

Answering The Call:  
The History Of The  
Port Washington Volunteer Fire Department

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Donald J. Alexander  
Protection Engine Company No. 1

conducted in association with the  
Port Washington Public Library Local History Center

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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: Today is September the 23rd, 2004. My name is Margaret Dildilian, and I am interviewing Donald J. Alexander of the Port Washington Fire Department. Donald, tell us your full name ...

Donald J. Alexander: Okay.

Q: ... and do you have a middle name?

DJA: Yep. My name is Donald J—for John—Alexander. My first name is from my grandfather; my middle name is from my father. And obviously my last name (laughs).

Q: And do you have a nickname of any kind in the Fire Department?

DJA: Just anything short for Donald. Don, Donny. Although D.J. has come into play, you know, quite often lately, but ...

Q: As a joke?

DJA: As a joke. It's my initials. As I was a kid growing up, there was a few—few guys that used to call me Blue Jay. I don't necessarily know where that came from. My dad's name, as I mentioned, is John. But all his life, as a kid growing up, he was called J.D.

Now, he's called just J. So it might have come from something along those lines, being Blue Jay. And my dad's nickname in the Fire Department has been, and still is, Alzoom. I am then—I come off with that name as well, with Alzoom or Zoomer, or something. And that's a story I don't even know— (laughs) I don't know where that name came from, but it's been around for quite some time.

Q: What—does D.J. then stand, also, for disk jockey, in any way?

DJA: No. Unfortunately. I do love music. But, no, I've never had the opportunity to be a DJ (laughs).

Q: So what was your childhood like growing up in a firefighting family?

DJA: Well, I've been around Port Washington Fire Department all my life. My dad's, I believe in December he'll be a thirty year member. And since I'm thirty-one, this past August, I have been around it all my life. It's my next family. I've grown up with a lot of these guys. I've seen a lot of people come; I've seen a lot of people go and had my earliest chance—I started to go around the Fire Department, meet some of the guys who I didn't know, familiarize myself, because I would be joining soon. And so, I got to know the equipment. I became a sort of a member without being a member. I was always welcome. Soon after, I joined as soon as I became eighteen, and now I'm, next month, will be thirteen years.

Q: Who influenced you the most in becoming a firefighter?

DJA: I guess it's safe to say my dad. My dad has many years. I've been around it all my life. And that's really what I've grown up to know—the guys around the place. My dad had convinced my cousins to join. Earlier, I had mentioned my cousin Bobby Gennusa, who we had gotten back into the company. Now he has, I guess, eleven years in the company. But earlier, my older cousin—Bobby's brother, John—he was a member. I don't know how long he was a member. But in 1992, he had a heart attack. Unfortunately, he passed away. He was thirty-two at the time. Of course, that had a big impact on my life. We lived very close to my aunt and uncle. I grew up with my cousins, and they're my brothers. So that was a very difficult time, to know that, funerals and things like that were held at the firehouse, and, you know, where ...

Q: This was at the firehouse.

DJA: Yeah. It was so big.

Q: What do you remember of the funeral?

DJA: I remember it was just a—I mean, it wasn't a line-of-duty death, of course, as I mentioned. But I do remember that the first night was up at Knowles on Main Street. And I—the whole family was a wreck, I mean, needless to say. His wife was six months

pregnant at the time, and they also had two young children. So, I guess all of our anger and hurt and everything was kind of steered to trying to help her and the children. But it was a devastating time for all of us in the whole family. But I do remember my mom saying that—her friends had come up, and they said that the line was just down Main Street, past the movie theater, just to get in. So the next night, they had decided to have the services at the firehouse, which, of course, was a better idea. You could hold more people there. And I—I partook in the services. I was still a probationary member at the time. But I remember, I said, "Ma, I can do this. I can go with the rest of the guys in my uniform." And I passed out from, I guess, all the hype and everything. It was really—it was moving ...

Q: How old were you?

DJA: ... to see everybody. I was—that was '92. I was nineteen. You know, I was just about to turn twenty the following month. Oh, it was a devastating time. And it still is, to think about him and think about how things were. But, really, it's the family—getting back to your original question. It's the family that brought me in and that's where I am now.

Q: And what images do you have of your father as a firefighter?

DJA: Well (laughs), it's funny. You know, people—how you say people change in their life. They grow up; they grow different. My dad has always looked the same. Aside from the

more receding hairline, of which now I have even less hair than he does, my dad has always been the same. I just remember he had his own turn-out gear and his firefighting gear and things of that nature. Of course, that has changed also along the lines, to meet specific codes and things like that. But ...

Q: Do they call you the Yul Brynner of the Fire Department?

DJA: Amongst others. Due to my shaved head, which I did three years ago, anything from the movie from Austin Powers—that Dr. Evil character—or Kojak, or anything along those lines. I don't find any problem with that. I find humor in it, really. No problem.

Q: And what—what types of humor do you encounter while you're at the Fire Department? The culture in the firehouse?

DJA: Really, everybody knows, no matter who you are, no matter what your name is, everything is a joke, okay, until the horn blows. Once the horn blows and the whistle sounds, that's when things turn serious. Leave your jokes at the firehouse, and things become "this is the job."

Q: Let's look at this lighter side. What kinds of jokes do firefighters engage in?

DJA: Just anything from just joking on the person—their size, their height, their hair, their, you know, just really anything, you know, nicknames that ...

Q: And is it taken in good humor?

DJA: Oh, in most cases, it is. I've never really seen it where it hasn't. And the thing—well, I think I found this in every aspect. I'm in the construction field also, where there's some tough guys around there. You've got to kind of show that you have a tough skin sometimes. If somebody starts to get to you, you can't sort of whimper down. Because if they see that, they just go after you that much more. But, everything is taken in, yeah, with good intent. Or just in a joking manner.

Q: Why do you think your family is so civic-minded?

DJA: I—to be honest, I don't know how my dad got into the company. I believe it was a friend of his that had him join. And just once he got into it, the fact of joining the company was one thing. And then when we march down the street and people are saying "thank you," we'd say, "Oh, wait. This is actually a job that people appreciate." I just thought it was something extra that I could do for myself. Without thinking I was helping others. And now you look back, you say, yeah, geez, here it is. I mean, I have book and pictures to prove that my life personally was on the line, and hoping to save another. You say, "Gee, this really is a job!"

Q: What are some of the major fires that you have been in?

DJA: Okay. I've been in a few. Thankfully, they've all come out good for me, or else I wouldn't be here to speak about it. There was a few in Sands Point where, it was a complete surround and drown, which we would call it's too unsafe to go into the structure, okay? So we would surround the building with our hoses and our ladders and things like that, and dump water into it. You know, if there was a danger of collapse or it was just too unsafe. There was the fire in January of '99 in Manorhaven on Kirkwood Road. There was also the fire on Bernard Street. I forget what year.

Q: Can we talk about the one on Kirkwood Road.

DJA: Sure.

Q: Can you tell us what happened at the Kirkwood fire?

DJA: Well, basically starting with the day, I remember that it was Sunday. I guess it was about eleven o'clock, maybe twelve o'clock or so. The siren sounded. I was at my house. And it was just a regular day. It was cold. I remember there was some snow on the ground. But, for all intents and purposes, it was a regular Sunday. The siren sounded. I jumped in my car. And a lot of times the horn'll go off, and you'll jump in your car, and you'll be off without really saying goodbye to the people that you're leaving. This particular instance—I'll never forget—I was pulling out of my driveway, and my sister was younger

at the time. She was riding her bike. So, I leave for the fire, and then the events of the day took place. Basically, what I mean by that is, we get to the firehouse. I went to the Channel Drive firehouse, where I would normally respond. I lived in Manorhaven. We jumped in Engine 8511 with Bill Zwerlein as the chauffeur. So we get down there. I remember that we had a few guys on board. And since I live in the Manorhaven area and the fire was in Manorhaven, I kind of got a sense of what it was. I could smell it in the air. So I kind of knew that we were going to go to work.

Q: What did it smell like?

DJA: It was a wood frame, so, a wood-burning fire. You could see the smoke in the air. By the time we had gotten there, Flower Hill Hose Company, I guess, was conducting a Sunday morning drill, so they were out on the road a lot quicker. We were pulling out of our firehouse, as Flower Hill's engine—I guess 857—pulled past us. And to avoid any sort of collision—we're on Channel Drive going onto Shore Road—we give them the right of way. They continued down to the fire scene, at which time there were people saying that their father, or the gentleman, was in the basement. At that time, without worrying so much of the fire, those guys concentrated their efforts on getting this guy who later succumbed to his injuries. They went in a window. Fire Marshal Walter Clark was there first on the scene.. He had jumped into the window to try and help the guy. He was a larger—he was a larger guy, and I guess Walter is about my size, maybe a bit shorter. But your adrenaline starts going. And once your adrenaline starts going, he was

trying to pick him up, and it was just—it was a lot for him to handle. The crew from 857 jumped, and they tried to assist with Walter in getting the man out. At that time, the Chief's orders were for me, who is an engineer at the time, which is, it's under Lieutenant and really it's a company officer which is responsible for making sure the equipment is up to date and things like that. But in the absence of a Captain or Lieutenant, the engineer would take place, okay? So we are trained alongside Lieutenants and things. So I took a couple of my guys—the Chief's orders were to go into the front door. So I took a hand line. We went into the front door. We go in. We ...

Q: What do you mean by hand line?

DJA: A hand line is the hose line, or the attack, the fire hose that we would take in. In this particular instance, it was an inch and three-quarter pre-connect, two hundred feet, pre-connected to the side of the truck.

Q: And you were in?

DJA: Yeah, I was actually the officer in charge of it. There were other guys who were actually holding it. I was the guy to tell them where to go and how to get there. And, now keeping in mind that there is fire, there is smoke, there is danger below us, but we were here to do the job. So this is what we—we proceeded into the front door to a quick left, which was the living room, and proceeded down the hallway. I remember them saying

that the truck company, which usually the ladder truck would go and they would do their initial search and rescue—their officer came out and said that the fire was in the basement. So, going to school and fire school and things of that nature, we—there's different ways of doing different things. So, there's a way of attacking a basement fire, rather than attacking a basic bedroom fire or kitchen fire. Keeping in mind, you're going down a three-foot hallway or a three-foot stair case. So, it's basically a chimney, if you will. All the heat and all the smoke is coming up that way. So, we—I told the guys to stop where we were. We're still in the guy's living room. And it's really hot. We didn't necessarily see any fire yet, but there was a lot of smoke, and it was very, very hot. So, I said to the guys, "We're going down into the basement. Do you remember what to do?" And my—the guy on the hand line—the "nozzle man," as we say—his name was Gary Chudd. He's still an engineer, as a matter of fact, with our company. There's another guy named Ken Glasser, and the name escapes me of the third guy on the hose line. But we were all, we knew what we had to do. I made sure that we were all in sync with what we needed to do. And we began to proceed. At that time, Geoff Cole was—one of the assistant Chiefs—was outside and could see, you know, with his years of experience and things of that nature, he could see the patterns, the smoke patterns. How it was coming out of the side of the windows, how it was actually sucking back into the windows, and at times it would—the smoke would seem heavier; sometimes the smoke would seem pushing. So, seeing these patterns, he said that something—basically, he must have said in his mind, "Something bad's going to happen." He headed right to the front door. At that time—now we're inside; we're attacking the fire. And I can actually see the door.

And I don't know if the door necessarily burnt away. That's what they tell me, because (laughs) it was—it was one of those things that once we got the order to get out, we got out. But we saw the fire. The fire came up. We were now in the hallway. Not in the staircase yet, but the hallway. The fire came up and was now over our heads. So, it was safe to say that the fire was completely behind us, maybe ten, fifteen feet.

Q: Is that what you call a flashback?

DJA: Yeah. A flashover is basically when all the fire and the heated gas, with the introduction of more oxygen, it would cause a great—okay. The flashback is actually one—the flashover is one of these pictures where it had enough oxygen to fuel the fire and cause an explosion. Geoff saw these characteristics. He was at the front. And what he actually did was he took the hose line, and he just gave it a good yank and pulled it away from my nozzle man. By doing that, he was ...

Q: Why did he do that?

DJA: He did that because if we were here, the fire was ten feet behind us now. It was better for him to pull it back and force the fire back over us and away from us, rather than for us to try and open it here, because now, although we're putting it out here, now it's behind us. So he thought best to pull it back, which he did. He pulled it back. At the same time, yelling, "Get the ... you know, get out!" He was yelling pretty loud, "Get out! Get out!"

At which time, we all bailed out. I remember that the Chief, Chief Cole was there. He was actually attacking the fire with the hose line by himself, and one of the—one of the guys from the truck company—Atlantic's—was at the front door. And he was actually just standing at the front door looking out, not knowing what was going on behind. And it was safe to say he took up the door size, okay? With all the gear, he was a bigger guy, but throw on an extra forty pounds of turn-out gear, plus his tools and his air pack and things like that. He took up a good portion of the doorway. And I remember pushing: "Get out! Get out! Get out!" He finally pushes ahead. At which time, I made my way down the front stairs. And, at that same time, which I later found out that the heat and the fire was so much coming out of the front windows, which had blown—were blown out or else the truck company had taken out—I'm not exactly sure on that—but the vinyl siding on the house was dripping down as if it were just caramel from a candy bar, just dripping down. So I made it to the front, to the front of the house. I remember that there was a gate. And I remember feeling as if I did something wrong, or I didn't—we lost it. That was my feeling is that we lost it. It wasn't any—we couldn't handle it. Somebody else had to come and do it. Sooner finding out how bad it was. I mean, I had gotten to the front door, at which time I remember turning around and just seeing the whole place—just as this picture shows—just fire, debris came flying out. We have this photo at our firehouse. And it's blown up. I guess it's about eight and a half by eleven. It's—it's a real big picture. And it actually brings out all the particles you see flying through the air and how far they were flying. What happened was, once I got to the front, however it was, I mean, I took off my face mask from the air pack, and my helmet fell to

the ground. I went to the triage area, because the Chief was insistent that we all go, because the fire was over us and just, he wanted everybody checked out. The guy—my nozzle—my nozzle was—he says that his helmet had blown off. But what happens a lot of times, you have to just figure that you're down on your hands and knees and you have an air pack on you, which comes up right around the top of your shoulders. And you have your helmet, which comes off the back of your head a good five or six inches. That can sometimes hit the back of your air tank, okay? He didn't have the chin strap on, but he was wearing his helmet. But he says that he lost his helmet. He got like first degree burns, which is basically like a bad sunburn, on his lower, you know, on his face right below his ears, and his neck.

Q: What happened to you?

DJA: What happened with me—this is at a time when we have issued Nomex hoods. We're taught how to wear them. Smart guy me wasn't wearing it. It was in my pocket, but I wasn't wearing it. I, too, got like first degree burns on my neck. Nothing really bad. I've had sunburns before. But it was a wake-up call. And I still teach the lesson all the time to wear the hood. The hood costs fifteen to twenty dollars. But I've seen in pictures what not wearing your hood can do. I was lucky. But not wearing your hood is—it's made to resist heat.

Q: How heavy is it?

DJA: Very, very light. It's very light. It's just made of a material that can resist the heat. It's not fire proof. Believe me, it's not fire proof. To a degree, I guess it could withstand something. But it's just made to withstand the radiant heat that—it does get pretty intense. But I wasn't wearing it. So I did get the sunburn as we would say. I then went to St. Francis Hospital. Actually, excuse me, we went to North Shore Hospital, a whole bunch of us. I believe there was three in the ambulance. If my memory serves me, there was eleven to twelve guys that went to the hospital that day. And I remember that, you know, my dad—my parents had been divorced for a couple of years now. My dad had lived in East Meadow at this point. I believe he was living in East Meadow. Yeah, he was living in East Meadow. He heard the call go over on his pager, but he wasn't really thinking much of it, because he couldn't pick up the rest of it. You know, the calls and sirens and you can't hear that from East Meadow. So somebody had called—I don't remember who. I think it was Chaplain [Tom] Tobin called him and said, "Here's the deal. Here's what happened. He's okay. Come to the hospital." So he came, and he was all, nervous and, a nervous wreck wondering what had happened. I said "I'm fine."

Q: How extensive were your injuries?

DJA: They weren't extensive at all. I went to work the next day. As I mentioned, it was just really a bad sunburn, right below the ears, right where my collar would miss. So it's right around under the chin and like that.

Q: And what happened to the helmet?

DJA: Okay, the helmet. After we got back from the hospital, my dad had drove me back into town, went to the firehouse and a bunch of the guys go, "Oh, hey," you know, as they—as we did with everybody that came home that day: "How are you feeling? What happened? What happened? Are you okay?" I'm like, "I'm fine. I'm fine. Have you guys seen my helmet?" They're like, "Have *you* seen it?" Now, I'm saying, "Oh, no. What happened to it." I'm thinking when it fell off, did it fall under the truck and the truck ran over it and maybe it looks like a pancake. So they said that it's inside. So I went inside by the TV, and I saw this thing (laughs). It was yellow. It still is. But it—I didn't even know what it was.

Q: Can you describe what it looks like?

DJA: It actually looks, if you were to take a candy bar maybe, or just a thick, goopy—a goopiness, if you will—and just poured it right on top and it just encapsulated most of the top of the helmet. And when it fell, it fell on its side. So portions of it then came over where my head would go into the head part of the helmet. And by now, it was rock hard. Because it was soft and it had cooled down. So it was now plastered to my helmet.

Q: And did this happen to the helmet after it left you?

DJA: This happened right when I was walking out of the building.

Q: So you still had it on.

DJA: Yeah, I still had it on. So, if I didn't have it on, I could have been in a lot worse shape than I am now (laughs). Not that I'm in a bad shape, but it could have been very, very bad. Because it is so hot, and it was a—it was a vinyl material. So, thankfully, my helmet was on. Thankfully, my helmet caught that debris. And a lot of the guys were saying, "Oh, just -- you could peel it off; you could wear it again. I'm like, "Nah, this is a keepsake." This is one of those things that I'm not going to wear ...

Q: Where is this ...

DJA: Right now, it's in my firehouse in the TV room. We have a member, Frank Pavlak. He's one of our trustees. He's basically the company historian. And he's very good with that sort of thing and keeping up with novelties and what-not. So, he knew what was going on. I said, "Frank, we know where this is going." And I, of course, said, "You can't put it in today, though. I'm taking it to work tomorrow." So I took it to work the next day, believe it or not. All the way into Manhattan. I showed the guys what I had been through, and it was a storytelling piece. And I brought it back a few days later, and it's still in the trophy case. And that was something.

Q: Were you given any commendation?

DJA: No, I wasn't. And, to be honest, I wasn't looking for any. All the commendation to the recipients were well deserved. Geoff Cole. I owe him everything. He's a very, very close friend to me, from before then, even to now. Just a very, very good guy, good friend. He got the medal. Well deserved. You know, there's not enough words to say thank you. It could have been a very, very bad—it could have been real bad. And thankfully, at the time, I didn't know how bad it was. We went to the hospital. No big deal. I came home. No big deal. I saw my helmet. No big deal. Until I saw the pictures, and I heard the stories of what was going on that day. Because you're only one person. You can only see so much. So, later in that day, we went to the Fire Medic company who was having—again, the name slips me, but he's trained in what they call CISM—Critical Incident Stress Management. And this guy is very good. I apologize, I forget his name. I'm sure that we could get it. But he's very, very good in what he does. Basically, he tries to get you to see what happened, to work out the traumatic experience. And here I am, still, I'm still saying, "What traumatic experience?" What is—I mean, it was—it was as though I just came out of a shell. I had no idea what these people were talking about. I saw this, but I didn't realize the extent of it. I was inside, and I didn't realize the extent of it. But, as the days gone on, and I saw it, and when I met—I saw Geoff again the first time that day, he gave me a hug and wouldn't let go. You know, and he's just like, "You don't know how lucky that you were." And I said, "No, I don't. I

don't know how lucky." And as the days gone on and just realizing and reflecting, I say, "Oh, my, you know, this could have been really, really very bad.

Q: How did you work out the stress from that one, though?

DJA: Well, we met with the gentleman. I apologize, I forget—I want to say his name, and I forget his name. But we met with him once or twice, and I actually felt that I was okay. Again, like I just mentioned. I didn't really know what was going on. I was just thankful that people were there at the right time, and that I was—I was okay.

Q: So, after the Kirk—

DJA: Kirkwood Road.

Q: Kirkwood Road, pardon me.

DJA: That's all right.

Q: The other major fire was on Bernard Street?

DJA: Yeah, that was on Bernard Street. That was on a Friday night. That was in, I guess it was February. I forget the year. But that, too, was quite a fire. There was loss of life,

unfortunately. The conditions were, though, something I've never seen before. We had—it was about, I guess, about eleven-thirty. My girlfriend—my wife now—were at a friend of ours' house on Amherst, Amherst Road. We get the call, and her—our friend's boyfriend was also a member of the Fire Department. We both went together, and we made it to Protection's main house on South Washington Street. So we jumped onto the truck. We get to Bernard Street. And we saw fire, again, coming out of everywhere. The guys—we were like the second or third due engine. So, the initial guys were attacking the fire. We were just trying to supplement extra hose line if they needed, putting ladders up wherever was needed. Just really trying to do whatever it is to assist them, carrying out their job of search and rescue and extinguishment of the fire. It was—that was—that was something else. That fire was, it was—

Q: You know how it started?

DJA: Yeah, it started—they found out that it was a jealous kid—I believe it was a jealous kid, and it was along those lines. It was a jealous kid, and he had tried to get back at somebody who was living in the home. And he threw some sort of explosive, homemade, like a Molotov cocktail—whatever that's made of—but something along those lines, something explosive, he threw it into the house, which started the fire. There was an older woman—the grandmother—who was carried out of the back window by friends of mine, and they were actually performing CPR on the woman right in the

back—I've always—I've learned CPR, I know CPR. We've done it on the mannequin dummies, but never actually seen it. Never seen it in a restaurant. Never mind seeing it on a snowy Friday night with ice and snow and rain. It was just a treacherous night. The woman later succumbed to her injuries. And the big—not to slight her death—there was the death of—I believe she was seven or eight years old, the young girl. She had also passed. And I remember a friend of mine carrying her out to the ambulance. And I—in my mind, I always believe that things happen for reasons. I don't know, I can't explain really where I got this reasoning. I—that's— it's just a feeling that I've always had. But, for some reason, I was wearing my air mask, my face piece, and it was like fogging up and I couldn't see. I was outside. I wasn't in the building, in the house. But my face piece was fogging up. And it was fogging up just at the same time that my friend was bringing this little girl out. So, for some reason, someone didn't want me to see this. I do remember him carrying something. I didn't see her face; I didn't see the extent of her injuries, although I understand that they were—they were bad. But, for some reason, I didn't see. Thankfully. After that, we went—you know, we all had a certain closeness to this little girl who we didn't know. We found out when the funeral was and the wake services and church services. And it was funny how many people from the Department turned out for this little girl who nobody knew. And it was just—it was just another sign of unity in the Fire Department. , That, again, the jokes happen, but when the seriousness—that's when the seriousness—just one of those things.

Q: , Was your fiancée at the time called in for these, from the Medics?

DJA: Right. How we respond in Port Washington—in other departments, you know, they special request an ambulance. In Port Washington, whenever there's a fire call, the ambulance is automatic. My wife was not home when the Kirkwood Road fire was happening, she was at Fire Medics Headquarters filling a duty slot. At that time, she lived in Glenwood Landing. She was originally a member of Glenwood Fire Company. She had a boyfriend there. Blah, blah, blah. Things didn't work out with them. And Port Washington Fire Medics takes out of town members as squad members. She joined Port Washington; that's where I met her. But she was at home. She heard the call. She came right over. You know, obviously knowing that I would be there. So she was right there. She was a Lieutenant at the time. So, here she was. I mean, she sees what's going on. She knew where I was, and here I am going off to the hospital. And—but she had a job to do. She was the highest officer from her company, and she had to still stay and make sure everybody else was fine, even though I had to go to the hospital.

Q: Did she finally get there later?

DJA: She finally—no, somebody had called her and said, "Don't worry about coming." You know, "Just go back, I'm on my way home. Things are fine." By the time that everything was cleaned up and I was on my way home. In the Bernard Street fire, as I mentioned, we were both in town at the time. So we had both responded, and she played her role in the EMS and ...

Q: Was your father, since he's in the Fire Department, was he also on the scene this time?

DJA: The Bernard Street? He wasn't at that one either.

Q: Okay.

DJA: No, he wasn't. Not that time. My cousins weren't members. You know, my first cousin had passed, and—and which—and cousin—and Bobby wasn't a member back, not with us yet.

Q: I'd like to ask you about your training. How different was your training compared to your father's training?

DJA: Oh. Well, you know, it's the same old story, and I feel like an old man sometimes telling the story about my probation to these new young guys who get in and—The schooling, it's all to save your life, to learn what we do. Is it inconvenient at some times? Yes. Yes, to be totally honest, it is. My dad had to ...

Q: Inconvenient, in what way?

DJA: Inconvenient. There is one particular course that, when I was going through probation, was ten consecutive Tuesdays in the wintertime. So if you worked all day, then you had to go sit in a classroom and listen to this guy talk about a fire department. That's for ten Tuesdays. Then, as the summer and the spring came, another class, which we call "Primary," was given at the Fire Academy in Bethpage. That's eight Friday nights. So, as a young eighteen, nineteen year old guy, now you're spending your Friday's at the Nassau County Fire Academy in Bethpage. And now, you add in your Thursday nights where we have our drills and our work nights, which we do when we check all our equipment and things of that nature. So ...

Q: Three nights a week.

DJA: Safe to say, you know, sometimes it can be two; sometimes it could be three. But, you know what? At that time, also, when you just joined, you're kind of gung ho. You're kind of ready to go. You want to do. You want to be. So you're at the firehouse all the time, waiting for the horn to blow. But then I have to leave now and go to school in Bethpage for three hours, and (laughs) that was like the downer. But, my dad going through probation, I believe they had some in-house training. They also had the Bethpage Fire Academy, at the time. But that was really it. Now, even now, these kids who join, they have a lot of training to do. Not to say that my training is over. Or anybody's training's over. Because you're never too old to learn. But the actual requirements for probationary members, it's pretty detailed.

Q: More detailed than your father's generation?

DJA: Oh, yeah. And now, it's even more detailed than mine. Oh, yeah, it's gotten considerably—

Q: Can you give any details as to—details as to ...

DJA: Yeah.

Q: ... where, in what areas it's more detailed?

DJA: Sure. With all the things that go on in the world today, unfortunately, we have different training to cater to that. Right now, the Department is attending Long Island Railroad School, and that is basically to see how the railroad system works. We have the railroad right in town, and anybody who wants to get on the train in Manhattan can come to Port Washington and wreak havoc here. We don't like to think about it, but, you know what? The way that the world is today, you have to think about everything. Anything from how trains work to how to get in them, how to get through the windows, how to emergency stop them. How--what is flammable, what is not flammable. Where do they keep different equipment on the train. It's pretty good. I've taken it. I'm not currently enrolled

in this class, but I've taken it in the past, and it's pretty in-depth. And you come out, you think that you can drive the train (laughs), but it is pretty in-depth, and ...

Q: Along with the train, what about the fire boats? Because we have a large area where we have open water.

DJA: Right. The—believe it or not, we always had a small, what we call a Zodiac boat, if you will.

Q: What's a Zodiac boat?

DJA: It's a small—like it's an inflatable, small boat that we could use for any sort of water rescue. Thankfully, we haven't really had any instances like that. I believe it was back in '94 where we had one. It was actually Valentine's day. '94 or '95. Again, I forget that. And it was out in the—out in the harbor. These guys were actually kayaking, I believe. That kind of boat. And the boat had tipped over; they were out there. And our guys had gone out with our boat, and we had saved—rescued them. They were fine. They were really cold. You know, the water was obviously right around the freezing temperature. It was February. We do have a couple of different things for water rescue. We're currently, I believe, looking into getting a formal water rescue boat just for that nature because in the past we've always had the Coast Guard, and we've had every other agency to protect

our waters. Nowadays, with safety, their efforts are concentrated in other places. So we have to really worry about our main area.

Q: What qualities do you admire most about your generation at the Fire Department?

DJA: I would have to say the training. As I mentioned, the training is very extensive, but it's there, it's what we do.

Q: What specific skill did you learn when you first became a rookie? Is there a specific thing each person learns?

DJA: Yeah, well, when you join the company—see, you join the Fire Department. The Fire Department is the big one. That's—it—the Fire Department incorporates all the four companies. I joined Protection Engine Company, in particular.

Q: Why?

DJA: One, the family. I can't actually say it's because of what they do there. I would say the family had brought me in. But, really what we do in Protection, we're an engine company or a hose company. We deal primarily with all the fire hoses and the extinguishment of the fire, rather than the ladder company, which deals primarily with the search and rescue of victims. Dealing with roof operations—cutting roofs open,

things like that. So, yes, there was different training that was catered to the different companies. Not so much the individual, but the company. We did go to hose training, whereas the guys from Atlantic's may not have gone to hose training; they may have gone to ladder training. Nowadays, we sort of take a group class, and everybody learns everything. Because, at any time, we could jump on Atlantic's truck and have to do ladder duties and search and rescue techniques. Back when I was going through probation, if you were in the engine company, you did just that. You weren't really doing anything else. You weren't freelancing.

Q: So, in your father's generation, it was more specific ...

DJA: Yeah.

Q: ... than it is now.

DJA: Yeah. Even in my—thirteen years ago, I would say it's more specific to just the company. Nowadays, thankfully, we all inter-company train and train on each other's equipment and learn what each company does. Because, like I was saying, at any given time, we'll be on a ladder truck or the rescue truck and have to use particular tools that we, not in our company, but we're on the truck and this is what the truck carries and this is what we've got to do.

Q: What does a hose actually feel like in your hand?

DJA: Depending on the size, the smallest one that we carry is a one inch, which we call a booster hose. That's—it's on a coil on the top of the truck, and we use that pretty much just for an overhaul, which is after the fire is out, putting out any hot spots and, whereas the bigger hose is not needed. The next one up would be the inch and three-quarter. And it's very, very—it's a powerful—it's a powerful tool. It's carrying, in most cases, a hundred and seventy-five pounds of pressure per square inch. So it is very, very hard. It is very—it does have quite a kick to it. And moving up, we use our two and a half, or our "deuce-and-a-half," if you will. And that's, you know, you can imagine, it's that big and rock hard, and once you open it up, you need somebody to back you up and really push into you so that you're not pushed back. Because, even though the water's flowing out, the pressure's pulling you back. And they do get—it can get pretty tiresome dealing with things like that ...

Q: What were your first working experiences handling that? Anything humorous or anything unusual?

DJA: Well, I always saw how it was done. You see as a kid--you hear a fire truck in your neighborhood, and you follow it on your bike and you see what the guys do. You see it in movies. You see it here, you see it there. But to actually do it, they're like, "Watch, kid. Watch, kid." It's going to be—you're going to have a kick to it. Of course, they

didn't leave you alone, because, A, ten years old, I think I was maybe a hundred pounds, wet (laughs). So, I mean, they really—they could have really kicked me around. But I did have a bigger guy as a back-up. And it was—would it be something that I always imagined it would be? I don't know. But it was—it was something. This is like, this is what we do, and I'm finally getting to do it.

Q: Anything great happen or unusual, on your first fire call? First fire call?

DJA: Yeah, well, the first one was just a routine, automatic fire alarm. I don't remember exactly where. But that was back in the early '90s when we were able to ride on the back of the fire truck as you went through a town. There were four of us on the back step.

Q: What did that feel like?

DJA: That was—it was cool, because it was something that we haven't—I always saw the guys doing. And looking back now, I wish we were still doing it, but it was a safety issue. You hit a bump or something, you can actually fall right off. It was—it was crazy, but it was fun, because that was half—half the job was just getting there and how you got there. You know, riding on the truck and riding on the back, and ...

Q: Does anything go through your mind as to when you used to stand on the back as you're screaming to a fire?

DJA: Well, I knew that where we were going was just a routine call, but really nothing would meet us at the other end if we would get there.

Q: How did you know it's a routine call?

DJA: First off, by the nature of the call, the location of the call. ,There are times when the routine call is not just a routine call. There was the Sands Point Nursing Home fire.

Q: Tell us about that.

DJA: Prior to that, we were--we would go there, I would say, once or twice a week, maybe more, on a routine fire alarm. No fire. Just the alarm malfunctioning and us having to go. And, not to use, you know, the "crying wolf," but it gets to the point where you're like, "You know what? The Nursing Home's going off again." But you have to go, because you think of what could happen. Well, on this particular night, what could happen, did happen. I was in probation—I was on probation, so it was a Tuesday night. We were headed out to fire school out in Bethpage. The call comes over and we hear it, and we all say to each other, "Oh, Sands Point again." We continue on to the Fire Academy, and we had the radios. We took one of our utility vehicles with the fire radios in it, and we heard what was going on. So we were at the—we're on our way up to the Fire Academy, and finally, we were just like, "Forget it. Forget school. They need us

back home." We turned the vehicle around, put on our lights and sirens. By this time, I guess we were somewhere near Hicksville on the Expressway. And we put our lights and sirens on, and the six or eight of us was on our way back into Port Washington, because the routine automatic—fire alarm—turned into—earlier in that day, guys were working on the roof, redoing the roof. They had left a torch going up there. There was no great big fire in the basement, or in the main part of the Nursing Home, but the fire was contained to the roof. It was extinguished quickly, but there was a lot of smoke. And, obviously, being a nursing home, we had to then evacuate all of the residents. That was the biggest part of the night. We evacuated everybody in the nursing home.

Q: How many patients?

DJA: I would—there was—there had to be over a hundred, I would imagine. And it was the strangest thing, because at that point, the Chief had called in for mutual aid, which is assistance from an outside Fire Department. We had multiple—from Manhasset to Roslyn. You know, neighboring Departments had come to assist us in evacuation of all the residents of the nursing home. And it was just so—just how we had to get them out—okay, you have some of the patients who could be wheeled out, some of the patients who could be walked out. But then you have the patients who are on their respirator or on their oxygen. So we had to take each individual case. So, we had to—if my memory serves me—we had to basically separate them. We had town buses; we had moving trucks; we had school buses; ambulances, bringing them. And most of the people were

then taken up to the Weber High School—Weber Junior High School, at which time, there were nurses and doctors there to make sure that their cases were okay. If anybody was in distress, we had to bring them to the hospital. But that entire night was all of a—I don't even know if it was a rescue, more of an evacuation. ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: We are now on Side B. To continue with the nursing home evacuation. Donald, this was quite a deal for being on probation ...

DJA: Yeah.

Q: ... What did you learn from this experience?

DJA: Well, it was—it was nothing that we've ever learned in our school training. We've never really learned about evacuation of elderly patients. We learned how to break windows, chop with an ax, extinguish fires. But we were never taught how to care for patients. That was always pretty much left up to the—to the EMS company. But just in the assisting of the evacuation, you had to—like I was saying, you have to take each person's physical and health issue. You don't wind up doing it by yourself, but somebody who couldn't walk, you had to assist them. You had to take a little extra time with each person.

Q: Do you recall when everybody went back to the nursing home? Was it several days after that?

DJA: Yeah, I believe it was several days.

Q: And you had to also then transport them back?

DJA: No, I don't even remember exactly how they got back. But they started construction again.

Q: I want you to describe how you—how you ascended in the Ladder from rookie to assistant engineer, to Lieutenant, and to Captain.

DJA: Okay.

Q: And I believe, now, you're ...

DJA: I'm a trustee.

Q: ... trustee. So, I'd like you to describe what happens. How do you move up these rungs.

DJA: Okay. You're on probation for two years, which is, you know, sort of lengthy. You're responsible for making every Thursday—Thursday night work detail. So you have to make every single Thursday, and you go to a bunch of training and things like that. So I got in there October of '91. In October of '93, I was then off probation. Completed all the training I was responsible for taking. Of course, like I was saying earlier, training never ends. October came. I got off. November was nominations for engineer's position. As I mentioned earlier, engineer is basically, there's the engineer and then there's four assistants, and they assist in making sure the truck is put back in order after the fire or, if something is broken, to make arrangements to have it fixed or fix it yourself. And it's really, it's a Lieutenant in training, is what I always like to call it. Because, as I said earlier, if, in the absence of a Captain or Lieutenant, the engineer would be in charge. So, just coming—you know, I guess I could always say that I had a—I had a head-start just being around the place for so long and knowing the equipment. I see a lot of these kids that join these days don't really know what they're getting into. I knew what I was getting into. I knew the guys; I knew the job. I knew the equipment; I knew what—I knew sort of what was going on. So, I moved up in assistant engineer's position. I finally moved up to the rank of engineer, which, then, it all falls on your shoulders. You know, you can't rely on your assistant engineers—or, as an assistant engineer, you can always say, "Well, I'm only an assistant," and get away with it, to a certain degree. But as the engineer, if something was broken, the Captain wanted to know why it was broken and when we could have it fixed, and if it was still broken, he wanted to know why. But again, it's all learning experience. It's learning to deal with

guys. Sort of being in charge, because Thursday night work details were run by the engineers. So the engineer had a scheme, a work plan laid out for the night, and you had to carry it out. You had to sometimes not be so nice, because if you didn't get a particular thing done, Captain wanted to know why. So, after I was engineer, I moved up to Second Lieutenant. I was Second Lieutenant for a year, at which time the company's First Lieutenant, which, at that time, was a friend of mine, in a lot of guys' eyes, wasn't really carrying out the job as he should. So, a group of the guys said that "What we're going to do is we're going to write you in for the position of First Lieutenant." Now, I don't really think that a write-in is how you should—how you should win. I had my Second Lieutenant's position; I didn't want to lose that. It took me too long to work to that point. I said, "Guys, basically, do what you want to do. If you want to write it in, be my guest, but I really don't think that that's the right thing to do," blah, blah, blah ...

Q: A write-in versus what?

DJA: A write-in versus a regular check-in. See, in November—between November, December ...

Q: ... [And that wasn't] ... a check-in.

DJA: Right. You get nominated off the Company floor, you know, where they say, "I nominate you for First Lieutenant or Second Lieutenant," things like that. But there was

also the line after that office. So, what actually has to happen that night is that there is nobody being voted against, or running against anybody. There's just that person for that position. One member from the company off the company floor asks to have one ballot be cast for all non-contested offices. But what you need to do to knock that down is some member has to say no, which some member did. A member said no, which could mean that a write-in could then occur. So the guys wrote me in. They spread the word. Believe me, I didn't go and I didn't solicit. I didn't—I didn't do anything, because I didn't want to jeopardize what I had, because that's the worst thing that could happen is start to bad-mouth somebody. Not that I'm that type of person. But to bad-mouth somebody and then lose, or win, and then you have to deal with that and say "ah, back-stabber," or whatever. But I didn't want to deal with that. But I basically told the guys, "Do what you want." Because it was the guys in the company that were not happy with the performance of this guy. January came; I won. I blew the guy's doors off in a win. Was I happy? Yeah. I was happy because I was moving up. The guy on the other—you know, he was sort of blind-sided by it, but I didn't really think that it would work, so I was like, "Yeah, do whatever you want to do," because it never works. Well, it worked. I won the position. Accepted the position because ...

Q: To become Lieutenant?

DJA: I moved up to First Lieutenant. I had moved up. Because the company members, that's what they wanted, you know. After they had done that, I couldn't actually say no,

because the guy really wasn't doing his job. So I moved up to the rank of First Lieutenant, where I kept for a year. And the Captain, myself, and the Second Lieutenant all worked together very, very well. The First—the Second Lieutenant was a friend of mine—Donald Reese. He's been a long-time friend of mine. So we had moved up through the ranks. We went through probation together, things like that. After ...

Q: So how long were you First Lieutenant and then ...

DJA: First Lieutenant for a year.

Q: And then you become a Second Lieutenant?

DJA: Second is First.

Q: I mean, Second and then First.

DJA: Yeah, Second, then First. One year apiece. Normally, two years apiece. But I moved up because of this crazy thing that these guys did. But I won. They—the company got sort of what they wanted. So, I moved up. The following year, I moved into the Captain's office. Was I the youngest Captain? I wouldn't say that. I was one of the youngest.

Q: How old were you when you became Captain?

DJA: I'm thirty-one now. I believe I was twenty-eight, okay. So, I mean, you got to figure even for a twenty-eight year old to be in charge of, you know, a big corporation, because each company is responsible for itself.

Q: And what are the duties of Captain?

DJA: The Captain is—we—I'm in charge of everything. I have seventy-five members or so, depending on how many guys are in the company at the time. Seventy-five under me. The daily duties of the company all falls back on me, whether I was there or not. The operation of the company—making sure things are working properly. Being a good leader. Being a personable person. Personable person.

Q: What makes a good leader?

DJA: I guess to be able to interact with the guys. To know where to draw the line. As I mentioned earlier, you know, we all joke around, but there has to be the line when the joking's got to end, and the people have to respect you for that. I was always, and always am, the jokester. But there is a time when you have to stop, and they have to know that he means business and have the respect for me. And I can honestly say that they all did. I had a fantastic two years. Thankfully, nobody got hurt, which is your main concern. Obviously, there was no loss of life due to the fire—fire service.

Q: And then, did you ever have the goal to be Chief?

DJA: I did when I was a kid. Right now, I'm at a point where I'm really happy with the way things are. I accomplished ...

Q: What do you mean, right now?

DJA: I accomplished the biggest goal in my company, which is to be the Captain, to being a leader. I accomplished that. I guess, I would like to say—and I'm sure that other people would say that I was successful at it. I carried out the duties as they were supposed to be carried out. I continued our legacy of being a great company. But the duties of Chief, it's just a lot—it's a lot to do. And right now, I don't really feel that I can commit myself one hundred percent that's required to do that. So, in January, the role—one of the Trustees—we currently have five Trustees. One of the Trustees was going to run, but he lives out of town and he didn't really have as much time. So, we contacted him, we said, "Listen, are you serious about running." He says, "Well, if nobody else wants it, I'll take it." And they mentioned that I wanted it. So, he says, "Let ..." you know, "Let him run." So there were other—a couple of guys that wanted that position, because basically, you have five guys each year. They rotate.

Q: Who are the five Trustees?

DJA: Frank Pavlak who's been a Trustee for four hundred years (laughs). He's been a Trustee for as long as I can remember. John Murro. Paul Carpenter. His brother, William "Butch" Carpenter, and myself.

Q: Can you explain what the duties of the Trustee would be? How do you— how do you go from Captain to administration?

DJA: Once—that was—that's the good thing is because it's the other side of the coin. As a Captain, you have to know everything. You have to know where this is and where that is. And, you know, if we have to purchase something, make sure that we, you know, get it in a timely fashion, but make sure we're getting the best price for it. As a Trustee, you don't really have to worry about the firefighting aspect. You just have to worry about the financial, the administrative end—making sure that things are running smoothly, the day-to-day operations are running smoothly. This is the Captain. And that was a good role for me, because out of the five, I'm the only ex-Captain. Okay? That's what we call them. It's not that I did something bad; it's just an ex-Captain or past Captain. And it's good to have an ex-Captain, because they've been there. So a lot of times if a truck comes back from repair and the bill comes in and it kind of looks a little shady, or so they think, they always call me up and say, "Did the truck really need this?" I was like, "Yeah, it is '92, so it did need this service or that service. Because I do have first-hand knowledge of the other side, and now I'm learning this particular side.

Q: So you buy all of the parts for the ...

DJA: Right.

Q: ... for the—for all the equipment?

DJA: Right, the Captain and the Lieutenants, we get together and decide what they would like on the equipment, and they would come to—you know, if the Captain—the Captain and the Trustees always had a good relationship. It was never something, you know, because really, you're dealing with two different things. You're dealing with somebody who wants something—the Captain who wants something—and the Trustees who are trying to make sure that we're getting things because we need them, not because we want them. But, we've always had a good relationship with the past Captains, to know that they're trying to carry out their job, so let's make that job as easy as possible.

Q: What are the frustrations of being a Trustee?

DJA: To know that if the current Captain or current Lieutenants aren't doing something that I think that should be done in a particular way—not that my way would be right--but just as a way that I would handle something—and you've got to—you have to kind of bite your tongue, because you've been there. If it's something that's really going to put us in

jeopardy, of course, you have to step in, but if it's something, handling a particular issue with a member or something, that's—that's something that—it is—it does get a little frustrating, to be honest with you. To know that, "Hey listen, you're supposed to go to this school, Captain. You're supposed to go." You know, just because you're busy you have to make plans. Because if you're not doing it—that was my motto always, "Always do something, because if you don't do it, how do you expect everybody else to do it?" You have to go. You have to go to training. You have to go and do this. You can't—you can't hype up the crew, if you're not going to be there to hype them up.. But to actually, to get the position of Trustee, it was funny, because the position—I was talking with Frank, and I showed interest. My dad is a friend of Paul Carpenter's. Funny thing is that Paul mentioned it to my dad that there would possibly be an opening. So my dad decided to run. So now I'm here in a predicament. I was like, well, if my dad wants it, but the other guy wants me. I'm like, I can't naturally run against my father. I mean, Captain or no Captain, he's my father. I had approached him, I said, "Listen, Dad, here's what I want to do. For the betterment of the Company, we've always had an ex-Captain. Would you mind if I ran?"

Q: And what did he say?

DJA: He said, "If you want it, of course, you take it," you know. "You'll do a great job," and "You did a great job in the past." So, but that was just—it was awkward. Because here it is, me and my dad are fighting for the same position. Not necessarily fighting, but you

understand, it was funny. And you get the other guys in the company who say, "Hey, geez, you know, I wanted to run." I said "Well, if you want it so bad then you could run, but I am also." The guys in that office, they wanted me. After I spoke to my dad, they wanted me in the position. So, it was—I said, "Go ahead and run." And then the word got out that the Trustees—the other four wanted me there, so they're like, all right. It's more—it just works better if you have five guys who work together than four and one guy who doesn't really (laughs) ...

Q: What position did you enjoy—or do you enjoy the most?

DJA: The most I think that I enjoy—I enjoy the Trustee position, because I'm still a company officer. I still have say, if you will. Not that that goes very far. But I do feel that I'm still contributing to the company in an authoritative manner or ...

Q: How many hours do you have to put in?

DJA: As a Captain, I had to put a whole lot more. As Trustee, we usually meet every Thursday night. You know, they do other work nights and things. I'm on the phone with the guys every day. If something breaks. The fence is falling down, we have to get bids to get a—you know, somebody in to come and fix it. So, is it that you're always on duty? Not necessarily. But when something needs to be done, you have to take care of it.

Q: I'd like to go on to your personal life. How do you balance your family life with your job?

DJA: It's ...

Q: And how do you then balance your day job with what you do and your family?

DJA: I am—I'm a father of two. I have a two and a half year old and a four month old. Okay? So my hands are full (laughs). We had—in last February, we had bought into my mom's house. So, I'm a homeowner. It's a two-family home. So I'm juggling that. I'm an electrician by trade in Local 3 in New York City.

Q: Tell me a little about that.

DJA: Okay. I went through the apprenticeship. Apprenticeship training, which is a five and a half year course, which involves night school, and also they give you supplemental college through Empire State College. So, actually, for a guy who just graduated high school and did some odd jobs and stuff, now I have a Bachelor's Degree and a career. Not Bachelor, Associates Degree (laughs). I make myself look better than I am. I have an Associates Degree, and I'm what we would call a mechanic or a journeyman within Local 3 of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

Q: And what lessons have you carried from the Fire Department into that?

DJA: I would have to say the leadership. I've been with the company now for, I guess the better part of three or four years. I would say close to four years, I've been with them now. So, I've been with them as an apprentice. And my superintendent liked me, so he kept me busy. And from that, he kept me running small jobs. I still tell him I don't really want to run big jobs, because the stress level. I'm not ready to tackle the stress—the extra stress. But anything small. Right now, I'm assisting a foreman handling a particular area of a job.

Q: Construction sites?

DJA: Yeah. And the nice thing is that, by being an officer in the Fire Department, you have to deal with people. And you have to deal with different people, different situations. We're all here to do one thing, but if somebody's not right on that day—maybe it's because they've got something else going on at home that they're not acting the way that they should—and the same thing goes at work. One day you'll get great production out of one guy, and the next day that guy is not really doing the same thing. You have to learn how to take the good with the bad and deal with each person as an individual, there. You know, don't expect them to all do the same, or produce all the same, because it's not going to happen, and you'll drive yourself crazy (laughs).

Q: Now, do you have help at home at all?

DJA: I do have help. Of course, my wife. My wife is ...

Q: And how does she go to the Fire Medic while you're ...

DJA: That's the difficult part. It's a two-family home. My mom is still living there. My mom's our in-house babysitter. It's two separate apartments. She has her own entrance and her own phone number and the whole thing. But, it's ironic, because when I was born, my parents had lived on Linwood Road in Manorhaven. At that time, or soon after, they had bought the house on Graywood Road where I currently live. And we lived on the second floor. Soon after, they bought—then, they moved down to the first level and rented the second floor. When my wife and I had gotten married, we went through a terrible time trying to find a place to live. At the same time, my mom's tenant was moving out. So she says, "Listen, I know that you're in a jam, but if you want I'll drop the rent a little bit. I still need to collect rent. You know, this isn't a free thing. But—because I still have, you know, mortgage payments and things like that. But I will drop the rent, and you could live here." So that's what we did. We rented the upstairs apartment. So—so now, I'm back upstairs. So, soon after, we had made a deal with my mom, we actually asked her, we said, "Mom, we'd like to do something with the house. Would you be willing to move upstairs? It doesn't really benefit me and a family to live on the second floor of a house." But at the time she says, "No, no, no, no. I'm very happy with where I am; I'm sorry." So, soon after my son was born—the first son—my mom became crazed over

him, as you would imagine, and we had approached her. I said, "Mom, listen, I really don't know what else to do. We want to do something. We want to buy a house. But, you know, I can't live on the second floor. It doesn't help me any to blow out and put two more rooms. It just doesn't do anything for me. I still have to go to second floor. I have two dogs. Now, I'm going to have the baby. We're going to have to start looking for a house further out east." Well, just at that, she was like, "Well, all right. Maybe we could talk about the house." I'm like, "Well, Mom, if you move upstairs, I'd be willing to re-do the whole place to your liking. Re-do the kitchen however you want. I'll put washer and dryer up there for you, re-do the bathroom." So she bought it. She did it.

Q: So, in other words, you have in-house help.

DJA: So, she moved upstairs. I'm downstairs again. So I've gone from Linwood, to upstairs, downstairs, upstairs. Now, I'm back downstairs again. But things couldn't be better, you know. I'm very fortunate. I have my mom. My wife is great.

Q: Did you have a firehouse wedding?

DJA: Yes, absolutely. As you would imagine.

Q: Was that ...

DJA: Yep. At the time that we got married—we got married on March 3rd. Well, my son was born—I was married March 31st, 2000 (laughs)—I hope my wife doesn't hear this. No, I just say that, because my son was born on March 30th of 2002, and I always get the two mixed up. But March 31st, 2000, we were married.

Q: What are firehouse weddings like?

DJA: Okay. We—we didn't—I'm not saying that we had our wedding at the firehouse, by any means. But, you know, at that time, my wife was Captain of Fire Medic Co. and I was Lieutenant of Protection Engine Co. So, we had gotten married. Most of the guys in my gigantic wedding party were members of the Fire Department. Obviously, very close friends of mine—my cousin, two—my other cousin. But a few friends who were just coming for the wedding said "We have to do something for both of them." So, it was sort of a daisy chain of phone calls. "All right. Here's the day, this is what we're going to do." And when we were—when we got to the church—we went to St. Boniface Church in Sea Cliff—we were greeted by—as you would imagine, being a member of a company, we'd bring a truck to your wedding. Providing it's not in Bangor, Maine. If it's—if it's relatively close, we'll bring one of our spare engines. And so we were greeted by, naturally, one of my engines, one of my wife's ambulances. But then we saw Atlantic's ladder truck; we saw Flower Hill's fire engine; we saw Glenwood Fire Company's ladder truck—my wife's former company; we saw Sea Cliff's fire engine. There was, I guess, seven or eight fire trucks parked outside the church. Now, I

remember (laughs)—I remember the story that a Sea Cliff fire Chief came home from work—it was a Friday afternoon—and didn't know what was going on. Because he saw seven or eight fire trucks all over his—his town (laughs). He didn't know what was going on. So we--we got married--a regular mass wedding. And when we came outside, as well as when we walked in, we were greeted by about ten of our friends, all in our standard, Class A uniform, all lined up at the door saluting (laughs), which was strange enough. Two with our decorative parade axes, which are gold-plated, you know.

Q: Did they ...

DJA: Yeah, and they did, with what we call our pike poles, which is our long poles for pulling ceilings and things in a fire ...

Q: They crossed the pike poles?

DJA: Right over us, like that. And the two ladder trucks—one from Glenwood and one from Atlantic's, both put their ladders extended, with helmets coming down, over us, like that. So, we came out of the wedding—out of the church. Of course, the sound of eight sirens blasting right in a concentrated area. You know, balloons. They had the whole nine yards. It was amazing. I remember distinctly how we wanted to get a picture, obviously by my truck, by my wife's ambulance. Then my wife said, "Let's go on the ladder." So we—so they dropped the ladder truck with the bucket, dropped it down to the ground. But prior to that, my wife's jumping up on top of the fire truck. And if you can figure a

woman just married with a gigantic wedding dress climbing on top of a fire truck. Her mother's screaming, you know, and everybody else is laughing. Because it's nothing out of the ordinary. It's something crazy that we would do. So, next thing, we get into the bucket, and the ladder takes us up for about seventy-five feet up in the air. And our photographer took our picture while we were up there. And it was really great, because it was at the end of March, so sunset was, I guess, about five-thirty or six o'clock. So it was a beautiful sunset. And actually one of the pictures that we have is just my wife and I on the ladder, but you can't really see the ladder because of the shadow. So the ladder is all dark with the sunset and the blue sky. It's really a very, very nice picture.

Q: Well, were your children then christened in the firehouse?

DJA: Oh, naturally. Oh, naturally. Yeah, we had—well, of course, we went to a church. We made St. Boniface Church where we christened our oldest son John. Because at that time, when he was born, we weren't really sure where we were going to be living. This is before we decided anything with my mom. And so we said, you know what, at least we can always come back to St. Boniface. That's where we were married, so let's christen him there. And then we had our reception for after the christening back at the firehouse (laughs). And then we just had christened my son Danny in July, was it? Yeah, July. No, August. Oh, boy, I'm bad with dates. In August. And, of course, we went to St. Peters, because we're established now in Port Washington again. We went up to St.

Peters, had our christening there. And had our reception, again, back at the trusty firehouse (laughs).

Q: Tell me about the Pierce engine. What do you do on that committee?

DJA: Right.

Q: What do you do?

DJA: Okay. Pierce is a brand. Just as Cadillac or Volvo, or anything of that nature. In the past, our company has always bought the Mack. That's another brand of the truck—a Mack fire engine.

Q: Well, how do you decide which one you want?

DJA: Okay, when we had bought our first one, our first Pierce, which was in '96, we go out, you know, we form a committee. The Captain forms a committee of, you know, a group, a couple of ex-Captains, a couple of regular members from the company, an ex-Chief. And we'll go out, because we didn't—we weren't really sure what we were going to buy. But we wanted to—when we buy, we buy to last fifteen to twenty years. They are expensive, but we do buy for fifteen to twenty years. So, we form a committee. The committee gets together. And then we contact other fire departments to see what they've

got. One, they have one particular brand—the Salsbury—which is, you know, one of the top-rated brands. Or, we pick a group that we know that are good—good vehicles—a good name. Then we go and we check them out. We go to different conventions, which they have throughout the year, all over. Some in Maryland, some in the Nassau coliseum where they'll have shows, and they'll actually have the apparatus on scene and we could see what they have and what they have to offer. What the truck is made of and things like that.

Q: Why would Port Washington want a Pierce instead of the Mack?

DJA: The Mack—they weren't making the Mack fire truck complete anymore. They were just making the chassis, which would be the front, and everything else would have to be after market ...

Q: Oh, you'd have to then buy the parts to put in it?

DJA: Exactly.

Q: And this comes with ...

DJA: Pierce is made at a plant in Wisconsin, and they make it from ground up.

Q: And how much does it cost?

DJA: That one, at the time, was about three-fifty—three hundred, fifty thousand. And, at that time, it was—the reason it was that much is because we also went up in our hose size. Our supply lines ...

Q: You say "that time." What do you mean?

DJA: That was in '96. Bought it in 1996. And we—we always used a three inch hose supply line, and then actually we upgraded it to a four inch, which would supply our engines from the fire hydrant with more water. With doing that, had to buy new hose, had to buy new adapters. And it was just—it was—I don't know if economical is the right word—but we just found that studies on firefighting would be the bigger hose, would be the bigger water, which would be better for the operation of the whole scene. So ...

Q: You know—I don't know if you're familiar with what's happening in Centerport, with the community and that fire house.

DJA: Yeah.

Q: What is your take on that?

DJA: From what I know is that they want to—they want to make the firehouse bigger. Is that basically what they want to do, and the Village is saying no? I can understand that. The way that—I mean, just being a resident in Port Washington, knowing what taxes are. Nassau County—I wouldn't even say Port Washington. But, things go up. Prices of things go up. Taxes increase. It's like having a bill at home. I think you're always going to have a bill at home (laughs), you know, it's like—we ...

Q: Do you think that there'll ever be that animosity between the community and the firefighters that ...

DJA: To be honest ...

Q: ... they is in Centerport?

DJA: ... I think that—I hope not. I know that there are people in town, like that now.

Q: Oh really?

DJA: You know—yeah, oh, yeah.

Q: Tell me about them. What do they feel?

DJA: There are people—there are people that, you know, like my wife is right—you know, since she's had the kids, if we have a parade or so, she's usually with the kids and I'm with the company. And she'll hear people saying, "Oh, look. They've got another new truck." Or "Look at ... " But they're not keeping in mind that we just got rid of one. We got rid of our other one, which was an—is an '83. It was an '83 Mack.

Q: You sell it to another fire company?

DJA: Yeah, what normally happens is the salesman—like you would bring your car to a salesman, you know. And they would take your car and give you an estimated priced, and then they'd just whack that off of the cost of the new truck. There are people that say, "Well, what do they need all this for?" But, we're the ones that are there at three o'clock in the morning when the horn blows. And sometimes it is a thankless job. But, the best feeling I get about being a member of the Fire Department is Pride in Port, because that's when you actually walk down the street, and people are actually thankful and you can actually see that your job—not that you're looking for a pat on the back, don't get me wrong. But you see that what you're doing is actually somebody sees what you're doing. And that's nice.

Q: Do you think that the community shows their appreciation enough?

DJA: I would say. I would say. There has never, to my knowledge, been an instance where we were denied a budget. I don't think that we're buying things that are putting anybody over the edge or doing anything that anybody else isn't doing. But ...

Q: What do you think are the biggest changes between your father's generation and your generation?

DJA: I would say definitely the equipment. That goes without saying. Right now, we're up to just a higher standard. We're held to a higher standard, as far as our turn-out gear goes. With anything. Everything goes ...

Q: 9/11 had an impact on that?

DJA: That did. I would say, really what had the big kicker was back in—again, with the dates—it's either '86 or '83. When Bob Dayton passed away on Main Street. I knew the guy. I didn't know him really that well. My dad says I knew him (laughs). My dad, of course, knew him. But, again, just being around the guys. He goes, "You know the guy. You know him." And from that point on, I think that we really looked into safety. Not that we weren't being safe. But we looked into it even more. How to make ourselves better, right? To make sure that things don't happen. Not that—again, not that I'm saying that something happened as the result of. But just to look, have foresight, and say "This is what we should be doing that we're not doing to make ourselves a little bit better."

Q: Did you go into New York on 9/11?

DJA: Ironically, no (laughs). I was working during the day. I was working at Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn, which is right at the tip of Brooklyn, overlooking the World Trade Center. I went there for the day. My boss had sent me in the morning. Of course, before anything had happened. I took the BQE [Brooklyn Queens Expressway). And, routine. You see the New York City skyline, and you go to work. And, it was actually, it was an ironic day, because we had to take my wife for a sonogram. She was pregnant with Johnny, my first one. So I knew that I had to leave early. I was going to be by myself for the day. Just do what I had to do and get out of there. So, I went to work, like any other day. Start doing what I'm doing. And there was a laborer on the job. We were just finishing the job, so I was just there by myself doing some busting up stuff. And he's got a TV on as he's sweeping. And he says, "Oh, my God! A plane just hit the World Trade Center." So, here, the dope that I am sometimes, we're saying, "Oh, look! Job security." We're not thinking of loss of life. That's just—we weren't picturing that. We were just saying, "Oh, the job security for construction!" But knew that there would be problems, but we were just trying to make light of it. So I go down to the end of the hallway, and I'm over looking. I see Manhattan. I see the World Trade Center with the smoke blowing out of it. I said, "Oh, my God!" So, I said, "I have to get this stuff done. I have to go to the doctor with my wife." I go back to work. The laborer said, "Oh, my God! Another one hit." So, I went back. I run and see both towers going. So, oh, my

God! So, you know, so now I'm forgetting about work. Work is not even an issue. Go to the roof. I'm trying to call my friends that were, thankfully, none of my—my working friends from the City are there. We didn't have a job in the Trade Center. I finally get in touch with my superintendent. I said, "Richie, I don't know if you hear if you're in the car, but don't go anywhere near the Trade Center. There's two planes just hit. I don't know what'd going on down there." He says, "I know. I'm headed home." I'm like, "Well, I'm just letting you know. I told you earlier, I've got to leave early to bring my wife to the doctor." He says, "All right." So, now I see that this place is just a wreck. I mean, one of the towers just had fallen. So I said, I got to—I got to get out here. So I packed up my stuff. I told the superintendent for the general contracting company, I said, "Listen, I—I'll see you tomorrow. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow. I don't know what's going on, but I'll see you whenever I see you." I packed up my stuff. I get in my car, and I just—I get back on the—I get on the Belt Parkway, and I'm flying home. There was probably ten or twelve cars in a pack, all going eighty-five miles an hour, as fast as we can, to get out of there. I look in my rear-view mirror; all I see is black. And it was like, oh, you know, I don't know what's going on here; this is just horrible. So, I called my wife. I said, "Listen, we still have the doctor's appointment. I'm going to be early, because I'm leaving work. I'm getting out of the City, out of the Borough." So I go to her job. She works at a bank in Glen Head. So, I'm sitting there. She's still working. And the irony is that we—we went to the doctor. And we come out, and here it is that the world is collapsing around us, and we're getting pictures of our baby that's going to be born. It was like so like what are we doing here (laughs)? What's going on? We were

happy that everything was fine with the baby, but, you know, our minds were still on what's going on out there. So, I dropped my wife off. I went up to the firehouse. So, at that time, I was First Lieutenant. My current Captain is a police officer in the City. Thankfully, he wasn't working. Well, he was working, but he was—he works in Harlem, so he was further up. So he went down to the Trade Center, and he assisted in that. The Chiefs were then looking for volunteers who would want to go. And I said, "Well, you know, I can't rightfully abandon my town. You know, I'm the next leader of my company. I have to stay here." So I had to make a crew of guys to go. And, you know, I stayed overnight at the firehouse that night, you know, and that was just watching the news and getting a call from this guy who is a City fireman but also a volunteer with us. And he's okay. And finding out that this guy was okay. We found out that all of our friends were okay. So, the next day, obviously I didn't go to work the next day. I went up the firehouse. And spent the rest of the day there. And again, as I talk about how sometimes things happen for a reason, we—there was then sign-up sheets, and they said, throughout the week, different crews are going to be asked to go and help. So I said "All right, well, you know, what I ..." —the Captain—Captain Tommy had come back—"I'll sign up, and I'll go one night." So, my wife was kind of upset. She didn't want me to go. And the stories that these guys were coming back with would like just make you real upset. So, I wasn't really looking forward to doing this, as you can imagine. But, you know what? I signed up anyhow. So I sign up and that day—I'll never forget it; it was the Friday. So that happened on a Tuesday. That Friday it rained very hard during the day, and we were supposed to go that night. Later that night, we get a phone call from

emergency service or whoever it was, saying that "Your crew is not needed for tonight."

So, I was sitting around and saying, "Well, geez ..." this is just, I mean like, as I was always saying, things just happen for a reason. And that, maybe there was something there I shouldn't have seen.

Q: I'd like to ask if you have anything you'd like to add or talk about, other than what you've said. What do you think, for instance, is the future of the Port Washington Fire Department?

DJA: Well, recruitment and retention is the biggest thing. To have the people join and to have the people stay. That's always been the biggest thing. Guys in my company, we always hype it up: We're the best. Just like anybody else would. "We're the best. Thank you for joining with us." But we also keep in mind that—and we try and tell these younger guys, "Hey, listen, you guys joined here. We didn't come and rip you out of your bed and say you're coming with us. You joined us. These are our rules. So if you can play with our rules, then you can play." Excuse me, so ...

Q: What are the perks for them to join?

DJA: To join the brotherhood and the sisterhood. We do have some female firefighters, as well, in my company.

Q: How do you feel about the females?

DJA: I have not one problem. Not one problem at all. One of—one of the young girls who joined the company, she had just—she lived upstate, by Rochester. And she was just looking for a better opportunity, career-wise. She was in the medical field, and there wasn't really much up there for her. So she moved down here; she joined our company. And the background that she comes from, and her firefighter training ... Normally if you transfer into the company, you don't have to do the complete two years. You just sort of prove yourself what you can do. Bring any of your training records with you and we'll abbreviate your probation (laughs). We gave her six months. Back upstate, she was a chauffeur, or an MPO—motor pump operator—with her fire trucks up there. SCBA [Self contained breathing apparatus], which meant she could wear her air pack. So she was really very good. She was well trained, and the only thing we really had to do was teach her the operations of Port Washington. But, just getting back, I just think recruitment and retention, to have these kids, you know, biggest problem, living in Port Washington, is that you can't live in Port Washington. You can't find a house, and you can't find a rental that's within reason. And that's the biggest killer that's killing us. Because we've got a great group of kids who join us in their senior year of high school, and they go off to college. And nine times out of ten, they're not coming back to Port Washington. So we're losing. We gain them for their senior year, their junior year of high school. But once they go off to school, we're kind of sunk.

Q: Do you have the Explorers that you ...

DJA: Yes, we ...

Q: ... and is that how you joined?

DJA: Yeah, I was an Explorer. I joined back when, I guess I was fifteen. Fifteen or sixteen.

Basically, the Explorers is just a smaller offset of the Cub Scouts or the Boy Scouts of America. And it's geared towards the fire service. And we'll go and learn about different things of the Fire Department. And that's where I got my kickstart and ...

Q: It worked out for you?

DJA: Yeah. Yeah, it definitely did.

Q: Well, it's been a delight to talk to you, Don ...

DJA: Thank you.

Q: ... and thank you so much.

DJA: Thank you for your time.

Q: And now, I think Port has a good future with young people like you.

DJA: Thank you. Thank you very much for taking the time.

Donald J. Alexander

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Q: Thank you.