

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Ex-Chief Geoffrey P. Cole
Flower Hill Hose 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

Interview with Geoffrey P. Cole
pk July 6, 2004

by Sally Olds

Q: Today is July 6th, 2004. This is an interview with Chief Geoffrey P. Cole. My name is Sally Olds. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. Can you say your full name?

Geoffrey P. Cole: Geoffrey P. Cole.

Q: And what company are you a member of?

GPC: Flower Hill Hose Company, Port Washington Fire Department.

Q: How old were you when you came to the United States?

GPC: I was three.

Q: And what made your family decide to come here?

GPC: Well, my mother and father were both American citizens, and my father had been transferred to England and France to work with his job. So, I was automatically an American citizen when I came here, and I had up until the age of eighteen to declare my citizenship to either the United Kingdom or to the U.S. And, by not declaring anything at age eighteen, I automatically became a U.S. citizen. I remained a U.S. citizen.

Q: And how did they happen to come to Port Washington?

GPC: They were from Long Island originally. They met in Floral Park, and they both attended high school there, and my mother was born in Mineola. My father was born, I must say Mineola, as well. Winthrop [Hospital]. They both went to the same schools in Floral Park, and they've got a strong attachment to Long Island. My father graduated from the Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point. And my mother was the only editor ever of the *Ladies Home Journal*, the only female editor up to a certain point. So they both had strong ties to the New York metropolitan area, and Long Island was it.

Q: And was there anything that happened in your childhood that made you want to become a firefighter?

GPC: Not really. I mean, you always heard the horns and everything else, when you were a kid. And, you know, there isn't one child in America that's not fascinated with fire engines and fire trucks, and things like that. No, I mean, there really was nothing special, that I had no history of anybody in my family being involved with the fire department. And I just happened to be walking down the street one day, down Haven Avenue, and I think I had gone to the deli next to the firehouse, and one of the ex-captains stopped me and said, "Are you interested in joining the Fire Department?" I said, "What do you mean, join?" And he explained the whole process to me. And at that time there was a waiting list to get into the companies. And I filled out an application and ended up being elected in February of 1975, with not having known anybody. But over that period of months when your application is pending, you get to meet a lot of people, and you have to get sponsors on your application, and that sort of thing.

Q: How old were you?

GPC: I was just nineteen.

Q: And you say you got to meet a lot of people. How did you get to meet them?

GPC: Because you didn't just submit your application and stay away from the firehouse. You know, you had to come around work nights, which is when we inspect all the trucks and clean them and maintain them and whatever. And you had to come on Sunday morning drills and stand in the background and watch, but know what you were doing. And then, there were a lot of people that used to hang around the firehouse. That's--that's one of the big draws of the firehouse is the social life. You know, the meeting of other people and having a place to go and doing things and--and that sort of thing. And you meet a lot of people that way.

Q: And you said you had to have--to be sponsored to join?

GPC: Yes.

Q: How many sponsors ...

GPC: You need-- for Flower Hill, you need a sponsor, and four co-signers from active members in good standing of the company, and I believe that's the way it is for all the companies right now. Each one is a little bit different. They each tweak their own regulations a little bit. But at that time, it was just simply a matter of getting the sponsor and the four applicants [four active members?]. You know, going for a simple physical, like "How do you feel? Have you been sick in the last two weeks? Open your mouth." Take your blood pressure and check a few other things, and that's it.

But it's quite a bit different today. The person has to go through the same sponsor and the four co-applicants. They have to be read off at at least one or two company meetings. They have to go through a very detailed physical examination right now, which then determines what class of firefighter you can be when you do join. There's a full, active, everything, super, all-around type of firefighter. There's exterior only. Somebody might have a breathing problem or whatever, and they can't wear an air pack. And when you go for the physical, one of the things that they do is they give you a spirometry test, which is to test the capacity of your lungs. They can determine whether or not you should be wearing an air pack or not. So it's a very, very detailed physical that the person has to go through.

Then, there's a very, very detailed background check. There's an arson form that goes to the Nassau County Fire Marshal's Office, and through that form they check your complete criminal--to see if there's any criminal background. Any history of arson, you cannot become a firefighter. That's a law that was created several years ago, that had been on the books for a long time, pending. They finally signed it into law three or four years ago. You can't join a fire department unless you've had this--this arson background check. And when that's checked, everything else is checked through the police computers.

And then, again, once you get in, once you're voted in, then your odyssey of all your training and your schools and everything else starts. And you're basically on a very tight leash for two years, as a probationary member. You're designated with your gear that you're a probationary member, so that a member doesn't turn to somebody and say, "Put an air pack on and come with me. We've got to do this." You're designated a probationary member. You have an orange shield on your helmet. You have "Probationary Firefighter" on your coat, so that there can't be any mistakes made. And usually the way it works is that the senior firefighters, the older firefighters, generally

take a probationary firefighter under their wing and they can ask any questions they want. That's how you learn, is to ask questions. And that's how we all learned.

I was standing outside a building; I had three months in the Fire Department. I'd had some air pack training. But, again, this is thirty years ago. And three months into the Fire Department, I'm standing outside of a building in Sands Point--I think it was 225 Middle Neck Road. It was--it was--are you from town?

Q: Yes, I live on North Washington Street.

GPC: Do you remember like a garage-looking type building towards the end of Middle Neck Road with a gas pump in the front? It was on the right. It was almost down towards Land's End. Well, anyway, it was a very, very large barn/garage/residential type structure, and it was a Memorial Day Eve night. And the Captain stuck--I remember it clear as a bell--he stuck his head out the window. Took his face mask off. There I was, a green rookie, three months in the Department--he says, "Put an air pack on and come up this ladder with me." And I'm like looking around. I'm like, "Well, me?" Yeah, he's, "Yeah, you!" And I did. And that's, you know, a lot of times, you get your christening under fire. Whether that would happen now, I'm not really sure. But at the time 30 years ago, that's exactly the way it happened with me. There were a lot more fires also 30 years ago than there are now.

Q: Why do you think that is?

GPC: Because of the advent of all the automatic fire alarms in the residences and in the commercial buildings. That's definitely what it is. And we get 10 or 12 calls a year. We go to an awful lot of false automatic alarms. I'm going to say that 60 percent of our calls,

at least, of our fire calls, are faulty alarm systems going off for no reason. Maybe 10 percent are due to cooking, things like that, which is okay. I mean, we don't mind that. That's what they're there for. The people are more upset than we are, going. They're upset that we have to come out and go, and they try to give the alarm company a disregard, but in New York State, you can't give an alarm company a disregard. The fire department has to go, because it could be the bad guy, an arsonist in the house lighting the house, just calling up the alarm company and saying, "Oh, don't worry about it. It's a false alarm." So we go on those. But we get 10 or 12 a year that are actual fires.

We just had one several months ago in Sands Point that came over as an automatic alarm, and several minutes later the neighbors across the street called and said there were flames coming through the roof. Now, obviously, there was something wrong with their automatic alarm that it took that long. But it--still, that's how we were notified of that. The house was a total loss.

But we do get a lot that, you know, incipient fires, fires in basements, that creep up and the smoke detectors go off on the second floors. We get a lot of automatic carbon monoxide calls now, where it's a carbon monoxide detector that dials the alarm company, just like a normal fire alarm does. And for those, we won't just verify that the house is okay. We will make entry to go in, because we've had several cases where people have been unconscious on the floor, and we've broken in and gotten them out. And you look through the window and there's nothing wrong inside the house. So--but I think generally it's the advent of all the fire safety systems and the alarm systems combined, and the tighter regulations by the NFPA and the county Fire Marshal and that sort of thing, we've gotten a lot fewer actual fires, as do most fire departments in the area.

Q: What's the NFPA?

GPC: The National Fire Protection Association. There the ones that create all the standards throughout the country, and they have a standard for almost every circumstance that you could think of. Their largest one is it's called NFPA Standard 101, and it's the Life Safety Code. And it's probably, I'm going to guess, it's 400 pages of a generic life safety code, and then they have specific life safety codes for public libraries, schools, worship--areas of worship, areas of public assembly. They go into great detail on very specific items. They have a, probably an 80-page life safety code for hospitals. And what it's intended to do is give these people a guide of what they have to do as far as fire safety in those particular institutions. So ...

Q: Well, do you, as a firefighter, have to be familiar with all of that?

GPC: You as Chief do. As a Chief, any of the Chiefs. But once you're up with it, you kind of want to keep up with it. And they do send you updates every six months. And now it's not simple, but it's much easier than it used to be. Obviously, it was all on paper before. Now, they give you a paper version and they give you a CD-ROM, and it's much easier to search the CD-ROM for a key word. For instance, if you want to find out how close propane--a bottle of propane, a 20-pound bottle--can be to a building, you search "building" and "propane." And it'll come up with all those possible matches.

But it's still a lot of work to do it. It's a lot more work to know it. And, in addition to those kind of standards, we do our own--we have our own sets of standards and pre-plans, and everything else. So if we get a fire in a certain building, when the dispatcher puts the alarm over, it'll come over the computer and it'll read out exactly if there are any hazards in the building, you know, all the utilities for the building, what dangerous areas there are, what entrance you should go in, where there might be a Knox box.

A Knox box is a K-N-O-X box, and it's a box that many of the commercial

buildings throughout town--unfortunately the library doesn't have it, but they should--it's a box that's mounted on the wall at the front door, and the Fire Department is the only one that has a master key to get into that. And inside of that are keys for your elevators, any entry doors that we might need to gain access to, that sort of thing. That helps quite a bit, too, because that gets you in the building much faster. I mean, we can still get in the building fast, if we need to. We're good at picking locks and finding ways to get through. I mean, probably 90 percent of the automatic alarms that we go to that are false alarms, that people aren't home, we get in without doing any sort of damage whatsoever. It's amazing where we know how to look and, you know, what to feel for and what to look for as far as glass and doors and things like that, and locks.

Q: Can you remember a particular instance when you needed to use one of these locked boxes, what the building was?

GPC: Oh, we use them all the time. We have it over at the Landmark [on Main Street]. We use it all the time. We get medical alerts over there all the time for people that--we don't know if they've pulled the cord on the way down and they're down on the floor. Every unit across the street has a pull cord, and it activates a medical alarm. And it ...

Q: And these are ...

GPC: ... and it dispatches the Fire Department.

Q: ... the apartment units?

GPC: Yes. And it dispatches the Fire Department to the scene. But, of course, for security

there, everything's locked up tight. So there's a large Knox box on the wall. We just put the key in, open it up, and there are four sets of master keys inside the Knox box. And you just take it. You put the bracelet on your wrist. It's the same set of keys for this whole building, but there are four. So you could have four teams--one on each floor--opening doors to check for things, without doing any--I mean, we have tools that'll get through these doors in 20 seconds. But the door--the lock, and possibly the door, may not be useful again; it may have to be replaced. But, in a medical emergency, obviously you want to get in as quickly as you can.

We don't want to do damage to any building or any situation that we're at. When we do damage, it's for a particular reason. When you see the firefighters on the roof cutting a hole in the building, it's to let all the heat and the gases out so the firefighters inside can be in a tolerable condition. Tolerable--I mean, like under 500 degrees. You know if you stick your head in an oven, you know how hot 500 degrees can be. Well, a lot of times it's 1,000 degrees, 1,200 degrees in a building. And the sooner we can get that hole cut in the roof in the correct place, so that it doesn't make the fire extend--we know pretty well where to cut the holes and what we have to do--and it's just a natural vent. Picture lighting your fireplace and forgetting to open the flue and what it's like, and then suddenly you remember and you open the flue and everything just drafts right out and right up, and it becomes more tenable inside. But, it can get 12-1400 degrees without a problem.

And we have great turn-out gear. We have great protective equipment that we wear. We wear, the bunker pants, leather boots, turn-out coats. We have hoods that we wear--Nomax hoods [Nomex?] that cover our heads, or most of the skin except for the face, and on the face you have the face piece for the air pack. And a helmet and gloves. You get all that equipment on, first of all, it's about 70 pounds of weight. And second of all, you're so protected that sometimes the conditions around you, you're not aware of.

And I'll use the term "in the old days," meaning 20-25 years ago for me. You used to go in, you used to have a turn-out coat. You'd have a pair of boots, rubber boots. You didn't have protective pants on. And you'd have a helmet with flaps. And one of the things that you would do is be to make sure that you didn't definitely have the flaps all the way down, because your ears are a pretty good thermometer. And when your ears started to get really hot, that's how you knew that you were going in too far. Well, now, you're basically protected in a cocoon, and we're going in a lot farther than we ever went in before. And some of the bottles last longer. At that time, we only had 30-minute bottles. Now, we have bottles capable of an hour, if necessary.

Q: Bottles?

GPC: Air bottles for our air packs. Compressed air. It's not oxygen. It's compressed air. Oxygen obviously is a flammable gas. You don't want to be going into a fire with a flammable gas on your back. But compressed air is what we use.

Q: What exactly are bunker pants?

GPC: They are the same material that a turn-out coat is made of. They're pants that you physically put on over your street clothes. Or, if you get out of bed at night, whatever you wear to bed, you put them on. You put them on first. They've got suspenders. They latch. And then you put your coat on, and between the coat and the pants, your extremities are fully protected other than your head and your ears and whatever. And that's what the mask is for.

Q: And what kind of material ...

GPC: It's called Nomax [Nomex?]. It's a fireproof/fire retardant material. And it can be Nomax, and there are several others. There's Kevlar, which is the same material that a bullet-proof vest is made out of for police officers. So it's very durable material. It's not going to burn unless it gets direct flame on it for an certain period of time--usually like a minute or more.

Q: Well, then, so if you can't feel the heat, how can you protect yourself from going in too far?

GPC: It's very difficult. It's very difficult. Basically, the only way is to take your glove off and if you're down low on the floor versus up high toward the ceiling, there could be a five or six hundred degree difference. It can be that much. That's why you always see firefighters crawling, and the only way really is to take your glove off or just crack your glove, and you'll feel it instantly. Believe me, you'll feel it instantly on your skin. You might come out with a little burn on your skin, but there's really not too much other way to do it.

Q: And ...

GPC: It's a very dangerous business.

Q: Are you still--but you've done this yourself, that you've had to, you know, pull back your glove a little.

GPC: Yes.

Q: And then what do you do at that point?

GPC: You have to make a judgment based on your experience as far as how far you and the people with you should go. And that's up to the officer to decide, and that's a lot of responsibility. And you're not just worried about the heat. You're worried about whether there's a floor in front of you. You're worried about what is actually in the building and burning. You certainly don't want to walk into an explosion, or crawl into an explosion. Because when explosions happen, nothing is predictable.

You have to make the determination of whether or not the risk is worth the reward. And the reward, meaning: Can you get to that person? Are they still alive? Can you put the fire out? Can you contain the fire till you get help, or should you just say, "Put the line down," and what we do is we trace the line back out. Because you can't see. If you were there, and I was right here looking at you, I can't see you. I cannot see you. Verbal communication is what we deal with. We do a lot of hand signals, with taps on the shoulder, you know, that sort of thing. You try to talk as loud as you can, but it's also very noisy in a fire. There's water flowing. There's water hitting the walls. There's the noise of the fire itself that it makes.

But it's basically, you don't want a person that's got a year in the Fire Department leading in two fellows that are on the line that might have six months in the Fire Department. That's not what you're looking for. You want somebody that's got experience, that knows what they're doing, that's been through it before, and that can make the right judgment call. And that goes all the way up the line, right to the Chief.

And the Chief is ultimately responsible for everything. Even if the Chief is not on the scene, by law, he's responsible for the actions of the Fire Department, or mis-actions of the Fire Department. It's a very, very--for a volunteer position, it's a very, very

demanding and difficult job that state law, in the State of New York, the only person that has more power than the Chief of a fire department is the governor of the State of New York. The Chief can basically do anything. He can order the police to do things. He can order anyone at any time to do anything within his purview. He can ban people from going into their own residences. He can shut down commercial businesses. He can shut down streets. He can shut down railroads. Anything. The Chief has the power, by law, to do that. And again, like I say, there's a lot of weight on the Chief's shoulder, or the Deputy Chiefs, when they're not there, or the Captains or the ex-Chiefs when there's a major situation and there are no Chiefs there, it usually turns to the Captains and the ex-Chiefs. And if there are no Captains there, which there could be, then the ex-Chiefs have to jump into action and do what they have to do.

Q: What was the hardest situation you encountered as Chief?

GPC: The most complicated was the Sands Point Nursing Home fire.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

GPC: Yeah, it was on a Thursday night in November, nineteen-ninety--I'm going to say 1992. I'm not sure if it's '91 or '90---I think it's 1992. And you'd be able to look that up here in the archives, because there was a lot of coverage on it. We had always been to the nursing home for false alarms. I mean, it's one of the places for the boy that cried "wolf." It's not that bad anymore, as far as fire alarms. We go to a lot of medical emergencies there--probably 400 a year. Just to the nursing home. And they have a contract with their own private ambulance, so that's the kind of volume that they do there.

It was around dinnertime. It was just after seven o'clock. And it was a work

night. I remember, it was a Thursday night. And the call went over. It was either--well, I should say it was either a Tuesday or Thursday night. I think it was a Thursday night. And we got a call just after seven o'clock for a fire at the nursing home. They come over the same way all the time, so you don't know if it's an automatic alarm or a real fire. And I came around the corner on Harbor Road down by the S-curve, down by Cow Bay Lane, and there were flames 40 feet in the air coming out. Now, you're thinking, your first thought is "Oh, my God!" And then,-after you've said that to yourself, you don't say it out loud, the first thing I did was I got on the radio. I said to the dispatcher, "I need a full response, and I also need a full response from Manhasset-Lakeville," which we've never asked for, ever. My first concern is life safety. There's 125 people in the building that are in beds, that can't get out. The staff at seven o'clock at night is minimal. And I've got a visible fire 40 feet in the air. P.S. About five minutes after I'd gotten there, the units started to arrive. The main--the first two units were split.

I had to contain the fire. I had to definitely contain the fire to make sure I could get the people out. There's no reason for everybody to run in the building and try and get people out, if the fire is growing and it's going to prevent us from getting people out. We safely evacuated everybody out of the building. The teams worked on the fire. We had Brower's Moving and Storage there within 20 minutes, which is something that we had pre-planned. The moving vans came right up to the front of the building. We loaded--we started to load patients with beds right in the back of the moving vans.

It ended up, just to summarize it, it was a 14-hour operation. No one was killed. There were no fatalities. There were 25, not minor-aided, but serious-aided elderly people that had taken in smoke and whatever. We were so lucky, because it was November, and it was in the high 40s, low 50s, at night. So it wasn't as cold as it should have been in November. I had 34 fire departments there. Because I needed over 50 ambulances.

Port Washington was essentially closed. The Nassau County police and the Port police had the entire town shut down. Traffic--nobody could move anywhere, other than emergency vehicles. We transported people in the moving vans up to Weber [Junior High School], and we set up the Weber School as a--as a temporary hospital. North Shore Hospital came in and staffed the hospital, or staffed the school, with nurses and whatever, as well as some people from St. Francis, but it was mostly North Shore. The Red Cross was involved. And by--I'm going to say eight o'clock the next morning, everybody had been transferred from Weber to neighboring nursing homes, including nursing homes in New York City. And, like I said, there were no fatalities. And I was--it was nice, because I got to speak at several different conferences about this particular emergency, and a nursing home emergency in real life. People drill for it; they plan for it. But most people have never gone through it.

Q: Well, what are the factors that you think were crucial in your having such a good result?

GPC: I think calling for additional resources right away. Manhasset-Lakeville has 10 engines, three ladders. They're around the size of us, maybe a little bit bigger. But, I mean, they came with 150 men. And between our 150, their 150, and then we called in other fire departments--Roslyn, Great Neck, that sort of thing--to come into our firehouses to stand by in case there was another alarm. Because that's the other thing you've got to worry about is, this--the nursing home isn't the only place in Port Washington that might have an emergency, and when you do have an emergency in one place, you've got to call in, get coverage from another fire department. They then respond, lights and sirens, to our district, so that they are here and ready to go in the event of another call. And also, when people get tired at the scene, which is very realistic, you call them in to relieve, and you call another fire department to come in. So that's why we had 34 fire departments from--

we had fire departments from as far away as Long Beach and Valley Stream, Farmingdale.

What the dispatchers do is they sit there and they try not to strip a particular portion of the county. They try and take equally from the whole county. But it was like the Avianca plane crash. We were not called right away. It was very, very much into the Avianca crash that we were called. Because we're a peninsula. We're very difficult to protect. They really don't want to take units from here and send them outside of the peninsula, because then you've got to somehow get other units into the peninsula. So, it's a very complicated system, but the dispatchers at FireCom over in Mineola did a great job. That's who dispatches us is Nassau County Fire Communications Bureau in Mineola.

But I would say that that was probably the most difficult call that I've ever had as Chief. Obviously, the most difficult calls that I've ever encountered were the loss of Bobby Dayton on Main Street, the loss of Ingrid Sowle down on Roslyn West Shore Road. I was an Assistant Chief at the time. You know, to lose two firefighters in the line of duty in 18 months is--to lose one in 20 years is tough enough, but to lose two in 18 months is--is horrendous.

Q: So, how do you deal with that?

GPC: Some people deal with it different ways. But we provide critical incident ...

Q: What about you, yourself? How did you deal with it?

GPC: I knew I had things to do, and that's--I kept busy. I kept doing things. We established a scholarship fund for the family, and we were busy finishing renovations on his house, and

things like that, and setting up trust funds for his child, and that--so that's how you get through it. Going to memorial services. We went to a couple down in Emmitsberg, Maryland at the National Fire Academy, where Bobby's family was there the first time we went, and then two years later when we went, Ingrid's family was down there. And it was nice, and they still keep in touch. They all still keep in touch. But it's--it's something that's very difficult. We've had, I think it's six killed in the line of duty since the Department was formed. And, you know, when you don't--when you're not really--when you're ...

Q: Six in a hundred years?

GPC: Uh huh. I believe it's six. I don't think--I'm pretty sure it's six. It's a different story when it's something that happened 60 years ago and you didn't know the person, and it doesn't--you know about them, you know their name. Everybody in the Fire Department knows the names of the people, but--that passed away. But, when it's there, when it's real life, and, you know, I was the Captain and Bobby was a Lieutenant when he died. And it was my responsibility that he died. I mean, it really was. I'm the Captain; he's a Lieutenant. It's like the Chief. The Chief is responsible for every member of this fire department and their actions. He was in my company; I was responsible for all their actions. And it's just--it's something that happened. It's terrible. We all learned from it. You learn. There are investigations and everything else. OSHA comes in. And if there are any issues from the investigation, then you correct what needs to be corrected.

Q: What did you learn from Bobby Dayton's death?

GPC: We expanded the--they came in, and it was decided that our medicals weren't extensive

enough. So they came in, and they said we needed to--it was not a direct result of his death; it was a direct result of their investigation of the death. And they look at all your plans, your procedures, your policies, what you do, what you don't do. And they said, "Okay, you guys need to do this for your physicals." "Okay, thank you." And we went out and got a Department surgeon, and, like I say, now we're--very extensive physicals. Not only do you do physicals when you get in the Fire Department, there's a period of time on a cycle that you have to go. I have to go every year for a physical, and it's a very detailed physical. But I don't mind going.

Q: You--I mean, you say you "have to go" ...

GPC: Because of my age bracket.

Q: Oh, at what point do you go every year?

GPC: It's--it's every one year, every two year, and every three years. And it's just broken down by ages. And the ages just changed about a year and a half ago, and I don't recall off the top of my head what it is. But I think it's anybody over thirty-five has to go every year, and between thirty-five and twenty-nine or something have to go every two years, and under twenty-nine have to go every three years. And, like I say, I don't mind going. And a lot of people don't mind going anymore, because there have been things discovered during physicals that were actually life-saving things that were found of people that would normally not have gone for physicals. I know of at least four situations where that happened.

Q: What kinds of things?

GPC: It's things that they probably never would have found on their own until it was too late. We'll just leave it at that.

Q: Okay. And then, when Ingrid died ...

GPC: Uh huh.

Q: ... was there an investigation there also?

GPC: Well, Ingrid died from a criminal matter. We were operating at a motor vehicle accident on Roslyn West Shore Road down by the beaches. We were in the southbound lanes. We had all the road blocked off properly and everything. And it was a very minor accident. It wasn't a major accident. It was a car into a tree. But the female occupant was walking around and she wasn't really sure whether she wanted to be transported. So, we all went into a situation under controlled type of mode, where everybody slows down and, you know, that sort of thing. A signal is transmitted, and everybody responding to the call, you make a full stop at the red light and that sort of thing. You slow down in general driving to the scene. We do that a lot.

And in this particular situation, another vehicle came down Roslyn West Shore Road. The occupant was intoxicated. Drove around the barriers and struck Ingrid, and also struck another vehicle. Ended up with four flat tires. An off-duty police officer chased the subject to--because I mean, he was probably 80 miles an hour. He was finally apprehended at Roslyn Road and the South Service Road. That's how far he'd driven on four flat rims. And, unfortunately, he didn't do more than four years, which is the max. I believe it was vehicular homicide was what they--and the sentence was one and a third to

four years. And obviously, at the end of the one--we had a massive letter writing campaign to the judge as far as the initial sentence. He sentenced him to the max, which is one and a third to four years. And then when it came time to get off on probation, we again wrote letters. And his first probation was rejected; the second one was okayed.

So--and the guy didn't have any money. So the family couldn't even sue him. Not that suing him would have gotten her back. But he had nothing. And he had borrowed a car that night, had gone to a local establishment in Port Washington, and obviously had too much to drink. And he went on and he took her life. And she was the mother of three children. She was a breeder of dogs. She had 150 poodles in her house when she passed away. So that was one of the big things that we did was to make sure that all the dogs were taken care of. But it was just--it was an absolute shame. And she was such a nice lady. And she was--I'm sure she turned around and said, "Oh, I can't believe it's my time," you know, that sort of thing, just before she got hit. If she even knew she got hit.

But it was tough. It was tough. I mean, the Department had just gotten over--Bobby Dayton was November of 1988, and Ingrid Sowle was Lincoln's birthday, nineteen---I believe it's 1990. So, it was 16 months. And it was just--we'd just started to heal, and, you know, the pomp and circumstance and everything else for a line-of-duty funeral and everything, it's just so emotionally draining. It's two full days at a funeral home, which they both happened to be--they were both waked in the firehouse. And then you have county-wide and state-wide, and everything else. For a firefighter killed in the line of duty, everybody comes out of the woodwork everywhere. For Bobby Dayton's service, we probably had 10,000 people.

And, you know, not only--you asked me how I got over it. You're so busy planning it and making sure that he gets the right send-off, and that Ingrid gets the right send-off, that you don't have time to sit around and feel sorry for yourself. Yeah, the first

couple of hours you're really upset, but could I have done anything differently? Could I have changed the outcome? You always ask yourself that. Could circumstances have been different? But you're just so busy planning things. You just can't believe the planning that goes into these --there must have been two meetings a day for the next four days after each of them, just to try and make sure that everything was in a roll and that we had done everything right, and with me, as I'm saying, I'm talking 20-25 people from all different agencies, all involved in these meetings, with Port Washington, Sands Point, Nassau County Police, all the local fire departments. You've got to get help in to cover your fire district, because your fire department certainly can't do it.

You take some people out of service, because of their emotional state. And that's where the critical incident stress comes in. It's a team that was started in the mid---I'm going to say the mid-1980s, and it's a team of people from Nassau County that are specialists in --I'll say decompression and stress debriefing. Because if you let these emotions stew in you, down the road it can have a drastic effect. It can lead to domestic violence. It can lead to suicide. It can lead to an awful lot of things. Alcoholism, drug addiction, drug abuse. In fact, they just opened--in the last two weeks--they just opened the 9/11 rescuers--I don't know if it's technically called the "9/11," but it's the New York Rescue Workers Counseling Center over in Williston Park. They just had something about it in the *Port News* the other day. I didn't get a chance to read it in detail. But the stress team, you call a stress team. They activate within an hour. They come to you. You sit around. You talk in groups. And the counselors can pretty much tell. And Peter was quite heavily involved in the counseling of people. He was a member ...

Q: Peter Zwerlein?

GPC: ... he was a member of the team. Peter Zwerlein, yeah. In fact, the night we had the fire

at Shields [Hardware Store] right here, he was in Bayville along with our Chaplain, Tom Tobin, giving a critical incident stress debriefing session to the Bayville Fire Department, because they had just gone through--it was three nights after Avianca, which was in Oyster Bay. And all the fire departments from that whole area were involved in that. But the team comes in. Like I said, they sit around in a group. They talk to people. They ask them questions. It's like a roundtable where you talk. And they can tell by the way you're answering questions and what you're doing, what your emotional state is. And then you're approached privately afterwards for further counseling. You don't have to take it, but it's there, and most people do take it.

Q: Are any of the people on the team professional therapists?

GPC: They have all gone to courses on how to do this. I'm not going to say that they're-- whether they're medical doc--none of them are medical doctors, as far as I know. The person that's the leader of the team is a doctor. He's a Ph.D. His name is Ray Shelton, and I'm sure that he's still heavily involved in it. And basically the way they have the team is now you just call the County Fire Dispatcher. You tell him you need the critical incident stress team. They page everybody. And within an hour, the team is assembled, or at least on the way to go to any particular location. Firefighter, line-of-duty deaths, they're called out for a lot. Deaths of children, they're called out a lot for that. You know, where you may have one, two, three, four kids killed in a house fire. That type of thing. Thirty, forty years ago, they didn't have that.

Q: There was a fire not too long ago where a little girl did die here in Port Washington. Were you at all involved in that one? And her grandmother ...

GPC: Oh, yeah, but I don't remember where it was. Trust me, there--we have a lot of fires, and --do you know the address? If you told me the address, I would--it'll come right back to me.

Q: I don't remember.

GPC: Okay. Maybe the next time, you can ...

Q: Yeah.

GPC: But there are a lot of fires. There are a lot of fatalities. Some you remember; some you don't. You know, we do 3,000 calls a year.

Q: Can you tell me about a time when you were involved in a rescue?

GPC: Yeah, as a matter of fact in, I believe it was, 1999, we had a fire in Manorhaven. It was-- I want to say it was Super Bowl Sunday. And it was obviously during the winter, and we received a call for a house fire just after lunch time on a Sunday. You don't expect too much from a house fire on a Sunday afternoon, because normally everybody's awake and things don't get too far out of hand unless something dramatic has happened with a flammable liquid or an explosion or something ...

Q: Excuse me. I have to turn the tape over.

GPC: Okay. ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ...

Q: Okay.

GPC: Okay. And, when we arrived, there was a large volume of fire in the house. We were told that there was an occupant trapped in the basement. There was a tremendous amount of fire in the basement. We had a hard time getting to him. We eventually did get to him. He survived for seven days in order to say goodbye to his family, which was very important to both the family and he. He knew he was going to die. When he went into the hospital, they told him that he had no chance to live, because his lungs were seared, which is usually what happens in a fire. It's not the burn that kills you; it's the inhalation of the super-heated gases. Which basically, it turns your insides like a turkey. And it only takes one breath, so when people-- when they tell you to "stop-drop-and-roll" in a fire, they mean it. If you stand up and take one or two breaths, you're not going to make it in a well advanced fire. We also received word at the same fire that there were possibly children trapped. So at that point, we tried to get in the front door. We did. A hose line went in the front door, along with myself. And at that point, we had what's called a "flash-over," where all the super-heated gases in the room ignite. The door to the basement failed. It burned right through. The door to the basement failed, and it ignited the gases in the house. At that point, it knocked the firefighters that were on the hose line down. I was behind them around the corner. I crawled up, grabbed the hose line, opened it up above their heads, and literally pulled--tugged on all three of them to get them out behind me, and then I backed out with the hose line. We dropped the hose line, and the pictures that I've given you show the extent of the fire, of exactly what happened within literally two seconds of us leaving the house. There was a book written by a Mr. Michael Middleton who did write about the fire and the rescue and how very unusual it was to have two rescues at the same call. One a rescue of a civilian and one a rescue of firefighters.

Q: Those were the three that you got out?

GPC: Those were the three that I got out, for which I got a Nassau County Gold Medal of Valor. I received the Firehouse Magazine Heroism Award, and I also received a Texaco Life Saving Award from my company that I formerly worked with, of which there were only 100 issued in 103 years for the life saving. It was nice. I got the award from the chairman. I got the Gold Medal of Valor from the Chairman of the Nassau County Fire Commission at a nice ceremony. And obviously the families of the three guys that I got out were very, they're always very appreciative. They make an extra effort to say hi, and I was in one of their weddings, which was very nice. And two out of the three have children now, and it's nice, because I'm not sure that they would still be here. And I think the book, which they also narrated to the author and described, the book goes into a lot more depth on the rescue, on their comments, on their feelings--that sort of thing. And it was nice. And I hope the Library gets copies of the book.

Q: Oh, we definitely will.

GPC: Okay.

Q: And you said that there were children in there.

GPC: That was unfounded. So we went in for no valid reason that we found out later.

Q: There were no children?

GPC: No. It was neighbors that said it, and there happened to be no children in there at the time, but you can't guess, you know. You have to do what you have to do.

Q: Did you find out what caused that fire?

GPC: It was a problem with the heating unit in the basement. Something with the cooking. There happened to be a kitchen in the basement, and we don't know other than, beyond that, we don't even want to speculate. But there was something--there was a problem in the basement, and that's where the origin of the main fire was. In order to get the person in the basement out, they had to lift him up onto the top of an oil tank and get him out through a window. There was that much fire in the basement. So he just narrowly escaped, but again, he only lived for a week.

Q: How old a man was he?

GPC: I'm going to say middle to late fifties, maybe, because his daughter was in her--I think she was in her twenties. So-- you don't want to go through too many of those.

Q: Well, if you had one bit of advice for people on avoiding home fires, what would that be?

GPC: Make sure your smoke detectors are working. Can't even tell you how many times we go to a house, and the smoke detectors never went off, because they didn't work. People pull the batteries out. If you pull your smoke detector down, if it's going off while you're cooking, take it down and put it on top of your pillow. You're not going to go back to sleep with a smoke detector on your pillow. That's what we always tell people. That's the most logical place to put it is lay it on your pillow, and this way when you go to bed,

you'll, "Oh!" And you'll walk downstairs and you'll do it.

We had a firefighter killed in town that was one of our own members that was redecorating his house. The only night that he had his smoke detectors down was the night he had a fire, and he was killed. And it's unfortunate. But if everybody had a working smoke detector in their house, we would never have--literally, we would never have a fatality. They do what they're supposed to do. Carbon monoxide detectors do what they're supposed to do. Unfortunately, you or I don't have a way to determine if it's for real or not, so we do get a lot of carbon monoxide calls.

We get a lot of calls for smoke detectors going off, people being cautious and calling us even though they know there's nothing going on, because we know what we're looking for. I mean, they don't even think about going above the detector in the attic. Maybe there's something going on up top. That sort of thing. But that's--that's the biggest thing. If everybody has a working smoke detector and a working carbon monoxide detector, these things don't ...

Q: How do you know if it's working?

GPC: Test it. Push the button every week. There's a test button right on the smoke detector and the carbon monoxide detector. Just push it once a week and make sure it works. Chances are, if it's working at the test, it'll work if there's an emergency. And if the power is not working properly or if the battery is dying, it'll let you know. It'll come up with a series of chirps to let you know that it's time to change your battery.

And you should-- just don't have an excuse. Just have batteries on hand. Know what kind of smoke detector you have. Know what kind of batteries it takes, and have a couple extras in your night stand or wherever, just for that. Not for your nine-volt radio, not for anything else, not for your shower radio that you need to listen to the news in the

shower. Just have it for that.

And again, a lot of the systems are wired in, and have a back-up if you have a significant power failure, because for the alarm systems the batteries are only good for 24 hours. So if you have a black-out, like we had in August, and it's going to be long, just keep a smoke detector--they're not even five dollars anymore, the smoke detectors. Just keep one in your drawer with a battery near it. And if something happens, just take a piece of duct tape or double-sided tape or whatever and hang it from a wall or hang it from a ceiling, and this way you've got it, even if you have a power failure. A lot of bad things happen during power failures. People use--in the winter, they use gas stoves to heat. They use fireplaces to heat. That sort of thing. You've got a lot of carbon monoxide issues. And a lot of candles during black-outs. Forget about it. So, a dangerous time is when you lose power and you do other things to make your life almost normal.

Q: And have you had to go to fires caused by candles?

GPC: Yes, we've had fires that were caused by candles from people not having power. You know, that sort of thing. We've had carbon monoxide calls where people have been overcome because they used gas stoves to heat their home, and the gas stove was not tuned properly. There was more gas coming out than what was being consumed, and that's what causes the carbon monoxide. It's--it's--any time there's combustion, it's incomplete combustion is what creates carbon monoxide. If you have perfect combustion, then there is no carbon monoxide.

Q: Can we go back a little bit to your service as Chief. You served as Chief two times.

GPC: For twelve years, yes.

Q: Yes. What made you decide to do that?

GPC: I think I was just so into it. I was so in tune with the regulations. All my requirements to become Chief were already fulfilled, as far as my classes and my training and everything else. I had the time. I don't have any children, so I had the time. And I think it was just-- it was something that had never been done, and I just thought that I would try it and see what happened. And I had to stand for election again, and it's probably pretty unusual that a standing Chief can be reelected again, because there are a lot of decisions and policies and everything else that you have to do when you're Chief, and you don't necessarily have a lot of friends when you make all these policies and decisions and rules and safety guidelines and everything else. And I think it's a credit to the Fire Department that that they understood everything that had to be put in place. And without the Fire Department, the Chief is nothing. Without the people under him, without the assistant chiefs, the other officers, especially the membership. The membership are the ones that man the trucks and do the yeomen's jobs at the fires and emergencies and everything else. And all the people with the Fire Medic Company, and the ambulances. They do the--they do more calls than we do, and I don't know how they do it. They encounter such burnout with the Fire Medic Company, with the amount of calls that they go to, with the things that they see, that a person that's very, very active for a couple of years in the ambulance company, generally after that, either they become very inactive or they resign, because it's just so much. You go on the ambulance at eight o'clock in the morning, sometimes you're not back until two. With, you come out of the hospital, "Oh, we have another call for you." You come out of the hospital: "We have another call for you." And everybody--you've got to remember we're still all volunteers. We all have jobs and

everything else to do, and so it's difficult.

Q: How did you manage to integrate your not only being a firefighter, but a Chief with your job?

GPC: My job was very, very good to me. I was allowed to leave at any time and do anything that I needed to do, because it was--it was a very good public relations thing for them, as well. And I had several articles written about me in the Texaco magazines and newsletters, about being Chief. And I also used my expertise at work. I was Assistant Manager for Environmental Health and Safety. So I had a safety background to begin with. But there was no problem with me leaving work for major emergencies here, or anything else, and I did that quite a few times when there were major emergencies. I used to have a radio at work, and I could hear what was going on. And you make a couple of phone calls to the dispatcher to find out what is going on, and it was only 20 minutes for me to get back.

Q: Where was your office?

GPC: In Harrison, in Westchester. But it was only 24 miles, so it wasn't like it was 80 miles away. And usually when I was coming back, it was non-rush hour. So I'd say there were eight or ten times that I came back during my times as Chief, and they were very, very supportive. You know, "Don't worry about it." I'd call in the morning, "Oh, I've been up all night at a call. You know, I'm going to just get a couple hour nap and I'll be in by noon." "Don't worry about it," you know. That type of thing. They were great. They were fantastic.

Q: That's great. You talked about the training that you were up on your training.

GPC: Yes.

Q: What kind of training did you receive to be Lieutenant, Captain, and Chief?

GPC: You constantly received training, and there are specific training requirements for each position. And obviously they increase with your level of responsibility. There are probably eight to ten courses that you must take. Officers' training, officers--a lot of it is people skills, management skills, that type of thing. And then there are time restrictions, as well. You had to be a Captain of your company for a certain period of time, at least a year. And you had to be an active member in good standing of the Fire Department for at least 10 years. And then you had six years as Chief--well, you actually had four years as an Assistant Chief to learn before you became Chief, and that was a big part of the process.

You can never get enough tutelage. The goal of the Chief is to ensure that any officer that serves under him, including Captains and Lieutenants, are able to command the Fire Department at any time. And if you leave town and you can't be assured of that, then you're not going to enjoy it very much when you leave town. If you go away on vacation with your family for a week, you want to know that everything's going to be okay, and that the Assistant Chief will call you if there's a reason. And you tell them what the reasons are to call you. You know, if there's something very bad that's happened. Like I used to call my--I used to tell my Deputies, I said, "You guys got it. You know what you're doing." I said, "You know the only time that I want to be notified if there's either a death of a firefighter or a serious injury to a firefighter." But that was it. And ... [KNOCKS ON WOOD] ... never got the call. And it was great. And I never got

called when I was on vacation. Things ran fine. But that's your goal. If you're a Captain, you want to make sure that all the officers under you are properly trained.

That's your responsibility, to make sure they have the training and the knowledge and the experience, and you wean them into things. If you happen to be in the front seat of the engine, and you have a junior engineer with you, behind you, "Latch onto me. You and I are going to take the line in, and we're going to give the instructions to the guys that are physically--or the girls--that are physically on the hose line." And that's how they learn. You know, similar to the Captain yelling out that third floor window to me--"Put an air pack on and climb up the ladder"--that's exactly, that was my first portion of on-the-job training.

Q: Remember his name?

GPC: Yeah, but I'm not sure whether he was the Captain or Lieutenant. It was Jim Duncan, the police commissioner. He's a police commissioner here in town. He's an ex-Captain. I think--I'm pretty sure he was Captain. It was in 1975, so I'm pretty sure he was Captain.

Q: And do you remember any of the other firefighters who sort of took you under their wing, when you were a rookie?

GPC: Yeah. I was probably along with the Lieutenant at the time, Don Kurz, probably one of the youngest chauffeurs ever on the apparatus. I had in just under a year when I was made a chauffeur, which was like unheard-of then. Usually you had to have five years in the Fire Department to become a driver. And I was just so into it. I wanted to learn all the time. The pumps and the trucks fascinated me, and how to pump them and what to do. They look simple, but they're not, and they've gotten more complicated as you go,

because now, when I first got in the Fire Department, a 1,000-gallon pumper was a lot. A 750-gallon a minute pumper was a lot. Now, they're 1750-2000. You're dealing with hose that's double the size. We only used to deal with hose that was as large as three-inch. Now, we have four-, five-, and six-inch hose. We now have foam systems on a truck, which we didn't have then, for certain types of fires that you need foam to extinguish. Oh, yeah, Donny Kurz did a lot of training with me. And when I first got in, we had an unbelievable crew. I couldn't make the fire apparatus from my house. That's how fast it was. And I only lived--I don't know--eight, ten blocks away. Can we just pause this for one second ... [INTERRUPTION]

That's how things have--I mean, from 30 years ago to now, things have changed completely. We have office managers, and we have maintenance personnel now at headquarters, and they supplement the Fire Medic Company with the ambulance responding. Because sometimes we can literally have five or six calls in a morning, and you just don't have enough people to do it, at times. So, we now have maintenance personnel who take care of the fire apparatus and some of the firehouses, and they take care of headquarters. And they take care of filling bottles, and just maintaining the trucks more so that the members have more time for training instead of the washing the trucks and maintaining the trucks and things like that.

Q: So the maintenance person, is that a paid staff?

GPC: Yes, uh huh. We started that three years ago. It was just time. And in order to keep the volunteers here, a lot of the volunteers here have two jobs. And they just don't have the time to come to the firehouse every Thursday night and do three or four hours of washing trucks and whatever. And we want the time that they have to be as valuable as it can be. So, we've freed up a lot of time for more training, which satisfies a lot of other

obligations. And we keep our members.

We had almost a full complement of members, which would have been 425, just prior to Bobby Dayton's death. After Bobby Dayton died in the line of duty, and after Ingrid died, if you graphed it out, there would have been a steady, nice slope downwards of members. Because members' families were saying, "Well, why--what are you doing this for? Look at what you're risking. Look what's happened. What are we going to do if something happens to you?" At the time, it was a very insignificant death benefit. It was fifty thousand dollar death benefit, which is nothing for a family. And a lot of our members don't have life insurance. And great, so you get your name on a plaque that you died in the line of duty, but, you know, how does that leave your family? So we had a sure but steady decline of members in the early to middle 1990s. We probably lost 100 members net. I think our lowest point was around 260 members out of 425, which is-- that's a fairly low point.

9/11, we saw the spike come back the other way. Everybody wanted to do what they could do, after 9/11. We had a spike. Some of those members that joined after 9/11, they didn't last. But many of them have. And we're up to, I believe it's 295 right now, which is still a fairly decent number. We're still one of the largest fire departments in Nassau County. We're the second busiest fire department behind Long Beach, and Long Beach is a paid fire department. So we are the busiest volunteer fire department on Long Island, or in Nassau County anyway. Suffolk County, I'm not real familiar with their statistics.

Q: Why do you think that is? Because Port Washington is not the second largest community on Long Island.

GPC: It grows dramatically during the day. The census, I believe, is around 35,000. The

census population, the last census that we did. However, during the daytime, that census grows by 20,000 people. With the industrial park on Roslyn West Shore Road and everybody that comes into Port Washington, very--you know, there are commuters that go out of Port, but the population gets up--we've calculated--to roughly 55,000 during the day. And that's when the bulk of our calls are, between eight a.m. and four p.m., there's 70 percent of our calls. So it does get very busy.

We have a large fire district. I mean, we go from St. Francis Hospital to everything north and the whole peninsula. We're a 12-square-mile district. We have the whole industrial park down on West Shore Road, and we have St. Francis Hospital and all the schools and all the factories and everything else. And Thomson Industries and Publishers Clearing House, and the large estates in Sands Point, and so we're a multifaceted fire department. We have to do everything. We have to do HAZMAT [hazardous materials]; we have to do residential firefighting; we have to do commercial firefighting. Look at the water that we have. We just applied for a grant for a fire boat. We don't have a fire boat. We applied to the federal government, FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], for a fire boat, and we're hoping we get it. And the local senators and congressmen and everything else are pushing for us to get this, so hopefully we will get it.

Q: Why do we need a fire boat?

GPC: Because there's no firefighter capability on the water. Anything more than 20 feet off of a piece of land, we can't get to. And the Town of North Hempstead doesn't have a fire boat. Nassau County doesn't have a fire boat. And, you know, we're surrounded by water here.

Q: So what has happened in the past when there's been a fire?

GPC: In the past, the County police boat maybe has had a little pump that they stick in the water, and they have a little tiny hose like a garden hose, and they'll tow the boat in, for us [laughs] to put the fire out. So if we get the fire boat, we've been offered all the facilities and the place to put it and everything else. So we're just hoping that we get it. And they're not cheap, but the federal government's going to pay 90 percent and we do have a former member, again, the same member, Jim Duncan, that was a captain of a Nassau County police boat. So he's very familiar with being in command of a boat like that, and I'm sure he could train a lot of us on what we need to do. And we get a class in here from the Power Squadron, whether it's a couple of days or whatever, but have a class and get a crew going. Because a fire boat, it can't hurt us. The only thing it could do is help us. But those are the reasons why we're so busy. We have everything here. I mean, we have a major Long Island Railroad hub. A lot of fire departments in Nassau County don't have a dead-end rail yard in their towns. We do. We do a lot of training with the railroad, have actual drills, get out on the tracks. Have simulated fires inside the cars, that sort of thing. Now, last disaster drill we had with the battalion. There are eight battalions in Nassau County, and each battalion is comprised of fire departments in a geographic area. So, our battalion is Great Neck, Manhasset, Plandome, Port Washington, Albertson, East Williston, Williston Park. There are eight departments in the battalion. And we had, last fall, we had a drill at the train station, where we called in all of those fire departments for the drill at the train station. We had like 30 victims, and the hospitals got involved with mass casualty drills, that sort of thing.

Q: Did you ever have to be called to a fire at the train station?

GPC: Yes. Yeah, we've had fires in trains. We've had derailments. We've had more serious electrocutions, things like that. We've had trains that have gone through the end of the platform. We had one last year. Went right through the stanchion, about 10 feet out. Didn't get as far as the station, but you can look up in the records and see when that station was hit many years ago. There was a train in the '40s, I believe. Major derailment. We have pictures of it at the firehouse. It was a major Long Island Rail Road train incident here. So, a lot of brush fires along the tracks. You know, things like that. So we're very--we're a widely diversified fire department that has a very large area to deal with, and we feel we deal with it pretty well.

Q: What do you think the future is in terms of its being all volunteer?

GPC: I don't know that I'd want to speculate on it. It's hard to say that in five or 10 years, that it's going to be a combination paid-volunteer fire department or whether it's going to be Nassau County Fire Department or a Town of North Hempstead fire--it's just--it's very difficult. Now, cost of living in Port Washington is not going down. We're not getting the white collar workers to knock on our door and join. In the Fire Department, there's maybe 10 or 12 people that wear suits to work, and that's about it. Everybody else is basically a blue collar worker. And that's historically been the type of member that joins the Fire Department. But who wants to get off the train at seven o'clock at night and spend two and a half hours at the firehouse doing their work night or whatever, that has a million dollar house and is paying twenty-five thousand dollars a year in property taxes? And so, I don't know what the future will be. I wouldn't want to sit here and predict it. I don't know that any one of these 50- or 60-year members that are going to come in and talk to you could have sat there and predicted what's happened, in the meantime. We just don't know. We don't know what's going to happen in our future in 10 years. We don't

know whether we're going to have fewer firehouses. Whether we're going to be purchasing trucks that have ladders and pumps on them, that sort of thing. We just don't know. We don't know what the future of emergency medical service is going to be here either. It's a very, very hard thing to predict. There have been some things that have changed in the last 10, 15, 20 years, with dispatching and joint responses and things like that, with other fire departments, but I wouldn't want to sit here and predict it. I wouldn't want to sit here and say, "Well, in five years it's going to be a paid fire department," because I just don't know.

Q: What are the biggest changes that you've seen since you've been in the Department?

GPC: Well, I think in the community itself, I think the demographics of the community have changed so much. We do a lot of Spanish-speaking safety presentations now, with our Fire Marshal's Bureau. We have several members that have taken that under their wing and do fire safety demonstrations and things in multi-language.

Q: Where do you do them?

GPC: Some of them have been done in Manorhaven, and none have been done here in the Library, but ...

Q: But like at churches or schools or ...

GPC: No, basically through organizations. I'm not sure what the names of the organizations are. One of the people that arranged it was Scott Falconer--he's now a member of the Fire Department. He was always in the Explorer program. And his Eagle project was to

coordinate and arrange and have the Fire Department begin the multi-language safety sessions for whoever needed it. And he created that project. Got a couple of members in the Fire Department on board, and it's something that's been continuing.

Q: So that's a scouting--a Boy Scout ...

GPC: We have an Explorer Post that's affiliated with the Fire Department. We sponsor it. It's our Explorer Post. It's the Port Washington Fire Department Explorers.

Q: Well, what are the Explorers?

GPC: They're Boy Scouts, that can join from age thirteen, and I think it's thirteen to eighteen. But most of them, they leave at age seventeen to join the Fire Department, because that's when you can join. But it's specifically a Boy Scout organization that is sponsored by the Port Washington Fire Department. But we get children, whether they're males or females, from the community, that join at age thirteen, and basically they're trained as Scouts, number one, and as firefighters, number two.

Q: So there are girls ...

GPC: Yes, absolutely.

Q: ... in the Explorer program?

GPC: Uh huh. Yeah, there are females in the fire companies. There are females-- predominately females in the Fire Medic Company. But we do have females in the fire

companies.

Q: How do you think the entrance of women into the fire companies changed the Department?

GPC: It didn't change it much. It didn't change it much. Initially, you know, there's the same reaction that there would be anywhere, in something that may have previously been all male. We didn't have a sign up that said, "You must be male to join." But it was just something that a female just wouldn't approach it and even consider doing. And when it happened, it happened. And there were no snickers or snide remarks or anything else. I mean, there were things that we had to do in some of the firehouses as far as providing access to ladies' rooms and things like that, which, you know, we have ladies' rooms upstairs in the meeting rooms and things like that, but not down near the truck rooms or anything like that. And that was all accommodated for, as time went on. They were given separate areas to change and do different things. But I think I've seen--I don't know, I'm going to say-- between 10 and 15 female firefighters that have joined who are still active members. And there's no difference between a male going in on the hose line and a female going in on the hose line. If he can handle it, he goes in; if she can handle it, she goes in. There are some males in the Fire Department that don't have the physical strength to do some things. Because they're small--their smaller stature, that type of thing. But we don't discriminate against anybody. There are males, there are females; there are African Americans, there are Latinos. We have several members from Chile. We have a very wide variety of members.

Q: And the entrance of these people from different ethnic groups or backgrounds, did that have any impact on your department?

GPC: It did in a positive way, because we were able to reach out and do more things.

Q: What kinds of things?

GPC: Well, it's a very difficult time when you go to a call, particularly a medical emergency, and the police officers don't speak Spanish, and nobody in the Fire Department formerly spoke Spanish, but now you had people that did. It changes things a lot, when you can get information right away instead of literally having to wait for a Nassau County car to come from maybe Westbury that has a Spanish-speaking officer to come. We have quite a few members that are qualified in sign language, that have taken courses from the Helen Keller Center, qualified in sign language. We get an emergency at Helen Keller or anywhere else, which, you know, there's a lot of residents that live down there, and they can do the sign language exercises, and that sort of thing. So it has widened the scope of the things that we can do.

There was no--in a firehouse, there is always people's chops being busted in a very friendly way. Doesn't matter whether you're tall, short, white, black, Latino, heavy, thin, age sixty, or age twenty. Somebody always says something in a joking way to try to just needle you a little bit, and--because if you didn't, it'd be a very tense place. It'd be a very tense place. You know, just waiting for the next call. What's it going to be, and it's not like sitting down and you're writing up the questions for me and having a couple of days to go, "Well, maybe I should ask him this or that."

You know, the radio goes off, and there's about 25 different things that you have to think about when that radio goes off. And even if you're not the Chief, you still have to be thinking about it. What time did the alarm come in? Where is the alarm? How, exactly, did they put it over? Did they put it over "in the vicinity of ... ?" because when you hear, "In the vicinity of ..." "next door to ..." "in the rear of ..." usually it's something bad that's happening. In other words, a

neighbor looked out and can see fire coming out the neighbor's window--that type of thing. Time of day, time of night. Like I said, fire at lunchtime is completely different than a fire at three o'clock in the morning. You get a house fire three o'clock in the morning and you don't get too much other information from a dispatcher, you've got a lot to be concerned about. You've got 95 percent probability that there are occupants there. It's a lot harder to see at night. A lot harder to see at night when there's a lot of smoke in the area. You're looking for fire hydrants for the engines to hook up to. You're looking for a place for the ladder truck to go. You can't put the ladder truck somewhere, unless you're sure that there's no overhead electrical wires. Because all that truck has to do is set up and go up and the guy can't see the electrical wire, and he's going to get injured or killed. You've got police officers on the scene running around. You've got to make sure that none of them have gone in and got trapped inside.

Your goal is to make sure that everybody that goes to the alarm returns to the firehouse in the same condition that they left it. That is the Chief's goal. There is no other goal at an emergency call. When it's not an emergency call and the Chief has the time to sit back, then that's the time that he's got to make sure that all of his people are trained and everything else. But if you don't come back from the emergency with the same number of people that you left with in the same condition, then I'm not going to say you've failed, but everything didn't go as well as it should have gone. There are times when you can't avoid injuries. Those times do happen. There are times when you have to put your people into a predicament where they could get hurt, but you've got to also consider the person that's trapped.

And great instances right here, again. Shields lot, when it was an empty lot, a vacant lot, there were construction workers down there, and I don't know what happened, but a very, very large piece of concrete fell on a worker and trapped him under the piece of concrete. We didn't have the rescue tools to get him out. We had to call for a confined-space rescue team to come from Bethpage and Syosset. Both of those fire departments had them. They're very specialized technical teams. After that, we did establish our own. We created our own. So we're one of the

very few, also, in Nassau County that has one. But it's things like that that you can never ever plan for. And you might have to put your people in a precarious situation there to climb under the concrete in danger of collapse in order to stabilize the person medically until you can get him out. You can't fix him under there. You ...

Q: And did you have to do that? Did you ...

GPC: Yes. Had to get people under there to give him an IV [intravenous injection], to give him oxygen, to give him psychological first aid, which, you know, if you're trapped anywhere and you can't get out, the best thing for you is to have a living human being either talking to you, seeing you, or doing something to make you feel more comfortable. So ...

Q: Have you ever been injured yourself?

GPC: Nothing worse than like a cut to the finger. Oh, I'm sorry, yes [laughs]. I keep forgetting about this one. We had a fire, as you go up South Bayles Avenue and you get to the cemetery gate, and you make a left onto Beechwood [Avenue], and where you go past the old lumberyard where the storage place is and you make a left onto Beechwood, there was--there still is a very large white garage there that a landscaper owns now. It was a commercial building. And at the time, we got a call there for a fire at night, and we pulled up and there was a lot of fire showing. And myself and another person got to the front garage door, which was already open, and had the hose line trained on the fire, and the heat melted the springs on the garage door. And again, I told you this--there's a lot of noise in a fire. We didn't hear the door coming. The door came right down the rollers and hit both of us. Fortunately, we had helmets on. The heavy leather helmets. And I was out of service about six weeks with a neck injury, and the person that I was with about two months. And it still bothers me to this day. Have to go to the chiropractor every

now and then to get it taken care of.

Q: What was it diagnosed as?

GPC: Severely bruised neck. Like I said, I was in a collar for almost six weeks. And also when you bruise your neck, it affects everything else. It affects everything else in your spine and whatever. So, that was the worst I was ever injured, but I don't consider that life threatening or anything like that.

Q: Okay, all right. Well thank you very much.

GPC: Okay.

Q: And we probably will meet again.

GPC: That's fine. I'd be happy to talk to you. It's not a problem.

Q: Okay, good.

GPC: All right.

Q: All right ... [INTERRUPTION] ... Minor-aided as opposed to seriously- aided. What is that?

GPC: Minor-aided are very minor injuries that the person maybe even refused transport to the hospital. They may sign a form releasing the Fire Department from any harm. But the

aided [person] does not want to go to the hospital. In other words, it could be a cut that's already stopped bleeding and they'll see their own doctor. We recommend that they go to the emergency room, get a tetanus shot, that sort of thing. Somebody that fainted and knows why they fainted and will go to the doctor afterwards and doesn't want to get transported, that sort of thing. Serious-aided are people that are seriously injured in car accidents, a lot of bleeding, cardiac arrests, serious strokes, things like that where we have to do things to help them because they can't help themselves. And that's the two terms that we use. Usually serious-aided and serious critical or minor-aided. And that's the way our medical reports also show.

There are four levels of the patient's condition. It's called CUPS--C-U-P-S. It's Critical, Unstable, Potentially Unstable, and Stable. So when they're potentially unstable or stable, generally, we refer to those as fairly minor-aided. When they're the two top--critical or unstable--then those are the two worst. And those are serious. Those are when you have to rush to the hospital, or you might have to call a helicopter in for a Medi-Vac landing, or something like that.

Q: Okay, thanks.

GPC: No problem.