradition and some of the other areas. So you're now working for your, your, what was your current department? Talk to me about January 26 2002.



1:10:58

January 26 2002, had been there for 10 years now. You know, a little over 10 years or 10 years

Yeah. And you know, I'm, I'm active firefighter all of all about training them you know, taking every class possible just driven driven firefighter. You know, I at that time before that date, you know, I was I was one of the individuals that brought the confined space program, confined space rescue program to our department, you know, I would go out take a class and bring it back to our department and so on. I'll tell you about that, that air that air later but January 26th 2002, I'm at home and I have my kids and I'm going through through through some bad times I'm going through divorce but that time James and I got three three kids, one single day and I got three kids and you know, my mom, I know I had I don't know how I did it back then. You know trying to go to work and having the kids and dealing with all the everything else that goes through when you're having going through those times. But I leave to work that morning and I you know babysitters livings live outs I did everything to try to keep keep my kids stable, I guess you know, because they were all good. They were young. So I leave I go off and they leave to work their morning wintertime cold foggy morning in here in the valley and I stopped I stopped that and bought a gift card for when the when the my one of my co workers one of my friends. Not true. He's the one I just told you that retired with me. I stopped because it was his birthday. So I stopped that at Home Depot.



1:12:58

On the way in, I don't know if it was home base at the time or Home Depot bought a gift card and I get to work that morning.



1:13:09

I come in and they asked me they assigned me to go across town to one of the other fire stations because somebody was going to be gone for half a day. So you know I'm one of them. I'm at the bottom of the totem pole and I've been I was a firefighter for 10 years and they were a small department there was not much movement there. And we had a lot of older dinosaurs there that were just starting to retire at the time but I was I was the young guy I was the one doing everything for 10 years. I was the rookie for 10 years where it was more important we don't hire much you know and again you fight for your positions I get there and they said you know you gotta go across town you know someone's leaving for half day so I need you to go there or over there for the day. Okay get back and get my car and head over there. on there and you know we're working in the shop cleaned up the engines and so on. And I get a we get a call our lines down again you know we've gone to those these calls from wherever it's called to call. You know somebody was cutting trees and snap some power lines and there was some arcing going on and so we so we respond out there we arrive at the scene and we see powerlines is laying across the roadway there. You can see where they cut trees down and so we staged we parked in front of the place we tape the area of and standby for Edison. Electric Southern California Edison they're the electrical company out here. Well as we're sitting there, there's a house next door to where to where all the trees were cut down and the lady comes out of her house and I can get out of the the fire engine or walk over and telling us sheltering play So, as she's walking out, she's no walk up to see what she needs. And she's telling me in front of her house, there's a tree there that has this smoldering, a couple of limbs that were smoldering. So I said, Okay, I looked at it okay, go go inside the house, I went back on the engine and, you know, I suit up for my girls golden helmet on and, and that last one of the other firefighters, you know, we walk over there. And we're kind of just looking around at the tree. And we don't see any power lines here. Then we see I seen some some, some smoldering

going on because again, it was wintertime, everything's really dry. So the power line was camouflaged into the branches. And then I reach out with my right hand and I break one of the limbs that was smoldering, I reach up with my left hand and grab another branch at the same time, I grabbed the 12,000 volt, high voltage power line, and I became stuck to it. And I got lit up, I got lit up James like, like a light bulb, I can actually see electricity, like a halo of electricity around my body. And I could hear that loud buzzing noise and it was shaking me really hard. And everything crossed my mind. I'm gonna die. If I don't get off of this wire that actually crossed my mind. You know, my kids everything. It's just It's weird how that happens and everything just instinctively crosses your mind. And I started fooling myself. In a Friday night. I started fighting I remember yelling like, oh, wah, and then I'm trying to pull myself off of the wire. Well, we had another our engineer. At the time he was the acting captain Marky, he runs up. And Mark has always been aggressive. He's a farmer. He's a hard working farmer and he's aggressive guy and me and him were really close buddies. He runs up and throws his clipboard, the metal clip or he gather information, he throws it, he said he threw like a Frisbee. He threw it and then hits the wire. And I think my weight and him hitting the wire helped me disconnect off of the wire. And I fell down fell back. I fell back because I had my helmet on I think like, split the back of my head when they landed on my head and so on. But he dragged it was disconnected and then he dragged me away. He dragged me away. So they dragged me away. I think when I landed, boom, I think I blacked out for like a second just that impact. Um, because I woke up and I looked around and I could see, you know, them running at me I can see one of the captains running in with the with the AED at the time or the monitor, I remember and so they dragged me away and they're trying to pull my coat off for me. So I sat up a little bit and I kind of help them pull my coat off because everyone's yanking on me. And you know, they pretty much thought I'm going to die because they seen how lit up I was the captain looked at my fingertips and they had some small holes on the fingertips of my right hand and he I remember him saying there's his exit wound they never stripped me down yet. So he called the lid calling for ambulance some of the guys told me that you know there was guys off duty that that responded back then you had these pagers at your house we call them electron that they would hit the alarm if there's a huge fire they need assistance and you're and you're off so over the radio everybody heard you know firefighter down and everybody is saying you're the last person I thought was going down because you were always training and you know safety so they can remember the captain saying there's his exit wound there and they lay me down I'm still talking James I'm talking the whole time I never really looked at my hand but I recall telling them my hands burning you know my hands burning now remember they went and grabbed the the water from the from the engine and dump cool water on my hand. I do recall that the pain relief there but the ambulance arrives they're going to put me in a cease didn't see spawn me on the board. I just get up and get on the gurney and tell them let's go you know let's go my hands burning everybody said you No, they all they all thought that he, he's gonna die in any minute. He's in shock. So he's still talking. That's what the rumor was. I pretty much left I left my footprints on the grass there. The power went out in the neighborhood because I became the ground. So I looked at at one of the other firefighters Steve, and I said, Steve, jump in ride with me to the to the hospital eel, he looks back at the captain captains. Yeah, go ahead. And he jumps in with me and we're taking me to the hospital, I'm talking from still talking. In fact, I'm even kind of joking around back there. So I get into the ER, and that's when I started feeling, you know, my legs, my back my butt every I started feeling you know, the pain from the burns. So they stripped me down. And that's when they had exit wounds and third degree exit wounds, like, like seven holes, or each calf was blacked and, and had a hole on each calf, my thigh, my underarm, my butt cheeks. I just had holes everywhere from the exit one. So they they shipped me the ship, they were gonna fly me over there. But I guess he was faster the ambulance drove me to Fresno, their burn unit over there. And they gave me some morphine. And so I wake up when enrolling me into the hospital there. And my friend that I told you that I

bought the gift card for he happened to be at the hospital. So I don't know how long everything took at the local hospital there to Larry, because when I got up when I woke up and the rolling me into the burn unit, I see my friend Nacho there, and I sit up and they yell Happy Birthday, bro. Yeah, so, you know, the, the the nurses, they all said that's a good sign that he can still remember, that was a good sign. So they're rolling into the hyperbaric chamber. And they asked me, Do you have any, you know, any issues or problems going into this tube, I said, No, just make sure you document two hours of confined space training. You know, I'm still talking and joking around like this James. And they're like, you know, I don't think this guy knows how severe his burns are. But that's who I was, um, you know, I like to joke around and, and, and so they did that I remember being in the hyperbaric chamber, then that led to, you know, five, six weeks at the burn unit.



1:22:44

And I was there and again, that led to the amputation of my mid form left mid form, they first removed, I think their first remove like three fingers, they were trying to save as much as possible. The doctor did a great job there, Dr. Dominic, he did a great job, because he actually did try to save as much as possible, he could have easily just amputated my, my arm above elbow, but he left me a lever here and you skin grafts to leave that lever, you know, he actually took some fatty tissue to pat it up, and then use skin grafts just to leave that lever there for a prosthetic. So that really helped out. So I you know, I ended up ended up in the hospital for anything five weeks. And, and a lot of support there from from the, from the fire fire service in general, you know, mostly just all the neighboring agencies, firefighters came from everywhere to see me and a lot of family and friends support there. Which, you know, I think that kept my spirits up. I always I always had my spirits up in there. I don't know if people asked me well, you know, we want to know about about, we want to see some of your downtime when you were, you know, sad and I'm like, Well, I always kept my spirits up. I did hear while I was there, you know, there was times, James that I would hear people come and tell me oh, you know, you need to start thinking of plan B or, you know, we've never heard of a firefighter with the, with the prosthetic or, you know, an amputated limb. And all these to me, I'm thinking okay, I heard that growing up. As a teenager when I wanted to kill him. Firefighter had heard all the individuals, you know, in the environment I grew up in, I heard him telling me it's too hard to be a firefighter. You can't be a firefighter. So I've already faced that type of adversity. So to me, that didn't bother me. I just felt like you know what, that's prove them wrong, you know, I'm gonna make that decision. And, you know, also, you can see, the media was pretty heavy on me, you can see when I walked out of the hospital, I got footage of the media, and you know, of course, all support there. But uh, you know, one of the things that when I'm walking out of the hospital, I'm thinking, Yeah, I'm gonna get a prosthetic, and we're gonna put a spanner wrench there. And, you know, this is as I'm walking out of the hospital, you know, so I'm already thinking that I really still have a vision, I'm coming back to work, you know, where I'm gonna make that decision later, but I was released from the hospital. And I was offer a couple months, I'm gonna say about four or five months, James of going through through some occupational therapy, finding a prostatitis who's gonna make my prosthetic and I did find one. And we built a, I'm still with the same individual. But when I met him, he said, I'm more worried about your burns, you know, your body, then in your actual prosthetic. So we know we kind of worked hard, I found the right adapter device for for my prosthetic, because it took different adapters to find that I found the one that's called a farmer's labor hook. And that's how I can grab all the tools. You know, obviously, maybe some farmer invented it, because this is how you grab the shovels, and, and any round handles. So, you know, I was training again, I was training, I had lost a lot of weight. You know, I was really I wasn't really well shaped before I went in. Again,

I've always worked out. So I lost a lot of weight. James, I remember, you know, coming out of the hospital, now I'm still dealing with with my kids as single dad. And my parents came from, from Los Angeles and spent some time you know, helping me out with the kids. But, you know, there was really nothing, no type of, of therapy, counseling or any of that for me and my case, we didn't have anything, we just pretty much wrote it out. I'm sure there probably was but I didn't have the guidance to to reach out for that. So I, again, I would go work out football when the firefighters he would come pick me up, Carlton would come pick me up in the evening, I didn't really want to go out much, you know, I'm dealing with body image now that's lost a hand back then it was rare. Now, you know, you got so many wounded warriors. prosthetics are a fashion now. I mean, you have them everywhere with designs and so on. So back then it was you know, it was rare to see somebody with a missing limb, especially in upper extremity, lower extremity, you were much more advanced back then. But, you know, I started going to the gym at night. And I started to want to build my strength back up. So what I did, I would, I would get an ankle strap and put it on my forearm and use the cable machine all different directions and just started building up my strength again, I finally got fitted for a prosthetic. After about six months, I got fitted for a prosthetic. And I came back to work on light duty during prevention. But while I was there, I was on an eight to five light duty. I was training every day with the different crews that were coming on duty. I was training, whatever training drill they had, you know, they allowed me to participate. So I was training on duty off duty James till I felt really competent with with my prosthetic you know, I was ready to to take the manipulative exam. And, I mean, I was just trained that was that driven and, and that competent, that I knew exactly where I'm going to grab the hose when I connect, you know, I grabbed the mail and I screw on the female end, you know, so I, we had we hired some firefighters at the time. And we have our own internal in house Academy. And I was given the opportunity to to be part of the academy. And again, it was it was it was a good thing. You know, I I did everything that was required, you know, I figured it out and I would train and you know, we did ventilation we did vehicle extrication. We did just all the basic essentials, and I did it all with my prosthetic climb aerial ladder. You know, people asked me what do you feel was the hardest, or for you, I would say just raising the ladder with the halyard. I said as far as going hand over hand, I wouldn't grab a bite, pull it down and hold it with my prosthetic and grab another bite. And that's what you know, that's, that's really probably one of the only things that I felt that I was doing different. But I raised the ladder, I didn't, you know, like I said, I, the strength was there, I worked out. Um, you know, that's why me I can I'll do people on push ups or whatever, because I love to work out. So let's do the physical part of it, the physical challenges were, you know, that's what we live for, as firefighters, we love the physical challenges, they were their physical challenges i i enjoyed, because I was still learning and you're, you know, to me, I'm a student my whole life. People ask me are you instructor your student, I'm a student forever, I've always learned. So the physical challenges were there. I don't think I really gave myself much time to to mourn or a brief you know, or grieve on, on on what actually happened because I was so driven, so busy, and I would come home and I'm taking care of my kids. And I really don't know how I did. You know, if I had projects on the house, I would do it when they when I put them to sleep. And I was painting all night or whatever I would do. You know. And so So, you know, went through the academy, went through the academy, and I took all my final exams, you know, we did all the final manipulative exams and passed everything, passed everything. I mean, we had I had people from HR from the city, they were there when I was doing the, the exams, everybody was there. Everybody wanted to see, and I wanted people to see, because I felt that company, there was a point where I was connecting the large diameter holds your supply line from the hydrant. And I was being timed on it. And I remember just getting to the cap of the hydrogen. And instead of just putting the hydrogen wrench, I just used my prosthetic and boom, hit it a couple times loosened it. And now it's off to the races. I mean, I was driven that way. So time came and I passed everything, all the exams, and I got, you know, I came



back to work and came back to work and I was reinstated back on duty, no, no commendations, no restrictions, they didn't change anything for me, came back as a fire. You know, I, I was training on everything I was trained on, setting up an IV line, I was set trained on taking blood pressures. I mean, I was dialed i was I knew exactly where I'm where I grabbed the stethoscope.



1:32:43

And you know, and came back I passed everything. You know, we did C spine, everything, all the basic EMT skills, the basic firefighter skills that are required. Like I said, I've been there already as a firefighter 1011 years, it was just learning how to adapt with the prosthetic and the device, you know. And then so I came back, came back out, then January of 2003. A year later, I was back on duty, full time, no restrictions, no accommodations, back as a firefighter. I remember my very first day back on duty the media was there. The media actually wrote it did a ride along they got in our engine with us and and they videotaped me on the medical aid and so on putting on my turnouts and I mean, I pass everything James I put on Don, my BA put my gear on within the time that's required. So I did that in I came back as a firefighter. Then I went back to I was also an instructor in, in firefighter survival back then. Back then it was it was Rick, you know, which firefighters survival was part of Ric then they divided into two different classes. But I was you know, I went back and did that again. I went back to the all my rope rescue courses, and I was already instructing me, but I would show up I want to go back as a student. So I would show up I remember when we were in Fresno, doing the rescue systems, one and chief gherkin from Kings County. He was one of the instructors. So I would arrive or John Perrella. And they were like, hey, Louis, you to help us teach today. I said, No, I'm a student. Treat me like a student. I'm a student and I want to just keep building my skills up with my prosthetic. And we were in the tower up there that repelled down from I don't know, third or fourth floor, rebelled down, they came down and went to achieve working and his name is Chris and I went door to Chris and I say Chris, who do I talk to if there's an injury, saying what happened? I got a rope burn right here on my prosthetic. Rappelling now so he put a bandaid on there. I got a picture of him putting A bandaid on there, James. But again, you know, I was, like I said, I was driven. So I went back as a student to all the classes that I've already done in the past, you know, and that was teaching, instructing that I want to go back as a student went back to the confined space, all the firefighters survival, I went to San Bernardino County took their, their, their rig class, their firefighters survival class over there. And again, people would kind of look at me like, Okay, how's he? How's the, uh, how's he going to, you know, do ladder bailout, you know, and that could see, some of the instructors are walking around trying to act like, they're not there to watch me. I know what's going on, you know, I know, I stand out, I know that, you know, people are curious, you know, or don't want me to get hurt, but I tell them, hey, you know, cuz they're like, you might want to try it this way. I'm, like, I got it, you know, I've done it several times. And this is not my first time. And so I was, you know, I said I was that active and that driven and, and still going back to where I left off, you know, training wise, came back and finished, completed my, my instructors courses and competed and became a senior instructor in the, in the confined space and, you know, started promoting through the ranks and became a driver, operator engineer. And again, that's, that, to me, that was that was that was ease pretty easy. You know, I was doing a lot of acting time before when, as a firefighter, small departments, you get a lot of acting engineering time. So I knew exactly how to grab my tools, how to grab my chainsaw, where I'm going to place my hand, you know, connecting my hydraulic lines, you know, everything that we didn't have battery operated back then extrication tools. And then I and then we opened up a new fire station, we had some people retirements and, and they promoted several captains and I tested for Captain.



And then I was a captain for 12 years. I engine company, again, just, you know, always training that was, you know, training training training was was me putting on classes all the time, just that I was driven that way. So most of the most of the fires are fire departments, especially here in this whole valley here, you know, back then they, they would seem that all the training classes and, and I know, nobody never had to do anything different for me. You know, I remember going up to Sacramento just to renew my firefighter survival. cert, and, you know, they those individuals, they didn't know what it was, but you know, they watch me go through the skills, some of them were kind of he does that, that's how do you do that? Does that not hurt you? You know, that's, that's just that's just, you know, that's my hand I used as a tool, you know, going through current San Bernardino County going through their firefighter survival course or, you know, they put us through these mazes and and then you get the entanglement prop. And then at the end of the wall, they want you to reach through there without using any tools, you know, either your tank or your helm, and so on. My guys were, it was me and two other guys that went and did this. And they already knew they weren't inside of that wall, they already knew what was gonna happen. They see my hook, right, go right through that sheet wrong. That was the first I cut it out really quick. But my cut through that sheet run today, that's you know, but again, going, nothing was easy for me, James, you know, going through the entanglement prof I kept my my prosthetic down next to my site, because I don't want to get tangled up, you know, you're blindfolded and so on. But, you know, nothing was easy to, you know, to be successful. And everything I've done, it's taken, you know, a lot of work that people don't see, like the iceberg the picture of the iceberg, you know, nobody sees what's going on down at the bottom, they just see the top of the iceberg. Nobody sees all the struggles, everything else that goes with it, you know, doing that, and then coaching my kids, you know, I remember after losing my hand, you know, it was it was hard for my kids, you know, they, their friends, you know, they're now they're looking at me like and they're looking at me, like their friends are looking at, oh, her dad or his dad don't have a hand. That was rare for the kids to see that. And remember, my son didn't want to play any sports. You know, when I got out of the hospital, and I didn't allow that to happen, there's no I'm still willing to go back out and I'm still going to continue to coach you know, so I did whatever I can do to just keep them, you know, stable and keep trying to keep everything as normal as possible, I should say. And, you know, and going to work and like I said, sometimes I look back. I don't know how I did all that. You know, but again, there was a lot of, you know, there was a lot of a lot of times that it was it was difficult But I never said nothing. And after a while, nobody ever looked at me like I have a prosthetic. Everybody just people forget, I have a prosthetic around here, people forget I have a prosthetic, they said, well, it's just the way you, you work the way you carry yourself and so on. And there were, I was never one of those individuals that said, Uh, why me? You know, I always said, train me, you know, that's why I'm that's and, and you know, and then I, you know I was a captain and later on after those 12 years, I tested for battalion chief I didn't get it, the first score of I tested like two or three times, you know, I didn't get it the first two times I scored high enough to promote it, you know, they give it to other individuals. So then I went back and got my bachelor's degree. And that was another challenge for me, James, you know, typing with one finger, people forget about all that. It's, you're writing papers constantly, when you're going for your degree, your your program. So I went back and did that and got my degree in Business Administration with an emphasis on leadership. That was that was that I missed that that was great. So, you know, that kind of brought those skills up, you know, my writing skills, and my, you know, education brought that up. So then I tested again, for the, for the battalion chief position and got promoted. So I was a talented for for four years. And then I became the training battalion chief overtraining, and, and then, then, our fire chief retired. And when he retired, he assigned me as a fire chief. So I did that for three years. I was ready to retire, you know, but I put those other three years in there, James, and I'm glad I did, because I brought a lot of good things to our department. You know, I mean, I had a really good

relationship with, with the individuals there, I knew how to communicate with them and read them when I see something's going on, something's not wrong, that's one thing that they can talk they can all tell you is that, you know, I was fair with everybody. And to me, I don't care who you are, if you work hard, and you come to work and and ask yourself, How can I make my department better? How can I serve the community better, I'm going to acknowledge you, if I see you doing it, I don't care who you are, those people that are lazy. And I'm not afraid to say the work because they're lazy, you know, they'd have no drive, they just come in, do a little time sit around in the recliner as much as they can and punch out in the morning.



1:42:45

I don't have nothing for you, you know, I'm sorry. But you know, that you're not making, you're not making my department better that way. And I would call them in James, just one thing I can tell you, when they did not get promoted, I would call him in and sit them down and tell them why I did not promote them and tell them what they have to do. Because I want to promote them. I tell him I want to promote you, but you got to put the work in. So nothing was handed to me. Nothing. I said, you know, I did a lot for his department I put up I put the organize the use or the training facility. You know, there was really no, for the training facility. It was really no those funds for that. I mean, I reached out to the industry. It was me and another captain and and we're the only two that really had an interest in the technical rescue at that time, we reached out to the industry to get most of our props donated. You know, I got volts donated, I got to silos. I mean, so, you know, I did a lot of work for my department and, you know, hard work works pays off, you know, so that's how I felt as a chief, I was fair with everybody. But you know, don't go taking a class or a couple of classes a month before promotions, and think you're going to change my mind. So, so I was really fair with everybody I can, you know, call somebody in if I can read them as something's going on. Something's not right. And that's I think that's that's the major difference with me and, and other individuals that have been in that position. I said, I care about the firefight, I care about my people, I really truly care and they all know that you know, till this day they are now they you know they reach out and say I care about it, but I want you know, I make sure I help you make sure that you fit for duty. If you're not you don't need to be here. I said I hate to see anything happen to anybody. I've been through it and I don't want to see it happen to anybody else. So if I see something, you know, you need to go home. If you're not feeling it we're not going to wait around till after the fact you know and then you know try and do something after the fact but but that was that's one thing you know before I left also, you know we put the mental wellness program in place. We had one of our captains, Vincent that spearheaded it. And I supported it as a chief and, and we did a good job with it. We put peer support team and, and I brought some some of individuals. I don't know you and Andy Ruiz and a couple other guys from LA City to come speak to our department, I always brought her brought line audit cause Crothers to speak to our department. You know, Don Abbott, I was doing everything. As a chief officer to make my department because we had a reputation in the value of our department being up there authority, when it comes to training, everybody would ask, When are you guys putting some training on? Because I pushed it, I was the advocate for training. And they always brought people from everywhere to come and put on the class or train the trainer. You know, that's I did everything I can to make sure that everyone gets the best training possible. But, you know, right before I retired, also, you know, we had a, they had an incident and one of our neighboring agencies in Porterville, we had two fatalities over there. And both of those individuals were really close to me. One of them, you know, he helped me he was an instructor with me, we taught together at the academy, young, younger generation, you know, they kind of looked up to me, I mentored them. And the other one was a lot younger, where he grew up

down the street from me when my son play football with his with his older brother, and as a kid, he always wanted to be a firefighter. So you know, we, I lost those two guys over there. For I retired, in fact, that was on my way home from from meeting up with line or us in Orange County, they were doing the fire ground survival class, and on my way home from there. I got a phone call that you know, city of Porterville has a mayday going on. Okay, so I started thinking about and the first thing I asked, you know, check it raise raise on duty re Figaro captain, he's the one that he's one of the ones that we lost. And so later on, I got on the way home, I got the phone call that that it's it's it was Ray, and Patrick Jones was the firefighter. So we lost those two, and that that that was pretty, pretty hard on me. You know, because I was pretty close to these individuals, even though their neighboring agency are still really close to me. I've known them since they were young, young, young individuals. But But yeah, that's a little bit about me, James.

J

James Geering 1:47:30

Well, I mean, there's so much in the last 30 minutes of what you've told us, but I mean, it's it's beautiful to hear it, you know, chronologically from that initial event to your journey back to the fire service, and all these other elements. When I heard you talking about prior to the event, and trying to maintain a household, I was a single dad going not only through the fire service, but going through medical school at the same time, and I look back on that, I don't know how the hell I did it. Because you come off a super busy shift, not sleeping at all, go straight into a medic classroom for nine hours, then go to bed, wake up and do a ride along where the hospital clinic clinical with the hospital right along with the department where I live, not where I worked, because my department offered zero support to their medic students, even though they were screaming for him. Now the whole conversation, right, but then fast forward a couple more years, I ended up having a pretty severe back injury, which, again, you're still a single parent, you're still trying to maintain your household but now your physicality has been taken away, you're not around your tribe anymore, you know, what you used to be able to climb, you know, 100 stories with with your gear on. And now you can't even put your shoes on anymore. So those were a couple of times where when I look back, it was definitely some of the lower points of my, my career, you know, and then the pendulum swung again. And I was fine and never got to the like suicide ideation element, but definitely very, very deep in depression and leaning heavily on alcohol. With all the things that you've told us, when you look back now with this, you know, this lens that you have a full career in the fire service of line of duty deaths of, you know, near career ending injuries. What was some of the lowest points in your path? And how were you able to navigate those?

i

1:49:27

Well, I think one of the one of the lowest points was, you know, when when I when I lost my hand and they weren't sure what they want to do with me, the city never had to deal with any type of injury that way so they weren't sure. You know, I think I had a fight for my job. You know how to get an attorney just to help fight for my job back. To prove that I can do the job because I was not going to do it. James. If I was going to get her or if anybody else was going to get her. I was not going to put my So in that situation, I want to make sure that I can do the job. So there was a time where I was training, I was still, you know, back to work and I'm training to come back to work. I'm still on light duty. But I had my gear on because I was training with the crew, and they had a vehicle fire. And I asked the captain, can I jump in the engine? And that

was the first time I got in the engine after my injury. He's like, Yeah, come on, let's go. And you know, just pretty much stand back. Okay, so we get to the vehicle fire. And you know, me, James, I grabbed I grabbed one of the, one of the tools. It was a it was a, you know, engine compartment, I grabbed one of the tools and fry, fry the hood OP on the side, so they can stick the nozzle in there. Anyway, everything went well. Well, that evening, they call me, the captain calls me and he said, Hey, you know, someone from City Hall seeing you out there, they just want to make sure that you're not, you know, pretty much telling you're not allowed to get on the engine and go with us on calls. It just crushed my heart. Like, they don't want me to come back. You know, I remember I was driving and you know, I just crushed my heart, you know, you know, but I just felt like, they're trying not, you know, they're, they don't want me back first of all, so that was low, you know, any other time was pretty much. I think a lot of it has to do more when, when, when, when I'm dealing with with my kids, you know, the relationship thing that kind of brings you down? That That kind of brings you down. Like I said, James, we never, we never really had professional assistance or not for my kids, not, you know, for me, they sent me to pain management. Once and as a group people talking about their their back pain, I'm honored to be here. I mean, it'd be at the lake, wakeboarding. You know, it's, that's my therapy to me, you know, I you know, but as far as feeling low, I think just going through the motions of, of, of not, not knowing what the outcome was going to be, if there wouldn't allow me to come back or not. Again, there's, there's other times that, you know, when I'm by myself, you know, I have my low moments, you know, but other than that, I, I, the way I snap myself out of it is either for one, you know, I told you I go to the gym to I always look back at myself and and tell myself, hey, I need to be grateful. And it'd be grateful for being alive, continuing to be here for my kids and, and so on. You know, I just kind of tell myself, like a, you know, for everything that I have, and the great career that I had, but but back then my moments, my low moments were. I don't think they were too. too obvious. Because I think I was just so driven all the time. You know, I was always the type of person that I am always busy. I'm finding something to do. And I think I can say that pride comes from as a child. You know, I'm always adventurous. You know? That's, that's pretty much I've always been, but people always ask me the same question you just did with? Well, we want to see some of your low moments. And I'm trying to recall most of my low moments is when I'm by myself, and I'm thinking, you know, or I'm on a long drive. You know, that's probably my low moments when there's times that I break down. And I'm human, and I break down and cry, and so on. But most of those times are really when, when I'm by myself on the long drive, or you know, and that's again, that's one thing that I never really got heavy into drinking or drugs because I knew myself that drinking is, is we don't mix. Drinking, I don't mix well. You know, people tell me you drink one drink, you're okay to drink. Sure. Okay, after that, you know, your mind starts thinking some crazy stuff. Cycle. Yeah. So I try not to, you know, do that. And when I was going through hard moments, I don't drink. So I think that I have the strength to, to, to not drink if I don't want to drink. But as far as the low moments go, they'll never I'll never forget that one there that I just mentioned to you, when they called me and said hey, you know, don't be on the fire engine. Other than that, you know, most of them were, you know, it was pretty much you know, going through Uh, you know, going through going through the motions or, or I know I did well, and then they call me tell me you missed it by one point. It's a political move there, you know, you know, I know that I'm well aware of it, but I never allowed it to change. Why am James as a firefighter, as every, every, every position, every rank that I've had, James, I've always strived to go out and get the training that I need to be better than everybody else. As a firefighter, I'm preparing to become an engineer, driver operator, I put myself through the, through the fire mechanics Academy, I will do everything I can to, you know, be the best, which it didn't matter much. You know, and small requirements, they already know who they want to promote, and so on. But I gave them a run for their money, you know, and then that wasn't going to change, you know, that was not going to change I, I went on took every course in, did everything I can just to just to stay on top, I

learned that like I said, I look back unless I tell him, I don't know how I did all that. You know, of course, my parents helped me a lot because they would come and spend the week with my kids while I go take a course you know out of town, but back then everything. I paid for it on my own. Now you have tuition reimbursement now we're we're begging individuals to go take a course for paying for their, you know, their hotel. And then of course, in the back then, if there was a tuition reimbursement, it was kept really, really undercover for certain individuals, but I pretty much put myself through through it all. And, you know, it didn't allow anything didn't allow me to stop my, my destiny or my goals. And if it didn't work out, I'm back at it again the next day. But, you know, that's really you know, what made me who I am today.

 James Geering 1:57:09

Why is it interesting observation and it's funny, we're talking about tuition reimbursement, my, the county, Orange County in Florida when I was working, and I put myself through medic school, they were supposedly doing an in house program never materialized on my Oscar, I'm gonna go to school. They were dying for medics, they wouldn't even cover tuition reimbursement. But then we're more than happy for me to walk through as a medic was zero, no support whatsoever. But you've gone through this journey, you know, you've you've given your service as a firefighter, you've created all these, you know, the train division and bringing Special Ops to your department. But it's interesting, you lose an arm in this near fatal accident. But when I asked you about trauma, technically, is organizational betrayal. That is actually the thing that resonates with you. And this is I think one of the least discussed elements of mental health and the fire service is the number of people that I know that we're in the same circle with that are super aggressive firefighters that love this job that get the concept that people's lives depend on us that a fight an uphill battle in a department. And so I think so many of us have experienced that. But it's something that a lot of people don't understand is if you're a part of a tribe, and you're given your heart and soul to that tribe, and that tribe cuts your legs from under you, that is as detrimental to mental health as childhood trauma and some of the other things that were more familiar with.

 1:58:38

You hit it right on the nail chains because I faced that many times. You know, many times they said obstacles and you know, again, I've overcome them in a good way. You know, I did it in a good way professional in that. But they would change, you know, they would sometimes change the qualifications for a promotion. Thinking I didn't have that qualification. They're like, I didn't know you had that. chief officers certificate. There's a lot of things you don't know about. Okay. And one of them is going back and getting my degree. You know, they didn't they didn't have that, that requirement before that, till I went and got it. Now, before I got it, I said okay, I'll go get my degree. You know, is it it hard? Am I paying for it on my own? Yes. But, you know, to me, I'm like, Hey, that's my next challenge. And, and I'm going to continue to strive to, you know, meet my goal and, and so on, you know, it's like, I'm not gonna allow an individual to change who I am. Now, you know, because, you know, they can't do what I'm doing. You You know, they can't do what I'm doing. Physically, you know, and they know how hungry I am. And I always mean well, you know, you know, I went through the hazmat tech at CES TI, in San Luis Obispo. Again, you know, I get the, you know, of course, Everyone's looking at me like, oh, he has a prosthetic. It's rare for everybody. I mean, everywhere I went, James, you know, other firefighters again, they look at me, like, how does he do his job? It made me

they think this guy just answers the phones are? You know, they don't. They're curious. Nobody knows. Till they see me out there doing the work in action out there. But I went through the whole hazmat Tech course, I don't think there was anybody else in my department that did that. You know, you got the, you know, maybe the fro class, but, but there was certain individuals that were like, Oh, you you can't take that course. You know, we don't have a hazmat team here. It's grant funding, why can't I? And I'm thinking that's because you don't have it, and you can't do that. But I'm still going to do it. And I still did it. And I'll find a way to get in there. Because I want to do that. That's my next challenge. So I went through a four week course. And, and I have, you know, the first two weeks is just chemistry, you know, you're burning candles all night long. But you know, it was, you know, it was it was a challenge, you know, being in the encapsulated suit. And, and with the prosthetic, and we duct taped the heck out of everything. And, and we figured it out. And, you know, they set the props up, and I go in, and do what I have to do is like everybody else, so So yeah, there's that's one thing that I was telling you. When I became the chief, I made sure that I was fair with those individuals, I was not going to allow that kind of stuff to happen. That's happened in the, in the past, or has happened in other other agencies where we're hard workers are not being acknowledged. That was the first thing I told you. I said, that's one thing to me. I don't care who you are. I don't care what color you are. Male or female. I promoted the first female captain, our department. I promoted to females want to engineer on to Captain, you know, but that's because they worked hard. And they earned it. They were concerned there's you know, they're consistently taking courses, technical rescue courses. I mean, they're out there doing things. That's it. So you're gonna be acknowledged for working hard here. You know, and I wasn't gonna allow that to happen, because it's happened too much. And that's not fair. That's not fair to people that work hard and they're hungry and doing the job and doing extra, extra curriculum.

J

James Geering 2:02:58

Yeah, absolutely. It's funny. It kind of makes me remember a story, the last piece of work for they did have some tuition reimbursement. So I would use it and do like you said, all the tech classes and things. And one year, I hadn't done VMR for a few years. So extrication. So I submitted to do operations again, you were talking about being a student. That's kind of what I wanted to do. Like when you do a VMR course in the Florida State College here. You get so much Tool Time, by the time you're done, you're almost ready to hand off. I've never had a tool that anyone but you're almost you're almost there you're like oh my god. Yeah. But so it's a great thing. And they were like well, why do you need it you already have it because you don't just check a box with a course you want to stay good at it and where I was working then we just didn't get very many accidents. It was protecting a theme park and they owned you know, 1000s of acres. So everything was kind of slow. We go in an accident once in a while but you just weren't using it in the real world. So I wanted to stay consistent but that mentality of you already check the box. It's like no, you know, like the ropes oh my god, my mind does not retain ropes and knots if I'm not doing it constantly. I forget it. So So yeah, I mean that mentality of oh, you've got that cert now. Well, yeah, you have that piece of paper, but are you maintaining those skills?

o

2:04:14

That's right, James, you know, rescue system. You know, when I first took the first the first Rescue System courses, it was called a heavy rescue. And there was a ticket a camp Elliot in San Diego. They have sent a captain to go to go take the class. Well, he didn't sit down here.



I'm sure he asked if he can take this course. Back then we didn't have all that equipment. We didn't have all the skills in our department. We are the basic skills but but you know that's when that class first came up. It was called a heavy rescue. They later broke it down to rescue systems one and rescue system two. They made two classes out of it later, like everything else. But we went in and I was going I was out As a firefighter, he was a captain, but I was tagging along with him. Just just just to see if I can get in the class. They were paying for him, not for me. But I actually went over there and they said, Yeah, there's, there's, there's spacers room for you. So I paid for it. And, and, you know, and stayed in the same room with him. But uh, you know, I took that class, James. I've taken him maybe three, maybe three times before my injury. And once I like I mentioned to you after, once I have prosthetic, I take your maybe two other times, I've done the same with all the other you know, I've taken up there's a class where I would take it. And people were like, why do you why are you taking it again? You already checked the box, like you said, said no. I want to be proficient. I want to you know, I wanted to keep my skills up till this day, you know, and I still teach at the academy. You know, they ask, so I like to keep my skills up. I like to keep my skills up as much as I can. I've backed off a little bit now. But uh, you know, I do it just to stay proficient, keep my skills up. And, you know, that's, that's, that's the only way you're gonna do what you can just, there's individuals that check the box, they got the certain you know, that's, that's the end of that. But they can't you ask them to set up a Z rig or set up a system? And they have no clue.

J

James Geering 2:06:24

Yep. And I was I was worried about being that guy. That was the point I didn't want to be.



2:06:30

But yeah, that's, that's, that's, uh, as I said, I think I had a good a good run. And I thank God every day for for just allowing me to still be here. Though things could always be worse, in so many ways.

J

James Geering 2:06:46

Absolutely. Well, I want to throw one more kind of area at you. Before we wrap up. I know, we've been talking for two hours now. I called Lionel and said that we were going to talk and you know, obviously there's things online and you know, reports and and a couple interviews that you've done, but I'm like, alright, what are the things that I won't find online? What should I ask? And he says, asked about the mental shift that you're doing now with other first responders who have been burned. So you mentioned Greg Millay, and Brandon Anderson. So it doesn't have to be those people. But talk to me about how your recovery of injuries sent you to the mentor role not just with our youth, but with you know, burn survivors in the fire service.



2:07:26

Yeah, that's that's one thing that I've had, you know, I spent a lot of time volunteering at the burn unit as a peer supporter, they would call me to go up there if they had a battling just a firefighter, but if they had a burn survivor, that if they had an amputee there I would they



would ask me to go speak to him. Recently, I had, I've had two individuals that reached out to me. One of them is a firefighter in Florida. He found me on the internet, and he you know, his department reached out to me and he said, Hey, you know, you're, you know, we've looked everywhere and you're a pioneer. You're a pioneer, you know, you came back to work as an amputee and so on. And, you know, me shared his story with me and he lost his hand due to a mortar or illegal firework off duty. So he lost his hand and the amputated at his wrist. And so I got to know him pretty well. And I actually flew out there to Florida, and tomorrow, go out there, when you're ready to get fitted for your prosthetic, you know, I'll be there with you. And they'll guide you through it. And then we will, we'll go in, I'll show you how I how I you know, you know, grab the tools and equipment and like, you know, do everything as a firefighter. I'll go out there and spend the time with you and guide you and show you and tell you which which which device is going to work for you and so on. So the time came where he was gonna get fitted that that Monday while he was already getting he was already got videos and receive his prosthetic. And I went out there, I flew out there. And I went with him that morning to pick up his prosthetic. And then we went to the fire station. He's an he's an engineer, driver operator. And he said that's all he wants to be. But they were doing some training for a promotion that week. So he said that would be a good time for for him to be able to use the equipment and so on. Anyways, I went out there. And we picked up his prosthetic that morning and we went to the firehouse and there was a lot of firefighters out there training for the further testing and so on. And I could sense I could read it. I said you know he just has a prosthetic he doesn't even know where to start jeans. I could sense the pressure, the stress on I could, I could feel it on him. So I said, Hey, listen, we're gonna go somewhere and train where there's nobody there watching us. We went inside the app drawer. And I showed him how I roll hose, how I unroll holes, how I fire them up, go up to the aerial ladder, how I connected the hoses to the to the hydrate, I took some adapters with me. I put one on the stairs, they have a fire engine for training on reserve engine, we put the adapter on there, took him for a drive showed him how, how to connect to hydrants. I have spot hydrants. I've pretty much spent the week with him. You know, he had some issues with his prosthetic and so on. But, you know, we got that taken care of but but he got it, he learned the basics of what he needs to do. So he just called me when last two weeks ago, I think he's taken his finals testing to be the producer, he come back on duty. He's been a light duty the whole time. So he's been around the department. But I did that, you know, and I again, this is you know, and I had another individual here, locally, same thing, he lost his hand out of the desert, with an illegal murder, blew his hand off. So he reached out to me. I've been, you know, helping working with him. He hasn't received the prosthetic. But he needs a lot of help. I think he needs some help, just prepping him in the right mentality. He's having some some hard time, but he just got back, he's back to work now. But they haven't been in a, he was a lineman, now they have more like as a safety position. He wasn't happy with the safety position. So I had to sit him down and chat to remind him that it needs to be a little more grateful that you know how to give them the little they tell Louie, Louie talk, you guys always the burn survivor guys are like a Louis, you need to talk to this guy. You know, I think I guess I come across, you know, a little stern sometimes. And I have to, you know, but so I've been working with him. You know, those two, it's just funny, because you know, those two guys, I mean, it happened about the same time the same type of injury. But they reached out to me and they found me James and again, you know, I don't say no, I'll do whatever I can to, to help these individuals out. Same thing with some of the youth, you know, not just fire service related, but some of the at risk youth, you know, I'll go out of my way to, to help them mentor them. But, you know, I continue to, to move forward and do everything that I can you know, that I can that impossible, bear as possible, I'm going to help them out. But yeah, I'm dealing with these two guys. You know, and again, you know, they'll call me to go speak to someone that's not doing well, right when burn injuries, or amputations and so on. So I'll go out and do whatever I can. I don't know what it is, you know, but we build that bond. And,

and I think, I think that they know they can we can relate to the injury, we can relate to what's going on. And, you know, I'm telling them what's going to happen. And that happens. And you know, I guess I am the pioneer for that. And I've been through it already. So I'm sharing my experience. I've connected them with so many resources with different prosthetic places and surgeons, guys, I had the surgery, I've connected them with all these individuals and said every resource that I know, I'm gonna I'm gonna make sure that that I give you that information. I didn't have any of that, you know, I didn't really didn't have that type of guidance go coming out and have a hospital but that's why I make sure that I can provide as much as I can for those. But yeah, I'm I'm still doing that. I mean, it doesn't answer me James. You know, that's thick. I sent you that clip over a fire we just had last month.

 James Geering 2:14:33

Let's talk about that. Because it was perfect timing.

 2:14:35

Well, that was a that was you know, that was because a good day for me because not for house that burned down. But you know, I was at the meet. I was in Tulare, which is, like I said, 1015 minutes away. And I'm working doing some work on the house up there. And you know, our friend calls me, you know, he calls me and he said Hey Lois, there's a fire. There's a fire in the house behind. And it's big. And I can see the column from over there, I can see a huge column obvious. Looks like a commercial building burned. And what it is, it's a struction. With looks like a wrecking yard in the backyard cars motor on everything you can think of that big lot in the back. So, you know, he's calling me I could hear it in his voice. He's like I said, I'm just wet. Make sure you wet your fence because it's a wooden picket fence. Make sure you wear it down really well. Okay, he's doing that. And he's a Louis, it's growing, it's expanding out. I mean, you got to get over here. I'm gonna pull my computer and my TV out of my house. I said, All right, I'm gonna start heading that direction. So I started driving, and I could see I mean, it's, it's growing. I see new columns. And I'm thinking oh, shoot, I'm I'm 80% sure that the exposures around there, some of the other structure are catching on fire. So as I'm getting closer, I pull up to go down the street. It's in the afternoon, maybe lemon in the in the AM. There's just so much traffic James of all the looky loos with their phones, you know, videotaping so I just parked my truck and jog down the street to his house. And I get to his house. And I go in the backyard. And it's burning back through that the neighbor's fence is on fire that his fence is on fire. And there's no firefighters. There's no fire engines there. They're out there on the next tree in front of the structure and the office side of the structure is burning. And I think at that time, they also had another structure fire going on in town. So there's so couple of civilians here with the holes, which is not doing anything but piercing army. And I looked around I said, Hey, let me go see who the the IC is on this. We need to get a fire engineer like ASAP. It's gonna catch on fire. I run out. I open the gates, he had double doors, I open the gates, I think keep these gates open. And I run them jogging down the street and I see a fire engine from a neighboring agency, I think they call for mutual aid because they had another structure going. And as I'm jogging down the street, this firing is it's in traffic with all these cars, you know, but I see the captain driving and I know these individuals, I train them in the academy and so on. So I run down and I look at at the driver captain. And I'm like, I need you over here. I need an exposure line over here I have the perfect access gates are open for you. And I'm jogging and he just follows me and I tell them exactly where to stage. And as he pulled up James I pulled this crassly and I extended it

all the way to the because he was only they were only staff with to forever operator and the captain. I extended the the inch three quarter line all the way to the backyard and I was it I just I went into this command mode. I got there and I yelled, ready for a water and they charged that line James and I just started knocking the fence down I just started you know putting the fire out. And that it's funny because there was a a young I think he was one of my students, you know, young guy there. He was must have been riding his bike because he had his bike helmet on. And he's like, Hey, Chief, and I'm like, pull the hose, pull the hose. And then once I started knocking it down, I let him hold the nozzle and I got behind him. Now I'm guiding him with it so on. And we knocked it down. We knocked it down. Back there in the in the on the Charlie side, we knocked it down. And, you know, after that I left as I was leaving. I told you can put your computer and TV back in the house now.

 James Geering 2:19:22

Oh, by the way, you you left your wife and kids when they're

 2:19:26

Yeah, yeah. But, you know, then I seen a couple individuals I know some civilians and some of the law enforcement cough that I know. They're like ag you know, like, Amen. You know, whatever I can do to help I'm gonna I'm gonna do it. That's that's I'm not gonna watch something happening where I where I can do something to help the the situation that was that was that was good. That was good, James.

 James Geering 2:19:52

That's amazing. Yeah, I mean, I always have a few things in my car. You know if you ever end up passing something, you know, traffic accident. Shooting whatever it is, and I think we have a we have a lose that to be honest.

 2:20:04

No, no, no. I mean, I've been in some times, you know, if I see something, you know, an injury, and the high school football fields, and then there's nobody there, I'll walk down and see what I can help with. If there's nobody there doing anything. But But yeah, that's that's, that's, that's good. That's, that's a little bit about my story there, James.

 James Geering 2:20:28

Well, I mean, it's been an amazing story, I just want to pull one thing out of you, before we close out. I know that you're very passionate about the Phoenix society. So for people listening, talk to me about the resources they offer, and if there's any way people listening can support that.



2:20:46

Yeah, the Phoenix burns society, you know, to me, that was a that was a blessing. When I got introduced to the, to the Phoenix burn society, that world burned Congress. Actually, the nurse, the nurse manager at the burn unit here, in Fresno, she's not there, she retired Sandy, she retired, you know, she, I'll do a lot of peer support over there. But I mentioned to most of those nurses over there, I said, you know, you guys call me to come and talk to him, the vigils here to do peer support, but nobody's reaching out to me to check on me. I said, you know, you know, sometimes I leave from here, and I feel good about what I did for somebody to help them. But I get in my car, and I'm driving. And I feel emotional. Sometimes, you know, there's really nobody reached out to me. And so she, you know, she introduced me, oh, we're going to pay for you to go to World burn Congress, and so on. And so I and I went and and that's where I met some of the other firefighters. And when you go out there, you actually meet people, and you hear stories, testimonies, you actually look at yourself and go, I don't have it as bad as they do. You see other individuals that, you know, are burned much worse than you were or are facing, you know, worst time that don't have anybody, you just meet individuals that realize that, you know, what, it could always be worse for yourself. And it's a great to have, you know, they have classes and, and courses in systems where you meet so many other birth survivors from all over the world. And that's where I've met, you know, several firefighters. So it's, it's been a positive thing. I've spoken on their panel before. But we actually, at one point, or putting the curriculum, we put a curriculum together for firefighters, because when I first went over, they didn't have anything that specialized on firefighter, burn survivors. They do now, I haven't, you know, due to the low pandemic, it's been virtual for the last couple of years, this is the first year that they're going to have it in person after the whole pandemic. But, you know, that's, that's one thing that I did get a lot of positive feedback and a lot of good networking from other burn survivors there. You know, I met some of the survivors from the Rhode Island, the fire that happened on Rhode Island, Station Fire. I've met some of the survivors, you know, just meet other individuals and realize that, you know, that it could always be worse, and you're not alone, you know, and you can always help other individuals, you know, through their programs. So, it's been a good thing. You know, that's, that's Phoenix branch site. And that's what introduced me to, to the Washington DC, the DC burn foundation, you know, those those individuals, they do a lot for other burn survivors, for firefighters. You know, that's how I got introduced to them. But yeah, to finish branches, it was always it became a really positive, positive thing for me to be involved in that and, and I wish I can do more right now. You know, they want me to be a peer supporter, instructor for the Spanish community. I just told them, I need to hold off a little bit because I have so many other projects going on, and I won't be able to give 100% to whatever I commit to. And I felt like right now, I don't have the time to give that 100% So I said, Let me hold off a little bit on that. Because I'm getting pulled into many different directions. And one of the things that I'd have to learn is to say that not right now, you know, let's take a moment because I get pulled so many different directions. But yeah, that was that was a that's a good thing for for all of us and that's and we you know, it's also Good networking, because we meet once a year there, and kind of bring us back to what you know, to what we need to do. You know, I've met a lot of firefighters that I had the opportunity to talk to them and, and hear their stories and they hear our stories, and, and then they find out that they're not alone. And you know, you're not alone out there, and other people have it a lot worse than they do. So I think it kind of it kind of motivates them or, or wakes people up like, hey, you know, it could have been worse, these individuals have a lot worse than I do. I still have all my limbs I still can see and so on. So that's, that's a positive, a positive society.



James Geerinn 2:25:44

 James Geering 2:25:11

Beautiful. Well, I'm sure people listening would love to find a way to connect with you, where are the best places online or on social media to reach out?

 2:25:55

I don't have any social media. Right now. I'm James, but I have an email address. And you're welcome to give my email address. And I can get back to them.

 James Geering 2:26:09

Beautiful. Okay. If anyone's interested in connecting with Louis, then send me a message and I'll get that email to you. Sure, yeah. That'd be great. Brilliant. Well, I want to say thank you. So so much. I mean, we spent over an hour talking about SLA drug prohibition and the tradition and the fire service and and obviously, then you you lead your lead us through your incredible journey. There is so much to pull from this conversation. I know, we've been setting up this this interview for a while. But I think as I said before, the universe always chooses the right time, and you just had that incredible fire the other day. So that was a great way to cap off this conversation. So I want to thank you so much for being so generous with your time and coming on the podcast today.

 2:26:53

Well, thank you, thank you, James, for not just for giving me this opportunity, but thank you for everything you're doing. You know, for everyone out there for military first responders, you know, you know, thank you for taking the time to do something like that, because I know it takes a lot of a lot of work and a lot of it consumes a lot of time for you to set up your, you know, your podcast and get good positive feedback that helps everybody out there. You know, I've heard some of the podcasts that you've, you know, just the recent one you talked about the tradition and the history and and you know, it helps everybody kind of brings you back or gives you information that you didn't you know, you didn't have or a knowledge that you don't you weren't aware of so thank you for doing what you're

 2:27:38

doing