

# Trevor Williams - Episode 850

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haiti, people, earthquake, firefighter, work, called, tool, family, years, story, happened, leave, door, lock, life, started, department, put, died, airport

## SPEAKERS

James Geering, Trevor Williams

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James Geering 00:00

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science has spanned, but also see for yourself the incredible health impact of this life changing software. And you can find even more information on [nucalm.com](http://nucalm.com) Welcome to the behind the shield podcast. As always, my name is James Geering. And this week, it is my absolute honor to welcome on the show, firefighter missionary and the man behind the Williams key Trevor Williams. Now in this conversation, we discuss a host of topics from the missionary work that led Trevor and his family overseas. His personal experience in the Haitian earthquake as a civilian, his journey into the fire service, forcible entry, innovation, entrepreneurial ship, joining the special operations team that responded to Haiti years prior and so much more. Now, before we get to this incredibly powerful and important conversation, as I say every week, please just take a moment, go to whichever app you listen to this on, subscribe to the show, leave feedback and leave a rating. Every single five star rating truly does elevate this podcast therefore making it easier for others to find because this is a free library of 850 episodes now. So all I ask in return is that you help share these incredible men and women's stories so I can get them to every single person on planet Earth and nice to hear them. So with that being said, I introduce to you, Trevor Williams. Enjoy Hey Trevor, I want to start by saying thank you so much for connecting on social media and for coming on the behind the shield podcast today.

 Trevor Williams 05:15

Thank you, James. I've been looking forward to this, I'm glad we're able to work it out.

 James Geering 05:19

So for people listening, we are recording now this is a new thing on the behind the shield podcast. And when I first the video first popped up, there was this majestic beard, which you do not see in the fire service normally. So why don't we start with that? How is it that you were able to play a Viking Halloween last night?

 05:37

Yeah, we did a great Viking themed the whole family last night. I've got two little baby girls and a wife. And yeah, I was able to take advantage of this beard if you're watching this. I've been off of work for a couple months, I had a baby. So I went off on FMLA to be able to spend time with my wife and kids. And then I had a hernia that needed to have surgery. So I'm a couple of weeks recovered from a hernia surgery. And in the meantime, I've been growing this beard out. So as a firefighter, you definitely cannot have a beard. At least like a structural firefighter, maybe some wildland, you can. But yeah, this is going to have to go once I go back to work can't wait to go back to work. It seems like it's been too long, but also enjoying the time with the family here at home. Now

 James Geering 06:31

this is gonna be a weird question, because you've literally got two young young children there, what 1010 months apart? I've got that room



06:38

just over a year apart over you, okay.



James Geering 06:41

And so you're you're having a lot of sleepless nights at home. But coming from the shift schedule that you have in in California. Did you notice the difference when you got off shift after a few years of working?



06:55

Yes and no, I feel like at the at the firehouse is sometimes you'll get lucky. And you only get one call at night. Or maybe once in a blue moon, you'll sleep through the night. My my station is out of West Hollywood. So it's typically very busy at night. There's a lot of nightclubs and things that happen at night that go wrong. So we are up a lot at night over there. But yeah, I'll get lucky from time to time. But coming home with two babies that are very needy at this stage, they're both in diapers, it seems like there's less sleep going on. And my wife had a rough delivery, multiple surgeries, she almost died like she had internal bleeding, they had to go back and open her up again to do like exploratory emergency surgery. So she's like, I've had to take care of her along with like two crying babies. And then she's had to take care of me with my hernia, and then the recovery from that. So there's been some struggles. And I definitely miss, like the routine of going into work, working, maybe getting up at night, maybe not coming home, and then having like, no kids and being able to sleep through the night and recover a little bit. So, yeah, it's a season, we'll get through it. And we're trying to find our rhythm. But it seems like it's constantly constantly changing. But it's a good thing. Like, the being a father is a new thing for me, you know, within the last year and a half. So I'm learning to appreciate it. And it's hard work, but it's definitely work you want to be doing.



James Geering 08:44

It's interesting, because you got to see that separately. Now you put those two together, which is what all of us do. I mean, my little boy was colicky. So at the moment I got through the front door, a baby was handed to me and he would cry on and off for 24 hours until you know, I did the California shift in Anaheim for a few years. So it was you know, one on one off, and then the four or six at the end. And yeah, it was brutal. So you get to see it without that. And another thing one of my friends, he almost lost his wife to the same thing. She delivered the I think we're discharged and then she just started bleeding out and almost died. So that's something that a lot of us don't think about is just because you initially delivered doesn't mean that everything's great, you know, you got to be aware of some of those those scary warning signs because he literally from what I understand was ours from losing his wife, which is terrifying.



09:32

Yeah, I found myself in the delivery room with two babies a newborn baby and then my other young daughter, and they had wished my wife out without telling me much other than we got to move her now go into surgery. And hours of just Oh man. Oh, she's okay like and then

thinking like, what if she's not okay. Oh man, I have these two babies like how am I going to take care of them without a wife and blah goes through your head. During those times but luckily, pulled through, you know? Excellent.

 James Geering 10:04

Well, we are speaking obviously over zoom, where are we finding you on planet earth this afternoon?

 10:10

I'm based out of Los Angeles, California, little city called Azusa. So that's where I'm at right now.

 James Geering 10:19

Brilliant. Well, you have a very unique early life. So we're going to spend some time there. Let's start at the very beginning, tell me where you were actually born. And tell me a little about your family dynamic. what your parents did, how many siblings? Okay,

 10:32

I was born in Richmond, Virginia. And I was the firstborn. So only child for a little bit. My dad at the time was an attorney. And I believe my mom was just taking care of me. During the early years, when I was four, my dad, and my mom felt called to be missionaries. So my dad stopped being a lawyer, and went to Africa and brought all of us with him to work for a company called World Vision, which is a large, nonprofit organization. One of the I think it's the largest Christian NGOs in the world. And they're in almost every country. So he took us to a country called Zaire is called Xavier at the time, it's now the Democratic Republic of Congo. And this was back in 94. So during that time, there were the Rwanda genocides were going on. And Zaire borders Rwanda. So we before long, I don't remember, it being like, bad when we first got there, but not not long after it, we started to be impacted by that. The Rwanda fighting, and the civil unrest, and people or friends that kind of knew us that were local would come and give us their valuables to hold for them in case something happened to them during those dangerous times. So eventually, it got too dangerous for us to continue staying inside here. And we evacuated kind of, to South Africa, Johannesburg in South Africa, and stayed there for a year, while things cooled off in Zaire. Now during this time, that's when it got its name change just because of the war that was going on. So by the time we went back, it had been changed to DRC, Democratic Republic of Congo. And we were there not, not long before it, it just, it was too dangerous to be in Africa, whatsoever. So we had been there about four years total. And we now legit evacuated to where we go Connecticut, where my mom had family on that side. But I remember and I've actually never shared this, but I remember the airplane taking off. And we were like late getting to the airport. And it came back around landed, so that we could get on it was a big airplane. So that we could actually evacuate out of Africa. And I remember like feeling really awkward that,

you know, like that never happens, right? up playing comes back for you. And just because we're so special or whatever. But no, it was like it was because it was really dangerous. And they just needed to get as many people out as possible.

J

James Geering 13:48

So why do you remember about that time? I know you were younger. For you know, when I think of that I actually had a guest Ishmael Bay who's from Sierra Leone, so not right there. But when you heard him talk about being an innocent young boy, you know, and they they loved hip hop and he was just having a normal childhood and then that broke out and his parents were murdered and he was forced to become a boy soldier and truly forced either you die or you fight. It's one of the two. You know, you get to see inside some of these horrors. So what you know when you first got there, I'm assuming maybe maybe through your parents storytelling, because you were so young. Was it immediately war torn? Or was there a kind of devolution over the years?

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14:31

Um, I think I was sheltered at first by my parents because four year old boy you know, they don't want to expose me to things they don't have to. But over time, you just see stuff so that you see the military presence. You see guys with guns running around everywhere. We were in Lubumbashi Zaire, which is more of a city. It's not like the jungle you might think of when you think of Africa but dirt roads everywhere, but Busy houses, buildings, all the all the good houses had walls and security around them. And I went to a school English speaking school called Test TESOL where my mom would would teach at and bring me as a kid. So the only time I was out inside of like a protected area was during like the transport from from home to church to school. And but yeah, I would, I would see things from time to time. The the time that stands out, the most to me, was coming home late at night, from a friend's house and my dad was driving. And I think my mom and I were in the backseat. And so we have a gate around our house, or we have a wall with a gate, barbed wire, an unarmed guard. So he's more like a gate opener and does like chores and stuff. And a dog. I guess. Looking back, the dog wasn't very big, like, I have a huge Cane Corso now. So I'm like, I know what a big dog looks like. And I'm like, my dog probably wasn't going to do much back then other than bark. But coming home late at night, our our yard boy opens the gate for us. We're pulling in, it's dark. We have a long, narrow driveway. And my dad just driving us down the driveway to go park. And we hear our yard boys screaming and jumping and trying to get our attention. My dad looks back, he sees four guys run in with stuff like weapons and rope and stuff to do us harm and probably rob us and who knows what else. So we reverse out of there. And my mom is like putting our heads down so we don't get shot. Or yeah, my dad to like my dad wasn't seeing he's like driving with his head down. Reverse out of there and leave, leave the premise. And we're like, oh, man, we hope isn't able to Joseph our yard boy. Oh, Joseph, okay. They, they had to like going back the next day, he was okay. He went and hid, didn't get hurt. But they had told him don't say anything. And he did anyway, you know, so he risked his life to protect us, which is great, and got arrays and all that stuff. But that that stands out to me to where, you know, there's there's four guys who wanted to hurt us or, or rob us or whatever. And that stuff like that happens all the time, I'm sure.

**J** James Geering 17:41

What about South Africa? Was that a sound? If I've got my dates, right, was that pretty soon after the fall of apartheid that you got there?

 17:51

Yeah, so we got to South Africa in 96, I want to say, and South Africa was dangerous in its own way, where there's like bad gang violence. And we had these necklaces, like a little panic button. I don't know what they do. I think they call some service. Maybe the police come. But we had to wear them all the time. Because there's a heightened sense of just being in trouble. I guess you're getting into trouble out of nowhere over there. And it seems safe. Like it seems more first world culture. But things would go south quickly. And the house that we ended up living in come to find out afterwards. The family before us had been killed in that house. And I guess not nowadays. You got to disclose stuff like that. But yeah, we didn't find out until we were already moved in. So the Carfax for the house? Yeah, exactly. At least in California, you got to do I think within four years if somebody dies, like you got to report that so? Yeah, I

**J** James Geering 19:01


think it's fair enough between ghosts in the Biohazard between the two. Yeah. Yeah, I was just in Johannesburg in February. But I mean, it was around the world. Like literally deliberately as fast as we could. While some of the guys did skydive. Some of them did marathons, but we went to Johannesburg and Cape Town. But that was the beginning of this. So we actually got here it was two days in Cape Town. And it's again we'll talk about Haiti in a little bit what I feel with their two beautiful, beautiful country it's just it's heartbreaking when you see destruction, wars, etc. Because I mean, these places are absolutely gorgeous and I'm sure you know Syria has beautiful places I'm sure in a Gaza has beautiful places, and now they're reduced to rubble because of, you know, fucking human beings. Yeah,

 19:49

it's terrible. That's how it goes sometimes though, I guess and that's why, I guess people like you and me. and my family are called to help out and shine a little light on the darkness out there, you know? Absolutely.


**J** James Geering 20:06


So you went back to Connecticut? What took you to Haiti?


 20:12

Um, yeah. So we went to Connecticut, I was there for a couple years. And when I was 12, my parents felt called to go serve again. And they had actually done some work in Haiti before I was born. As a newlywed couple. So I guess, God put it on their heart like, hey, he needs some help. You guys should go help. And we went. And by this point, I had a sister that was

seven years younger than me. And not the end, I have one more sister, but she wasn't born yet. So we're all seven years apart. Yeah, so we, we had a beautiful house in Connecticut, on eight acres of land, there's a lake or river, nice house, just a really hard place to leave. I had a good community, good friends. And at an impressionable, 12 years old, like my whole world was just taken away from me to move to Haiti, which was the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Also going through civil unrest, and just night and day, like, going from a beautiful place to like, one of the worst places you can imagine. was devastating to me. So it took me a little bit to come to terms with that. And Hades, I guess, so dangerous and violent. You're really like exposed to death. Like, as soon as you, you get off the plane, you can feel it, it's heavy. There's just, there's just something in the air over there. If you're like, in tune to that sort of thing. And even as a young younger kid, like, I could feel that. And then I would start seeing stuff. So you'd hear gun gun fire, you'd see bodies in the streets. Just like a disregard for life. From time to time. On the other side of that Haitians are beautiful people. They're very nice. Until they aren't, you know, it's like, I've great things to say about the the island of Haiti, and the people of Haiti. But there's a lot of bad people there too, just like anywhere, but it seemed more condensed in Haiti. There were the most suicides, kidnappings per capita in the world at the time that I was living there. I think it was 100 a week in the city I was living, and I had friends kidnapped, and it was just very, like, you'd see crime all the time. And so this does dive a little deeper if you want. This. made my mind Make a choice. I can either be afraid all the time, afraid that I'm gonna get killed, or kidnapped or whatever, something bad's gonna happen to me. Or I can not be afraid of that anymore. Over here, and try and live a normal life as much as possible. Knowing that any day I could catch a bullet or something bad could happen to me. So I decided to start living without fear as a pretty young teenager, so at this point, I'm 13 or 14. And Haiti became a completely different place for me. I started enjoying it. I started adventuring, even like in you shouldn't, you know, in places like this. And so I had, like, I had come to terms with the fact that I could die at any at any point. And it seemed like the healthiest way to think. I don't know if it was especially as like the developing adolescent. But I also think that that has followed me throughout most of my life now. And I've been able to reflect on that and have less of a fear of some of the things that could be really dangerous or could really hurt. You will

 James Geering 25:01  
you import a prince? So one of the other cities? Yes,

 25:04  
we're based out of Port au Prince, which is the capital. And for your listeners, I can talk a little bit about like, what what Haiti is,

 James Geering 25:13  
is absolutely, yeah. So

 25:15  
Haiti is it's an island that is attached to the Dominican Republic. And together they make up the

Haiti is it's an island that is attached to the Dominican Republic. And together they make up the island of Hispaniola. Haiti is very poor and brown on the map. And the Dominican is lush and green. And you can very clearly see the border and the divide. That island is 565 miles south of Florida. And, of course, poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. So a lot of people didn't know about Haiti. When we moved there, we were trying to explain what it was to people and they're like, oh, Hades, like no, no, there's something different. But since the the Haiti earthquake, which happened in 2010, and we can get into that in a little bit, that put it on the map, and almost took it off the map. But now people know what Haiti is, and kind of where it is, and whatnot.

J

James Geering 26:13

So I have a unique experience. I'm actually about to go to Haiti again. That's six weeks from now. But we are going to what the cruise ship comedian referred to as fake Haiti or Jurassic Park. And the reason being that I don't know how but Royal Caribbean, I think is the only one that goes to this. There's a place called Labadi. And they basically put, I don't know how many feet of fence electrified fence around this tiny little peninsula on Haiti. But what is so devastatingly sad is I've traveled a lot of the world I've cruised quite a bit. I love it. We're living in Florida, obviously, it's so easy to jump on a ship here, by far the most beautiful island I've ever seen, anywhere near us. And so the potential for it to be a beautiful tourist destination with a lot of money coming in is huge. But again, because of people and I work with a couple of guys, hey, Johnny, and Eddie, when I worked in South Beach, if you look down South Beach in Florida, the chairs, umbrellas, everything are all the same company, Boo che brothers, and I was kind of managing one of the areas and where were those guys, and they were awesome. They were from Haiti, and not not too long. Before I met them, you know, they were in Haiti, but they were talking about Papa doc and baby dark. And again, that the the tyranny, you know, a few people making a huge amount of money while watching their people kill each other and starve to death. So this is what's so sad. And I don't know if you know if you have any response to this, but it seems to me like the island of Haiti itself, being so close to Florida potentially could make all their money from Americans just jumping on ships and going over there and exploring their island. And, you know, respectfully, hopefully, and because of the unrest because of the, you know, the abuse of the people, and what's what it's created, it's put this this barrier to entry of it actually be able to solve all its problems, which would be this tourists commerce, but you know, until obviously, they get control of the violence, they're never going to be able to get that tourism. So it's this real kind of double edged sword, but the solution is, as you said, 500 miles away. But the unrest caused from the oppression of its people for years and years and years, has resulted in the fact that I asked someone once and they were like only when some sort of military goes in there and helps them stabilize again, or the Haitian people really going to get to get back on their feet. Yeah,

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28:39

no, I agree with you. There's huge potential for Haiti to be good, you know, but it's, oh, man, it's complicated. It's really complicated. And I own a nonprofit organization that builds houses, in Haiti, for earthquake survivors, and we can talk about that in a bit. But lately, I've been having a lot of meetings trying to figure out what else can we do for Haiti? Like, how can we fix Haiti? And it's a super complicated thing. And there's hundreds of organizations that have been trying to crack this code for years and years. And yeah, it's definitely not a simple answer. So and on top of that, I tried to go to Haiti a couple months back before my my kid was born, and I was



told you cannot come to Haiti right now is way too dangerous. Everything is shut down. People aren't even going to work like though they'll be killed if they're seen like that sort of thing. And I'm like, oh, man, this is really bad. Like I yeah, we're like at a standstill with with hate, like at least Labadie is doing good, but I don't know the We all hate to you know, it's just, it's terrible. It's really, really bad and sad and unfortunate. So, yeah, I've been trying to figure out what to do with that. And it's a it's a big, big problem.

 James Geering 30:12

Yeah. One of the guys I just interviewed great three weeks ago, he Greenbrae I think we got it right. They were literally on the plane, a plane or helicopter. That was, I think it was a plane because they were literally taxiing towards the runway to go to Haiti for an invasion to stabilize, hey, this was, you know, I think 30 years ago, somebody was a young, young Green Beret, and, and then they literally kind of ground to a halt. And they were told the operations off. So the US was about to go over there a few decades ago, and try and stabilize itself. But obviously, that never happened. For whatever reason. I know, it's a tricky thing to go into someone else's country and say, We're here to fix everything. But um, yeah, I mean, while while we're, you know, we'll get just to the death toll from the earthquake alone. But, I mean, I wonder what the death toll is just from all the violence as well, I mean, so close to us, there's got to be something that we can do in 2023. Of we're responding to all these places a lot lot further away from us, you know, and we're ignoring the Haitians that are on our shores? Yeah.

 31:17

Yeah. It's one of those things, you got to like, hopefully, like maybe technology helps improve our abilities to help, you know, with the Starlink. And whatever, you know, just I don't know. Yeah, I've been thinking a lot about it lately, and trying to figure out how to create jobs for Haitians. How to just make it a little bit better, you know, and not one person or one organization is going to fix everything. But I think when enough people get involved, that's when you start to see those changes.

 James Geering 31:52

Absolutely. Well, I know you spent a few years in Haiti, what brought you back to the US then.

 31:59

So while we were in Haiti, there was a president named Eric steed. And he was a bad guy. Not as bad as Papa doc, and maybe doc, but another, just bad leader who's taking advantage of his position. And it got to the point where he was ousted, and the government was overthrown. There's civil unrest, like there always is. And he had to leave the country. I think he went, I think he went to Africa somewhere. But in the meantime, he was supplying games with like money and weapons and having them hurt Haiti, and just make Haiti even worse place because he was angry. And so I got really bad, even worse for all of us that were still living in Haiti. So we had to evacuate Haiti. I was 15. Now, at this point, there were roadblocks everywhere burning tires, Haiti is mountainous down to the ocean. So you can, if you're up high, you can

kind of see a lot of what's going on. So you'd see pillars of dark, dark smoke going off as they're setting tires on fire and creating roadblocks so you couldn't get through. Everybody had weapons out in the street, it looked bad they'd make. They'd make roadblocks even out of like dead bodies and stuff to try and keep you from getting where you wanted to be. So yeah, we had to leave. Got out of there. Ended up in California, actually. It was supposed to be a quick, hey, let's go to California while things cool off in Haiti, and then we'll go back. So like a six month thing, was what we speculated. And we ended up in Monrovia, which has a World Vision headquarters, and they decided to use my dad as part of a New World Vision project. In the meantime, so six months turned into two years, and we stayed in California longer than expected. At this point, I am, like almost an adult starting to decide what to do with my life. Pretty soon after getting to California. I knew I wanted to be a firefighter like you at that age, people were asking you Oh, what do you what do you want to do? Firefighting was along the same lines as helping as a missionary. You're, yeah, it's very similar. You're helping people on their worst day. And you're able to, you know, be light in the darkness and continue to just be a good person in in these scenarios, so I went to my local fire department And I asked about how do I become a firefighter. And they said they had an explorer program. And for listeners who don't know what that is, that's a kid that can go and train with the fire department to see if it's what they really want to do. They get exposure to the training the firehouse culture. They eventually go through a little fire academy so that they can start staying the night and going on calls and doing ride alongs. So I did all that. I went, and I was, yeah, pretty much as soon as I got to California, I was like, 15 and a half. And they allowed me to start training and I was a mess. At first I, my hair was long, and I had bracelets and necklaces, and I was, you know, straight out of Haiti. So they had to scare me away a little bit. But you wear a uniform, and you shine your boots, and you just learn all the proper etiquette of the fire service. So I was doing that. For I did that as long as possible. But when I turned 18, my family was like, Alright, we're ready to go back to Haiti. And I was like, Cool, I want to stay here like, established again. And I'm 18 like I'm an adult. So they ended up leaving me to go back to Haiti without me. And I stayed here. And to pay the bills, I was I started working construction. So I got involved with a couple of different construction crews. And eventually ended up as a carpenter, specifically doing finished carpentry as a door, door and lock installer. And that'll come into play with some other things here later. But yeah, I was doing that to pay the bills. And doing the Explorer program during my fire science classes, started going to college, getting all that stuff knocked out, became an EMT, did part time EMT Did the State Fire Academy through a school out here called Mount SAC, Mount San Antonio College. And then once I got that, I was able to start applying for small departments locally out here, a lot of big departments have their own academy, but the small ones, just ask that you have a State Academy. So I was able to get hired with a volunteer fire department out here. And there's only two of them in the LA area. So when I got hired with it was called Sierra Madre, fire department, single station in a small city. But they would run with LA County, which was the department I'd been training with, they used all the same equipment as LA County. So it felt like a really good stepping stone for the department I wanted to be working for. Meanwhile, hustlin trying to survive in LA and trying to pay the bills, super busy, young adult. And not long after my family moved back to Haiti, I decided I should probably go visit them. I hadn't been back to Haiti in five years. And I had set up an opportunity to where I could help the United Nations with a new fire program. So this was going to be like a good way to visit my family to kind of build my resume a little bit to be back in Haiti. And I had planned to go to Haiti for about a month. And just do that for a little bit. So this was in early January of 2010. I got to Haiti a few days before the Haiti earthquake, just out of happenstance, and I think it was definitely for a reason, looking at the big picture. But I was in Haiti a couple of days before this big earthquake hit. And I was supposed to do an interview with the United Nations, the day of the earthquake, during the time of the earthquake, unbeknownst to anybody. The day before, I realized I was kind of wasting my time not doing

this interview as soon as possible. Because I'm only in Haiti for a limited amount of time. I want to be able to be a valuable asset and teach and train the people that I was there to help. So I called the UN I was like, Hey, do you mind if I come in early and do this interview? I just want to get it out of the way and hopefully get to work sooner. And they're like, oh, yeah, absolutely. Come on down. So did the interview the day before the earthquake now? And had I had been in that building during the time of the earthquake as planned? I most certainly would have died. That building completely collapsed. It's called the Kristoff building. 300 people died and everybody died. That was in that building. So dodged the bullet there. And that's something that it doesn't haunt me. But I'm, I'm great. You know, it's like I got a second chance. And we can talk about that in a little bit. But to talk about the earthquake if you want me to dive into that, yeah,

 James Geering 40:21

absolutely good. The reason why I remember that so clearly, I was working for Orange County Fire in Orlando area by that point. And when we're in school in England, we don't learn Spanish with a French. So I spoke you know, I speak basic French, I wouldn't say I'm even close to fluent, but a lot of times in Orlando is a lot of patient communities. You know, people will be like, he's Haitian men and women would be like, blown away because there's pasty English dude started speaking French than not Creole, but French. So when the earthquake happened, I proactively reached out to our chiefs like, Hey, are we sending anyone? You know, I know there's, there's Utah teams, but there's devastated there. It's on our shores. And they, I mean, basically, they dragged their fucking heels what they did, they finally a few days later put out a kind of, you know, questionnaire almost. Okay, who would be interested? If we did? Do you speak French, I signed up straightaway. And then I was very strange, because we were pulling you saw teams back out when they were still finding people alive in there. So I'll kind of get your perspective on that. So not only had I been aware of Haiti and Haitian people, you know, years prior working with the two lads, but now, you know, really did try and get out there. And I just had Timmy Gleason on the show who's Florida Task Force to who was one of the people that responded. So walk me through it was January 12 2010. So walk me through the events prior if you want to put some kind of observations of building construction prior to it, and then we'll walk through not only the tragedy of all the Haitian people, but obviously the the near miss for your own family as well. Okay.

 41:55

Yeah. So before the earthquake happened, I was visiting different places in town, and I actually was paying attention to the building construction. At this point, now being a carpenter, and fire training, and we pay attention to those sorts of things. We're living in Haiti before I did not, not really at all. And I was like, looking around, I'm like, oh, man, like, I don't even feel safe in this building. And the way that these houses are built is unreinforced. concrete. So like, no rebar, or very, very minimal rebar. And these houses are not up to any code whatsoever, they're just slapped together as cheaply as possible because nobody has money. And then they're like, built on top of each other up the mountain. So it's just a domino effect, if anything, were to happen, any of, you know those structures. So they're just barely hanging on as it is. And Haiti had never experienced a significant earthquake in recent times, at least. So that's, that was never a concern. It's always like hurricanes and, and flooding and disease. Like that's the things you worry about when you go to Haiti and crime. But yeah, nobody's thinking about an

earthquake. And another reason I did that interview a day early is, my, our plans got cancelled the day before, and we're supposed to get on a boat and go to like, one of the beaches and stuff. And the waves are like, really bad. And like, uncharacteristically large that day. And to the point where like, it wasn't safe to go out and vote. And that never happens. So something weird was already like, brewing, you know, in the environment somehow. And I haven't looked into that, but I just, yeah, that was my observation. And the day of the earthquake, I was down in the town in Puerto Prince at an orphanage. And I was with my family wasn't with me. I had some friends with me. But we were helping out at this orphanage. There was 110 kids. And I was on the second floor on the balcony when the earthquake started. And initially, I didn't I don't even have like a good earthquake radar, even living in California, like I hadn't been in anything real significant either. And so it starts rumbling, like, the ground starts shaking. But that happens in Haiti when like big Mack Trucks drive by and stuff like that. So that's what I that was my initial thought like, oh, big trucks come in. And then it gets worse and it starts shaking even more And there's actually an American paramedic who she owns this orphanage with her husband. And she's, like, retired older than me, but more experienced. And she knew it was an earthquake. So she yells, earthquake, and I'm like, oh, shoot, earthquake, okay. Okay, what do I do, like, so I stayed where I was. And I'm like, There's kids everywhere that went, like, we got to keep these kids safe. The floor that I'm on, is all special needs kids, why they're on the second floor. So the first I don't know, but they're up there. And I just decided, like, I'm gonna hang on, and I'm going to try and keep my body in the safest place, like feel this out, you know, I don't know how long it's gonna go on for all these thoughts are going through my mind in like a half second, right? So I look over the balcony, I see a pickup truck down below. I was like, Okay, if I have to, if this building starts collapsing, I'm gonna jump on that truck, break my fall a little bit. It's got rubber tires and shocks, and I think it'd be okay. Meanwhile, other houses are coming down, like, we start to see like, housing collapse collapse does is loud, it's violent, people are screaming now. And the earthquake went on for 39 seconds, which seems like an eternity, you know, after five seconds, is not fun anymore. And all the the last five minutes of me telling you about what was going through my head that happened in the first like two seconds. So that seems like it's going on forever. And this was a 7.0 earthquake. In it, it was almost dusk. So this is happening around, I think, maybe close to four o'clock. So it was towards the end of the day. Anyway, the earthquake stops. Our building had not collapsed. There's cracks all over the walls, everything that could fall down had fallen down, including most of the kids. And I was like, Alright, we gotta get everybody out, start picking up all the special needs kids. And these kids are like, like, severely handicapped. Like, you don't even see this in the States. But are you familiar with hydrocephalus? Yeah, it's like the enlarged heads and stuff like that. Really weird to see, because it's something that we can like address early on. And in first world, first world countries. But in Haiti, it gets bad because the, these kids had to just grow as like, there's buildup in the fluid, I think in the heads and stuff. So there's a lot a lot of kids like this. And we're so we're carrying these kids down, and, and trying to get them like in safe areas. And then there's kids who can't walk. And so that was our first priority, just getting all the kids out and out of a collapse zone because the house could still fall. And we were surrounded by a wall that could still fall. And before long, we started getting these aftershocks. And these aftershocks are like 5.0. So they're still significant as well. And they would bring down the buildings that were barely hanging on, after the 7.0 had, like, messed them up, you know. And there were hundreds of aftershocks over the next couple of weeks. So we stayed sitting on the ground in a collapse free zone as safe as possible. And just and just waited they we didn't know how bad it was. At that point. I didn't know where my family was. None of the cell phones were working. There's probably a million people were trying to make phone calls and text messages on top of all the like repeater towers having fallen down. So yeah, communication was like out the window. I knew my dad knew where I was. So I waited. I waited for him. I'm like, hopefully he shows up and comes and gets me you know, because I

don't want to like just start wandering, like, I wanted to go help but at the same time 110 Scared kids with needs like, I'm like, okay, they need me here to help out with everything that's going on. But the like EMT and the firefighter inside of me was like, I gotta go pull people out, you know, I gotta go like Time is of the essence. But it wasn't, it wasn't a right thing for me to just leave the scenario I was in and go out in the dark with like, no tools or knowledge of what really had happened. And at this point, nobody knew the severity of the earthquake like America in Haiti didn't know we just had all experienced it at that point, and I think to throw some figures out there, and they, they've changed. So I don't think anybody really knows like how many people died, but 300,000 was the common number 300,000 people died. Uh, during the earthquake, which is largest disaster, natural disaster in modern history, like, even the tsunamis and stuff didn't kill that many people


 James Geering 50:09


was a small population too, isn't it? So percentage wise, it has to be definitely the worst tragedy of any country for that small half of an island to lose 300,000 people. Yeah,


 50:22

so there's 7 million people in the island of Haiti. And I think most of those people, at least half of those people are in the capital or the capital in the surrounding cities. On top of that, a million more people were injured and left homeless. So everybody was impacted. Everybody knew somebody that died. And, yeah, we'll get to that in a sec. But I eventually my dad showed up. And he had like this, look of devastation on his face. He pulls me aside, he was like, hey, Trevor, I need to talk to you. He said, he went back to the apartment, my mom and my two sisters were at, and it had completely pancaked down and completely collapsed. It was five storeys, they lived on the bottom floor, on the edge of a mountain. And he's, he told me like, there's no survivors. He didn't tell me they're dead. But he just told me what he saw and like that it did not look good. And I was like, it obviously caught me by surprise. In my head earlier, I'd kind of been joking, like, hope everybody's okay. You know, like, I didn't know the severity of what truly had happened. And so I, I refuse to believe initially that they had died. And I went, I went when my dad had a vehicle, and we slowly made our way up the mountain. And you're, you're already like off roading before the boat for the earthquake, the roads are just bad in general, a lot of dirt roads, a lot of potholes. Now, there's walls collapsed everywhere. There's dead bodies, because people will find somebody and drag them out into the street. And they because they're dead. If they're alive, they're trying to get treatment. But there's lots of obstacles. So we made our way up the mountain but very slowly to my dad's pastor's house, and up in the mountains, it's safer. They're less impacted by the earthquake. So I don't think any of the houses up in the mountains. For one, they're like high up in the mountains, but one of the better built, and they're owned by people with the money to have a nice house that can be better built. So we stayed up there. And I obviously cannot sleep thinking about my family. Anytime I start to doze off and other Aftershock, kids wakes me up. And we're also all thinking like, was the 7.0 the worst earthquake? Or was that like a preliminary one for like, another even bigger one? Are we going to get another 7.0? Or like, nobody knew what was going to happen? So that was scary. But all night long, I'm thinking we gotta get my family, we gotta go. We gotta go find them. Like, what if one of them is still alive? You know, like, I hope they're also. So I'm thinking like, alright, we need supplies, we need water shovels, maybe bodybags for other people that we might find, you know, and like, just trying to stay hopeful and trying to keep my

mind like, focus on like, the right things. And as soon as the sun started to rise, I was up and I'm like, Alright, come on, Dad, we got to get down the mountain. We got to go, go dig, you know, we got to do something. And he's like, he's a very wise guy, like, smart, smart man calculated. At this point. He's the director of World Vision, Haiti. So he's in he's in charge of all of World Vision. And he's like, No, Trevor, we gotta eat. We're going to need our strength today. And are like, okay, all right, you're right. So I'm like, I'm like trying to force down a little bit of food. And then while we're eating, my dad started talking about funeral plans for for the family. And that's when it like, just crushed me. I'm like, oh, man, he really believes that, that they're dead. And I did like, excuse myself from the table. I got up, I walked over to this balcony that was overlooking all of Haiti. And I realized I hadn't seen Haiti in the daylight yet, especially not from that vantage point up in the mountains. And it's it was such a vivid memory in my mind. Seeing Haiti for the first time after the earthquake, where it was just totaled up devastated. And like the sun is coming up so you're getting like this dark red sun like piercing through like there's fire everywhere. I guess the the clouds like caused a bunch of fires. So you'll see like smoke Hatter's Sun piercing through, there's still like a haze of dust in the air from all the collapses. And then you can hear wailing like just people were are just so distraught and crying and patients are very emotional people, but I think anybody would be in that scenario. But they're very, very vocal and singing and you'd hear singing too. But a lot of a lot of crying and sobbing. And yeah, that's when it hit me like, in my soul, where I was like, Oh my gosh, like this. This is crazy. Like the whole the whole island just got devastated. And it's a lot bigger than I thought it was. And we still didn't have numbers. But that's when I started to cry. Like, I've been like holding back, trying to be strong for my family and stuff. And then that's when he got me. Anyway, yeah, so at that point, we not not soon after that, we started heading down the mountain. And I remember seeing people like just covered in debris, walking up the mountain with like a suitcase. And then other people, bloody or whatever, holding clothes walking down the mountain, like people didn't know where to go, or what to do. And but there was like a common ground even though I was like American and different from from the Haitians, like we all shared this similar experience. So at that point, we were brothers, brothers and sisters in this big, big event. Excuse me one sec.

 James Geering 57:13  
No worries, brother.

 57:16  
It does. Yeah, it doesn't always hit me. But this time, it is good.

 James Geering 57:21  
I mean, this is a natural emotional response. Especially. I mean, so many of us have emotional responses to something seemingly far less acute Burma, and you're talking about absolute devastation near death. You know, you think you've lost your family at that point. You're watching, you know, obviously the aftermath of hundreds of 1000s of people losing their lives and homes. You know, this is a pretty significant event that I'm sure is going to, you know, raise emotions till the day you leave this planet.



57:51

Yeah. Okay, here we go. All right, next part. Ah, this isn't even the most emotional part. Um, so at this point, I don't know if my family is alive or not. And our plan is to go to my dad's office, the World Vision headquarters, and grab some supplies, so that we can go dig and dig share about my family a little bit. My mom is in her late 40s At this point, my sister's 14, and my youngest sister is seven, six or seven years old. So very young. So we get to my dad's office, and we go in the front gate, and we park and we get out. And I start, like, it's game time. Like I started looking for stuff. I can grab the shovels and water and stuff. And somebody else Hey, your family's here. And it didn't really register with me at first and they, my family had made it you there. They had been dropped off in the back gate. And they were all alive. Dang, it is getting me. Oh man. Alright. So yeah, they're all alive and they're covered, covered in debris, and holding each other helping each other walk. And my mom was barefoot. My youngest sister was barefoot. And my youngest sister was being held by my other sister who had only one was shoes on the 14 year old. The youngest one couldn't see she had debris that she had caught on her eyes and stuff but they were all alive and we ran to each other and and hugged and held each other. And it was beautiful. Um, yeah. Going from thinking that you lost everything to getting it back. Yeah, very strong, very strong memory. And in my life probably probably one of the strongest ones. But yeah, they made it. So their story was incredible. They had just gotten home from school. And they were all together in the same room, talking about their day. And this doesn't normally happen. They usually split up once they get home. And they, they're all together when the earthquake started. And they could hear it, like coming down, pancake pancake super loud. And the wall broke open next to where they were standing. And they jumped up. And they're on the side of a mountain. So they're tumbling down the mountain. The house is tumbling behind them. They spent the night in a tree. Immediately after the earthquake, looting started. Prisons broke open and bad people escaped. Just like opportunities, right? Like you start robbing right away if you can. And also a very dangerous place in general for three women, you know, on the road. So yeah, they spent the night in a tree. And sure, they didn't sleep very well up there. But they were up there all night. And then the next day, they caught a ride and got dropped off at my dad's office. So yeah, they definitely shouldn't be alive at all, like, yeah, they're a miracle story for sure. But we had to get them evacuated out, get some medical attention from a mom, especially she seemed the most beat up in the the, my youngest sister with the eye issues. That was like a temporary thing. So eventually, she was able to get all that debris out and see so she's okay. And everybody's okay, now like in full retrospect. Big picture. Everybody's okay. But we got my family to the the US Embassy. And it took a while because we had to navigate all the like downed power lines. And yeah, just figure out how to get there. And the air was airport. Yeah, the Air Force evacuated out, like injured Americans. So my whole family had the opportunity to get on an air force plane and leave the country. Right as we're boarding. I told my dad, I need to stay in Haiti. I'm an asset here. Like, I know the country. I know the language enough to get around. I'm an EMT, fire training. I know some search and rescue. This is the perfect place for me. The family is okay. They're in good hands. They're in your hands. They're going back to the US. I need to stay. And my dad said, You're right. Here's the keys to the car. No discussion.



James Geering 1:03:25

So you're waiting for him to say no, come with us. And



1:03:28

that was an article this day then? Because it Yeah, he definitely could have convinced me to come with them. But no, he knew he knew was the right thing. So then I was on my own in Haiti, and I spent the night at the US Embassy by myself on the ground. And everybody had to leave their backpacks and their their suitcases. They're like, No, you can't take anything, just leave your luggage and get on the plane. So everybody's like, yeah, you know, take what you need for my stuff, because they knew I was staying. So I went through some bags, I made my own bag, some food and some clothes and stuff. And I woke up to somebody like dragging my bag away from me. And I got up, I went, I grabbed my bag back and I wore it backwards and like, and I slept on top of it. So I didn't get robbed again. But I was tired. Like I did sleep. I got up the next morning, took my dad's car to the World Vision headquarters where I knew some people. And I was like, Hey, I'm, I'm here to stay in Haiti, for I don't know how long but I'm here to help. And they're like, Oh, your Frank Williams is my dad. He's like, Oh, Frank Williamson. So they think I'm like, as good as him at everything. And that's like, not the case at all. I'm 19 years old at this point. But they put me in charge of a food distribution. And I was like, Alright, cool. Let's go. Let's go hang out some food. And we had these trucks, we went into the city, and we start handing out food and supplies. And before long, like within minutes, we're just getting mobbed. Like people were like shaking the car jumping on top of it, jumping into it, trying to get the driver out. And I was like, oh, we gotta go, we gotta go. So we took off, like, could have been really bad. People die in those scenarios all the time. So we didn't hand out even 10% of what we intended to hand out. And it was also like, really dangerous and scary. So we get back to World Vision. And I was like, okay, change your plans, we need, we need security, we need an entrance and an exit, we need like, an easy escape that's not blocked off. And we'll go do this and like a big soccer field, where there's lots of space. So we try again, same thing happens. And yeah, so we dive in the truck and take off and I'm like, Oh, this isn't working like people aren't gonna get their food. So I stuck around World Vision a little bit longer. But before long, I met a search and rescue team. And I was like, Alright, this is this is what I want to be doing. Like this is more up my alley. Oh, and I forgot to mention when I was at the US Embassy, LA County's Task Force to arrived. And they're like an international search rescue team. I was very familiar with them. Because I've been training to be a part of LA County for years. At this point, I'm not hired on by LA County. I am now but their search and rescue team was like something like that would be like a dream once getting hired to be part of this, like elite team one day, like, specialized traveling around the world. Very cool thing to be a part of. And I was wearing a county t shirt and a county hat, every all my other belongings had been lost in the apartment collapse. So I just have the shirt on my back. And it just so happened to be County. So Task Force Two shows up and they see this kid wearing like county stuff in Haiti, and they're like, Who the heck. So they come over and talk to me. And I'm like, hey, I want to explore. I want to explore. I told him my story a little bit. And I was like, Can I help? Can I like travel with your team? And they're like, No, good. Sorry. You know, we're, you know, FEMA, and after, and all these, like regulating entities are in charge of us. So there's no leeway. So I was bummed. I was like, oh, man, all right, well, one day I'm gonna get hired. And one day, I'm going to be on that team. And that I did eventually get on that team, once once getting hired. So that was a cool, full circle thing, eventually, but for the time being, I was still like, like, bitter about not getting to go with the big county team. But a smaller team I got to meet allowed me to go with them. And again, like, my contribution was, I know the country I know, the language like I can help out a little bit, you know, and I was here.



James Geering 1:08:17

So I iust to iump in a second. But at that point. you know. it's such such devastation. you think



there was a little leniency the bend some rules? I mean, what an asset, you know, you have this understanding, you understand the organization that you're trying to attach yourself to, you speak the language you've lived there. You know, I mean, that. And that seems like a poor leadership decision to not bring you along the first time to be honest.



1:08:43

Yeah, there's like good local knowledge. And that's something we look forward. Now. Now that I'm on the team, like, I know that that's a valuable thing. But anyway, yeah, it didn't happen for whatever reason, and got to work with a smaller one. And it was like, I think there was like six or seven people of like, elite. You got your your navy seal, and your Greenbrae, and your pilot, and your cadaver dog and your security, and your team leader. And you're paramedic, and then there was me. And we went around and we just pulled body parts out. Like we didn't find anybody viable, even though there were there's plenty, we just didn't know where to look. We didn't have the equipment that the big teams had. And I think LA County ended up getting quite a few saves over the course of those couple of weeks that they were there. But we didn't and it was there wasn't like that part wasn't hard for me. The the part of that was hard was that the families are there, like they're there with you like wanting you to save, you know, their family member. And it's kind of like You're a paramedic, it's kind of like, when you're doing CPR, and the family is there, and they're just rootin for you, you know, hoping that you save their, their loved one, and you can't all the time, you know, you do your best, but you can't. So I think, yeah, that was the hard part. At that point in my life, just hear hearing like the family members crying and like, please, you know, begging you to do your best and not being able to. So, yeah, I did that for a little bit. And this is when I started noticing, like, maybe like some early signs of PTSD for myself. I was having trouble sleeping. And I would wake up, like, violently hitting stuff like flailing my arms. Loud noises were starting to become an issue. So yeah, I've started picking up on some of that stuff. And, yeah, that, well, I'll talk a little bit more about Haiti, and then we can talk about that. So I was in Haiti a couple of weeks after the earthquake happened, like I stayed for a couple of weeks longer. And I did the search rescue team. And then once they left, we had been back and forth to the airport a lot. So let's jump in



James Geering 1:11:25

again, because my observation was trying to get out there, and they were already sending people back. And yet you'd see on the news, they were finding more and more and more people. You know, to me, it almost seemed like alright, rotate the teams, then, you know, do a pass on, let some of the other teams try and do some more work, but also get experience so they can bring back to the US and apply to the next Oklahoma bombing or, you know, whatever it is. But it was, you know, they just pulled in seemingly, really, really soon. We you've obviously got a very unique perspective, unbiased, what was through your eyes? Did it seem premature being member of a team now? years later?



1:12:02

Yeah, it definitely did. Because I've felt like I was there longer than anybody. And yeah, it seems like people would come in for a week, and then leave. And then I think we'd like the military. They were there longer. So I mean, not all of them. But at the airport is where

everything was getting set up. That was like the base of operations for every country that sent a military war relief team. And it was pretty massive. Like, after a couple of weeks, there's like flags from like, all different countries, flying like over their base. And there were mash. Hospitals set up at the airport, like three giant circus tents have emerged emergency hospitals. So there's a lot going on at the airport, and nothing commercial. But military planes would land and some private charters would come in, but they didn't have a good reason. The airport was kind of messed up, I think. So it was dangerous to land. And I ended up making friends with some helicopter pilots from Utah. And they were there. They're independently wealthy, because they're on their own dime, flew in Three helicopters. And just wanted to help. And I was like, Cool. Let me go pitch myself to them and see if they'll take me along. Because helicopters sound fun. So I didn't told them my story. I was like, Yeah, I've been here for a couple of weeks. Now. I was here when the earthquake happened. Can I help you guys? Like they're like, yeah, we're just trying to do the best. Good we can with like, our helicopters. So the big issue was, food wasn't getting out food and water was not getting out is, as I explained earlier, with the riots and trying to distribute food. It's too dangerous. And so the answer to that problem are these helicopters. And we go, Oh, and there's just tons and tons and tons of food getting dropped off by all these different aid countries like China would come in to dump a bunch of food and then Russia, Russia or whoever, they'd all be just the plane lands, offloads food takes off. So we go find that food and just take it like it wasn't being protected very, very well. So essentially, just go seal it, load up these helicopters, and fly all over Haiti and drop the food out and do it again all day long. So I was getting tons of helicopter hours like getting to ride in the back and having the time of my life. It felt like we're being the most effective as far as getting people fed. And in early on, we were landing the helicopters, getting out, offloading really quick, and then getting back in and taking off. That started to backfire on us when people started trying to jump in the helicopter, the same as earlier on in my story trying to jump in the trucks. So and that's way more dangerous in a helicopter. Like at one point, I had to jump into the helicopter as it was taking off. So like Rambo, and this is after like ripping open a 50 pound bag of beans with like a Rambo knife, you know, like, so I'm running knife in hand jumped in the helicopter was cool. So I just have in the time of my life and feeling like I'm doing really good work at the same time. So we changed our approach, and then we'd start hovering, and dumping the food out so that they couldn't get to us, but we could get the food to them. Sometimes we'd even hover over like a river and start like throwing canned goods in the river, it would disperse, people will come out of the woodwork and just start loading up and people are getting fed. So we do that for a while, I was really cool. We would sleep in the Dominican at night. And they had rented out a baseball field. So they hired security to watch the field land, the helicopters would sleep there at night, we'd be safer. And then we'd fly to Haiti the next day all day long. So really cool work. Once they left. I went to one of the hospitals. And I was like, Hey, can I help I, I'm an EMT, I just got my national registry card, I was a very new EMT, I just pass all the Nationals. And I had actually gone back to the collapse department where my family had been living to see if I could find at least my wallet. And somebody had looted already. And they had found my wallet, took out the money but like left the wallet so the wallet was like in the opening and they had wrist you would add to like, go way deep in there to like try and find it the interest way more than I would want to risk to go get my wallet, but got my wallet is all beat up lots of rocks and stuff and landed on it pulled out my national registry car with like dents in it and stuff. And I was able to present that to these hospitals. And they're like, they actually looked it up and stuff. And then they're like, Alright, your doctor, you know, go go help. So I was able to like, get to participate in things that I wouldn't ever get to do under my scope in the US. But now we're in like emergency medicine, like for real like, it's like jungle, wild west stuff. So there's people still getting pulled out of the rubble that are alive at this point. Lots of amputations, lots of surgeries. And then still lots of violence, like I had mentioned earlier, like the prisons broke open. So there's people getting killed, there's people getting shot.

So like we're getting gunshot wounds, too. So I'm getting help with this stuff I'm getting to help with with the leg amputations. And at one point, we took a little kid's eye out because his other eye was gonna go blind if we didn't take that one out for some reason. And starting IVs and pushing drugs, all that stuff I got to learn how to do. So that was really valuable for me. And in those settings. Nobody would tell you to stop like, like, nobody would tell you to go take a break or anything like that. It was just a non stop 24/7 around the clock, as much as you could handle and as much as you could do. You did and then you go take a nap on the cat eat an MRE get back at it. So people are getting burnout quick. And I could see the quick turnarounds at the hospitals like new doctors and nurses and medics would come in almost every day, and then the old ones will leave. And I was there about a week and it seemed like after that week, I had the most seniority. And I was in charge of my own little orthopedic tent of patients. And I was like, check all their IVs and make sure they were good and get them fed. And then I felt like I was getting burnout too. So I'm like, Alright, cool. I felt like I helped a lot. I learned a lot. But I needed to like move on to the next thing. And I did one more thing before I left Haiti, and that was I got involved with rubble removal team. And they were getting clean water. Like they're digging up wells. So a lot of wells got covered up so people weren't getting access to water. So we go and get the get the rubble out and by hand and give these villages like their clean water again. So got to do that. And then after Yeah, after a couple of weeks, I was like you know what? I think I should go home now. Like, there's always gonna be work work to be done. But I felt in my heart that it was time. So I lost my passport in the collabs I didn't have any money. I didn't have a phone, like I had no way of getting home, practically. But I just trusted my heart and my gut. And I went to the airport. And people were telling me like, oh, there's no way you're gonna get out, like people have been trying to leave the country, you know, for weeks. They're like, camped out on the tarmac right now. I was like, I know, but I'm just gonna see what happens. So I was like, I'm just gonna walk. So I walked in, walked past security didn't get stopped. Just kept walking, walking all the way through the whole airport till I got to the tarmac didn't get stopped the whole time. Got out on the tarmac. There were tons of people just like, in their tents, and with their luggage and sleeping bags. And they'd been living out there trying to get home. And there are planes coming and going and like little private charters and stuff. But how do you get on one of those? You know, that's the big question. And within 20 minutes, somebody approached me, and they told me, Hey, we have one extra seat on our plane. Do you want it? And I was like, oh, yeah, but I mean, I don't have any money. They're like, No, it's okay. You can you don't have to pay. We just, we felt like we should come talk to you. I'm like, yes, yes, I want that seat on that plane. So within like half an hour of getting to the airport, I was on an airplane.



James Geering 1:21:40

That's quicker than now if it goes through



1:21:44

way quicker. So I wish that happened every time. But it was a small a very small plane. So it takes off it takes us to was the Bahamas I think is one of the islands on the way back to the States. So takes us to Bahamas refuels and then lands in Florida. I have no idea what even city we're in. No phone, no, no way to, like do anything. Oh, and as we got off the plane there checking people's passports, and customs and stuff like that. And I don't have any of that stuff. One sec. But I'm like, Well, I got this far. I'm just going to one foot in front of the next and see

what happens. I was last in line. Intentionally. I didn't want to hold up the line if there's an issue. And they didn't ask me for anything. And I just I just walked past them. Really? Yeah. So there's obviously like, a path being paved for me to get home. And I get out of the airport. It's starting to rain. It's nighttime. And I look around. I see somebody with a phone. And I asked if I could use their phone. They said yes. And I called my dad. I was like, Hey, I'm alive. I made it back to the States. I'm in Florida somewhere. Um, can you get me home? And he was like, yeah, oh, are you ticket? And I don't think I went and saw them. They were in Connecticut. I think I just went back to California. And yeah, so the next day. He's like, You need to get to this airport. I forget which one it was. But he's like, You need to get to this airport. And I was like, Okay. And there's like a bus loading up. So I get on the bus. I don't even know where it's going. And it turns out, it's going the right direction, an hour to where this other Airport is. So I get close to that airport that night. At that point, I made some friends on the bus. And they're like, Oh, you can like sleep on my hotel room, Florida night if you want. So I did that. The next morning. I take a free shuttle to the airport. Give him my tickets, get on the plane, get back to California, like with no money who's crazy? No money, no ID. So yeah, so I made it back to California. And that's when I started my nonprofit organization. I felt like I should continue to like it. Like I knew I got a second chance in my heart. I wanted to continue helping Haiti. So I started it's called the firm foundation is spelled F I R M E. And it means strong or solid in the Creole language. So firm foundation, and the mission was to build houses for earthquake survivors. And we built 39 houses so far at this point, but it's been slowed down a lot just because it's so dangerous right now in Haiti to be able to do anything. But that's how I was continuing to About would love to go back soon, but I can't.

J

James Geering 1:25:04

Well, hopefully, hopefully something will happen. I think I saw somewhere that one of the African nations was thinking of sending troops to try and stabilize it. And I'm assuming it was probably one of the French colonies in Africa. But I'm not sure. I just remember seeing a headline. Well, firstly, I mean, that's the most comprehensive story of that event that I've heard yet. I've had people that were there, you saw our members, I've had a nurse, military nurse who was on a ship off the island of Haiti. And they could only have you know, they were brought mercy ship, I think. Yeah, I think it was. So but to have that perspective, and then obviously, you end up being in that exact you saw role yourself years later, is incredibly powerful. I want to walk through your fire service story and acts we can get to the tools. But before we do so many traumas at this point, how did you and your family, how were you able to process these traumas, and then talk to me about your faith as well, because obviously, your mission raises as deep rooted faith. But a lot of times when there's horrors and things, you know, it must cause that face to be questioned. You know, God, how could you let this to happen? So kind of walk me through the emotional and spiritual journey from 2010. through to today. Okay,

i

1:26:22

yeah, those are, those are good questions. Whenever my family would say, like, Hey, we're thinking about moving to Africa, or Haiti, or there's other countries that were considered. I always trusted God, like, God's gonna take care of us. He's never let us down. And yeah, these are super dangerous countries sometimes. And our friends or family usually didn't improve, especially bringing like kids to these places. But in my heart, I was like, No, God's gonna take

care of us if he wants us to go there. And, and that's why I didn't believe when my dad told me like, nobody's alive. In the apartments. I couldn't believe that. God would let something happen to my family when he called them to be there. I was like, No, there's just, there's just no way. Um, and so the point where it's, it really seemed like they had died. That rocked my faith a little bit. And I didn't understand. And, and it was, it was just for a brief moment, but it was like, it was almost like my theology unraveled for a sec, and but come to find out, he did take care of them. So that like that made it even stronger, reinforced it, like you just guys like you needed to trust me, you know. And so yeah, that's the, I guess, the spiritual aspect of it. And if you're listening to this podcast from like, spiritual, like, if you have a faith that you believe in and stuff, you can pretty clearly see, like God had his hand in this journey that I went through and that my family went through. If you're not religious, it just seems like an incredible story. Maybe unbelievable. But yeah, it happened. And I don't think it would have happened without, without God's hand in it, you know, keeping us safe and sparing my life screwing my family's life. Me getting to Haiti a few days before the earthquake, being in the right place at the wrong time. And all that stuff. Like there's so many little things that add up, you're like, there's no way that that was all coincidence. You know. As far as dealing with the trauma goes, I think I dealt with it better than my family did. My family got whisked out of Haiti right away, didn't have time to process like I did. I got to stay in Haiti for a couple additional weeks. And things started to like make sense more in my brain. And I was able to, like rationalize why some stuff happened and why, you know, just I answered some questions for myself because I was seeing it firsthand where there's a lot of unanswered questions for my mom and my sisters. Just like something crazy happened to them, and now they're in Connecticut. In like, first world, country, you know, being taken care of and recovering and culture shock, even if nothing had happened is always a culture shock going from Haiti to the to the States. On top of that, with the nonprofit that I started, I began speaking at colleges and fundraisers And everybody, I was telling my story to everybody just raising awareness raising money. People wanted to hear the story anyway. And that's therapeutic. And I don't know how many hundreds of times I've, I've shared my story now, but it's been a lot. But it has to be for the right reasons. Like, there's guys, there's guys on my shift who probably haven't even heard my story. And I've been at my station for eight years. It will come up over a, you know, cigars and one on ones and out front. Maybe, you know, if if the opportunity presents itself and stuff, but I'm not like, I don't just jump to like, tell you how cool my life is, or anything like that. I just, you know, I'm just me. So, but that being said, it really helped me process. It really helped me process. I did go to a therapist a little bit, initially, just because people wanted to make sure that I was okay. They're like, yeah, get your head checked, make sure. You know, there's nothing here, lingering that, you know, could creep up on you later. And I did, it seemed like, everything was okay. Like all the all the checks and balances were there. I was processing in a healthy way. I was still like very motivated, fitness oriented, eating right. Talking about my story, trying to make lemonade out of lemons, you know, this bad thing that happened? How can I make something good come from it, you know, and I was. And meanwhile, my family was just kind of stuck in a rut for a little bit. Lots of therapy, treating medical complications for years. And they're good now. But it took them a lot longer to kind of get through it. And they eventually started a music ministry for Haiti, where people would donate instruments, they take the instruments down to Haiti, they put on a music camp, teach the kids some songs, they get to keep the instruments. And they do that about once or twice a year. So that eventually ended up being one of the ways that they gave back and was also therapeutic for them.

J

James Geering 1:32:22

Beautiful, that's yeah, I forgot until we started talking. My my first wife, my son's mother, her

grandfather started a orphanage in Haiti as well. And I don't know if it's still going now. But I totally forgot about that. That was another connection I have with Haiti, you know, years ago. It's interesting, because there's lots of people on here that have really struggled, especially when they get into our profession, they start seeing the things that we see. And they get sleep deprivation and all the other compacting, you know, God, amplifying elements of maybe what's already occurred earlier in their life. But there are some people that do well. And I've said this week, we've recorded before we hit record, I've said this. I had, you know, quite a few things happen when I was young. But I think why I was just so lucky. And this is purely, you know, a life roulette when that's it. I mean, I haven't done anything special at all. But I grew up on a farm, I grew up in a large family where we ate together and made fun of each other, had all kinds of people walk through the door from extended royal family through the you know, traveler's gypsies. You know, watching my parents be very kind, you know, my dad was a veterinary surgeon who's healing I was around blood and guts. So I think, again, there was, there was enough good to offset the bad and helped me process it. You obviously want to know who's listened to the story for over an hour and a half. Now, I've got some very significant events that one would say, Oh, you must have PTSD. And you talked about showing the signs, but then it sounds like the ability to become a rescuer become a fixer and part of the solution was healing for you. Talk to me about you know, if if that observation is right, but also then, we talked before we hit record about some of the people you've lost in your department, because that's one of the biggest mistakes that we make because we compare trauma while I was never at the Haitian earthquake, and traverse fine, so what the fuck is wrong with me? Why am I such a Posey? Well, obviously, it's way more complicated than that, especially the formative years before you put on the badge. As a big part of it, I was from a very loving, strong, you know, family, clearly you were because you literally navigated the planet helping other people as well. So what is your observations of why you're okay, and then let's talk about some of the people that you have lost and the mental health element in your department. Okay.



1:34:51

Yeah, so one of the things I mentioned earlier, was the realization I had as a young A teenager, the first time I lived in Haiti to either you got to accept death, or you're not going to have a good time, you're gonna live in fear. And it's going to be crippling. So that early, early on realization, along with being exposed to some of that trauma, even before the earthquake, seeing, seeing dead bodies and gunfire and whatnot, and being able to, in that mindset, being able to be like, This is how it is, this is how it is, like, it wasn't me today, cool, you know, we're gonna keep moving forward. And that's a tough mindset, like not many people grow up like that. And I think it can really be devastating for the wrong person. Either you, you enjoy it, which isn't good. You turn into like, a killer or something, or it just ends up creeping up on you, and you just break out of nowhere. I think those are kind of the two bad reactions to that mindset. But that didn't happen to me, fortunately. And then later, I was able to reflect on like, well, this isn't the worst thing that has ever happened to me. So I'm okay. You know, I've dealt with bursts. And my worst day, on a scale from like, most other people's worst day, is like, way different. Right? So we respond to emergency calls, and somebody's got their coffee order wrong, and they're having a mental breakdown, right, that's like, their worst days. You know, it's, it's comical, but maybe, you know, they lived a really blessed life, you know, whereas somebody else's worst day, like, they had a family member killed or, or something, you know, or their dog got hit by a car, you know, these are all different things, different scales of bad things that can happen that people may or may not have experienced yet in their life. So I think what allowed me to be a level headed emergency responder was the spectrum of what I've already experienced. And having process that in my own way. And for long enough to know

that I am okay. I think there's lots of different ways to process trauma. And there's good ways there's bad ways. And then there's like, like, clinically studied ways, you know, go go to therapy, you know, that's a pretty well accepted way to process and some people need one session, some people need 10 years, I don't know, like, so I think everybody is different. But I know that for me, what I did worked, and it's helped me in the career that I've chosen. So, yeah, yeah, there's that, um,

 James Geering 1:38:14

would you choose? Would you feel like you had security even though you were moving to different dangerous countries? Did you feel secure in your family unit? Because it seems like a lot of men and women that I know, you know, that I've got to speak to, so we didn't lose, or we almost lost. There was definitely that, you know, this is Maslow's hierarchy of needs security as the first thing. Like he was saying was trying to give food you can't give food if people he's been rushing in the truck. And so whether it was being around a deck addiction, whether around sexual abuse, whether in a foster system, you know, whatever it was, there's not that family unit that you're part of that, you know, whatever happens in the planet earth, at least you've got them.

 1:39:00

Yeah, no, we had a really strong family, a tight family. Because we were all that we had, like, no matter where we went, we had to rely on each other. And I think after the Haiti earthquake, even even more so like you don't know what you have until you lose it. And then I was able to get it back. So that like, really, like instill value, even more than than I already valued my family, but even more so. Having to think about not having them anymore, and then getting them back. It's just Oh my gosh, like think about every day still, you know, and this happened over 10 years ago. So yeah, we had a we had a tight family. We all have different places now, but we talk almost every day, at least text you know, so And actually since the this new baby has arrived, everybody is flown out to visit all my family members. So I spent Nice, brilliant,

 James Geering 1:40:01

we'll compare that contrast that then to some of the people that you've lost in your department. I mean, I'm, I do this thing here at the 343 hero challenge every year, I've told this story on here before, but I've done it for, I think it's nine years now, the first year, I had six names of people who'd lost it, it wasn't just mental health, it was the cost of the job. And they just did it the September, I had 92 names on my back. So I haven't met, a department haven't had a conversation yet with someone who hasn't at least lost someone in their their atmosphere to overdose or suicide.

 1:40:38

So my department is pretty big. We have almost 200 fire stations, and over 3000 firefighters. And so like stuff happens to everybody, right? Statistically, like people are gonna die, get married, have kids divorce, whatever. It's just such a huge act of family that things are bound

to happen, right. But when somebody dies, it's a big deal. For any department, and we take it very seriously, we, we have a team that's like, the funeral team and stuff like that. Because it's just such a, like, we want to honor those people, the best that we can and respect the families the best that we can, and my department does a really good job of doing that. So when there is a funeral, like we all try and go, you're either working, or you're at the funeral. That's like, that's the right way to approach any funeral as a as a firefighter. And then there's obviously like, not everybody can go because maybe you're on a trip you planned a couple years ago, and you're in Africa, and like you just, you know, people understand, but you try and be there. And it seems like I'm at a funeral at least once a year, sometimes more than once a year. And sometimes it's like a line of duty death where somebody dies in a fire. But more often than not, it seems like it's suicide related. And, and a lot of them don't even get talked about, like the like, some of them are just it's just like, they try and cover it up a little bit. Or they treat it like it wasn't a suicide, and and still try and honor that person. But it's weird. The fact that this happened, it seems like it happens so often. And it's really hard to catch. Like I was listening to your last podcast with a fellow from you. He was on a task force to as well.

 James Geering 1:42:57

Yeah. Timmy Gleason.

 1:42:58

Yeah, Timmy Gleason. And he had it all planned out, right. And somehow his captain got involved and saved him. Like, that's really cool, really cool that somebody would be heads up enough to one recognize that and to take action. And that was like an intervention brought the crew over everything. So I really, really need it, it seems like our, our lives moves so fast, it's really easy to overlook those little details or those signs that somebody's not doing well. And, or you notice it but you don't give it the respect it deserves. And then some people are really resilient fighters and you'd never think that they would have an issue. And other people that seem like they are struggling are the fighters and the like, you can't kill him, you know. So, I guess I'll share a story that I've never talked about, and I want to be sensitive about it and honor him the right way. But there's a guy who was on my he worked at my station for a number of years we were together. And he to describe his personality. He was the last guy that you would think would have an issue. Hard worker on entrepreneur always had like 10 things going seemed like the most successful business guy outside of being a firefighter like on the side and stuff like most successful business guy that I knew in the fire service, and had a wife was about to have his first kid like weeks from having his first kid and he kills himself. And like really shocking To all of us, um, and devastating, like, what do you what do you do with that? Like, how could that have been prevented? And I know that if you had asked him, there's something wrong, I don't think you would have said anything. I think he would have been like out our school dog like, I'm good. I'm good. You know, that was just his mentality. Like, he's always like, you don't need help. He's good. Like he, he's doing great, all that stuff. So yeah, how do you that raises the question, like, how do we recognize this in the future? How, how can this be prevented? And it's really tough. Like, I know that, like, there's been programs put in place now. It's like, preventative maintenance type stuff. So I do think that's important. And to be aware of it, but I don't know, like, I'm still at a loss, to be honest.





**J** James Geering 1:45:57

A few of the things I mean, obviously, I've been doing this for seven years now. So I'm just a big sponge of all these incredible people's stories and, you know, literally leaders in their field in all these different disciplines. But a few things that really resonate with me firstly, from it's the last guy would have thought it was the number of times I've heard that. And I always point out if you and I went on a TC right now, you know, when people were in trapped, and we walked up to the car and went, Oh, fucking now, that looks awful. You know, it's, it's not very professional. So you wear your mask for your job, you know what I mean? I mean, physically, and, and proverbially, but the problem is, as you said, We're just so overworked and tired, that people can't, won't take that mask off and be you know, vulnerable and say, Man, I'm I had a three year old decapitated in a car. And I had a two year old at home. And I wrote about it in my book, and it was, you know, it was one of those things where actually my crew was amazing, like we will responded. And that was on a truck company was supposed to go back and extricate the body and my captain and engineer DFO does me and my, my partner, we had the same time on only like, two years in the fire service something three years. And he's like, you're gonna see enough horrible shit in your career, you don't need to see that. And they were about both about to retire. And they ordered us to stay at the station, they went cut the body out. And, you know, so we wear that mask, but But taking it off and allowing some of these calls to bother you, they should bother you, that shouldn't happen to a three year old child, you know. So you've got that. Another huge warning sign that none of us talk about is busyness. If you have got demons, if you just sign up for all the OT or you have a side business, and you're constantly doing that every waking hour, it might be that you're just grinding and you're just, you know, working towards purchasing a home, whatever. But you also got to take a step back and go, is this person really being present? Are they really being with their family? Or is it escapism, and we don't ever think of work overtime as a negative coping mechanism, but it can be. And as far as one of the solutions, I worked for four departments for hiring processes, that was three polygraphs for Psych tests. And I realized that we're just doing it completely wrong. The money is already there. polygraph is smoke and mirrors bullshit just to get you to confess something that you've done. The Psych test I know now from numerous psychologists and psychiatrists was never ever meant to be a standalone test. To find out if Trevor or James are going to be good firefighters. It's just not it's not designed for that. It's designed for forensic psychology with a gamut of other tests. So rather than doing that, how about we when we hire someone on and they got probation and they got Academy? Why don't we give them six counseling sessions, knowing that all of us are going to have traumas that we bring into the job. And I think that's the real, the real piece that we're missing, of course, is some horrible cause. And they should haunt us and I and I've said this before, and you talked about it in your story. I think it's the people that are left behind that really haunt us. It's not the grotesque, McCobb mangled body so much as the loved ones screaming after they just lost their their person. So you've got that too. But what if we took the money from polygraphs and psych, got rid of those two? did a background check did a written test and a physical test right now, you know, you shouldn't know if that's a good person or not. And you got a probation to get rid of them if they're not. And then say, Alright, we've got we're going to hire, you know, psychologists for our department. And over the next three months, we're going to give you six counseling sessions. You have an opportunity to offload trauma that you brought in, you deliberately make mental health a priority at the front door with your new hires and you've removed any barrier to entry. Because if you know have Steve or Sarah start struggling, or they want to tune up immediately they know Alright, I'm gonna go to doctor, whoever. And I know there's no barrier. What happens is our guys get into crisis. Now they're scrambling, and it's an EAP, Russian roulette. This provider is supposed to be really good, but they don't take my insurance or I can't afford this one. And this is a problem we have. So that's just some of the takeaways that I've learned of these ones that fall through the cracks is why do we not start

looking them looking for them on day one, not to eliminate them to allow that trauma to become post traumatic growth. So just like you with your story, some horrible things that happen actually become a superpower as a firefighter. Yeah.



1:50:43

Yeah, those are all really good points. Especially from someone with your experience. I like I like that approach. Or yeah, just having like, easy access to counseling where, for us, we get a bonus for getting our like physical checkups. So if you don't go do it, like you're leaving money on the table, a couple counseling sessions thrown in there could, you know, I think they'd be able to motivate the people that didn't even want to go if there's money involved, you know, like, get a half percent if you do your session this year, and one to six, like it's up to you, you know, at least do one. Yeah, yeah. And what will make



James Geering 1:51:29

it mandatory? Yeah, again, out the front door is normal. You know, you have to do a good department, you have a physical agility test. You know, you have to do it. If you're a pool. I mean, a lotion lifeguard or a pool lifeguard, you have to research your swim, test your toes, your CPR. Why is it any different, you know, you don't have to talk about anything. You can talk about the weather, or, but I guarantee you, they probably start opening some doors. And as you get comfortable, you'd be like, alright, well, while I'm here, let me tell you about that house fire where there was an efficiency and we drag the guy out and he was sloughing in my hands. Well, you know what I mean? Just get it off your chest. So there's no downside to it at all.



1:52:06

Like that? No, it's just getting getting departments to adapt policies like that. Absolutely.



James Geering 1:52:13

Well, we were talking about the length of the podcast already two hours, we haven't even talked about firefighting yet. So let's kind of jump into your journey. But you've got a unique journey. So you've come from the world of carpentry, you've also got a nonprofit building houses on the side, walk me through the front door, the fire service to when you realize that your background and the skills and the toolbox that you had were very applicable to forcible entry. And then let's walk through to the inception of the Williams key and beyond. Cool.



1:52:48

So my journey getting hired with the Fire Department took a long time. I did everything right, I did the Explorer program, starting when I was a teenager at 15. Got my EMT did the classes to the academies. As soon as I turned 18, I started testing or started putting in my application. So first one was with LA County, because that's the department that I knew I wanted to be at, and I'd been training with. But I was like, I mean, I'll work anywhere. So I, over the next couple of

years, I applied to 60 different fire departments, I traveled all over the US, Washington, Texas, New York, all the big cities. And it took, I think, like six years, six or seven years to finally get on the job. So I got hired around 26. And it's like, in retrospect, I'm glad it took me that long, because I've seen the young kids get on the job and just get eaten alive. And there's so much life experience that they don't have. That can kind of hurt you as a, as a firefighter. It's better to understand how the world works a little bit more what it's like to have different jobs, pick up some trades, versus being 18 year old who doesn't even have a cell phone or something, you know, like how are you? You're not gonna be as good as help, you might end up being more of a burden. Anyway, maybe I'm just justifying the fact that I didn't get hired right away. But in the grand scheme of things, I'm glad for the skills I was able to pick up along the way. So carpentry and working construction as a carpenter. I treated that job pretty seriously. And I in my head I was a firefighter already even though I wasn't and I would throw my ladders the same way I threw them out the fire station. I would flick out my extension cord the way I'd flick out a hose and And then obviously, like the etiquette to how it was, I wanted to keep my nose clean, stay out of trouble, all that. So that was going through my head every day, all day, every day until I got hired. Fortunately, for me, learning about doors, doors and locks came into play, being like a really valuable knowledge once I became a firefighter, because you go from installing doors to breaking down doors as a firefighter. And once I realized that we're doing it almost every shift, he kind of hurt me, because I was like, ah, these doors are so expensive, this is unnecessary, there's like, there's better ways. Sometimes there's better ways to get into these doors. And depending on the nature of the call, we don't always have to be like, super fast, like, we don't have to kick in every door, we can spend an extra 10 or 20 seconds like fiddling the latch on the lock, and maybe not break the door at all. And I also owned other businesses, to where I've been broken into before. And I know it costs two grand to replace the door. And if this is happening, like, or it didn't need to, that's just such a waste like and I feel like we're not doing our jobs, to the best of our ability. If we're leaving, you know, grandma with a security issue and no way to pay for it. So I had made some tools for myself as a carpenter, and I knew how to pick locks and everything involving doors and locks, I had like specialty tools that I either made or acquired and bought, to help me be like an efficient door guy. And I started bringing my toolbox on calls because I realized, so the area I work in, in West Hollywood, there's every type of every type of door and building and we have high rise there. We have mid rise, we have commercial, we have residential, just any type of door that is out there, like I mean, there's 1000s. But there's such a such a range, that I usually have a tool that can get into like a door I come across last resort being to pick it, which is a specialty skill that not everybody has. I can do it, but it takes more time. So I can almost get into every door without having to do damage if I have enough time. But one tool I would always bring out, which is a tool I made out of framing square, and is now known as the Williams key. I was bringing it out all the time. And it was getting us in. And before long. Other people saw that they noticed it, they'd always make fun of me for my tools, but fire service you get made fun of for everything until it works. And then hey, that stupid tool. Yeah, you might make a new one. I started getting approached like that. And it I mean, it takes a while just to make one tool. So I went and sourced a fabricator that could make a small batch. And I was like, Yeah, I'll make like 10 or 20 of these things, give them out to my friends, then they'll stop bugging me. No intention on making money, no intention on starting a business. And so I hadn't made pass them out. Before long, there's like 100 more people that have seen the tool out in the field working, knew I made it and wanted one. And I was like, alright, well, the first batch was just like, I gave him away, you know, just to make better firemen out there. And but now there's a lot of people I don't even know, I'm gonna have to like charge them, you know, I'll make a bigger batch. And I'll just charge them whatever. So I did. And after that it just took off. Everybody wanted one. I was like, Ah, shoot, okay, this is turning into something. So I had them powder coated black, so that I could screen or not screenprint so I could laser engrave a logo

on him. I came up with a logo. And I've always been like, pretty good at design like Photoshop branding. I was into. I did some sales for Google at one point during the before getting hired. So I learned about business and sales and all that stuff. And yeah, I just, I don't know, that's just something that I'm kind of good at. So I was able to make a brand pretty quickly. And I've always liked schools. I think schools are cool. So posts go on there and it's a keyhole. And it I called it the Williams key. And I got somebody to show me how to use a laser engraver and I started engraving the logo on there. And then people wanted their name on there too. So I left one side blank for somebody's name, if they want it, they don't want it and it stays blank. And that really pushed it like the customization. They turned into being good gifts, good way to mark your tool, and affordable enough to wear like everybody could like, you know, throw a couple of bucks at it and buy one. And I told him like, hey, go make your own. It's like, you don't have to buy this from me. Like, that's not the point like I want you to be better at your craft. So go make your own if you want, or if not, yeah, I'll sell you one. So that was my approach. And it started growing really fast, made a website made an Instagram, people started sending me content of them being Johnny on the spot and getting into doors and impressing their crew. So that's like the perfect product, right when that makes its own content. So that part was really easy. And then these videos would start going viral and get a million views or 3 million views and then orders would really take off. So it's just been this machine has been growing and growing and growing. And at this point, I've sold 20,000 of them. And it was the base for like probably 10 other tools that I've made now, where probably nobody wants to buy a wedge for me if they'd never heard of me or the William ski. But now I have a glow in the dark edge of the keyhole school, you know that people buy and a lot of other stuff that people buy in door hangers. So after you make entry, and nobody was home, you knew you know that you weren't robbed, but the fire service was there, the police and he leave a little hanger with a note. So just a little crazy, random products like that now that the website is full of stuff. So it's been like a crazy journey. And it's really made my life very busy. I like being involved with it as much as possible.



2:02:11

I'm able to outsource pretty much everything. Like I've got a warehouse with fabricators, they make this stuff and they powder coat it and now I don't agree with anymore. Now it gets screen printed. So I don't have to do that part either. And I've got almost 20 distributors now. So they mark it and package and sell for me. So like I don't have any employees. I'm just kind of the puppet master behind it all. And I love interacting with people. Like I get emails every day and messages like, Hey, I was having trouble with this door. Do you mind, you know, telling me what you think about it? Or is William ski the right tool for it? Or maybe something else is? And I'm like, Yeah, send me videos and photos, and I'll help talk you through this door. And maybe there's a better, better tool out there for you. Or maybe you need to break it. Like that's the fun part. We could break stuff too sometimes. So I'm not against the allegations instead of irons, the rotary saw chainsaw, any of that. I love using that stuff, too. But it needs to be warranted.



James Geering 2:03:10

Well, I mean, I love that whole side of the fire service. One of my friends Eric Wheaton has kind of through the last class that he does, I'm sure he uses some of your tools he must do. And actually I was just at the brothers helping brothers conference speaking in Ohio. And Cory from crackle was there. And I'm actually on the cover this month. So it's kind of cool. I



2:03:30

got some Yeah, that's it there.



James Geering 2:03:33

Thank you. But um, he actually gave me one of your tools as well, he had a few there. So I'm having a chance to play with it yet. Obviously, I'm not at a certain department at the moment. So it'd be a bit weird, just go into my neighbor's house. But But it's funny because I can remember a specific call. We got a call and it was an EMS call in one of the hotels at Disney. And their bathroom doors are like solid, you know, steel, steel doors, you know, the steel outside. And so this person sadly had locked herself in, in the bathroom to take her own life. And we're trying to get in I'm trying to shoulder it because we ain't got the tools with us. No one told us it was locked in a bathroom that was you know, exterior door quality. And one of the security guards at Disney was like, Do you want to use the card and he was thinking, you know, like in the movies. And it was so weird because we actually used it that moment it worked. But going back to spirituality and ghosties I had the lock turn. And I swear to God that I felt it turned from the inside like someone opened it and all of a sudden I went in now yes, I'm pushing against the lock and you know, it could have just given but it was more than that. So one I've had two really weird experiences that and another one I wrote about the book of a guy that was burned. Absolutely his body didn't know that I sold him though his body was dead. I mean it defied all Anatomy and Physiology, but this is the other one. And so it's weird that alphas are kind of like through the lock story as well. But I agree with you 100%. And you know, they we say, you know, risk a lot to save a lot. All right house is on fire. I don't give a shit, you know, Halligan, sledge, whatever you need, get that door open. But as you mentioned, you know, wellbeing check. Ladies, probably in the back def as a coup watching, you know, reading the paper, you don't want to be smashing in a door. So I think that those are, those are such great tools. And I don't think a lot of us, you know, are aware or trained enough on those, you know, to have that customer service LM, I don't think customer services go into everyone's house installing smoke alarms, I think that's not what we're supposed to be doing. But customer service has definitely, you know, a back to bed call or a wellbeing check where you haven't destroyed someone's door and done, you know, more damage than if you hadn't shown up at all?



2:05:51

Yeah, yeah, I think they're one of the biggest rewarding parts of the role that I'm in now, is I get feedback from people with stories of how they use the tool. And there's no way to quantify like how good the tool is doing, you know, out there, because I don't hear like probably even half a percent of all the all the stories that are going on, but I'm sure it's being used, like right now. There's so many of them out there, like it's being used all day long. And for all different reasons, hopefully, mostly all good reasons. Because it can get into the wrong hands, I'm sure. But the the cool stories where I'm like, Man, that's what made it worth it is it's like contributed to like saving people's lives. Like, I've gotten feedback from at least three different people saying like, they were able to prevent a suicide, or they were they were able to get in in time and like pull somebody off the ledge or give Narcan or whatnot, to where if they didn't get in. That way, they would have had to have waited longer for the key to show up or the door to be

broken down. And then there's the like, we got like, personal experience of mine is it was a it was kind of like a welfare check. And normally we'd wait, maybe for the keys of the building manager to show up like, there's no urgency, right? You show up. I'm like, Oh, let me try my, let me try my tools. Open up the door. And there's somebody in full arrest, but viable, full arrest. So they're like just going down. And we were able to make the save. So yeah, it's just stories like that, that make it really worth it.

 James Geering 2:07:31

We had same department, we had Orange County Sheriff's upstairs. And then our fire station was downstairs, two different departments. Reedy Creek was the station. And the lock had failed and the carpets locked in the bathroom downstairs in their office. And so we had to break in and again, understanding the value of the door I was able because it didn't have your through the through the lock stuff was able just to attack the actual handle itself. So ultimately go back to you know, avoidant, and they could put a new lock in there somewhere around is still his cell phone camera of us rescuing his ass from. That's my favorite possible entry story.

 2:08:15

Yeah, that's cool. I just got invited to my local police department. So now I have immunity in my city to like, present the tool and everything. And when I was done, they're like, Well, can you open the doors in here? And I was like, ah, normally not like you guys have like high security doors, like they're really well made and stuff. And I was like, I fine. I'll just try one. And it opened and they're all like, oh, they were sold on it. You know, I'm like, oh, shoot, I didn't even think that was gonna work. It's cool. It's been a lot of fun.

 James Geering 2:08:47

Well, for people listening, where can they find the key? The other tools that you

 2:08:50

have? Williams key.com. That's the website. Everything goes through there. But lots of other distributors. I'm sure if you Google that you'll you'll find other places to buy it. All the same to me just want to make the world a better place a little bit for first responders and actually, there's like tons of traders that use it now like locksmiths military, real estate. Moms that, you know there are families where their kids like themselves in the bathroom even so, yeah, there's a lot of good uses for it. Just use it responsibly. That's my only request. Absolutely.

 James Geering 2:09:23

Even when I was at Anaheim one of our guys, I mean it's funny when you look at it, just take someone that have a take a step back and have a common sense perspective. And you know, we had all the Jimmy locks stuff for the cars most of my career prior to that, and none of us knew how to use them. We just they were in a bag in the engine and no one was showing us

how to Jimmy a lot. And then someone's like wait a second. These tow truck drivers are using this blood pressure cuff looking thing. Why don't we try that so years ago is oh five that we got that and I was like this is so bloody easy. You make a hole and you maneuver the little rod And, you know, put the window down, pull the lock open, whatever it is. So I actually bought my, when I transitioned out the fire service, I have one of my car, post fire service, I've let three people into their car just from having the right tool. So it doesn't matter if you're a firefighter like you said, it might be someone lock themselves out their house, once you confirm it is their house or they are, you know, especially in Florida. Yeah, exactly. Please come on the cuff and you. But yeah, but it's you know, to me, when you transition out, you become, you know, a sheepdog in your community, you know, so there are some tools, I have extinguishers and trauma kits and you know, all kinds of stuff to mitigate whatever disaster I might come across in the car. So, you know, your, your tool that I have now is going to join my little toolbox. So thank you.



2:10:45

And then just for your viewers, since there are some visual aspects and



James Geering 2:10:49

then yes, new video podcasts that we have go.



2:10:52

They're not all pink. This is a special edition one, but it shows up best on the camera. So love it. Williams good. Beautiful. Well,



James Geering 2:11:02

I want to say thank you so much. I mean that we wanted to obviously make sure that we talked about the Williams key that's what you're known for. But to spend so much time going through your earlier years, I think has been amazing. And then to couple it like you said with Timmy Gleason, for example, you've got these rescuers, and then you've got you a resident at the time. It's been a phenomenal conversation. And you know, it's a pretty, pretty epic childhood that you have with your family. So I want to thank you so much firstly, for coming on the podcast, but more importantly for the vulnerability and, you know, getting to some of those emotions because that's that's what grabs people by the throat, you know, and reliving those I know sometimes it's kind of pulling the band aid off a little bit. But these are the these are stories that we need to hear and that particular incident, I mean that many people died and other people don't even know that story. You've you've kind of brought some of those souls back to life for us to revisit. So thank you so much for coming on the show today.



2:11:58

You got me to tear up on this one and dive deep and it was a pleasure being on the show.

James Thank you

James. Thank you