KERRY TAYLOR: Our guest, Mr. Gerald Mishoe is going to be joined by his associate Heidi Packard, who is relatively new to the state of South Carolina. And the idea here is that I'm going to guide the interview for the first forty five minutes or so, and then we'll open it up to your questions, and also hopefully, there'll be an opportunity to kind of work Heidi into our conversation as well. Just to get us started, Mr. Mishoe, could you say your full name and where and when you were born.

GERALD MISHOE: Yes, Sir, my name is Gerald Mishoe, M-I-S-H-O-E, just like it sounds. I was born in Conway, South Carolina in November of 1949. I'll be sixty-four years old this birthday.

KT: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your family. Did the family live in Conway for a long time?

GM: We did. Conway, for the ones that don't know where Conway is, it's a suburb outside of Myrtle Beach, which should be familiar to you. Conway is a small town, much larger now than it was when I was born, but it's pretty much the basic Mayberry R.F.D. It was pretty much like the Andy Griffith Show you see on TV when I was a child. My dad, JG--Julian Grant Mishoe was a firefighter in Conway, in a very small department, so when I was born, he was in the fire service, so I think I was
probably destined to become a firefighter. I knew very early on from the very first time I ever rode a fire truck, which was at the age of six, that's what I wanted to do, and I never wavered from that.

KT: So, you're second generation firefighter.

GM: I am, and my son is a third generation.

KT: Okay. Tell me about that. When did you first become aware of what your father did, and what do you remember about that?

GM: Well, I remember being in grammar school, in elementary school--they called it a grammar school back in those days. At the age of seven, on Friday afternoon, if my dad was on duty at the firehouse, which was just down Main Street from the school, when I got out of school, instead of catching the bus home, I would walk down Main Street and join him at the firehouse, and then I slept there with him and rode the fire trucks with him, and always got the dishwashing detail at night. And that was back in the day before liability and legality was all over everything, so you could get away with letting your six-year-old kid ride on the fire truck with you.

And I can remember many nights, that alarm would go off, and he worked by himself in the station. There were other paid people, but they worked different shifts. And when they had a fire, they had a huge siren on top of the building. I mean it was this big around, and they would turn that siren on or blow it, as they said, and you could hear it for miles. And it would alert the other volunteers in town that there was a fire, and then they would come and give him the support at the fire. So, in the middle of the night, if we got a call, we'd run down--I was too small to even push the door up in the firehouse, so I'd just go ahead and climb up in the fire truck.
And he'd push the door up and we'd head out to the other side of town. He would say, "Son, look, look." And he would point in that direction and you could see the orange glow in the sky, so you knew it was a good fire. You knew something was really burning because you could see it on the horizon. By the time we usually got there, there would be two or three other volunteers who would catch up with us. And I just stood on the side of the truck and watched it hundreds of times, so it was an amazing childhood.

KT: So, you kind of grew up in the firehouse in that sense.

GM: I did. I grew up in the firehouse, following my dad around. We came to Charleston in 1964. He got a job over at St. Andrews Parish on the west side of town, as the fire chief there, and I was fourteen years old, and so we moved to Charleston. And when I became seventeen, thanks to my daddy allowing it to happen, I lied on my application for the fire department, and fudged my birth date a little bit and went to work right out of high school, in the fire department. As a matter of fact, in my senior year, in second semester, I only had to take English, and so I'd go to school in the mornings, take my English class and head straight to the firehouse to work.

KT: Now, other siblings?

GM: I have a deceased brother, my older brother, who was a volunteer firefighter. He was also a Methodist minister, and he was the chaplain for the South Carolina State Firefighters Association for about eighteen years, so he was involved in the fire service. I have two sisters, one sister who lives in Myrtle Beach. My baby sister, my youngest sister was killed in an automobile accident in 1984, so there's just two of us left now, my sister and myself.

KT: Do you remember--just your sleeping down at the firehouse, going to fires
with your father, was that a problem for Mom?

GM: No, Sir, I don't think--I never heard any complaints out of Mom. She knew that Dad would take care of me, watch out for me, and I think she felt secure that I was with him and not somewhere else at that time.

KT: Yeah.

GM: I don't know that that was ever an issue.

KT: What about on your part, do you ever remember being frightened as a child?

GM: Going to a fire?

KT: Yeah.

GM: I remember the first time I saw a dead body, that was a little freakish for me as a child. Back in those days, we didn't have as much attention to taking care of the psychological well-being of our children or our firefighters for that matter. That's one of the reasons I'm in the business I'm in now, but I remember seeing my first burned up body. I still remember seeing it. I don't know that I was necessarily adversely affected by it, but it was something that most eight or nine-year-old kids had never seen. And so, it impressed upon me how serious this business was, and how serious fire can be, and what a great calling it can be. And it has been a great calling.

KT: This was a Conway fire?

GM: Yes. Yes, Sir.

KT: What do you remember about it?

GM: It was a frame house, older frame house in town that burned, and there was an elderly gentleman in it who died in the fire. They had to remove his body, and they put it in a bag, a rubber bag and zipped it up. The funeral home came and picked it up. Back
in those days, they didn't have EMS. They didn't have an ambulance service, just had a funeral home and the hearse would come. They had a stretcher in the back of the hearse, and they used it as an ambulance during the times they didn't use it for a funeral. When they needed it for a funeral, they'd take the stretcher out and put the casket roller in.

I taught a class yesterday and I taught about being afraid in the fire service, and we were addressing some firefighters, and trying to teach them that it's not bad to be afraid. Sometimes that gives you caution that you need to have in this job. We talked about some of the things that really stress us out, and there are four things in the fire service that we know from our history that really affects a firefighter psychologically. One of those things is any time he feels a threat—he or she feels a threat to their own life—and I'm happy to say that in my career of quite a few years, I've only felt my life was threatened on two occasions.

And so I got through a lot of firefighting and a lot of dangerous times and a lot of years, without ever being put in that situation. But you remember those times, you remember very carefully. The number one problem that most of our firefighters have as far as our memory is any situation involving a child. If all of these young folks right here were firefighters and had been firefighters for two years, five years, twenty years, and I went around the room and I polled them, I could guess that probably each one of them could tell me ninety-five percent of the times they had been involved with a call, involving a child. It just really, really hits home for us. And then the other thing that gets our attention is anytime there's a threat to another firefighter.

When you hear on the radio someone calling a mayday, I guess the international symbol for I'm in trouble, when you hear a firefighter calling a mayday; it gets every
person's attention. Unfortunately, when the Charleston nine were killed in 2007, we have a radio history of those kinds of calls, and listening to those guys begging for help and calling maydays, and they still resonate very heavily in our memories.

KT: I do want to get to those events. Did you begin fighting fires though, in Conway?

GM: No, Sir, I never got to fight fires there because I was too young.

KT: You were always on the sideline.

GM: There was a certain amount of liability and things they needed to worry about, so they always let me stand on the sideline. But when I got to Charleston and I joined the fire department at age seventeen, then I got into the thick of things then.

KT: Yeah. Do you remember your first serious fire?

GM: I do. It was in the Windermere Apartments on Ashley Hall Road, West of the Ashley. It was a very large fire that involved a complete office--excuse me, an apartment building with probably thirty-six apartments in it. I was a very young firefighter. It was one of the first and very few times I'd ever--was transported to the hospital from a fire. I was transported from just sheer heat exhaustion. It was a very hot time, very hot fire, and quite a few of us went actually.

There were probably fifteen or twenty of us that went to the hospital from that. And my mom got a little bit concerned after that because even after years of being a kid, riding with Dad, that was the first time I'd ever ridden in an ambulance to the hospital. And then she began to calculate that she had a husband and a son that were on the job, and that began to worry her a little bit more. She knew that we'd be okay.

KT: Yeah. How about Dad? Do you ever remember him getting into a dangerous
situation, either as a child as you’re watching him, or later on, where you became worried?

GM: I can’t say that I ever did. He was always a very level headed person, unless he was answering the call of duty sometimes. I remember once he was in the hospital. I was in grammar school in Conway, and I was in my classroom. I was probably seven or eight years old. My dad was in the hospital because he had severe migraine headaches. And back in those days, they’d put you in the hospital for a week at a time. And he was in the hospital, and he took his fire department radio to the hospital with him. So, low and behold, we had a fire in the boiler room.

We had an old steam boiler, you know, and the old-timey radiators, you know, in the classrooms. And we had a fire in the boiler room, out in the coal pile. And the fire department came, so we all got up, much like this, and we were watching out the window. Low and behold, I see a firefighter out there with his coat and helmet on, running around with his pajamas and his bedroom shoes, thinking who in the world is that? And then I realized it was my dad. He heard it on the radio. He got out of the hospital, got in his car and came to the fire. But no, I don’t think I ever knew him to get hurt or get in a situation. He unfortunately had a heart attack after a fire and he succumbed to that heart attack about seventeen days later, in 1973, a long, long time ago, when my career was just really taking off.

KT: Yeah, then you were in your early twenties when that took place?

GM: I was, I was twenty four when my father passed.

KT: You were both on the St. Andrews force?

GM: Same fire department, yes, Sir, had been together that night at the firehouse
after this fire, and he'd gone home and we got a call about 11:00 that--with my mother saying he was having really bad chest pains, and they took him to the hospital and he had severe heart damage and passed away seventeen days later.

KT: How old was he?

GM: Fifty-two. He had, unfortunately, many years of probably breathing a lot of toxic gas and smoke because back in those days, they just didn't use breathing apparatus. And he also was a very heavy cigarette smoker. Two things that I've learned from his legacy is number one, I've never smoked cigarettes, and number two, I've always used self-contained breathing apparatus. I don't think I could count on one hand the number of times I've ever been overcome by any kind of smoke. I even had my own personal one back in the early days when we didn't have them. I just bought my own because I knew that he had been adversely affected by it.

KT: You had mentioned a couple instances in which you felt fear for your life. What were those?

GM: One was we had entered a second floor of a building on St. Andrews Boulevard one night, an apartment over a store. Two of us had gone in to search for occupants in very dark conditions, smoky conditions, pretty significant heat. Most of the fire was contained downstairs underneath us. We had a recruit, a new guy on the department come with us, and we pulled a hose line in behind us, and we told him to stay with this hose line and let us fan out and search this apartment, and then when we need to get back to you, we'll call for you and we'll come back to you because you always knew that you could follow your hose line back out if it came in. That was the way to go back out.
And so we branched out and searched the apartment. We didn't find anyone, and then all of a sudden, we noticed flames coming up through cracks in the floor boards, so we decided it was probably not a good place to be, and so we called out for this firefighter to try to get back to where he was, and he was right behind me. He had gotten scared and crawled in right behind us. And I said, "Where's the hose?" He goes, "I don't know, I left it back there somewhere."

So, then we were frantically crawling around trying to find this hose, and thank goodness, we found it and got out. And that was a little scary. The other time was back in 1987, we had a lightning strike on the Hess Oil Terminal on the Cooper River. And we had a one-point-three-million gallon above-ground gasoline tank burning, where lightning had struck the top of it. And it had a floating roof. These tanks are designed that the roof goes up and down with the level of the fuel to keep the vapor area down, which is where the explosive hazard is. And so we actually went out on the roof of that.

We went up the ladder and over the top, and there's a ladder that goes down to the center of the roof. And as the gas level rises up and down, so does the ladder. So, we went down the ladder, got out on the roof, and we were fighting the fire. And when you walked on it, it was like walking on a waterbed. It was a little bit scary to think that there was a million gallons of gasoline under there sloshing around, but we knew that it was a pretty controlled situation, and by the way, close only counts in horseshoes, there's something to say for that.

We just about had the fire out, and we had pumped so much water and foam up there to try to contain the fire, that the weight of the water on the roof caused it to start losing its buoyancy and it started sinking. When it started sinking, then the hole that the
lightning had made when it struck it, the gasoline just spewed out of that hole because it was getting pressure from the lid going down, and it lit the whole roof off. I mean there were like nine of us in there, and we barely got out by the skin of our teeth.

KT: Yeah, scrambling for the ladder, I'd imagine, too.

GM: Yeah, we have really rethought our tactics many times after that night. We don't necessarily do that anymore. It was pretty scary.

KT: Yeah. On the St. Andrews force, you're responsible for St. Andrews, West Ashley, but I assume for big fires, you're called into Charleston and other--.

GM: Yes, they would always have mutual aid agreements. They actually have what's called an automatic aid agreement now. Back in the early days, in my day, we had a mutual aid agreement, which meant if North Charleston went to a fire, and it was a fire that they had difficulty controlling, they would call whichever fire department they needed, St. Andrews, city, to get help sent. But now they actually have a county-wide dispatch system that dispatches X number of trucks to a certain location. And those trucks may come from different fire departments. We had a fire recently in an apartment building on Rivers Avenue in North Charleston, and we had thirty-six units there from fire departments all over the county. And all of those are automatically done now with the new dispatch system.

KT: Yeah, so it's more coordinated centrally then, rather than being kind of more informal.

GM: And you don't have to call and ask for help from another fire department now. It's assigned in the computer. When a certain address comes in, they look at it. If it gets six engine companies and two trucks, and two rescues and three chiefs, then it
automatically assigns who those people will be regardless of what department it is.

KT: Tell me about what are some other kinds of changes that you've witnessed since the big--even going back to childhood, as you're watching your father in Conway, then through your own career in the seventies, and then as--compared to today. I'm guessing that a few things have changed.

GM: A lot of things have changed. I would say probably the technology in this work has changed a tremendous amount of things for us, hazardous materials, transportation incidents. One thing about being in Charleston--being in North Charleston, Charleston or anywhere in this area is you will be subjected to about any possible hazard there is in the fire service. The only thing that we don't have is huge tall high rises. We've got buildings that are fourteen stories and fifteen stories, but once you're about five or six floors off the ground it might as well be a hundred stories then because we don't have any ladders that'll reach it anyway.

So, you've got to hump it up the stairs, or get in the elevator and control the elevator. Training is way more important now because the fire service is changing so dramatically, so quickly. The hazards are out there, the tech is out there. Computers have really taken over a lot, and not only in our regular lives, but in the fire service world as well. I remember when we got our first computers in the fire department many years ago, and they had the orange monochrome monitors, and they had a five-and-a-quarter inch floppy drive, and they had a twenty meg hard drive and that was it. I remember having to learn how to use them. And now all the trucks have computers in the trucks.

I mean they have terminals in the trucks, where they can get all their information they need right en route to the fire. Communications is a big thing now. Back in the early
day, we would have only portable radios. If we needed to talk on a radio, we had to run back to the fire truck and talk on the radio. Then it got to a point where the chief officers and the command officers had portable radios, and now everybody has a portable radio. All firefighters carry their own radios, so that they can stay in touch with what's going on. A lot of things in the fire service in this nation changed after June 18th, 2007, when the Charleston Nine were killed. It changed this fire service in this county, in this community and this state. It changed the National Fire Service dramatically because there were a lot of mistakes made that cost nine people their lives.

KT: By this point, you had moved on to the North Charleston force, correct?

GM: I had.

KT: Were you in an officer's position in North Charleston?

GM: I was. I was Assistant Chief.

KT: You were Assistant Chief at that time.

GM: I was second in command at the fire department.

KT: What do you remember about that day?

GM: The day of June 18th?

KT: Yeah, when did you--?

GM: I actually had retired, and I was at home. And my son, who was still active duty in the fire department called me and said, "Dad, they've lost four firefighters in a fire West of Ashley." I said, "My God, four?" He goes, "Yes, Sir, they haven't found them yet. They're still looking for them." Then he called me back thirty minutes later and he says, "Now they think it's six." Then he called me back fifteen minutes later, he says "They're missing eight guys. Eight guys are missing." And so they had no accountability
system.

We have a very strong, strict accountability system now, but they had no accountability system, so if you put twelve fire trucks on the scene of an emergency, and all those guys were in the building, you had no way of keeping up with who was in there, what was going on. When the coroner got to the scene at 9:30 that night, she was given a list of eight names of people that were missing. And this is the kind of thing that didn't make the newspaper. They had gone in and marked where they had found bodies, and they went back in to try to identify those bodies and recover them.

When they cut the turnout coat as we call it, off of the first person and opened up his coat, he had his uniform on with his name badge, and his name was not on the list. So, they knew that there was at least nine, and her thought was my God, how many others are there? As it turns out, there was only the ninth one, but it was just a very difficult time. The 343 that died on 9/11 was a huge loss to the fire services community, that was seen at least--I don't know maybe in the public or the private industry or community, but certainly in the fire service community as a terrorist attack, an attack against our country that killed lots of--thousands of other people, in addition to the firefighters. So, even though it was a huge loss for the fire service of this country, it was a small percentage of the people who actually worked in the New York Fire Department. There were 12,500 people working there then. So, when you look at 343 against 12,500, and you look at nine people against 257 at the time, we lost a very large part of our life that day. It's just been a long road.

KT: Because most of these guys are not from Charleston and have only arrived in the last couple years. This was the Sofa Super Store on Savannah Highway, and among
the mistakes that were made— I know that there have been studies and investigations, but what were the big flaws in terms of the response?

GM: I think obviously the major flaw was no accountability of personnel. And had they been able to account for personnel— because now what we do is we have an accountability system that lists every single person on an accountability board at the command post. And so, if three guys or four guys or ten guys and girls go into a building, we have their names, and they can look at those names and they know they went in at a certain time. And so they’re accounted for and they’re brought out, they’re rehabbed after a certain period of time.

They’re called out and sent to a rehab area to be checked out and make sure they’re all right, so they’re accounted for, not only from the beginning, and then at the end of the night, but they’re accounted for all during the process. I don’t know that that would have stopped the tragedy, but it probably would have stopped the numbers of people that were in the building. They had water supply problems, and they had two hose lines, and then only one of those was charged, so they only had the capability of flowing a couple hundred gallons a minute, and this is something most people don’t know. There were sixteen people in the building. Seven of them managed to escape, so it could have easily been sixteen dead rather than nine, which is very, very scary. Not many people know that outside of the fire service. But they had way more people committed in the building than they had water to use.

Just some major flaws in the command setup. And I’m not singling anybody out nor criticizing anyone because the worst thing in the world is a Monday morning quarterback, regardless of what profession you’re in. But it was just a very, very difficult
Gerald Mishoe

KT: There were also, as I understand it, no functioning sprinkler system, right?

GM: No sprinklers, fire doors were blocked. Some of the fire doors came down and actually trapped some of the guys in confined spaces. There was a lot of things that just went wrong. I wouldn’t say it was the perfect storm because there was nothing perfect about it. But all the bad elements that you need to make for a tragedy all came together at once, and it was a bad situation.

KT: So, at what point did you become involved with the survivors’ community?

GM: Well, on the night of June 18th, the local Department of Mental Health Director called City of Charleston and said, “I have clinicians and therapists who are able to reach out to your firefighters, and to reach out to the people in the community to help them after this tragedy.” The very next morning, they teamed the mental health clinicians up with firefighters in the local community, and sent them out in the firehouses to visit firehouses. They were not very well received. Most of the guys and girls just didn’t want to talk to them, didn’t want to have anything to say.

They were still processing through the tragedy and just the time just wasn’t right. And then after a period of a week or two, the clinicians began to see some people in the office, and help some people in the office. But they were just about as lost as Hogan’s Goat because firefighters were coming in talking about back drafts and flashovers and supply lines, and these clinicians were like—they didn’t know a fire hydrant from a fire hose. So, they began to look for an old grizzled firefighter who knew all that lingo.

My good friend, a Citadel graduate by the way, was the Executive Director of the State Firefighters Association at the time, and he was heading up the team. And he called
me and said, "We need you to come and help us." And I said, "What do you need?" And he said, "I need you to come back and help set up a counseling unit. We’ve got to try to take care of these firefighters." So, I thought about it for a couple days, and I finally agreed, and I came back. It was my job initially, just to train these clinicians on what these guys were talking about when they spoke of things that they didn't understand. And that led to me being a team leader. And after about two or three months, we were seeing a tremendous amount of people in a clinical setting, and we knew we had to have a peer component.

We had to have a component of people in the fire service that understood what was going on, in order to encourage people and to help people at that level get to where the clinicians were because they wouldn't transition on their own. And so, we set up to train a peer team of firefighters. We trained seventeen people in the Charleston Fire Department to be peer counselors, so to speak. And as more and more began to come into the office, we all thought, even on the team that we would probably be in business for about six months, and we'd get everybody kind of through the bad part of it, and then we'd move on.

As we saw more and more people, we found out what was really concerning them the most was not the loss of the Charleston Nine. That's what drove them to the door, but the things that were going on in their lives such as alcoholism, marital issues, parenting issues, problems on the job, you name it, a full gamut of issues in their everyday lives, it was creating problems for them. So, we went back to the fire chief and the mayor and said we need to expand this unit to be a full service unit. And thankfully, they did that, and for six years, we've functioned.
KT: Is this still Chief Thomas at the time?
GM: It was Chief Thomas at the time.
KT: Okay, and he was receptive to the idea of setting up--?
GM: Absolutely, absolutely.
KT: I know he bore quite a bit of the bulk of the criticism for the handling of the incident, and the mayor also fell under a good deal of criticism for standing by Chief Thomas.
GM: Well, they needed help, and I think in their own hearts, they would have helped us provide that anyway. But they needed help, and they were in a bad place, and they weren't able to do it, so they needed somebody to help them do it. And so we didn't have a wide open ticket necessarily, but we had some opportunities that we took advantage of quite frankly. Now six years later, we have seen over six thousand people in a peer setting—six thousand contacts. Some of those are firefighters over and over again, but six thousand individual contacts in peer settings--435 of those people have reached out to clinicians and actually have come in for an actual mental health therapist appointment.
KT: So, this is beyond Charleston.
GM: Oh, yes. Well, the six thousand numbers are all in Charleston Fire Department proper.
KT: Six thousand contacts.
GM: And the team now, by the way, is down from seventeen to only nine, so there's a lot of people doing a lot of good work. And that tells us two things, number one, that the peer component of the team is working because if we're seeing six thousand
people here, and 450 of them are making it into an office, that's a fifteen to one ratio, so there's a good bit happening. The other thing is that we know as peers--and I'm a peer counselor, and Heidi's a peer counselor. That's basically what we do. We reach out to people in our own world. But we know that there's only so much we can do before they have to be handed off.

We have some significant deep-seated PTSD in the fire service, not only in Charleston, but in every fire department. Back during Vietnam is when PTSD started getting its name, I suppose. Afghanistan and Iraq have certainly created a lot of that problem with some of our veterans who have come back from there. But I can tell you there are people in the fire service eaten up with PTSD. And we have some very good therapies, trauma therapies we call it, that our commissions used, that have helped people dramatically. Confidentiality is always a big part of any counseling program, and so that keeps us from telling stories, but I can tell you that we know without question that people have been helped.

Careers have been saved, marriages have been saved, lives have been saved. There's no question about it. I've had a couple personal experiences myself, where we've prevented people with committing suicide. And people think it doesn't happen. That's something you hear about in New York or hear about over in Los Angeles, it doesn't happen here, but it does. It does happen.

KT: You've also kind of broadened the mission to take on issues of health and safety, or was that there from the beginning?

GM: It's always been there. What we've tried to do, and the city came to us in December of last year and said if you want to sustain this program, move this program
forward, you've got to help us find a way to fund it. We're not going to continue to fund it as we're funding it. For six years, they had funded it in total. So, we went back and I guess circled our wagons and tried to decide how we were going to continue. We had two choices. We could either quit, close up shop and go home, or we could go out on our own and try to sustain this program.

So, we decided to file for 501C3 status as a non-profit, to go out and raise money, which we've done. Some months get a little slim and we don't have money to--we can't guarantee we're going to be able to pay the electric bill next January, but we can pay it this month. And so we're working as we go. That has caused us or allowed us to expand our community outreach because we now do a lot of community outreach programs in support of our fire departments.

We do golf tournaments, we do car shows, we do five-K runs, which by the way guys, we're having on Saturday on Daniel Island if anybody wants to run--on Daniel Island, the 5K 911 Heroes Run, and all of those profits will go to our team. But anyway, that being said, back in December of 2007, Charleston historically has a very large Christmas parade. That's one of the big events--social events in Charleston every year, and it will have several hundred units in it. As from the beginning, it's always been managed and coordinated and run by the fire department. That's been their event for the year. So, in 2007, our clinicians and myself decided we wanted to be in the Christmas parade. So, we said, "Well, how are we going to be in the Christmas parade? We going to walk or what are we going to do? Well, let's ride on the fire truck."

So, we got a fire truck from the old fire museum in North Charleston. And we rode on the back of this fire truck. We were seeing a lot of people that we knew that we
had seen in counseling settings, standing by waving at us and supporting us. One of the clinicians said, "We need to get our own fire truck. Let's get our own fire truck." Okay, why not? So, we went in search of an old truck, and we found one, an old Charleston truck as a matter of fact. We restored it ourselves. We now have four. We've got four old antique fire trucks and a '62 Ford antique fire chief's car. And we use those in community programs, everything from birthday parties for kids to weddings for firefighters. We take them to family reunions.

We do some funerals with them. We go all over the community, and so that's why we never have called ourselves the Lowcountry counseling team. We are the support team because we provide a lot of support for firefighters and their families above and beyond counseling services. Some of you have probably read in the newspaper there was a firefighter hit recently up on Ashley Phosphate Road in the middle of the night while working a wreck--hit by a drunk driver. He wound up losing his leg. There's been numerous fundraisers for him. And in addition to raising money for our self, we support all of those activities to raise money for those families and help those people.

KT: Heidi, I want to pull you into the conversation, too, if I can. You're a newcomer to the team in the Lowcountry, a relative newcomer, and what brought you here?

HEIDI PACKARD: Change of pace. I had two grown children and I wanted to try something new, twenty years at a job, and volunteering with a foundation and with a support team from New Hampshire. I met Gerald and joined the team here, so I just wanted to pay it forward.

KT: Come in a little closer to the mike. You have a background in the firefighter
family?

HP: Just myself, actually. No one else in my family was into the fire service. I was part of the fire service in Swanzey for fifteen years—Swanzey, New Hampshire. It was a volunteer organization, three different stations within the locations, I did fire and rescue, which was we had a separate ambulance transport system, so I did rehab, like what Gerald talked about. I would make sure the boys kept themselves watered and hydrated, and that they were staying safe. And I did trainings along with them, too, mostly forestry was my firefighter experience. I have gone into buildings and I can run pumps and drive all the apparatus, and maintain it all as well.

KT: I want to open it up now. Do you want to jump in and ask—feel free to ask questions, and either follow up on things that we've talked about, or maybe you have some new lines of questioning.

GM: May I ask, is anybody here from a fire service family? Okay and where is that, Sir?

ELIJAH OTTO: In Dallas, Texas.

GM: Oh, wow, okay.

EO: My cousin just transferred to Dallas, and he’s a firefighter (00:35:45).

GM: Well, good, and you're planning on going back to Dallas or are you going to follow your career out of The Citadel?

EO: I'm going to try to go back to Dallas, but I'm applying to Houston and like my little hometown of Corpus Christi as well.

GM: To be a firefighter?

EO: Yes, Sir.
GM: Outstanding, outstanding, how about you?

STEVEN LOCKLAR: My uncle was a firefighter from Fire Department in (00:36:05). Unfortunately, he passed this past November from carbon monoxide poisoning. In support, I wore this today for you all and for him as well.

GM: Thank you.

SL: And I plan on pursuing a career into the military after I finish school here.

GM: Military service has a great fire department. We have a lot of friends who--in particularly Air Force--Air Force has a great fire service. Here in Charleston, they call it Joint Base now. They put the Navy Weapons Fire Department and the Air Force Base Fire Department together, but they have a civilian component and a military component, two mentors over the years in my career who were Air Force Fire Chiefs, so even if you wanted to do that in the military, you would have an opportunity to do that.

HP: Did your uncle--was his death as a result of fighting fire?

SL: He was at his camp house back in November, and what happened was, he had the generator running and also his window unit going, and somehow, even though the generator was on the other side of the camp house, the fumes somehow managed to circulate into the camp house. He didn't have a smoke detector.

HP: Oh, sorry to hear that. Sorry for your loss.

GM: I did notice you guys are a little bit different than the fire department recruits because if this was a fire department recruit class, they would all have filled up the back seats first, and worked towards the front. Charleston typically has two recruit classes a year. They have a class going on right now with forty-two people in it. It's a twenty-six-week training class, and it's a pretty difficult class, especially this time of the year when
it's hot. One of the things that we do on our team is we do a good bit of training. We have a training division within our team, and one of the classes we do is called behavioral health awareness, and we just talk to young firefighters and old firefighters about the things that bother them the most. Sometimes that's only job stuff, sometimes it isn't.

HP: And making it okay for the older generation firefighters--don't think it's okay to admit that they're really struggling seeing what they saw, or dealing with what they had to deal with that day. And we don't want the younger generation to be that way because it's unhealthy and it doesn't do you or anybody else here trying to serve a bit of good, not to say what's going on and why you're feeling.

KT: I was wondering if that's part of your challenge because there's a kind of macho tradition in firefighting. I'm sure there's a kind of a disinclination to say, "You know what, yeah, I need help."

GM: Well, I think that the program like we have--and many others--we're not the only program. We're not the only show in--for sure, there's people all over this nation doing what we do and doing it very well. After 911 in New York is where it really began to get its wind, so to speak. The National Fallen Firefighters have developed some great training programs that we teach. They were developed and piloted in this state, being some of the people who were involved in the program in this state, all over the state, there were about fifty of us--went through the training with them back in November of last year, and they allowed us to just take it apart and say what we wanted. And we did, and they took it all back, and rewrote the program and came back in January and did it again.

And so, for once, South Carolina was a leader in something, with the fire service
in particular, was the first state anyway, to start delivering this program. It's a lot of just basic stuff. I'm a product of the old suck-it-up culture. I can remember many years ago going to a wreck on Dorchester Road in North Charleston where a tractor trailer had hit a Volkswagen, and the driver of the Volkswagen had been ejected, and his brain was out. He had a skull fracture significant enough that his entire brain had jumped out by itself and was just sitting in the middle of the road. And I was—I mean it wasn't torn up, it was just a brain, just like a specimen in the lab.

HP: It's surreal when you see that stuff.

GM: And I'm looking at that, and I'm thinking what am I supposed to do with this brain? So, I go over to the Chief, and I say, "Chief, what do you want us to do here?" And he said, "Just wash it into the gutter. Wash it into the storm drain." I said, "Chief, I can't wash it into the storm drain." I'm getting really deep into this, and I'm thinking this is—what is in this man's brain? I mean he lived his whole life, and his whole life is in that brain, and I'm going to put it in the storm drain? And that's what we did. We took a hose line and washed it in the storm drain. And when I got back to the firehouse, I went to the Chief, I said, "Chief, I got to tell you, that's pretty upsetting." He said, "Son, you just need to find you another job. If you can't do this, you need to get out of here and quit being a wussy."

And I'm telling you, that won't happen on this old boy's watch, not to these young guys who want to go into fire service, not to anybody because we all hurt. We all have hearts, we all have souls. And I came from the culture where we believed we could jump over buildings in a single bound and drink hot grease out of the frying pan. And June 18th, 2007, my friends, showed us that that is not the case. We're vulnerable to being
hurt, to being killed, just like anyone else.

We have an analogy we use in our training called a file folder. In that file folder is that I would tell all of you that in some place in your mind, in the back of your mind—we have a place. We call it a file folder. Some people call it a drawer, some people call it a whatever, flash bulb moment. But it's a place where you put memories and happenings in your life. And a lot of those are good memories, you know, when you graduated from high school, when you fell in love the first time, when you got your first hot rod to drive. Those are just all rolling out of my head, out of my own file folder right now. I can tell you now, six of the most beautiful memories I have in my life are the birth of my six grandchildren. And some days when I'm feeling bad and I'm feeling down and depressed, I reach back in that old file folder and I pull something out happy, and I relive it again in my memory and it makes me feel better.

But unfortunately, in this business of life we have a tendency to file a bunch of bad junk back there. And if we don't learn that we can process through those, and there are ways we can overcome those bad times, they will overwhelm us. In September 2007, just a few months into this program, we had a man who was a firefighter and retired from New York, who came to us from the counseling unit in the New York Fire Department to work with us.

He worked with us for four years, and he taught me more in four years than I've probably learned in a lifetime about this business, but he's the first one that ever told me we had a file folder. And I said to him—I challenged him, I said, "Richie," his name was Richie Denninger, "I don't have a file folder, man, come on, what are you talking about?" He said, "I promise you, you've got a file folder, and one day, you'll realize it." And it
wasn't but a few weeks later, and it's probably because I'd been thinking about it because he told me I had one, and I'm searching for the darn thing, and I can't figure out where it is. We'd had a particularly difficult week, a lot of people coming in right after the fire, seeing a lot of the family members.

The Charleston Nine families we were still supporting very heavily, and I'm riding to Summerville up Highway 61 going home, and I felt this overwhelming anxiety that caused me to pull over on the side of the road, and I sat there and I sobbed and I sobbed and I sobbed, I was so overwhelmed by whatever was causing me problems. So, you know who was in the clinician's office the next morning? And by working with the team, you can always get high up on the appointment list. I got in there with a clinician, and they helped me with trauma therapies. They put me through some counseling and trauma therapies, and they have ways of helping you identify what it is in that file folder that's causing you a problem. Know what mine was? A fire in 1976, involving a body shop in North Charleston, an automobile body shop.

I was the command officer, twenty-six years old, assistant chief, scared to death, my first big fire. Nine men went in the building. Three staggered out, four were carried out because we had an explosion of a fifty-five-gallon drum of paint thinner. And my best recollection and all the analysis afterwards, we did everything that we should have done. We just weren't aware that the paint thinner drum had the cap off of it. They were trying to roll it out of the way so they could get to the where the fire was, and when they turned it over, paint thinner spilled out and exploded.

I remember getting to the first fellow laying on the ground, and I looked at him and his eyes were burned white. It looked like zombie eyes. His name was Ralph
(00:44:54). I said, "Ralph, just be quiet, Son, we're going to get you to the hospital." He said, "Chief, I can't see, I can't see." And I said, "We'll get you to the hospital." We got him to the hospital. It turns out that all of them are discharged by the next morning, except three who stayed in the hospital in the burn center. When it was time for them to get out of the hospital, we went and gave them rides home. We'd go to their houses and change their bandages for them. We would help their wives keep the grass cut and the groceries bought, and we'd take them to their physical therapy appointments.

We'd help them get back to work when they were ready to come back to work. Not one single time, not one time, did we ever give them an opportunity to talk about how it affected them psychologically. And several of them now have gone—-all of them have gone on to retirement. Several of them have passed away. But they went to retirement with that in their minds and not ever having any help for it. And I'm telling you my friends, it's never going to happen again, as long as this old boy can draw a breath. I'm going to give people an opportunity to get help if they need help. I still need help. But we're talking thirty-seven years, somewhere thereabouts.

Thirty-seven years, I guess it was, that I had carried that around, not knowing it was eating on me every day. But when I go back and think about it, I think about my failed marriage. I think about my two children who I didn't have the greatest relationship with because I was all tied up in the fire service. I think about how badly that file folder might have affected all that. And even though I'm sixty-four, and even though I'm putting my attention to six grandchildren now instead of children, I'm determined I'm going to do a better job at it. Part of being a better person and doing a better job is standing with people like this young lady right here, she's been through things herself. We're going to
help these people.

We're going to help these people because what we want to do is we want all of our firefighters to get to retirement in good shape, so they can enjoy their retirement. There's lots of people in the Charleston Fire Department who have retired since the fire because of the fire, and they live in a living hell every day because of it. And we struggle all the time to help them as much as we can, but they still are troubled by it. And they will be troubled by it till the day they die. And had we prepared ourselves early on, to help people deal with their file folders, they would be in better shape. It's important for the older guys like me, who have file folders crammed full of junk, to help them understand that and to get some of that out, we use a word process—we're going to help you process through it.

We're going to process this. We help them work through it and figure out what's causing all the problems for them. It's important for the older guys to try to get them to that retirement we want them so much to have, but just as important for young guys like you in the fire service because your file folders aren't full yet. And what we wanted to do is give you a way to keep that stuff from getting saved up. So, you go to a bad call, and God forbid, you see a brain laying in the middle of the road or a dead baby, or something that really strikes your mind and hurts your heart, that you have a way to talk to somebody about it and process through it and understand that there are ways you can overcome it, and there are ways you can live and you can be happy.

I always tell the recruits that if the Charleston Nine could say anything, if I could line them up in here in a line—and I knew most of them—and they could say anything to you or to young firefighters, they would say, "We want you to be happy, to live a good
life. Don't mourn for us. We died doing what we loved to do. We wouldn't have chose to
die on that night. We wouldn't have wanted to die on that night, but we knew that the
risks were there. We took the risk, and we lost the shuffle of the cards, but don't cry for
us and don't mourn for us. Take care of yourselves. If you want to, do something good for
the memory of us and the Charleston Nine, and all the others who have died in the line of
duty over the years, live a good life. Take care of yourselves, take care of each other.”

Our peer program is one of the most important things that we have. When it
comes to working issues out that bother me on a daily basis, I can talk to this young lady
right here as a peer, and she can help me as much as a clinician can. When we get those
real deep-seated problems, that PTSD and those other things that are just eating us alive,
that's where we need some of that trauma therapy that the clinicians bring to the table.

So, you can't do without either one of them. You just have to know when you
need to intermingle them together. And that'll happen to you in your careers. If I could say
anything to you, if I could do anything over again and go back to being your age, I would
live a happier life, and I would spend more time enjoying the more simple things. I
chased a career because I realized at twenty years old, if I worked hard and I got
promotions, and I went to school and I got all these certificates, and I prepared myself to
do my job, at some point in time, somebody would reward me by giving me a promotion
where I could make more money.

And then I made more money, and was thinking I could put a roof over my
children's head, and I could give them what they needed. And I did that. I always
provided for them materially. But my first two children, I wasn't there. I was at the
firehouse working, or I was traveling the state teaching. I was doing something when they
needed me most. And so if I could leave anything with you in that regard, it would be to remember that because you get to be sixty-four years old like me, and you realize that--I'm not planning on punching the clock anytime soon, but I'm certainly much closer to it than any of you all are.

And so, I'm going to try to give it my all, and while we're still here, but if I could get you to slow down a little bit--and I'm not saying necessarily in any area, but slow down and remember in your lives, there's much more to your life than a military career or a successful graduation from college. And I hope that for all of you. I hope you get all of the things that you want and you're looking for. But don't sell yourself short that you can't enjoy it while you're going. And that's what we do. We try to do good things and enjoy what we've got left. My young friend here from Germany is taking a nap, and quite frankly, if I keep talking, I might talk myself to sleep.

KT: Jump in. What questions do you have?

JOSHUA DANDRIDGE: Sir, you said your father started at Conway. I know that area is really popular in South Carolina, Myrtle Beach in particular. My family, we do a vacation every year. I was wondering if you ever had to do any work, your father or you had to do any work in Myrtle Beach. It's a big tourist area, I figure like fire service would be very, very important because people from all the state (00:51:48).

GM: Myrtle Beach has an outstanding fire department. Matter of fact, in the scheme of things, we have a classification system in the industry from a class one to a class ten fire department, and you're measured and you're gauged by the effectiveness and the ability of your fire department to do their job, by which class you are, and the lower class you are, the better you are. Myrtle Beach is one of the few class one fire
departments in the state, so they have an excellent fire department. We have team members.

One of the things that we've done to expand outside of Charleston to become the Lowcountry team, is that we have trained people all up and down the coast in the Lowcountry. We have two guys in the Myrtle Beach Fire Department who are members of our team, who have trained with us. And so, when we have calls to respond to areas outside of Charleston, for instance in Myrtle Beach or Georgetown or somewhere like that, I can call them. I just did it last week. We had a Charleston firefighter injured on the way home. He works in Charleston, lives in Myrtle Beach. He was injured in an incident on the way home, and was in the hospital in Myrtle Beach, and I couldn't get there fast enough, so I called these guys and they went and took care of him and his family. So we have that network.

Our Lowcountry network runs the entire coast, from Horry County to Jasper County. And the major emphasis of our work here in Charleston is on six counties around this Charleston, Dorchester, Berkeley, Colleton to Georgetown. But yes, so when do you go to Myrtle Beach, in the summertime?

JD: Yes, Sir.

GM: Got a timeshare or something there?

JD: No, Sir, we stay at Springmaid.

GM: Oh, okay, Springmaid, very familiar with that. We do a lot of our fire department retreats at Springmaid Beach.

JD: My grandpa was a mill guy, and Springs Mill was (00:53:36).

GM: In the upper part of the state? Where at, in the upper part of the state?
JD: Lancaster, South Carolina.

GM: Lancaster, my brother was a Methodist minister in Lancaster for many years. Yes, Sir, I know it well. Unfortunately, we've been to Lancaster twice in the last three years where firefighters died in the line of duty. We sure have.

KT: Other questions?

EO: You talked earlier about how you first worked on a computer, and the fire department and everything, like the evolution of fire fighting and fire training and stuff. Do you think you can go over a little bit more of what you saw during your time, and how it’s progressed?

GM: Well, one thing is in hazardous materials response. The fire service is charged with the responsibility of taking care of any vehicle accident, any railroad accident, any air accident, any shipping incident involving hazardous materials. And that can run the gamut from HTH chlorine in a five-gallon bucket, at a pool supply company, to a railcar full of sulfuric acid and anything in between. Back in the old days, if you will, if you'll allow me to use that term, when I was there, we had printed books on the truck. If we went somewhere, we had to get the books out and thumb through them, and try to look it up and figure out what we were dealing with. They have computer links.

They just punch it into the computer and bring it right up, and they have everything right at hand. Back in the old days, we in North Charleston, had the only hazardous materials team in all of this area. We trained, specially equipped it. Mt. Pleasant then joined up, and Mt. Pleasant had a team. The Mt. Pleasant Fire Department and the North Charleston Fire Department responded all over this Lowcountry area to take care of hazardous materials incidents. But in the early years, back in my dad's day,
had a railroad car blow up, it just blew up. Man, you just hoped for the best and there wasn't anything you could much do about it.

Some of their rolling command posts in the fire service now, they have huge--I don't know how huge, but I mean rooms in the back, offices in the back with all these computers, and they can link up to any federal database, anything they need, right from the road. That's probably the best thing available. And then inter-agency support, because back in the day, again, there was only a few people that even did it.

HP: We joke about sending the cops in, calling them blue canaries, so if they keel over, it's don't go near it. True story, sorry, are you an officer, going to be?

JD: I do have one question. In my National Guard unit, there was a fire--a fire chief (00:56:16) one of the units, and I went with him to Ft. Mills. And he always talks about police, and (00:56:24) the fire departments share with the police. I was wondering if you could give a perspective of how you feel about the police department, just from your career, camaraderie you guys shared, any stories.

GM: I'm not sure this is going to answer your question directly, but we're actually going through a process now in the county where the mental health center is trying to organize a team much like ours, based on lessons learned from us over six years, that to take care of fire, EMS, and police. And I have always been a supporter of doing that. However, I don't hesitate to tell you that I'm about the fire department, and I'm going to make sure the firefighters are taken care of first. But if a police officer came to us, which they have, into our offices, or an EMS paramedic comes to us, which they have, and asks for help, we will always give that help. But what they want to do is they want to clump these three agencies together, these three professions together under a public safety
program. And I'm telling you from my own experience that firefighters, police officers, and EMS people, all come from different cultures. They are public safety people. They work for the citizens, they work in the community, but they come from different cultures.

And if you try to clump them together, they're going to rebel against that. They will expect and they will demand to have their own identities. Now my suggestion was that let's cross train our clinicians in the office to take care of all of them because they're doing it anyway. And let's have these peer teams, and these other individual teams in these departments to support firefighters, support the police, and support EMS. We're in the throes of hashing all that out right now.

The distinct difference between fire and police is that firefighters usually live, eat, sleep, and exist together in crews of three or four people, sometimes six or seven or eight people in a firehouse. And so, they come and they work twenty-four hours. So, it becomes a second family to you. I mean you have a firehouse family, and you have a personal family. And if you are working in the firehouse with a bunch of other folks, nine times out of ten, over a period of time you're going to know about everything going on in their lives, from their marital issues to the fact that they couldn't pay their electric bill this month, to one of their kids got suspended from school, or unfortunately, sometimes one of them's having an affair, and his wife called him and you know, whatever comes with all that. The police department on the other hand, typically work eight-hour shifts, and they typically work alone.

Even though they're in a team, if you will--team four over West of Ashley is an example--where there's a group of police officers that report at the beginning of their shift, and then they disperse and they go out in teams of one. They go out in individual
cars, and the only time they get together is if there's a call that requires more than one
cop. I know from experience in riding with police officers sometimes, go to a call and I'd
say--we'd get back in the car and leave the call, and I'd say, "What was that young
fellow's name right there?" And the other police officer, he goes, "His name's Bill." "How
long's he been with your team?" "Oh, he's been here about eight months." "What's his last
name?" "Um, I don't know; I don't remember his last name." You've been working with
him for eight months, he doesn't even know his last name?

I guarantee you in--you work in the firehouse for three days, you're going to know
the wives' names and the girlfriends' names, sometimes both, which is not a cool deal. So
it's a different culture. EMS is kind of caught somewhere in between because EMS and
fire are much more closely related, and run together a whole lot more. But still again,
you've got the EMS crew that work in teams of two. And they usually work twelve hours.
So, it's a different culture. Yes, Sir?

SL: Speaking of EMS, you said that back then hearses were used by EMS at the
time. When was EMS introduced to the St. Andrews area?

GM: 1973. Actually, late '72. My dad was probably one of the last people to ride
in a private ambulance to the hospital after his heart attack. Just a month after that--well,
probably not one of the last--but a month after his heart attack, his fatal heart attack, the
EMS system in Charleston County started.

SL: I've also got another question about you all's equipment. When was the Jaws
of Life introduced into the area as well?

GM: That's a very good question. I would say we had our first Jaws of Life--the
first Jaws of Life were probably out sometime in the early '70s. We had our first set in the
fire department because traditionally in this county, we have a very big Charleston County volunteer rescue squad, just manned totally by volunteers. And they operate as a separate function to supplement the work of police and EMS systems all over the county, but they've been around since 1950 something.

And they have a great amount of excellent equipment and training and good people, and they've had Hurst Equipment for a long time. I think we were the first fire department in the county in North Charleston to get Hurst Equipment, to get Jaws of Life, and that would have been in the early eighties because we bought our rescue squad truck in the fire department there in 1980. It was a 1980 Chevrolet. But EMS system in Charleston County is one of the number one systems in the nation.

As a matter of fact, it won an award two years ago as the number one system in the nation. But there's a lot of changes going on with all that. I trained in 1979 to be a paramedic because we had started a program in the fire department called first responders. And because there's way more fire trucks in the county than there are medic units, they would send a fire truck to a call if someone had a heart attack or childbirth, or a stabbing or a shooting, or whatever else. We were considered to be first responders. We'd go in there and do the lifesaving stuff as much as we could, until advanced people would come with EMS. So, in order to develop our first responder program, I felt we needed to have someone who understood the advanced paramedic side.

And so I went to school with a bunch of paramedics. I was the only firefighter in the whole class. I went to school for six or seven months to be trained as an advanced paramedic, only to have the knowledge of how their system worked. I worked part time as a paramedic for three years, and then I realized that was a young man's game. I didn't
want to do anymore because they run crazy amounts of calls. It allowed us to develop our first responder program in the fire department, so that when we got on-scene with EMS, we would know what to do to help them the best.

About sixty-eight percent of the calls answered by fire trucks in this county now are EMS calls. If they weren’t running EMS calls, than a whole lot of stuff wouldn’t be going on. I think eventually, somewhere down the road, and the EMS people don’t like to hear this—I think eventually the EMS system and fire departments will be together. They are in many places now.

HP: Yeah, where I’m from, they are. It’s required.

GM: And I think they’ll be absorbed and they’ll all be together. But they run together a lot—I mean daily. I mean some of the engine companies—the busiest truck company, ladder company in Charleston County is Truck 301 at St. Andrews over on Highway 61. They run over four thousand calls a year, just that one truck. I got a call from the captain three Sundays ago at 8:00 at night. She told me they had already run twenty-two calls in twelve hours, for a ladder truck.

They had twelve hours to go on the shift. Back in the old days when I first went in the fire department, when I slept in the firehouse with my dad, I might go there for a week at a time, two weeks at a time, and sleep in the firehouse and never get woke up in the middle of the night. Most of the Charleston Fire Department, the stations now don’t even get to go to sleep at night. They stay up twenty-four hours running calls. So, it’s changed dramatically.

KT: On this topic of changes, the other thing that I’m imagining, you were witness to both the integration of the fire departments, as well as the introduction of women to the
force. I'm wondering if you could just say a few words about that.

GM: Sure. And I know specifically the history of Charleston Fire Department. On Coming St., most of you might know where Coming St. is, there's a two-company station there. And the old-timers in the fire department called that the truck house because that's-understanding you have engine companies that pump water, and you have trucks that carry ladders, or area ladders are called trucks. So Coming St. was always called the truck house. And in Coming St. back in those days, they had two truck companies, two aerial ladders.

And all of the Afro-American members of the Charleston Fire Department worked on Coming St. When they were segregated, they put all the Afro-American people in the Coming St. Firehouse, and that's where all those guys worked. One of my dear, dear friends who started out in the fire service with me, Battalion Chief Phil Hawkins, who's now retired, got promoted to captain, and he was the very first white man to ever work in Coming St. He was sent there to work on truck file, which was a normal truck. And his entire company were Afro-American guys.

And all the guys on the other truck on Afro-American guys. I used to go there to visit him because he and I were buddies, and we still are to this day, but back in those days, we ran together, as we called it, all the time. And I got to know most of those guys, and they were some amazing guys. Those guys taught me more about pride in the fire service than anybody I've ever known. And they used to do the most interesting things. They would sharpen their axes, and they wouldn't let you touch their axe. Don't you be touching my axe. I'm going to show you how we do this.

They'd put linseed oil on the handles and get them all nice and smooth, and they
would sharpen that axe. And you could shave with that axe almost, but you didn't get to touch that axe because when it came time to open up a roof on King Street, they'd put one of those guys on the roof with an axe, and he'd have a hole in that roof in the blink of an eye. Now they've got power saws and chain saws and all kinds of stuff they use now.

Coming St. is where I learned to clean windows on a fire truck, and clean the brass on the fire truck with newspaper. City didn't give them any supplies. If they had any supplies, they had to buy their own Brasso. They had to buy their own rags. They didn't get anything from the fire department back in those days, so to take care of a fire truck that was forty-five feet long, with all this chrome and brass and all on it, it took a good bit of work. They saved their newspapers. Newspapers will clean windows better than anything you can get your hands on. Sammy White, we called Sammy the Wheel Man. Sammy was the driver for my buddy Phil Hawkins for many years. And Sammy passed away last year, but Sammy was very active in our retiree group, which we started in 2008.

And Sammy used to come to the retiree groups, and we would recount those old stories. But when you talk about file folders, there's an interesting happy memory in my file folder from Coming St. I was over there the other day, and I was walking up the driveway, which is almost like an alleyway. And the window to the kitchen was open. And when I walked by the window, I smelled coffee percolating, coming out of that window. And it triggered my file folder to open up, and bring my memory forward when I used to go there in 1970, and sit in that kitchen and drink coffee with those guys, when they would make their coffee.

In the mid-seventies, when they started integrating--and there had been a lot of
good folks come through the system and retire, Afro-American guys who retired. Chief Hazel who is now passed, was a great mentor of mine. Women in the fire service. Charleston for some reason, has always been very—they've probably had a dozen women in the Charleston Fire Department throughout its history, total. They have one woman in the Charleston Fire Department now with 340 people. And they have a class of forty-two training right now, and one of those is a woman. And she is doing very well. We think she'll do very well.

The most I've ever known them to have at one time has been three. Some of the other fire departments, for whatever reasons, do more at it. North Charleston probably has a dozen. We sponsor the group within our team. We’ve started a lot of different things. We’ve started a retiree group, we started a family support group. We started a group called Women Firefighters of the Lowcountry because we realized there were women firefighters coming up in the fire service, who didn't have any peer support. And so we created a system. There's about seventy-five of them, I believe, who are members of the group. There's a good many women in the fire service now. But it's a program called Women Firefighters of the Lowcountry, and I'm the only hairy-legged person in the group. They call me their logistics guy because anytime they need anything, they call me up and tell me what they need.

KT: Well, I want to thank you, Heidi and Gerald for spending this time with us. This was wonderful. I really appreciate you taking out the time.

GM: Yeah, I see a lot of young fellows here. We'd sure love to have them in the fire service. I'm going to leave a few cards here. You guys stick my card in your wallet. You may never need it, may never call me, but if you need any kind of support anytime,
you're interested in getting in the fire service, you know, we have connections, between Heidi and myself, and all the rest of us on the team, we have connections all over the country. So Dallas wouldn't be a far cry for us to contact somebody in Dallas.

HP: We know lots of people in Dallas actually.

GM: Or in Florida, or in New Jersey, anywhere.

HP: Florida, Jersey, yeah, lots of them.

GM: Yeah, and I guess you all figured out by now, if you want somebody to talk about the fire department, we can talk endlessly about the fire department. It's a great profession. It's a great life. That's all there is to it. I have never considered the fire department to be a job. It's always been our life. We've always enjoyed what we do. We've had some sad times. We've had some bad times.

HP: But the sad times bring us people.

GM: That's right, that's right.

HP: I lost my husband. He was a firefighter who died in the line of duty in 2006. And that's what got me involved with the group and why I left the fire service, but more--but yeah, the file folder of smells and doing what we do, but paying it forward and helping other people, that's a whole different ballgame, but it's a wonderful thing. It makes your heart smile.

GM: There's one thing a fire chief that I worked for many years ago, Billy Hendricks, he was a mentor extraordinaire to me, like a dad to me. Matter of fact, my wife and I renewed our vows on our tenth year of being married, we've been married twenty-nine years now. But he stood in as her dad. He gave her away in the ceremony when we renewed our vows. But he told me one time when I was a young chief, he said--
and I'll just share this with you for whatever it's worth to you. He said, "You can't always control what goes on your life and what goes on around you, but you can control how you react to it, so don't ever give up that ownership of being able to maintain that control and have some effect on what's happening to you in your life, whether it's a good time or a bad time." I can't tell you how many times I've gone back and listened to that advice over and over and over again, and it's gotten me through some pretty bad places. So, if that's of any help to you, then we're glad for that. Thank you for your attention, and thank you for sitting up close to the front.

KT: Thank you again.

GM: Yes, Sir, our pleasure.

End of recording.

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