

# Steve Gillespie - Episode 779

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firefighter, fire, talk, years, call, worked, training, people, career, day, put, train, running, fireman, firehouse, fire department, part, new york city, understand, point

## SPEAKERS

James Geering, Steve Gillespie

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James Geering 00:00

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 S

Steve Gillespie 03:33

Thank you, James. Thank you so much. It's really I'm honored to be here. I'm a little nervous. How many guests that you've had on?

 J

James Geering 03:41

Well, that's what's funny is I have people that are you know, special operations or you know FDNY and they say things like that. And obviously this is, you know, firefighter talking to a firefighter, but that perceived indifference board or the perceived differences between what you do as a humble firefighter and what other people do. It's interesting, because I get that from so many other people, but the entire 800 You know, Episode list is good people that happen to do a host of things. Some of them are Hollywood stars, and some of them are, like you or me just firefighters trying to you know, make the world a little better.



04:14

I gotta tell you, my son is so excited that he is only three degrees of separation from finals now.

 J

James Geering 04:23

Yeah, he's definitely Josh is definitely one of the one of the biggest stars as it were a CEO and that one came out people were kind of blown away. But he's a great person and was a volunteer firefighter himself. I just learned actually Jack Nicholson was a volunteer firefighter. So I have to work out how I can get to him next,



04:40

that would be some guest.

 J

James Geering 04:42

So we have navigated both of our own Gremlins in our it on each side. So now we are actually good to go. Where on planet earth are we finding you today?



04:54

I am in North Charleston, South Carolina.

 J

James Geering 04:57

All right. Well, we all know that that is not where you're originally from. Oh based on the accent

All right. Well, we all know that that is not where you're originally from. Oh based on the accent and your resume. So let's start at the very beginning. Tell me where you were born. And tell me a little bit about your family dynamic what your parents did and how many siblings.

 05:10

Okay, I was. I was born in the Bronx, but I never actually lived there. I grew up in New Jersey, right on the side of the Hudson River from New York City. About seven miles from the George Washington Bridge, which is the bridge that connects New York and New Jersey. I grew up there. Mom and dad, my mom worked for an accountant. My dad was a salesman for Beech-Nut baby food. And I have a younger sister who she lives down in South Jersey, same town my parents live in. Now she's a social worker.

 James Geering 05:47

Baby food. Let's go there for a second. Yeah, as we now get into, you know, modern day and we're having not in, in my opinion, a paradigm shift and enlightenment on exercise food, you know, the things that are actually holistically good for us. We look back at the water baby food and realize that some of the company's food actually wasn't as healthy as we originally thought. So have you had any discussions about that with your dad?

 06:14

No, no. Later on in his career, I kind of moved from baby food to other things. But when I was younger, and I was in a lot better shape and was working out, I would actually eat baby food as a snack. Sometimes the Chiquita bananas were the best.

 James Geering 06:32

Brilliant Yeah, cuz I know even with the formula, my little boy was lactose intolerant even when he was a baby, he had allergies. And so we went to soy. I think F Familie I forget the the brand now. But um, but yeah, but then you fast forward and you see the you know, the way that the soy is grown and the chemicals that are on it, and then you're like, Okay, this is probably actually not the best for a child. So I'm glad now that that's evolved.

 06:56

Arsenic, right, it sounds like you're saying is in the Yeah, I'm

 James Geering 07:00

not sure you're gonna buy that probably. But I mean, just the chemical, you know, the pesticides and you've got the GMO, which I have a limited understanding, but from what I understand, you know, it's not in its natural form. So therefore, the body is going to view it as a,

you know, something that it has a inflammatory response to you rather than is nourishing. So yeah, there's also the the GMO allows them to put more pesticides on I believe, so it's a it's a horrible thing to give to a newborn at least.

 07:27

You're a smart man, James.

 James Geering 07:30

I think I probably butchered that. But I think that's right. All right. Well, then, when you were young, talk to me about the sports and athletics that you were doing.

 07:40

I was a big hockey fan. So unfortunately, though, I mean, I played all the, you know, the little league sports, baseball, football. But hockey was something I was really interested in. But there wasn't any thing around that. And so I had to wait till High School to actually start playing hockey. So I went to high school, to have hockey team and wasn't, wasn't that good. Because most kids start hockey, so much younger, they had a big head start. So my NHL career was very limited. So

 James Geering 08:13

now I talk about this a lot. When I first came to America, I saw a high level performance and the high school and college age. And then so many uncle Rico stories of you know, injured, now overweight, four year olds talking about how they were the you know, the high school star, and then they had their knee blowout, whatever. But when it comes to hockey, like football, soccer, you know, what I call football? It seems like a lot of people still play. So is that a sport that there is longevity, as opposed to for example, football?

 08:44

I think so I think there's a lot more opportunity to actually to actually play. You know, there's leagues where, you know, over 40, over 50 leagues have personally they call him because the guys are so old. They're just huffing and puffing. So the opportunities out also, I think that thing with hockey is that you actually have to have an ice rink to play. And what's really cool, I didn't think it would happen, but in North Charleston, there's actually an ice rink, an ice rink down here. So I started playing again for a little while. And then you know, the old body gave up. So pull the hammy you know, took a little while to recover. So skates up.

 James Geering 09:32

Well, we're gonna talk about your career into the first responder professions plural. When you

were young, did you have any firefighter or cops in your family?



09:42

My dad was a volunteer firefighter. My parents grew up in the Bronx. One One thing that my dad always wanted to do was be in New York City fireman and it was around the time that a layoffs were he was trying to get on so he actually never got on but Growing up as a kid, I spent my I grew up in a firehouse, the volunteer firehouse down the road, from my house. And even more so than the volunteers is it you know, I grew up in the 70s during the war years, and my dad had an old Bearcat scanner, I'm going to show my age with this one way with the lights that that then went across to the the analog lights, and you'd have to buy a crystal in order to be able to listen to the frequency. And we would listen to the Bronx all the time. And my dad was like, you know, second alarm on Burnside Avenue, come on, let's go. And we'd hop in the car. And it was so close. And we used to buff jobs, you know, as a kid. And also one of my dad's, there was a neighbor who lived across the street. He was an aide in the 60s battalion, which is right in the heart of Harlem. And we would go over there every once in awhile. So I grew up around it. It's the only the only thing I've ever wanted to do in my entire life, was being in New York City fireman.



James Geering 11:11

Now, with the volunteer firefighter role, I think a lot of people don't understand. Firstly, obviously the fact that you're you know, sitting around in and all of a sudden mum or dad have to get up and leave. And that hypervigilance that probably comes with having the pager and we're in a station as a full time career firefighter, once we go home, we don't have to worry about course. But these these men and women, obviously are waiting the whole time. But another big big element is if you are a volunteer in the town that you work in, then you're running on your friends and your colleagues and in the shopkeepers and the bankers and the accountants and so I can imagine that that sound becomes, you know, a host of reminders of some of the tragedies that they've seen, did your dad ever talk about that side of it? My dad



11:57

didn't really, that's not anything that anybody talked about. Back then I remember him. Being on a motor vehicle accident, the New Jersey Turnpike ran, the northern end of it ran through our town. And I remember there being a fatal accident that he had gone to and he seemed a little off when when he came home. And my mom was my mom asked him and, you know, she said something along the lines of You know, what did you say? And he just said I saw too much. So, but that's not something that, you know, did anybody talked about in the 70s?



James Geering 12:36

Ya know, exactly. When I talked to so many people now, and we're gonna get into not only your journey in uniform, but the transition out and what you're doing now in the mental health space. I've had a real, you know, awakening on how much our childhood impacts us before we

even put on the uniform and then progress through our job. When you look back at your career now with this lens that you have today. Are there any elements of your childhood that you contribute that you consider contributed to some of the trauma that you had later?

 13:07

I don't think so, you know, been in therapy for a long time. And sometimes, you know, it was mostly about the post traumatic stuff. No, but it went to, you know, every once in a while it went to the family, but there's really nothing that I can know unless I get damn EMDR soon and I something just comes, comes out comes out out of the woodwork but

 James Geering 13:30

Well, I think it's a very important conversation. Some people haven't, I mean, I have things but I know honestly, I think a lot of them were addressed healthily to completely sub in unconsciously it wasn't that I had this amazing awareness of my own mental health. I was just very fortunate to have some positive coping mechanisms in my childhood as well. But we don't talk about their foundations. So a lot of people do have things on here and the people that don't, you know, I think that's another lesson. I mean, how you dealt with the things that we're going to talk about today is probably going to relate to the good foundation that you brought into the job. Sure, so talk to me about that. Then you wanted to become a New York City firefighter. I know that journey wasn't a direct route to the fire service. So walk me through from high school on was,

 14:15

yeah, so 17. Three days before my 17th birthday, I was able to join the Richfield volunteer fire department and got my gear and my pager and actually had a call the first night. So I've lived so close to the firehouse, and there were there were a lot of local kids it was the pager would go off, and we all started running towards the firehouse. And I'm trying to think of a scene in a movie where it was one person running and then somebody else joined in and then there was two people running and by the time you know, we got a half a block from the firehouse. There were like five of us running together, you know, like chariots of fire or something like that. And we don't We get to the firehouse because, you know, whoever was first on the truck got to go. So yeah, my first call was a raging dumpster fire. But that was, you know, again, it's Sunday's Sunday was was the drill day. So when I when I was 17, I got to I got to start to do that. And I did that for about 10 years until I got into New York. So.

 James Geering 15:26

So I know you didn't go career fire initially, then. So what was the profession that you found yourself in?

 15:32

I was a police officer, which I hate to admit sometimes. Yes, again, in the town I grew up in, I

I was a police officer, which I hate to admit sometimes. Yes, again, in the town I grew up in, I was 20 years old, and the police department was hiring. And everything that I did in my life was I'm going to do this until I get on the fire department. I'm going to go to college until I get on the fire department. And unfortunately, too immature at the time when I went to college failed out, was driving a truck for a little while. And then the police department was hiring. So I took the test and was lucky enough to get hired, you know, in the town that I grew up in, which is sometimes a good thing, and sometimes a bad thing.

**J** James Geering 16:15

So talk to me about that. Firstly, what were some of the career calls you had while you were wearing a police uniform?

**i** 16:24

The first fatal, fatal accident that I ever had, was when I was 17. In the volunteer fire department, which was again, another call on the New Jersey Turnpike. So that's what started out, you know, not knowing what any of that stuff was. But probably I think the thing with me is that there's some calls that are so dramatic, that the everyday little ones just kind of fall to the wayside. The thing that, you know, plenty of fatal, fatal accidents. The one that bothers me the most, when I was a police officer was doing CPR on a three month old. So,

**J** James Geering 17:07

yeah, it's always either the multi casualty incidents or the PD incidents that really seemed to stick with us the most.

**i** 17:15

Yeah, and that was a whole thing where somehow I wound up in the ambulance with the paramedic and I did ventilation the whole way. And when we got to the hospital, the pediatric team was waiting there. The doctor was very pregnant. And when they call after they call the code she she lost it. And, you know, try now understand that, you know, this doctor who's trained or, you know, her entire adult career to do something like this. And she's not handling this the way, you know, how am I supposed to feel about that?

**J** James Geering 17:49

Ya know, exactly the inability to save something I talked about a lot, because I had, I just lost a lot of people in my career as a firefighter, and a paramedic. And when you are taught to do A, B, and C, the result is supposed to be D. You know, and so, you know, you've got this woman who has all the training, who probably has saved people in the past, has a little baby and her insider at that time, and now she's lost a three month old. I mean, that must have been brutal.



18:17

Yeah. And, and you know, that's the part that, yeah, I don't even know how to how to explain how how she was was feeling but, you know, we do these things we train, you know, and most of the time and trading is a positive outcome. You know, so you want it to be like that all the time. But I think second guessing ourselves, you know, throughout our career is something that really causes us a lot of mental strain as well. No, I could have with what if I did, my my therapist used to say, Stop shitting on yourself. What it could it should?



James Geering 18:57

Yeah, no, exactly. I think also that imposter syndrome, that that fear that you're not going to perform, you know, on the way to a call, like, I'm going to screw up, I'm going to search the wrong room. I'm not going to give the right drug dose, whatever it is, and you do you get on scene, if you train, well, you do the right things, but then the next call comes in and that same voices in your head.



19:17

Yeah, I think I've always had that. I've always had that. You know, I'm not as good as everybody thinks I am. But I think that that's what people that really care about the occupation. I think that's a good thing. I don't want to call it fear of being able to form but you you care enough to be the best that you can. So it makes you want to be better. You know, it makes you want to it makes you want to train harder to be able to try and handle anything that you know, anything that you can know,



James Geering 19:53

one of my guests, Alana Stott that I just had on she she said she'd heard a quote, the only few People that don't have impostor syndrome are imposters. That was that was profound.



20:05

I like that, like, very good.



James Geering 20:08

So speaking of imposter, so you're a firefighter wearing a police officer's uniform. Because you got that burning in your heart. And this what you want to do is to be in the fire service. I've been in, in the firefighters uniform, but missing that amazing crew that I had prior, like, for example, Anaheim, California, I had the absolute Rockstar crew that made it my favorite crew in my whole career. And I was chasing that after. So sometimes I'll be with a crew or a station, that was the other end of the spectrum. And it was it was hard. It was depressing, to be honest, when you are yearning to be a firefighter, how did you deal with with the years and years of waiting to finally get that position?





20:53

I don't know. I don't know the answer that. I guess being volunteer trying to take some classes, being a police officer and trying to take classes that kind of brought the two worlds together. But I also at the time, I would my dad's best friend, retired a battalion chief in New York City. And we would go hang out at at the firehouse that he worked. And you know, and it's just being around those guys, and going on to call and seeing that culture and everything is just like, I can't wait, I can't wait, I can't wait to do this. It took six and a half years from the time I took the written test, to the time I actually got hired. So it was a long process.



James Geering 21:39

Now you've you've your dad was a firefighter, you were a volunteer firefighter, you're an active duty police officer, what was it that took so long in that process, because you'd think that you'd get some extra points or all these things that you're already doing?



21:53

No, it was it was totally different New York City, it's his own entity I lived in New Jersey, at the time wasn't a big deal. But now with the hiring processes, now, you get extra points for living in New York City and get. But at the time, I just needed to have at New York address by time of employment. But you know, 40,000, people took the took the test in 1986, that by the time it will down to you have to take the written test. And then you had to take the physical exam, which both weighed 5050 towards your score. And then like that, like veterans would get, at the time, it was just veterans were able to get extra points. So but it was so competitive at the time, you literally had to get 100 on a written and 100 on a physical in order to be even close enough to get on. And I thought I wasn't going to make it because I missed 100 On a physical by four seconds. So my physical score was 95. So I was devastated. You know, I'm not going to make it I'm not going to make it. And I remember my list number was 2671. And the list is usually good for four years. And my it was supposed to end in May of 94. And I got hired in April of 94. So I just, I just made it which, you know, what do you call a person who graduates last in medical school Doctor, Doctor, you know, I made it I made I was I was able to what a day, you know, my dad cried like a baby when I got the letter. So,



James Geering 23:32

so amazing. Well, with the background in the volunteer fire service, talk to me about the difference when you entered it. And if it was called the rock back then but when you went?



23:42

Yeah, I think it was the pace, the pace of things, you know, again, coming from both sides, the volunteer side and the paid side, you can see, you can see the difference, you know, some volunteer fire departments, you know, show up with 12 people on one fire truck, you know, some show up with two. In New York City, I think the difference, the difference is how

calculated everything is two procedures are so well written that everybody has a specific job to do without having to be told, you know, it's, you know, everybody on the first four engines in the first two ladder trucks, knows exactly what they're supposed to do. And to be able to learn all those things to read and to study. You know, what it is the positions that you're supposed to have? And how if you actually listen to, you know, I can go off on a tangent on this one, James, you know, I'm not a huge fan of command. You know, where the person who's sitting in the car, nowhere near the fire is telling everybody what to do when Nobody's allowed to do anything until they're told. Now if you listened to audio, the five rounds in New York City, nobody's saying anything over the radio, because everybody is doing what it is that they're supposed to. And to try and get, you know other other departments out it, not everybody's going to be able to follow that. But, you know, learning that at the, at the rock, and, and breeding, the stacks and books of procedures and, and, and all that stuff to try and find out because again, you're like, you don't want to be the imposter, you know, if you're given a job to do when the fire ground, everything that you do or don't do is going to be affected. If you don't vent the window at a certain time, it could have a positive or a negative, if you do set the window at a certain time, it could have a positive or a negative. And just trying to understand how everything was so coordinated, because that's it's a, it's a dance almost.

J

James Geering 25:44

Well, through my own career, you know, observation, I've worked for some amazing departments and crews in different departments and the other side of the spectrum. And what I've seen is the department that had the highest level of training and I think they they did mirror FDNY a lot they did, they had a great relationship with some of your fire houses, and they did a lot of knowledge sharing. But we were trained, it was like a rehearsal, we had before word lay, you know, all these different things, lay the bundles, lay one, lay two, there was all these good names. And the captain would just turn around and say, Alright, lay the bundles. And there would be this orchestrated, beautiful series of stripping the engine and getting the Rig Ready either laying out towards the hydrogen laying away whatever it was in that particular scenario. But it meant that that, as you said, the radio chatter came to a minimum, my captain on the truck company I was in, you know, we turn around, say a couple of things. And again, off we go that has come out sores come out, you know, and Ariel has been positioned with minimal chatter. What I've seen with the, the other side, is this panic on the radio, because basically people are trying to undo the fact they haven't trained for this scenario. And they're trying to compensate with words. So for me training and trust is the enemy of the micromanager.

o

27:04

I manage it. Yeah, I've worked for. I mean, I could go a bunch of different ways with that training is definitely the biggest thing. And when I, when I was in New York, I've done a lot of training. I taught recruit school for one class, which is probably one of the most rewarding things I've ever done. In my career in New York, being in special operations, we kind of had our own academy, where we had technical rescue school and the training that we would go to all the time I work for I work for a training company on the side, don't do so much with them anymore. But do you have a guest, Aaron Heller, on scene on scene training associates, worked with Arab doing stuff, I'm all about all about the training, because I think we're in a, we're in a world now. Where, you know, I'm probably a lot, probably a lot older than you. But YouTube and everything wasn't around at the time, where people look at a video on YouTube and think that

oh, that's really cool. I'm going to try to at the next fire I go to, but you don't try it the next fire, you train on it and train on and train on until you become competent. And then when you can use that skill to fire that's, that's when you use it. No. And I was fortunate enough to when I got to New York, I went to a squad company with only two years on a job, which was unheard of. But the people that I worked with there were amazing. And we just drilled all the time and the repetition of it. And, you know, talk about recognition, prime decision making, you know, and gut feeling that's real. You know, your body's telling you that there's no, there's been plenty of times in my career where something has told you. It's, this is not right. No, and your body's telling you that. But that comes from all the training that you did over and over and over again, to be able to, you know, to recognize stuff like that. So I think Colonel Grossman, I think is combat is an excellent book for talking about recognition, prime decision making.

 James Geering 29:25

Absolutely, yeah, I've had him on the show a couple times. Actually. He's an amazing man. Yeah, yeah. So with that, I think now the modern Fire Service, which I'll include my career, I'm five years out now, but I've watched it over those 14 years, go from frequent fires to you know, less than less than less than as frequent because if something burns down, they rebuild it a lot safer and it tends not to burn when you first came on. Contrast. So there's a lot of us in 2023 Now, where were you assigned and what was the the kind of up tempo what was the fire Frequency early in your career.

 30:03

Well, excuse me. You know, New York Fire Department is unique. It's it's so big, you know, there's five, five boroughs. So you can work in a dif I worked in the Bronx my whole career. But the, the mindset, and the tempo in the Bronx was very different than it was in Staten Island, you know, than it was in Manhattan, or Queens or Brooklyn. And there will there were inner temples within those boroughs, they were slow areas, in each one of them. And there's busy areas, and each one of them, you know, the northern Bronx at the time didn't have much fired up. Everybody knows about the South Bronx in the war years and report from ng company 82. And that's exactly where I wanted to go. Unfortunately, when I got on, I got assigned to a company in the north Bronx, which didn't have a lot of fire duty at the time, which is ironic, they're probably one of the busiest in the city now. But I would still be in house watching listen to all the jobs going on, down in the South Bronx, 1075 here, 1075 there. I can't wait to get down there. I want to go down here and whatever down here and I had the opportunity to go to at the time it was called engine for one, that's a whole long story about the history of how they they closed the firehouse because of budget cuts, and then when they reopened them, they were going to be a special unit, but they couldn't change name because of the because of the court document that had to stay engine for one. So they called it enhanced engine for one. But it was doing the same thing to squad one in Brooklyn did. And we were doing the same training as all the rescue the rest of the conference, but I got there, and probably not as prepared as I as I shouldn't be. And, you know, the first night we went to a vacant building, and, you know, right after the night tour started at six o'clock, and we started cutting the roof. No, and my first night tore in squad 41. From six at night, till nine o'clock in the morning, I don't say this to brag, I say this to more to say about the experience that the guys that I've worked with had, we went to six fires and 15 hours and work the four of them. You know, so the early, you know, the, you know, every generation of firefighters, you know, talks about the generation before them, I

wish I was born during the war years, you know, but the A's were busy as well, you know, and the 90s are busy as well, it just wasn't as busy as the previous decade. But still, I for the first five years, probably up until September 11 I was going to a fire every single night. No problem, sometimes multiple fires a night, you know, just because our response area was so big. And what were you responsible for? You know, but there are parts of the city that you know, that still have a lot of fire DD and other parts that that are pretty quiet. You know, Manhattan, midtown Manhattan doesn't have a lot of fire duty, but you'll run your ass off with alarms and you know, getting stuck in traffic and, and all that other stuff. So it's really, the frequency of everything really varies depending on what part of the city are in.

**J** James Geering 33:29

Yeah, I mean, I've had that in a lot of the places that I've worked, you know, I've always sought the places that had the most fire. But, you know, you watch the 911 documentary and I had the French brothers on on the show that made that that probie you know, wasn't getting in a fire forever. And I think he got was a dumpster fire was his first one as well. But then as you said, you contrast that to some of the you know, the other areas where they're burning all the time. And I know, it's there's nothing worse than being a firefighter in the wrong station listening to a fire in the right station.

**o** 33:58

I truly believe that there's, there's firefighters that want to be in busy places that are in busy places, there's firefighters that want to be in slow places. They want to be in busy places. And as firefighters, they're in slow places, they want to be in slow places. So it's all it's all you want, you know, it's all and again, they talked about the personality type of not everybody you know, is a superstar fireman not everybody has the passion that you and I had for it. You know and that's something that you have to deal with. In a lot of the busier companies you go to the mentality is probably is a lot different. You know, some guys just want to go to work for 24 hours and do nothing and go home. And that's fine. I don't want to work with those kinds of people. You know, I want to work with the kind of people that are, you know, that are drilling all the time and want to go to fires and want to get better. You know And that's why I went to, I had the opportunity to go to 41. And it was amazing. I spent 13 years there. And the people that I worked with were were tremendous.

**J** James Geering 35:12

So you talk about 41 being a very busy, Special Operations Unit. But you also talked about the amount of training that you did. When I look at again, the kind of decrease in fires that I saw over my career, and in the last place was protecting a theme park. So it had a lot of fire protection, so we hardly ever got any fire. It was a trade off I made to make my son's life better. But what should have happened in that department would have been should have been training out the yinyang. What I've seen in my career is the ones that already get a shitload of fire, usually are the crews that are also doing strength conditioning training together, they're doing drills that. So the high run stations that maybe we'll be allowed to say, we don't need to train as much, because we get a lot of calls, in my opinion, we're the ones that trained the most

as well. Talk to me about your experience with that squad company. And, you know, now obviously, you've transitioned through another couple of departments, the importance of training, as we see less and less and less fire in the fire service.



36:17

But the only the best thing that you can do in your career to get better as a firefighter is to go to fires and put everything to work. But you have to learn to trade before that. So you have to do train. So the more training you do, the more prepared you can be for when it actually comes whether it is frequent or not. Because you have to get to a point in your career where it's it's second nature to you. Now, you have to force enough doors to understand which ended a tool goes into doors, it inward, outward, inward opening outward opening, where to cut a hole, when you're inventing a roof over the fire, you know how to figure out you know, flow path. And it's funny, I try not to use a lot of those a lot of those terms. Because the guys that I learned from, were the guys that wrote the books on how to do this stuff. And they just didn't call it those things. And they didn't have it, they didn't have the means that we have now. No, they try things, if it worked, they said try this. If they tried something and it didn't work, they're like, Don't ever do that. It's not it's not good. And now we have, and it's great, because the world we're in now, but we have NIST and UL doing these studies and be able to show us what we already knew with the cameras and the technology that these guys couldn't, they just could tell us about it. You know, I call it old school, new school. You know, I learned from old school guys that were doing it so much that, you know, they understood how fire behavior worked, you know, and now you have, we do these studies where we put these cameras and thermometers and everything, and look inside these buildings, and you can see how it works from the inside. And it's it's an it's an amazing thing. And that's where we have to fall, excuse me, we have to fall back on that now is is, you know, but the only thing that can make you better is training, you have to be able to, you know, you can't go to an incident and be prepared to do not even be prepared to do something, to do something on a fire hydrant. So you've never practiced before. You know, and again, that's where the training you know, the repetition of it, makes it second nature. You know, when you're when you're forcing indoors, you're not thinking about what ended a tool that you're putting in the door, you're thinking 10 feet inside that door, where in relation to the fire might a victim be, you know, Where is the fire in relation to the entrance that I'm going, you know, there's so many different things, it just has to be second nature. And the only way you can do that is by training.



James Geering 39:12

You talked about the men, I'm assuming the men at that point that you were working with already understanding these principles, and it kind of underlines of a quote that I love. Don't wait for science to prove what you already know. And we're getting these people like, oh, we just did studies and apparently, you know, not putting chemicals on your vegetables actually proven to be good for you. It's like to be really need to do research on that. And it's the same with this. And what I've seen in my career is in some people, there's almost an opposition to innovation to progress. And you know, even to the point and I talk about this a lot because it really irks me, like making fun of the European fire helmet when actually that's a better helmet for actually facilitating the job that is a better helmet. So you know, sometimes ego vanity gets in the way A lot of progress. So, again, when you're working with this, this group of men that

are performing at a high level that are having these realizations through their experience, what have you seen as far as resistance of that knowledge being passed on and the innovation in our tools and gear?



40:17

What? Have you heard the saying? There's two things that firefighters hate. change in the way things are? Yes. Yeah. So we're our own worst enemies. You know, we will hold on to something so long, just because, you know, some guys would still rather have horses because, you know, the horses don't break down, or whatever. I think it's my whole thing is, is that, again, we're transitioning from retiring from New York, coming down to South Carolina. New York does what New York does, because it works from New York. And that doesn't make it right or wrong. You know, but the fire service is very reactive, as opposed to proactive. So, if I was doing a class or teaching or lecturing somewhere, you know, having four letters, they have to fit your name. You know, FDNY was a blessing and a curse at the same time. You know, there were people that would go to see you just because you worked for FDNY, which those letters don't give me any credibility, I can be a handbag fireman. But the other side of it was that FDNY got to end a lot of departments. When you become when you're reactive, we changed a lot of things because guys got seriously hurt or died. So but it's really hard to be proactive. And stuff in a in a occupation has so much tradition. So I think I think I answered your question, but



James Geering 41:57

yeah, well, I think what I've seen myself is that sometimes the lines are blurred between tradition, and history. Like, for example, a lot of things that we were there three quarter length boots, and horses and steamer engines. That is history. That is not tradition, courage, camaraderie, you know, service, that is tradition, that's actually the tenants that you can bring through time. You can allow your gear to innovate, you can allow the workweek to change with the increasing demand of the modern day firefighter, but tradition is not, you know, it's not the helmet is not the work week, that's something that we did or something that we wore. So So you know, I think the understand that history is great, and a leather helmet that say, we have this awakening and we kind of get over that the image and move forward. And now we're in this more advanced bunker gear, that that beautiful leather helmet can be on our office wall. That's a history, that's what I used to do is what I used to wear. But this is what we're doing today. Because tradition as being the best, best firefighter I can be. And actually, this equipment allows me to be even better.



43:08

Even better. Yeah, sure. Yeah, I like that tradition in history. That's good.



James Geering 43:13

So what about from the fitness standpoint, again, you're going to a lot of fires, what was the kind of philosophy in in the Special Operations community as far as that side,



43:23

every every firehouse has has a decent gym, I'm gonna say, you know, 95% of them. And I think it's not something that was understood so much, because, you know, I'm retired seven and a half years now. And I got promoted in 2009. So almost 14 years now, since I've actually been a fire been a fireman on on a fire truck, as opposed to a boss or a supervisor. But guys learned, whether whether it was known or not, they figured out how to use their body. I learned early in my career, that just because a guy has a really cool mustache and looks like a fireman doesn't mean that they're going to be able to perform on a fire floor. You know, and the 300 pound guy who's smoking and eating doughnuts and drinking coffee, you know, although that might not be really healthy for him. But those guys were some of the best firefighters because they were able to understand what their bodies were doing. So you know, it's it's evolved over time. Excuse me. You know, a lot. When I was in New York, it was a very big running culture. They would have five K's and turkey trot stay cold. And so a lot of guys ran a lot for you know, for their cardio. But there's other guys that are very muscular that you know, they wouldn't last 30 seconds. And, you know, breathe in on air because, you know, pull that all that muscle takes a lot more oxygen to, you know, you know, those guys that suck down there. So they're in six minutes, you know, it's all, whatever works, whatever works for you, you know, I don't want to call them fans. But it's it's evolved over the years you know, supplements weren't really weren't really big you know 2020 30 years ago not that I can I mean, I remember do Korea team when I was younger, you know, which probably is horrible for you, but but just trying to stay in shape to be able to perform on a fire floor. And, you know, I would always work out before I went to work, no, I had a routine, if you know, I would go to the gym at two o'clock workout for about 330 and then start driving in and usually get into work about five, and then change the shifts for six o'clock. And then at the end of my shift six o'clock the following night, I would work out before before I go home. So



James Geering 46:13

Well, I think that conversation is you know, I hear that a lot with with the person who wasn't in the best shape, but had the efficiency had that kind of overall strength. But then I guess to counter that the the argument is, well imagine how much better they would have been way better if they can understand. But I mean, when you're talking about the 80s and 90s. I've discussed this a lot. What we were taught as far as strength conditioning nutrition was not 100% wrong, but it was really poor compared to what we know now. So I think modern day firefighters we have no excuse to be out of shape because all the good information is there. I mean, one of my sponsors Thorn is the best supplement company in the world, I would argue and the off room almost half off to anyone that is in the first responder profession. So there's your supplements right there, you know, CrossFit and Wolf brigade and all these you know, I've had so many people on the show that have great great programming for firefighters, whether it's kettlebells, or mesas, whether it's barbells, and you know, calisthenics. So I think that's the conversation that I like to hear now is, yes, there are some people that did it really well back in the day, and like you said, they did the best of what they had at the time. We don't have an excuse in 2023, we have all the information. So therefore, if you're showing up in the fire academy or department, you have no excuse but to be in the best shape you can be in.



47:32

100% would have to go back to the other part where you sit the frequency of fire

I agree 100% would have to go back to the other part where you sit the frequency of fires, sometimes allows us to not, you know, to slack off on that on that part. You know, where, you know, the sedentary lifestyle inside a firehouse? No, I hate it. I don't want it. As officer, I would not allow guys to play video games in the firehouse that was not a place for you know, if, if you have spare time, we're either drilling, you know, training on something working out or you're reading something. But you had the technology, is there output. Tactical athletes, you call it now? Yes. Yeah. Perfect. You know, that's exactly that's what it is, you know, we have to be trying not to get down a rabbit hole. But we're, we're lowering standards, and the fires in civil service in general. Because somewhere along the line, somebody decided that, because it's a civil service occupation that everybody can do it. Well, not everybody can be a fighter pilot. You know, not everybody can be a lawyer or an accountant. Now, it really takes I don't say special type but somebody that's going to be dedicated to to do all those things to be able to you know, keep their mind and body strong to be able to perform when it when their child comes when you're called off to do.

J

James Geering 49:09

Yeah, well, I think that's that's the kind of misnomer is that some people just rolled out of bed and became a firefighter. Like for me personally, I was an athlete my whole life. And when I was in, in Fire Academy, I was working in the publishing company would work out in the YMCA on my lunch break would run like four and a half mile laps, it doesn't matter, you know, come rain or shine. You know, I would do push ups and pull ups and all these things. And I was already in shape, but I understood that to become a good firefighter. Again, I wanted to be the best version of myself. So you leave the bar where it is and you invite people to reach that bar. And I think a real important part too is the mentorship programs. One of my friends has one here in in Ocala and that is how you also address the diversity issue then there are underserved communities there are you know, genders that historically They weren't empowered to believe they could be a firefighter or a police officer. So you reach into those communities, you remove the barriers to entry, and you train up of those communities, the best candidates, you don't just scoop a bunch of people of a certain gender or skin color and say, congratulations, you're all firefighters, you empower people love those areas, to be the best version of themselves and become incredible firefighters to stand alongside everyone else.

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50:26

And that's something that as I went on my in my career, and moved up the ranks more so outside of New York City, because I only made it to lieutenant in New York. But I never understood that part of it, where, you know, the neighborhoods that I that I worked in, that people who live in those neighborhoods that I was underserved communities, never really understood the process of becoming a firefighter, they would see a fire truck all the time, but had no idea how to become a firefighter, where somebody from the suburbs, who might be a volunteer firefighter, or somebody who has a family or friend on the fire department knew exactly how to do that process. And it was just trying to trying to figure out how to show people in those communities that this is how you go about the process, that doesn't mean that they're, we still want to have the best. But their access to it, which was really hard for me to understand, you know, how do you walk into a firehouse and say, How do I become a fireman? You know, I just didn't I didn't understand that at first. But, you know, moving more to an administrative role and in North Charleston, where I, I worked for six years, when I after I retired from New York, it's the same type of community. You know, there are some very



underserved communities in the city, you know, and you try to recruit? No. But it's just trying to get that word out there to people, you know, how do I how do I do this? You know, and to give them the opportunity to be able to see how to do it

J

James Geering 52:13

with a theme that comes up over and over again, I'm realizing it more and more is that as a profession, we do a horrible job of branding of, of educating people on what we do, especially, I mean, I know you're getting closer to the EMS side as well. But a lot of the rest of the country I'm sure Charleston was like this were a combination fire and EMS. And in 2023, the number of times people say well, why is there a fire engine at my mother's house? Well, that shows that we've done a piss poor job of educating people. So then you expect someone who doesn't have a fire family or doesn't have that kind of natural pipeline into uniform, to understand how to go through that process when even your average American has no idea what a firefighter does as far as EMS as far as their work week. And you know, we're still in their minds playing cards petting a Dalmatian and smoking cigars.

o

53:05

Yeah, yeah. Or Or join, join a fire department, you only work once every three days. And we get to sleep at night. What a great job. Exactly. Which, yeah, is that what we really want everybody to perceive it today? You know, where, again, and you know, I call for an ambulance, I didn't call I didn't call for fire truck. You know, people not understanding that. You know that a lot of Parliament's BLS or ALS, are going to give the same, the same treatment to the patient, they just can't drive them in the fire truck. They have to wait for the transport unit to get them. But yeah, it's going back to change. You know, there's a part of us that don't want anybody outside of our community to understand what it is that we do, you know, because there's definitely parts of it where, you know, trying to think analogy, history or tradition, I'm gonna, you know, I'm gonna write I'm gonna write that down, because that's something that I'm always going to talk about now. You know, do we want them to know, you know, what it is that that we do sometimes, there's also that they were I ran the, the joy recruit school. Down here, Charleston Fire Department has their own recruit school and at the time, no Charlson would run a training, recruit school, but all surrounding other departments would send their people there and there's part of you that want to go in the first day and tell them these blood and guts stories about how you know you don't want to lose good people just by scaring them like that as well because we can train them to be able to perform in situations like that and going back to training again i six years in training down here. Got disappointed a lot where If it wasn't realistic, you know, how do you prepare somebody? To be, you know, how do you prepare somebody to go into a fire building, you know, when the only time they've ever done it was in a concrete building with two pallets and a bale of hay, you know, and then you tell them not to put the fire out, because it's gonna be too hard to light again. You know, Derek, again, goes to that muscle memory. You know, I was always told that, you know, you open up the nozzle, and you don't close it until the officer tells, you know, where, you know, now, it's like, you know, you have to go to training now, you know, it's hit it twice, and then, you know, then it's, it's very, very difficult. And the whole, one of the big things now, too, is the stress, inoculation part of it, too. You know, where we don't, we're not allowed to hurt anybody's feelings of distress that they're going to encounter in the real world is so much, far beyond anything that I can give, you know, I can't be a grieving mother, who hands you their child, when a child stops breathing, you can't, I can't, I

can't portray that, as well as a mother actually handing you her child. And yet, we're not allowed to, we're not allowed to sometimes bring more realistic training to our people so that they are able to know the whole fight flight or freeze thing. Where, you know, I've seen it, I've seen it happen, I've had it happen to myself, you know, at the Black Sunday fire, it actually happened to me, where, at one point at the fire, we're trying to take care of guys, one of the guys from my company is like, Hey, Steve, snap out of it, you know, I had to get shaken a little bit to, you know, realize that you can't, you can't teach, you can't teach that. As much as you can train somebody to a certain point, I used some military tests, and stuff like this. And again, on combat, that book is amazing. I go back to the one part where it's more for police and police and fire and military, not so much firefighters. But the old school police officers that used to police them brass, you know, when they would go for for training, they'd pick up their brass and put and put the shells in their pockets, where they're how many times has a police officer, you know, from the old days, not so much anymore, you know, was found dead with shells in his pockets, because that's the way they trained. You know. So again, I go all over the place with stuff like this. Because I'm really, I'm really about to train, you know, and you really try and make things as realistic as possible. But sometimes, I personally think that we're making the fire service so safe, that when people aren't actually learning how to do their job. And when they're called upon to do their job, they have never performed at that level before, and they really don't know what to do. You know, and civilians can get hurt, other firefighters could get hurt, or themselves get hurt or even killed. So I feel really strongly about which is one of the reasons why I retired from New York was I felt like I couldn't do it anymore.

J

James Geering 58:28

What it should be hard. When I first got hired, my first spot was higher layer, which is in the Miami area, just north of Miami. And it was a just a twist of fate. I was hired in noncertified program, but about half of us were already certified firefighters and EMTs or paramedics. So they sent the other half through the entire school. So EMT school and then fire school. And so they had us for basically three months to kick the shit out of us. So they made up all these scenarios. And it was incredible. Like the in the PT you know, the first week was just gym gear, and then you started adding on pieces of bunker gear. So by the end, you're doing all this PT with, you know, full bunker gear SCBA on air, and pull ups and push ups and all kinds of stuff. And it was phenomenal. And my god that had set the bar for the rest of my career. But we would do you know all that PT and then go through a collapse maze and people were puking in the masks, they set these basically unwinnable scenarios. So you would fail after fail after fail. And you know, guys would have double double bags, you know, one bag and each arm at the end, you know, just phenomenal but that really, like I said set me up for success. We searched so much I could see a room just by doing a primary search over and over again and even the drill tower. They had a shitload of furniture as wireframe furniture, so they would clutter a room and you'd have to work on hose management. And then I went to the next one which is Anaheim, which was a great, great department but their host management was shit because they hadn't drilled that portion. So you know when you've got a two storey apartment, we They're in a burning building. And they've got stairs and closets and you know, couches and dining room tables and all that stuff, all of a sudden, it's a completely different scenario versus as you just said, the last department I worked at, you know, even that burning bale of hay was terrifying for some of those firefighters, you know, so and now you're in this and it's like, you're back in kindergarten, when you just graduated high school, and it's so maddening to kind of you understand that we are so fucking far away from where you need to be. And you have this

this scenario, particularly, you are the biggest target hazard on certainly American soil, if not in a you know, on the planet, as far as terrorism and was so ill prepared. So that's what I found just maddening.



1:00:45

Yeah, again, going back, going back to training, and, you know, seeing differences. Don't get me wrong, you know, New York City is the biggest, largest, probably busiest Fire Department, but not everybody in the New York City Fire Department was an amazing firefighter. You know, I can't there were neighborhoods that they didn't do a lot. So they didn't train a lot. But that's every fire department in the country, it's not specific to, you know, it's not specific to New York City. It's any it's Hialeah or Anaheim, or North Charleston, or any anywhere down here. You really have to dedicate yourself to learn to learn, and it's a constant learning process. There was, somebody said to me a long time, if there's 10 things that you're supposed to do to fire, you know, and you go to fire, and you do five of them. No, 50% isn't isn't that good. But what you do with it after that is the most important, you know, because you go alright, I did this, this, this, this and this, I forgot to do these five things. And then the next opportunity, you have to go do it, you know, you might do six things. But you forgot one of the first, you know, added a five d did the first fire you forgot to do with one of them. But you did two new things. You know, it's always a process, crawl, walk run, isn't is another the way I like to trade with people, you know, you don't put on bunker gear and SCBA and have somebody forced the door right away, you have to teach them, you know, the whys, the why of it. And the mechanics of it, and you know, so you do a lot of stuff, and with just a helmet and gloves on it first, you know, and then you move into the bunker gear, and then you move into the SCBA have to I used to, you know, trying to explain to you know, you were already trained and didn't have this other group of people that civilians in uniform, they used to call them but they're not at, you just have to do a repetition by repetition. Another quote, amateurs do things till they get it right professional to think till they get they can't get it wrong. You know, I tried to explain to new recruits again, that was for six years, that was such a part that was my job was coordinating the recruit, scroll down here, and to try and get them to understand that firefighting is a team sport, you know, and then you look at professional athletes. You know, they prepare all week, for 60 minutes, you know, of actual football players, you know, they watch film all day long, all week long, you know, to be able to prepare for that game. And even before the game, you know, you watch the wide receivers, they'll catch up hundreds of passes, even before the game even starts. Now you have to get to a point where it just again becomes second nature where you're just not teaches leadership class and they've had this matrix and everything but conscious and unconscious, competent and incompetent. You know, where you want to get to a point where you have unconscious competence. Where you're not thinking about anything that is you could do it but you really good



James Geering 1:04:23

Yeah, well, I think that's where the critical thinking comes in. You know, if you're focusing on like you said, forcing a door, you're not thinking about someone behind the door. Am I going to sweep you know, you've already thinking about the layout in your mind. Okay, there is no dirt no room to the right, I've got to go to the left. Yeah, you know, is it a bedroom to the left is that a kitchen in so you're able to kind of open your mind a little bit and then be open to the radio traffic and that kind of thing. If you haven't forced that kind of door before and you're so

focused on that, you know, that becomes your world and it may be you know, fumbling with a door and there's a massive window next to you that you could have just broken so yeah, I think you know, that's The other thing with with the EMS side, too, we have what they call the cookbook medics that will just do exactly what the page said, Well, to me, you know, if you train diligently and you understand the why behind some of this Paramedicine now you can critically think because I had some patients that it was like an episode of House, you know, trying to figure out what was going on.



1:05:21

Yeah, that's, that's interesting house, it was quite an interesting show.



James Geering 1:05:26

Where you, you mentioned the Black Sunday fire. So one of the biggest, you know, chsp moments is to call yourself a black cloud in a lot of us have that for the fire. Sadly, I heard that, you know, for losing patients as well, it was blackout on the negative side, you've had that element when it comes to line of duty deaths as well and being present. So if you want to kind of walk me through chronologically the first time that you lost a firefighter and then we'll just go through 911, Black Sunday and and onwards.



1:05:54

Yeah. So 911 was first, you know, it was September 11 2001. I lost six guys from my firehouse that day. Lieutenant Mike Ely, Bobby Hamilton, Bruce Van Hein, Greg Sikorsky, Mike Lyons, and Tommy, Colin, and all six guys that were working that day, you know, didn't come back. But that was, you know, what a day, you know, sometimes I don't even know how to how to talk about it, but I wasn't working. You know, it was Tuesday, you know, if it was Sunday or Wednesday, it would have been me to didn't come home. You know, so that whole that whole process. You know, I didn't see the buildings come down, I didn't see. I didn't see them actually get hit. Until, you know, later that night, we're actually saw it on TV. But which I think for me, personally has a lot to do with my lessening of survivor's guilt, because I really had no idea what it actually happened. But it was more for me, it was more about the nine months that we spent trying to find people, you know, and the things that we saw, think the things that we saw during that time, you know, so realizing that your mind can find anybody, you know, that was, you know, when is it going to be a recovery, as opposed to still trying to be a rescue, you know, the amount of damage that was that was done there just looking at some of the pictures and not being able to believe that, you know, these two 110 storey buildings, you know, pretty much fell within that footprint, you know, not not far, they could have knocked over another way and took out a whole bunch of other buildings, which part of the damage from the other buildings was, actually, if we get to talk about it, the Deutsche Bank building was a was one of the fatal fires that I was at. And that will have to do with it being damaged after September 11. But, no, but going back to knowing you just think that something like September 11 could be the worst thing in your career. And then January 23 2005. And I hate Black Sunday, I think that I hated excuse me, I hated Ground Zero. You know, I think those were the terms that the media put on it, which I really didn't care for, because it's called Black Sunday, because three firefighters died at two separate fires in New York. You know, two guys died. You know,

Lieutenant Myron and John Balu, died at the fire in the Bronx. And then risk of Fanny from from latter 103 dine in fire in Brooklyn on the same day. So that was the front page of newspaper, you know, you know, Black Sunday, so, but I call it the 178th Street fire because that's because that's where it was. And again, you think that, you know, September 11, could be, you know, the worst thing that ever happened in your career, and then going into that fire and witnessing some of those things was was was weighed on me a lot as well. Well,

 James Geering 1:09:27

well, I've had a lot of people talk about the 911 experience. And as you mentioned, that you weren't there. For that moment, even the chief normal. That was a really powerful conversation, because he was a fire inspector when that was being built, and then ended up becoming a firefighter and then, you know, saw the very towers that he, you know, witness being built and the kind of backstory behind the shortcuts from the fire protection that ultimately resulted in the cloud. So it's a really interesting perspective. But when it comes to the the 178th Street fire, that sadly sent ripples through the fire service and and also more so with the bailout rope discussion, you know, following that, so talk to me about that day through your eyes so that because a lot of people haven't really heard that particular story because they're, you know, the Charleston fire and 911 are some of the biggest ones that have discussed a lot.

 1:10:17

I think, like most if you if you read a failed fatal fire report, it's not one thing. You know, it's a bunch of dominoes, that one thing happens. And another thing happens, it was just a series of things that weren't going right. At this fire, you know, there was a blizzard the night before, there was 18 inches of snow on the ground, you know, the side streets weren't weren't paved, there was a lot of 27, who should have been first to the way that they came in, they were blocked by an oil truck making the delivery, for heating fuel in a building. So which switch the positions 27 should have been on the fire floor and ladder 33 should have been on the floor above, which meant those guys would have had to jump out the window, if everything worked out properly, the hydrant right in front of the building was frozen, which led to there having to be a relay, which to be quite honest with you, we weren't very good at doing something like that, you know, again, New York City doing things specific 99% of the time, the engine is parked right on the hydrate, and we're stretching the hose off the back, you know, we're not doing a forward leg, you know, laying 800 feet of five anchos. And, you know, the loss of water. The losing pressure? Well, if, again, I've I've listened to that audio a couple 100 times, I'm actually I do a presentation on it. I'll do one on Friday for the Somerville Fire Department during their, their firefighter survival week. And to talk about, you know, what happened with that, the difference between burst length and loss pressure, you know, and, and how the, the chauffeur or engineer or whatever it is that in your area called the guy that drives the fire, the fire engine knew exactly what was going on, and was trying to fix things. And tried to take care of it. But, you know, whatever happened, probably the other biggest thing at that fire was the illegal wall that they built, you know, you know, SROs single room occupancies were, you know, a landlord who have a three, a three bedroom apartment. But in this specific apartment, they built a wall in the living room, which made two extra bedrooms, so instead of getting \$1,500 a month for an apartment, you can get \$500 a month for each room. And if you have five bedroom, you

make an extra \$1,000 a month, which was probably the premise on that which. But this this illegal wall that they built, blocked these guys path to the room that has the fire escape in it. Which is why one of the reasons why they had to jump out the window

J

James Geering 1:13:26

where you talked about the fight flight or freeze element, you were frozen that moment I've had that, you know, I've been handed a dead baby lifeless value before and it took a few moments to go ABCs is amazing. These acronyms are super helpful when you're in that frozen state. Talk to me about through your eyes. That was the kind of logistics of the fire walked me through, you know, you standing there on the fire ground.

i

1:13:49

And that that's, you know, to say it just like that that's what wound up happening. At that point, we were given an assignment to stretch a thing that was different about squad 41. When you operate a squad company in New York, you have first, second and third do engine assignments, dual positions. And then when you went to work and fire in your response area 95% of the time you didn't truck work. So you were carrying tools. So we responded as a squad on the 1075. And when we got there we reported in with tools. When we were given an assignment we were given to stretch the third a third line. At some point during the fire. We were given a different assignment to leave the hose line there and to help civilians that were evacuated. From the front and the top floor. If you James standing in front of the fire building bolt, the fire was in the rear. You would never you never know that there was a fire in this building just by standing in front of it. So I was on fire escape, helping the civilians down when when a mayday came out, so, came down off the fire escape, and started making my way there was a four storey building. In the front, it was five storeys in the rear. And the fire is on the third floor and the guys on the floor above what it wants to had to jump out. So when they jumped out the window, they actually fell five floors. Five of them. Actually, this is part of the story, one guy only fell four floors. So as I was running down the Bravo side or New York uses numbers, I was running towards the Bravo, Charlie corner, and there was an officer. And you can hear it, you can hear it on the audio. He's yelling 35 to the rear rope on the roof 35 to tour he's looking up at these guys in the top floor, the trolley, the trolley side, in the top floor window, getting ready to jump out. And as I ran down the Bravo side, I I could see him in my sight and about 10 feet before I got them. Big black blob fell in front of me and I was like, this is really odd. They're overhaul and during the Mayday until I realized it was a fireman. Fireman had felt right right in front of me. And again, not you know, this is where part of that comes into. I just wanted to help the guy. So that was just cool. And Jeff cool wound up because he was the only guy with a rope. So Jeff kind of pendulum from the window and and landed one floor above everybody else. And I grabbed him by the shoulder straps, and he laid out a horrific scream and a couple of choice words. And and again, you know, triage that's the only thing on my mind, right? He's talking so he's alive. So I went around the corner and looked in the Charlie side. And again one of those things that will never the contrast that a black year and old snow on the ground. The past alarms going off the steam coming off these guys. That's something that I'll never I'll never get out of my head but wanted to wanted to get into real detail with that said we had a guy he was brand new in a company. He is about three weeks in a company, but he was a paramedic, his name is Jimmy the shoe. And when the guys jumped out the window, the first guy that I got to was Lieutenant Myron and I looked at him he looked deceased to me. But right next to me to

my left was Jimmy Shula and he started taking patient care on jeans the Loski Jean Mamba having an internal decapitation if you did you ever talk to any of those guys, Jeff cool or, or jeans the Loski or

J

James Geering 1:17:58

I haven't yet I know. We'll have hedge house was going to try and connect me with one of the guys that was on the scene that I don't remember which one it was.

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1:18:07

Yeah, yeah. So Jimmy being this train paramedic, the first thing that Jimmy did was he did a jaw thrust on on gene and I actually watched gene come back to life. I watched him start to breathe and I could see the breath come out of his mouth. So I did that to Myron and nothing happened. So we just put them on a backboard and again, just trying to think that we should have done you know, Jimmy being a fantastic paramedic that he is, he was take care of the stabilization you know, they packaged them so well again he had an internal decapitation is spinal column was severed not as cord because it is not deficient there. But when they took the collar off him in the hospital is headed turn 90 degrees. So looking to see what Jimmy did, Jimmy kept, kept patient care with him. I went to Meijer and we kind of just threw him on a backboard and got him around. When I came back around the second time. I got to John Balu, who was the other firefighter that died that day, and I leaned over him and that's the first time I froze. Meanwhile, everything that's going on I remember seeing somebody almost in a fetal position scream and yell and I can't do this. I can't do this. You know, no one standing over this. The second fireman down and froze, actually froze for a moment until one of the other firefighters from my company was like, Hey Steve, snap out of it. Let's take care of this guy and then get back into it again. And you know, and started taking care of I struggled for a really really really long time that I didn't do enough to help to help John below. If I would have done a couple Were more things maybe he would have survived that fire. But that goes back No. With a lot of the incidents and second guessing and everything that we do is what it could have should have to one of the biggest things from that fire, you know, not only seeing the things to happen, but living for such a long time with, you know, what if I did this for blue, you know what I've been able to help him and to go ahead of it a little bit, because it's kind of a pretty amazing story. September 10 2020, North Charleston had a firefighter that took his own life. About a month after that Charleston Fire Department had a firefighter particular life. And Charleston Fire Department who, who has a strong union at North Charleston didn't have theirs yet. But they had IFF pure team members come to Charleston, to talk to the whole department about about what happened. And it was two guys from Texas and two guys from New York. So I wanted to go see my New York, I'm starting to lose my accents, you know, so I wanted to hang out my boys, you know, get the accent going my sloppy English going again. And I went out to do with them on Wednesday nights. And I sat in between a dinner sat in between the two New York City peer counselor guys. However, we got on topic, the guy sitting to the right of me, was a very close friend of Lieutenant Myron, the first firefighters I got to the fire. And the guy sitting to the left of me was Dan blue, the brother of John Balu. The other firefighter. It was like it was supposed to happen, James, you know, and I was able to say to Dan, you know, told my part of that story. And he, you know, he gave me some closure on it. No, villain validity, I guess,

whatever word it is you want to use. But, you know, Steve, I know you did everything you could that day. And to be able to hear that took a lot of weight off my shoulders after, you know, it's 15 years, 15 years later, you know?

**J** James Geering 1:22:25

Well, that underline something that I've talked about quite a bit when it goes back to the training as well. If we lose someone, whether it's someone that we're responding to, whether it's God forbid, you know, one of our brothers or sisters, but we know that we train diligently, I think that helps you appease that that guilt. But if you are in a department where the standards are low, and you're not training the way you're supposed to, or maybe your your ownership of your own trade isn't as strong as it needs to be another layer of why you should train on top of all the things we've already discussed, is, God forbid, you lose someone and you know, in your heart of hearts, that they died because you're out of shape, because you didn't train diligently. That's something that you know, I think will be a crushing weight and be extremely hard to take through your life.

**i** 1:23:17

And, and that right, there is probably the main, the biggest reason that I retired was because I got to a point in my career where I felt like I wasn't 100% I felt like I couldn't do the job, as well as I could, you know, body's fairly beat up from 20 years. You know, the Trade Center has some effects on me right now. But I wouldn't have been able to live with myself, if I was at a fire. And something happens, somebody's gotten in trouble. And I wasn't able to perform to help them get out of trouble. And they got seriously injured or died. Or on the other side, if because I wasn't in shape. I put myself in a position where I needed help. And then somebody trying to get me was either seriously injured or died. I'm trying to get me up because I wasn't 100% I would never have been able to live with myself. So that had a lot to do with why I retired.


**J** James Geering 1:24:18

Yeah, well, I mean, kudos for you for making that decision. Because I think a lot of people are chomping at the bit when we first get into the career. But what really breaks my heart is you know, 15 years in people have some people have, you know, countdown apps on their phone only 13 more years, you know that that tells me you should probably be thinking about transitioning out now, you know, so for me, the universe sent me in these bizarre directions and creation of this podcast and the force multiplier element. I realized I'd probably be able to do more good in the fire service and outside doing this and having people like yourself on and 1000s of people get to listen rather than running one call at a time because the moment I'm gone afresh set of legs is gonna walk right through the door and take my place anyway.

**i** 1:25:04

1000s of people really? Yeah,



 James Geering 1:25:06  
1000s no pressure right now.

 1:25:11

That makes me think about the, you know, again, you know, again, I can go off in so many different places. But I know you're a big fan of Simon Sinek who is I love his books. But one of my favorite books for him is called infinite game. And it talks about how, you know, there's a finite game and an infinite game. And, you know, we live in a world that that's an infinite game that just like you just said, it's going on and on and on, you know, it's not a sporting event where, you know, there's a time limit, and whoever has the most points at the end wins. You know, we have to get better and better every day, and make it better for the next person. Because it's infinite, it just keeps going on and on, you know, you're doing the great things that that you're doing. know, somewhere along the line, you know, when you retire, somebody needs to continue something like this. And that's where how I feel with training and why I retired, to go become a training officer was I learned from some amazing, amazing people now, and I truly feel that if you know, everything that they taught me, it's my obligation to pass on to the next, the next generation. And then the next generation. Again, it's infinite. And if I don't pass on what I it's almost a crime. No, because the things that I was able to learn from these guys that worked so much, during such a busy time, in their careers that learned so much from their experience, you know, that. It's why if we get to it, one of those things, came into play with one of the next fatal fires that I went to. But I think we're gonna get to that later. But I'm all for passing on what it is that we learned. No, and now, you know, I'm in a generation where we didn't have podcasts, you know, you had to read a book, or go to a class or, you know, the technology nowadays has opened up in a good way, in a bad way. You know, in a good way, it's exposed us to a lot of things that we would never seen before. But in a bad way, it's made some people really a lot more confident than they should be in some of their firefighting skills.

 James Geering 1:27:26

Absolutely. So just one more thing with the 178 fire. Correct me if I'm wrong, I've got this image in my mind of what I thought was a documentary telling that story, and of a firefighter who initially survived the fall but ended up passing away months or years later. So talk to me about that, because that was such a heartbreaking thing that he made it there, but it seemed like he struggled so much mentally with that as well.

 1:27:51

Yeah, so that. So that's a whole other story. And again, how everything connects that firefighter was Jody Bernardo, also from rescue three. Who was in the he was in the window in the Charlie Bravo corner. And Jeff cool, was in the window directly to his right. And we FDNY had personal ropes years ago. But they were and this and this is, you know, not only Jeff Cole's passionate, but also the family of jelly demon Otto, who runs a foundation that will buy personal ropes for for firefighters, because that whole PSs system came came after that fire. So we had had ropes that were not very efficient, that were very heavy and bulky. And they were taken away from us by the commissioner at the time. We said, well, we never use them, so we don't need them.

So but it was a fair amount of guys that carry their own ropes, whether they were into rock climbing, right? You know, I carried a 50 foot piece of kernmantle I think it was seven or eight millimeter rope stuffed in my pocket with a beaner on it. That's pretty much for Jeff hat. So Jeff was in the next window over from the Bravo corner, and he yelled to Joey to his left and said, Joey, I have I have a rope but I have nothing to tie it off to. So Joey said to Jeff, throw me to rope and I'll lower you down. And Jeff said I'm not drawn to my rope. And, and Joey said to Jeff, throw me a rope. You got kids, I'll lower you down. So somehow or another Jeff got his rope to his left gave Jody his rope. And I believe that's what happened like Jeff, because when Jeff came out the window he actually had a climb over an air conditioner with fire blown out over his head. And when he when he bailed out the window he kind of pendulums which was What made him land? On the Bravo side? One story less than everybody else. But, you know, again, shall we saved Jeff's life? You know, the injuries that those guys had were were horrendous. Joey pretty much broke, I don't know exactly, but broke a lot of bones below his waist. He was not coming back, not coming back to work. He wanted to get promoted, which was awesome. But I guess they'll and I don't want to stay wrong, because I don't want to, I believe that there was some mix up with the medication that he was taking. Which, again, how many years later? There was something with the medic with the medication. So

 James Geering 1:30:50

is that what he came to originally, then? Ultimately,

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it was due to the injuries from the fire, he was on a whole bunch of different medications. And there was some type of mix up. It was out there at one point that he had taken his own life. And that's that's not true. That is that's not what happened. It was something from what I understand with medication.

 James Geering 1:31:14

Yeah, well, I mean, this is the problem is that I think this there's been a lot of accidental overdose, especially with this fentanyl is coming out now, you know, and that interaction with the drugs and you know, whether it's an actual deliberate suicide, or whether it's, you know, the the leaning into medication, or the accidental overdose, I mean, these are all part of this, the same thing, you know, we got to take care of our men and women when they're wounded, that the physical wounds, but also the mental wounds, because I can tell you, this is minor compared to the injuries that we're talking about at the moment. But when I hurt my back in my fire service career, the pain was was horrible, of course, but it was the mental element, you one minute you were wearing this gear and rocking up to structure fires and cutting people out of cars. And now you can't even pick up your child or put your shoes on. I mean, it was crushing. So I think that's, that's a very under disgust element that, you know, alcohol or these drugs, it's not a deliberate thing. But, you know, if we were leaning and all these these opiates and things that were being prescribed, that if we're not careful, these things that these physicians think are going to help us actually end up seeing something that hurts us. Yeah.



1:32:26

And I just want to be clear that, you know, I don't I'm not a doctor. I don't know how Joey died, but I know that it was that it was out there, that he had taken his own life, but from what I was told and understand that what that's that wasn't the case.



James Geering 1:32:41

Yeah, I appreciate you telling the story. Because again, I couldn't put the name to the face initially. So so thank you for that. Well, then, sadly, that is not the end of the line of duty deaths that you you had to witness so kind of walk me through the next one.



1:32:54

Yeah, I've got about a year and a half later. I was paying back a tour and wound up working in rescue three in the Bronx. And we went to single storey commercial fire 99 cent store and lieutenant and apparently died at that fire as well. How we car plunk was working overtime and set and 75 engine and Mike Riley was a probie it was just a couple of weeks that are out of recruit school. And there was a collapse of the floor. They went into the basement. And there were there were four other members collapse one of them got out pretty quickly three it took about they were trapped from the waist down. But Mike Riley fell into a hole and the lieutenant fell on top of on top of them and took about an hour an hour and 20 minutes or so to be able to remove everybody. So that was my my experience that that fire goes back to something. Again, when listening to stories I had had I had the sole opposition and rescue three and we were we're up on a roof and we finished cutting the roof and my foot sunk into sunk into the tar and I had one of those moments where you know, my brainwaves are firing and really, this is not good. I don't know why, you know, and it went back to you know, I need to tell somebody because if somebody told me something 10 years ago, and I turned around and my lieutenant from squad 41 Mickey Conboy but actually I was working in rescue three that day. He was looking away he had his back to me with thermal imaging camera and I yelled to him I'm like I said, Hey Lou, and then he just turned around said everybody off the roof. And he got about 14 guys off the roof and and later on the roof collapsed and then a couple minutes after that was The floor collapsed. When the main days and again what what we did at that point Mondo getting into the basement to try and we spent a long time trying moving debris that we thought was a firefighter that wound up not being. And that's just another one of those things that, you know, where you second guess yourself, you know, if I didn't spend that much time wasting time on that, you know, and move to another position what I've been able to get to them quicker. So which, you know, that's just the way we look at it, because they wound up removing them from the top, you know, I don't think there would have been a way for us to get to them in a basement. But that's just the way the way you think, you know, so I struggled with that for a while to



James Geering 1:35:45

what would the lesson learn takeaways from that fire,



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a lot of different a lot of different things, the two things that I've learned in the fires that I've been involved in, and a majority of the fatal fire reports that it has to do with two things it has to do with building construction, and it has to do with water. Now, if there's a loss of water, we can't put the fire out. You know, in the 170, HD fire, it was both those things, there was a problem getting water on the fire, and they built this one for the the second fire, the wall namond fire. The building was so old and had been had so many fires, and it had been renovated so many times it was just weren't structurally sound. And with all the debris with all the stock from these 99 cent stores, there was on top of unstable Foundation, and then all the water that was added to put the fire out the floor collapsed. So in those two things, it's usually its water supply, or something to do with building construction.

J James Geering 1:36:55

So we lost to origin bench here in Florida in the 90s. And it was kind of similar. There wasn't a nine cent store, but it was a t shirt store. And ironically, it was actually in my just aside my first shoe in the very last place that I worked in, it's still a T shirts store today. But they went in you talked about the 178, seemingly, you know, clear conditions on that one side. That's what they went into. But this place is stored so much stock above them, that that's where the fire was that everything collapsed. One engineer managed to actually get out he slammed his SCBA through a window and was able to get through that way. But yeah, the two men were killed. And if you see placards now, I don't know if they're national, but certainly in Florida here, you'll have an R or an F for roofer floor. Yeah, that's the origin story of that blackout.

[ ] 1:37:45

Yeah, yeah. Again, the building for this fire was so old. It it was dimensional lumber. But there the renovations and it just it was subpar. You know, they kind of just like, it was like a puzzle. In some places. They just stuck pieces in more pieces of wood into, you know, to hold the load at some points.


J James Geering 1:38:11

Yeah, well, this is the thing comes up a lot in conversation with modern construction, too. I mean, it's built to, to stand up, but it's not built to withstand withstand fire. So I mean, some of these crazy, you know, wood trusses, they're being built these days. You look at it in the construction phase. This is just a palette. This is what we used to train in the fire building.

[ ] 1:38:29

That's, yeah, again, going back to the point where, you know, what I did in New York was very different than firefighting down in South Carolina. You know, we fought fires and you know, 100 year old buildings that two dimensional lumber, you know, where, you know, in, you know, small town USA or wherever it is, you know, there's built, everything that they're building that

was is trust, no lightweight construction, to buy for trusses, laminated, laminated ID, land beams, wooden i beams, you know, that are that use glue to put everything together. It's really, you know, the engineers tell us that it's stronger. But it's it. They're firefighter killers.

 James Geering 1:39:15

Yeah, absolutely. Well, again, I wish that was the last, you know, line of duty death that you witness, but I know there's more. So walk me through the next one.

 1:39:24

Yeah, that was. So that was August 27th 2006. And then, less than a year, less than a year after that on August 18 2007. We were doing a confined space standby. Right outside. We shouldn't even even been there. Nowhere near our response area, but it was the Deutsche Bank building. That was because it was so damaged on 911 years later, they started to deconstruct it. floor by floor and because of the the asbestos abatement And, again, one of the things Porter supply, and I fires, the contractors cut the standpipe lines in the basement so that they can run, you know, run electric and pneumatic cords through the standpipes. So when the engine companies hooked up to the psi knees to supply the standpipe system, the water is just flowing into the basement so there was no way to get water on on the on the upper floors. And that fire again is different although it was

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that my third fatal fire or two more five and died. Robert Dan and and Joe graphic Dino moments were 24 engine and one was from from five truck, what

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would happen with that we were listening to the whole thing going on. And we eventually I don't know the exact amount. But again, listen to that audio, there's like 20 or 30, something made a and a whole bunch of urgent messages. But one of the things that we didn't stop the people that we were standing by for with a confined space as a private company, and went and got an assignment later on, where the guys had already come down, that they had found the two firefighters and already come down. But what we did at that fire and the weight, again, probably had a lot more information than everybody else did. But when we wound up breaking through the floor, and coming out onto the fire floor, we came out right where these guys were found. So that second guessing again is you know, if we would have stopped the workers sooner than we would have gotten an assignment sooner than we would have been on a fire floor sooner. But you know, there again, no, you know, should have could have what, uh, you know, we can second guess everything that we do all all the time. But in part, though, again, that makes us better. Because we want to talk about what we did wrong. It's about what we can do better than next time. You know, and the value of critiquing fires afterwards. So So that told that, actually, that the boss, the lieutenant, of those two guys, wound up retiring, psychological and then he wound up taking his own life a couple of years. Couple years later as well.

**J** James Geering 1:42:39

God. Yeah, I mean, this is the problem. I mean, the ripple effects. It's not just the the men and women that we lose. It's all the crews and you said that survivor's guilt. And, you know, especially if you questioned you know, now you're in command and you sent someone to do an assignment. And you know, now you're wondering if you should have sent them and now you lost them. So yeah, I can see how that would be another layer to that and haunting.

 1:42:59

Yeah, it actually, again, listen to the audio so many times, the incident commander, you know, gets on a radio numerous times. I don't give a shit about the bill. And I just care about the men, you know, I need accountability. You know, because there were so many guys missing at this fire get put there again, not only that fire again, not only was the water supply that was hindered because they had cut the standpipes, but because of the the the asbestos abatement. You know, it was like a maze up there, you know, with plywood walls and the material that they use for the asbestos abatement and everything every you couldn't go floor to floor in the building, you had to take the exterior construction elevator, because they had plywood over the stairwells, the stairs in each stairwell. So that was one of the things where when we gained access to the actual fire floor, we had a cut through cut through holes with soils. And again, you know, having more information than then the addition the primary units have they tried cutting them with with with Rotary saws, which weren't working because of the smoke emission. So when we got our assignment, we brought our electric salsals up and we're able to cut through, you know, and again, that was one of the things where I'd beat myself up for like, if we would have done this sooner, the sooner and this sooner, you know, we would have been in a position to help these guys. More. That's just me, you know, woulda, coulda shoulda

**J** James Geering 1:44:38

ya know, exactly. And I mean you did you paint the picture in my mind of what you just described as a fire fireman that must have been an absolute bloody nightmare, you know, just just for the regular operations but then you have the Mayday happen. I mean, you know, now you've got this, you know, rapid extrication needs to happen and basically none of the tools that you need as far as access and ability to remove the victim Yeah, and

 1:45:01

the means that again, it's never it's never one thing. It's a it's a combination things. It's all the dominoes. You know, the kid listening to the audio so many times that that fire, you know, so many things went went wrong. You know it's not it's never one thing.

**J** James Geering 1:45:24

So was that the last line of duty death that you witnessed wearing an FDNY uniform?



1:45:31

Yes. The last one. Funny. So it kind of ties into what you're talking about. With Joey earlier. It was around November of 2011. That's when Joey passed away. I was in a major crisis with my mental health. My son was young. He's about four years old. And one day my wife is just like, hey, if you don't do something, I'm leaving, and I'm taking the kid. So I drove over his counseling unit that day. And, and I'm a mess. You know, there was an old, old retired peer counselor there, Bob, he didn't know what to do with me. I'm bawling my eyes out. He's running upstairs to try and get one of the one of the clinicians, you got to talk to this guy. Anyway, she was in session, she wanted to come and down, I go up and see her. And she's like, Alright, come back, come back in a week. Right. So. And within that week from that date, and I'm in crisis to the next time I see her, that's when Jody passed away. So I go back to the counselor, she's like, Oh, how are you doing? You know, seems like you're better than you were the last time I saw you. And Mike Well, not really, you know, Joey just passed away, you know, a couple of days ago, you know, and that was another thing that just added on, I called the box, you know, box inside your head that, you know, all that trauma just gets stuck in there. And, you know, after a while, if you don't let it out, it overflows. So I got a whole stereo on that too, which is what led me to peer counseling and stuff.



James Geering 1:47:14

So just before we get to, you know, what worked for you, when you look back, what, how will you presenting, what was the lowest point that you got to in this kind of mental health decline?



1:47:26

For me, personally, it was just I was totally checked out. You know, I know guys that struggled with alcohol, struggle with drugs, with gambling, with cheating on their spouses, sex addiction, whatever it is, for me, it was I had totally checked out on life. I, when I would come home, I would sleep all day long. And to be honest, I missed the first couple of years in my son's life, you know, and now it's amazing. I have a tremendous relationship with my son. And it's, it's great.



James Geering 1:48:02

So you have this conversation with the counselor, walk me through your healing journey, as a lot of other people that have some horror stories first with EAP and some of these other things, what was your journey to to firstly overcoming some of the things that you were dealing with, and then kind of, you know, some of the tools that you were using that actually work for you?



1:48:22

Yeah, so that has to go all the way back to, to, like in March of 2002, where a lot of people know, the counseling unit for the FDNY. On September 11, I only had five people, they only had five clinicians. Because it was something that was so different at the time, it was more for the

guys who had drug and alcohol problems or got arrested for, you know, domestic violence and stuff. That's what it really was for, it wasn't for the post traumatic stuff. And the counselor was so overwhelmed, they started. They started hiring counselors outside. And I wound up getting hooked the guy that was assigned to our firehouse, I wanted seeing him and his office, along with going through the fire department counseling unit and therapy and medication is what got me through. You know, there's whatever it is that works for you, you have to find out what works for you. You know, again, you talk about, you know, I've made therapists cry, you know, tell him telling him much more detail than I know that I've told you today. And, you know, if you can't handle what it is, and I'm telling you, you're not going to be able to do me any good. Which leads to the whole peer counseling thing and cultural competency. No, but I had my therapist told me once that I had two scenarios left in my career, that I was at a fire where one of my firemen died or I died in a fire. And I really didn't like either one of those scenarios. So I retired got a new job energy therapist?

J

James Geering 1:50:03

So what was that transition out of FDNY? Like for you? I know you obviously you found yourself in the Charleston area. But and so yeah, there's an element of again, re finding a tribe. But now you're in a training department you with a, you know, a new group of people that you don't know. Was that jarring? Did that compound some of the negative things that you were dealing with? Or was it a positive thing for you?

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1:50:24

Well, both. Because I never realized how bad I was until I removed myself from New York. And then when I took the job down here, I was living down here by myself for eight months. And I had stopped therapy, and it's not my medication. And, and I had this horrible cycle of when I felt good, I would stop my medicine, and then I would feel bad again. So then I'd start my medicine. But every time that cycle went through, I would be worse than the last time. And I'm down here by myself having a having a hard time can not go into therapy off my medication. And I wound up getting hooked up with the Lowcountry firefighter support team, which was started after the Charleston nine fire and just got connected with connected with them with Joe mission. And it was actually kind of Ryan dollar was a member of the North Charleston Fire Department. At the time he since retired. There was a part of the team that directed me towards the team. And again, I, I never realized how how bad I was. And I've been able to, it hasn't been perfect. You know, it's often ups and downs all the time. But I know, they might disagree sometimes. But I think I have a much better relationship with my wife and my son now. Although there was a really big struggle with moving down here. But what led me to, to the support team is really what what helped me, I really wish I would have understood more about my mental health, when I was still in New York, and to be able to take care of myself up there, and to be able to take care of people that are dealing with that stuff. Because I moved. It's funny to another amazing tribe. And I actually wrote down the quote that I that I have in my presentation, you know about it and talking about, you know, your small group defined by a clear purpose and understanding the gaining it may be the key to our psychological survival. And the way Sebastian, younger, wrote in that book, again, more towards military, but that's why I find the value in peer counseling so strong because we're, it's each other. We're firemen.




You know, it's very, you know, you and I have talked like twice, but, you know, because we have that bond, the firefighter, you know, we can talk forever, which I think we have, like been talking for like two hours now, already. You know, what, speaking

 James Geering 1:53:02

of that, because I agree completely, it's amazing. You know, I think the passionate firefighters, like you said, you walk into a firehouse with a dude that just wants to put his gear on the rig and get through his 24 hours, you probably not going to have a lot of common with that. But the person who's there for the right reason that's a universal type of human being. You come down from New York to the Charleston area, you yourself have been through all these horrific line of duty deaths, you find yourself working close to a department that had one of the most tragic incidences in the fire service as well. Whether it was there any cross pollination Did you ended up kind of interacting with some of the members of Charleston that were at that fire?

 1:53:41

Yeah, so again, how it's really weird how everything interconnects James, I was working, I worked for for our and we're on scene. And on scene was hired by the Charleston Fire Department in April of 2010. To do some training for them after after the fire. And we came down. You know, Aaron picked up a couple couple of instructors to come down and he wanted to be able to relate to what's going on. So he had he had myself who had been involved in all this stuff. He had Kim Maloney, who was a retired District Chief in Worcester. So he had the experience with Worcester fire. And, and columbaria His name is John John Simpson, who's part of the training company as well who had an incident and he's friendlier. You know, he's he's, you know, Bart,

 James Geering 1:54:41  
that name rings a bell nationally. He's

 1:54:44

one of the founding fools. Okay, now, I'm drawing a blank on is that Ocala drawn a blank on a department that he worked for, I can't believe it. But he was involved in a training where Lieutenant NUPRO reside. So Aaron wanted to try it out.

 James Geering 1:55:00  
Oh, it's probably Osceola County. We lost Dallas. Yeah.

 1:55:05

Big. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. I can't believe I couldn't remember where Bart works. But he brought

down with the, with other people. And, again, what happened? What happened there was we wound up meeting some people and, you know, seven years later, I wound up getting a job down down here, you know, totally, you know, didn't plan it that way. But but that's the way it happened. You know,

 James Geering 1:55:36

I had Travis house on the show. And then David Griffin has also been on as well. So you know, two very different perspectives of that tragedy.

 1:55:44

Yes, yeah, I've spoken to both of them. Chief Griffin, you know, I speak to and I actually just ran into Travis. We have a bunch of mutual friends. I had met him once. But I just ran into Travis. The other day is like, by a fluke. But spoken to Chief Griffin about, you know, and again, what I'm trying to do now, is what they've been doing for the last 10 or 15 years, we'll be hanging April, just trying to get that message out about mental health with my story. Well, speaking

 James Geering 1:56:21

of that, Ben, so tell me about surviving the job.

 1:56:25

So it's, it's the whole story. And that pretty much I told you probably half of it. You know, the first test is about all the stuff that happened from our 17 year old firefighter. But the second half of it is how I really dealt with everything.

 1:56:39

And it started. I didn't know what to do at all, with all this stuff. And

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another really good friend who's head of the New England fools, Rusty Richter. He said, you know, do you mind talking about this, and I put this thing together. And then the more I started doing it, the more you know, the more involved in it, I got, and it's changed so many different times to include so many different things, I learned something about me every time or somebody that I get to speak to teaches me something about something that relates to this, but what I what I wanted it to be was that you don't, again, the cultural competency, you know, a firefighter talking to other firefighters, about mental health, and about the stigma of being in pain and how nobody wants to talk about it. No, and if, you know, if I can be that person where somebody says, you know, that knows me or sees me, it's like, hey, you know, I'm going


through the same thing that Steve has gone through, you know, and if he can deal with it, you know, maybe I should try and do it as well. You know, and and again, that's, that's what it's, again, it's not scientific, so I'm not a doctor, I'm not, you know, it, it gives that cultural competency aspect of it again, where I'm a fireman talking to firemen. No, which led me to hopefully, in January, going through the process of getting starting my master's in psychology, because I want to become a counselor now. So and I'm so I don't want to say I'm mad. But I wish I'm going to be 57 years old. I wish I would have understand stood a lot more of this a lot sooner in my life. So what I've been able to help myself a lot sooner, and Mabel have avoided some of the mistakes that I made over the last couple of years.

 James Geering 1:58:34

Yeah, well, again, as we talked about the way that you and I were taught about nutrition and training and everything was very different than it is now. And I think this is the amazing time to become a first responder and it's up to the leaders in all these spaces, nutrition training, you know, mental health to step up and do what you're doing now. So that our young recruits can enter this profession, understanding, you know, maybe having some counseling before they enter the fire service addressing some things you might be bringing in understanding that it's normal to talk about that, that you need to process some of the horrific shit that we see that you know, you're part of a tribe. And if you find yourself plucked from it, that that's going to be detrimental in some way, and giving them their tools so they can actually walk through their career. Again, as we talked about earlier, with that strong foundation, rather than that one that's already cracked.

 1:59:23

Yeah, making it part of recruit school just like no recruit school just used to be physical training, and then the practical chain, you know, now it's become financial training. You know, it's become mental health training. You know, we used to when I was coordinator recruit school down here, we introduced yoga one day a week. And guys flipped out. You know, because like, firemen doing yoga. You know, it's just another one of those things where we've never done it like that before. You know, and I don't want it. It's really it's helpful if you try it, you know, and Again, it's just like talking, I just want people to be able to empty their box. You know, and I strongly feel that talking about all that trauma that's stuffed up inside your head that because we have this, this thing with therapists and clinicians as well, you know, what, they're not going to understand what I'm talking about, you know, why would I tell somebody something like that they're not going to be able to help me? Well, let me help you first, excuse me, as a peer, and I'll lead you in a direction to seeing a clinician, which will help you a little bit more. And even to the point where, you know, you feel like you might have to go to any treatment, which, you know, is becoming a lot more acceptable. Now, you know, there's a place shatterproof, have you heard of shatterproof? I

 James Geering 2:00:49  
have? Yes. Yeah.

 2:00:52

I know about 10, or 12 people that have gone there in the last the last year that swear by that program, you know, but it's becoming more acceptable. Now, you know, and, again, we talked earlier about EAP, I'm not a big fan of EAP is as far as the fire service goes, because to EAP is an employee assistance program for the non first responders. And, you know, they're going to tell you how to, you know, deal with your life stuff where somebody from the you know, you're having some, some issues, some mental issues in the fire department, you're gonna call the 800 number, because it's a private contractor. And they're going to get back to you in three days to tell you that it's going to be another month before somebody can see you. You know, where peer counseling, you can call up somebody who has the cultural competency now and speak to somebody about the stuff that's going on with you. And again, with, you know, shameless plugs made because there's other, you know, the IFF has a center Center of Excellence, behavioral excellence. But the guys that I know, that went to shatterproof, within 24 to 48 hours, they were in the facility, you know, and that's, and that's what we're, if you're at that point where you think you need some help, you know, you need to do it as fast as fast as you can.

 James Geering 2:02:12

One more area before we get to some closing questions that I didn't make sure that I kind of pulled from you. With you personally. You mentioned EMDR, for example, what are some of the tools that have worked for you? You mentioned, psychiatric meds? So what is what is your toolbox look like that helps Steve navigate his trauma?

 2:02:31

For for me at first, it was it was immersion therapy. Where, again, going back to that incident where I was in crisis with with talking about the 178th Street fire, and again, I have to emphasize that, you know, when I was in crisis about that fire at that point, it was six years later, no, but it was and I had gone to two more fatal fires. But it was it was just this thing, you know, that just something brought it brought it out. Because it's cumulative. It's everything that and it might not be the last thing that might be something that happened 15 years ago that you just didn't think about. But when I went for therapy with, I had to tell that story over and over and over again. And it was it was it was calculated on a scale from one to 100. You know, when I started, I was stressing it 100. And the more I told it, the numbers got down to single digits, eventually. And that's why I have no problem talking about what happened to me why I really try and advocate other people talking about because you have to get it out of your head. It's just it's got to come out somehow. And if it comes out your mouth, and you know if you can remember it without reliving it. If it's something that you can that you can get out of your head still there, but it's not going to close your life. And that's what I've considered EMDR I know a lot of people have had a lot of success with that. And there's something else that some other acronyms that I've heard you talk about before. I'm not sure what it is.

 James Geering 2:04:11

Oh, yeah, there's so many I'm trying to think what that might be Nbd something or other? Yeah, I'm not I'm not sure. MDR is the main acronym. I can think of the one and that area that that

you know, it was very taboo A while ago, which is, you know, we talked about that change in culture is psychedelics to ketamine and MDMA lab counseling, you know, ayahuasca and Ibogaine and all these things that the military, you know, again, the, the actual members that are doing these themselves are having amazing success. And so, you know, for me, that whole, you know, gamut of tools should also be in that toolbox. But sadly, our prohibition laws are, you know, causing not only problems that we see on the streets and the civilians, but it's stopping a lot of our men and women in uniform getting that therapy that is seemingly very, very effective as well.



2:05:00

Yeah, I guess for me, it's whatever works. You know, what I did might not work for you. But you, but you can't give up, you just have to find out, know what it is a lot of, again, a lot of people, and if the easiest things to go talk to a clinician, but you know, we have this fear of speaking to somebody about about it, you know, and a lot of people don't like medication, medication has helped me, you know, and all the other things that are available now that whatever works for you, you know, if you're, if you're struggling with this stuff, find out what works for you, and use it.



James Geering 2:05:36

Absolutely. Well, I want to throw some closing questions at you quickly if you've got time. Yeah, sure. Brilliant. So the first one that I'd love to ask, is there a book or other books that you love to recommend? It can be related to our discussion today, or completely unrelated?



2:05:52

Did my homework James listen to the podcast? Thank you. Yeah, and, um, anything by Simon Sinek. I'm a huge fan of Simon Sinek. As far as leadership goes, there's another book called culture code by Daniel Coyle. And again, it's not fire related, but it has a lot to do with, with team building and stuff. Tribe is a tremendous book. It just so many good things and try and again, it's not about firefighting. But it has, it's such a strong message about the culture that we have as firefighters. And and the other one is his legacy, by James Carr. It's about the All Blacks to the New Zealand, Australia and New Zealand, New Zealand. Yeah. And tremendous, tremendous book about, about teams, I got one quote, I gotta read it right from here. For one, disaffected or selfish individual affects the group, remove them from the group, remove them, and the group will cohere and heal. And that's, um, you know, that's what I found that happening again, I know, we don't have a lot of time. But the next job I moved to had had some issues with some people who didn't think the way I did know and pattern removed myself from that from that environment.



James Geering 2:07:28

Yeah, I can relate 100% That was my last place five years of trying to be a positive change and realizing that positive change wasn't really what they were looking for. So they wanted Yeah. All right. Well, then the next question, what about a movie and or documentary?



2:07:43

My again, going back to you know, Sebastian, younger, you know, Restrepo was amazing. And the other one he did I can't remember the name of it. Karan gall. corndog cast amazing, amazing, which I think is what what led him to write the book tribe was, was based on on those things. But my favorite movie of all time is it's a wonderful life that has nothing to do with you know, it's a Christmas movie, but that's my most favorite movie. Remember, the Titans was a phenomenal movie about teamwork. And, and Heartbreak Ridge with Clint, Clint Eastwood, and how he's able to get these misfit ragtag group of Marines together to try and, you know, and in the way he led them, it's, those are just some click for me. It's like, it's a lot more scenes from movies and quotes from different more than one movies specific.



James Geering 2:08:47

They think it was an interview yesterday, or is talking to someone but one of my favorite quotes ever and this is so pertinent to what you just talked about your last apartment. From Bandar brothers, you salute the rank, not the man.



2:09:01

The man. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. That was another fantastic series, and learning leadership from from that point. Yeah. Yeah, I can respect the rank. I don't have to respect the man. Absolutely. You know, and if I respect if I respect you as a person, I will automatically respect the rank.



James Geering 2:09:18

Yeah, exactly. But the person usually that's the most respected kind of person isn't wearing their rank on the show. I mean, they are they are wearing it, but they're not wearing it, if you know what I'm



2:09:29

saying. Yeah, that informal leadership is huge.



James Geering 2:09:32


Absolutely. We're speaking of Sebastian, he's coming on back. I think it's the third, third or fourth conversation, but he'll be back next month. So I'll be getting them on again.





2:09:42


Huge fan. So yes, actually, I tell you a quick story. Oh, no, please. Yeah. Talking about six

degrees of separation. So his first book which I read 30 years ago, perfect storm. So the National Guard helicopter crew they'd had crashed. One of the PJs, the PJ that lived was in my prober class in New York City. Really? I went to recruit school with him. Yeah,


 James Geering 2:10:10  
you still still in contact with him now?


 2:10:12  
No, no I we we you know again it's such a big job we went to recruit school together people found out about his story you know, I read the book you know put two and two together. He was pretty humble about about what happened. But you know, we went to different parts of the city but just that again, how help so many different worlds, you know, Kawhi for so many different reasons. You remember

 James Geering 2:10:38  
his name? I can't, okay, no problem if you'd if you find out because I mean, that'd be a really interesting person to get on. If they were ended up in FDNY. Were there a PJ on that? On the was it something gales now forget the first name? Andrew D'Andrea, yeah, that was it. Yeah. So yeah, very cool.

 2:10:57  
That was an amazing book as well. He's an excellent writer.

 James Geering 2:11:00  
He certainly is. Well, speaking of amazing people, is there a person or are there people that you would love to recommend to come on this podcast as a guest speak to the first responders, military and associated professionals of the world?

 2:11:14  
I, again, doing my homework, I knew that we were going to ask that question. And I can't come up with one person. Because if there's different people in my life that I feel, so what I'd like to do is, I'd like to speak to them, and ask them if they would be interested. And then maybe get you in contact with them if that's okay.

 James Geering 2:11:36  
No, absolutely. 100% It's funny, because yeah, some people like, Oh, God, you threw a tough

one at me. I'm okay. So you've clearly never listened to the podcast 100 times. So I appreciate that.

 2:11:47

Oh, no, I mean, I've worked with, I worked with three different guys in New York City that won the highest award that you can get in the New York City Fire Department. And all three of them are the most humble people in the world that they would never do anything like this. You know, they're not going to come and talk about themselves, even though, you know, feats that they've done it at fire scenes are amazing.

 James Geering 2:12:12

Yeah. Well, I hope we can persuade them. I had our Benjamin on.

 2:12:18

Yeah, I was. I was great. Yeah, he was. We were when I was a five minute squad. 41. I would I would get detailed to rescue one. And worked with worked without Gentlemen, gentlemen.

 James Geering 2:12:31

Yes, yeah. But again, it's that trust, hoping you realize it's not about as we talked about earlier, it's not coming on here and beating your chest and talking about what about us you were it's relaying stories, you know, being vulnerable, because I'm sure a lot of them are probably had their struggles to like all of us that are human beings. But also passing on the knowledge to this global audience. There might be someone in the Sudan, who's a firefighter happens to listen to this. And that applies to a fire they go on and it saves their life. So absolutely. The way I look at it. Yeah. All right. Beautiful. Within the last question for you make sure everyone knows where to find you and surviving the job. What do you do to decompress?

 2:13:11

I spend time with family. Actually, when I actually, when I actually left the fire service. I never realized how much I was neglecting my family. It was like an epiphany. I love the fire service so much. I put it before my family for such a long time. And then when I actually retired, I was able to see that and hopefully it's not too late. But we've been spending some really good time together. And, and so it's really nothing. You know, I mean, I've done I'm back in school. So I tried to read I tried to read a lot and just spend time, you know, my son 16. And he likes to hang out with me, so that's really cool. Oh,

 James Geering 2:13:57

brilliant. I gotta I can't get him.





2:13:58

I can't get him to move along.



James Geering 2:14:01

With me, we got the same problem that yeah, my little boys 15, almost 16 and August. Not exactly, you know, a magnet when it comes to me being out there doing yard work, either. But he's, you know, he's an athlete and all this other stuff doing really well in school. So I'm like, alright, I'll mow the grass as long as you keep your grades up and, you know, stay in shape, you know. So brilliant. All right. Well, then the very last question, if people want to reach out to if they want to learn more about surviving the job, where are the best places online or on social media?



2:14:30

I'm not a huge social media guy. But on Facebook, it's Steven Gillespie on Instagram. It's I think it's Esquil SP underscore FDNY where it might just be Gillespie, underscore FDNY and I'm probably the best way is just an email. s ng 9340 at Outlook.



James Geering 2:14:56

Brilliant. All right. Well, Steve, I want to say thank you so much. been an amazing conversation. You know, this is what I love about his podcast. Now we're talking about, you know, people coming on this community that we've got this this tribe of, you know responders and all the other professionals that listen all over the world, you know, the network that is created. So, you know, you reaching out and coming on and telling your story and being involved with so many tragedies that you know, would crush so many people and making the listeners understand that we can go through hell, and you can navigate coming out the other side, but as you illustrated, it involves asking for help. And it involves understanding that there's this vast toolbox available to us. But you have to find what works for you. This is why you know, people come on and say, Oh, this works for everyone. I'm like bullshit, nothing works for everyone. So I want to thank you so much for being not only just generous with your time, but being courageously vulnerable today as well.



2:15:53

I'm glad we were able to finally don't get connected enough. I can't even express to you how honored I am that I'm speaking to you right right now that I'm part of these almost 800 podcasts that that you've done with the people that you've had on your podcast and I appreciate you letting me tell my story because that's what that's what it's about for me and for you haven't missed this should I keep kissing your ass are



James Geering 2:16:22

these carry on? I've got all day



2:16:27

No, but there's there's mediums for stuff for stuff like this now. And not to be a part of it. Yeah, I just want I want to share my story hopefully that if I can. You know when I do my presentation. I have one one thing that I want to get over that there is somebody in the audience listening did decide to you know, they can go for help and get better. That's my only objective