

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Mike Pickering  
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

Q: Mike Pickering from Flower Hill Hose, and this is Christina Southard. And we're going to start the interview. So, Mike, tell me about the day you decided to join Flower Hill.

Mike Pickering: I was a member of the Williston Park Fire Department, and I had a lot of friends through the drill team, racing aspect of the fire service, that I met from Port Washington, became friends with them.

Q: Like who?

MP: Doug Strockbine. Joey Izzo, Tom Murray. Harold Leeds, Johnny Morrison. And decided I was going to move to a different town, because they sort of talked me into moving over (laughs). The drill team would ...

Q: Are you a ringer (laughs)?

MP: No, not actually a ringer. I really loved the sport. And at the present, at that time, the Fire Department I belonged to--Williston Park--was--didn't really have a drill team. It was folding. And still had a lot of interest in it, and I had some good friends over here, so ...

Q: So that was that.

MP: ... that packed me up and moved me to Port Washington.

Q: And why did you pick Flower Hill?

MP: A lot of my friends, again, were from Flower Hill. Doug Strockbine, Joey Izzo, again.  
And that was one of the reasons I guess I joined Flower Hill.

Q: Who was the Captain at the time? This was 1974?

MP: Yes. Wow. That's a tough question.

Q: Do you remember?

MP: Oh, boy.

Q: Or the Chief?

MP: Wow.

Q: It's almost thirty years ago (laughs).

MP: I don't remember. I remember the Chiefs. I'm not sure who was actually Chief. I think Curly Salerno was either Deputy or Chief at the time from--he was the Chief from Atlantic Hook and Ladder.

Q: And do you remember the kind of apparatus they had at the time when you joined?

MP: Yes. They had a--Flower Hill had a Young Crusader pumper and a Ford with a Young body on it, which was a--the first due engine was 857 out of Flower Hill. And they also had a 1952 Mack, I believe. I'm not sure of the date of the truck, but it was a--it was in the '50s, a Mack. B Model, they used to call it. And that was the third due piece apparatus.

Q: And so you were trained on that apparatus obviously.

MP: Yes.

Q: Have you ever held any offices in Flower Hill?

MP: I'm on the Board of Directors presently, and that's about the only office I ever held.

Q: What about fires? What fires stand out in your mind?

MP: Well, coming from a department that was really small and not a very busy department, I think the first time after I received my insurance, I think we had six calls that day, and that was like, I would say to myself, that was the most I would see in three months in the other fire department I belonged to. Port Washington was a very busy department at the time. And a lot of calls. And the marinas were probably, at that time in the '70s, were the most major fires we had. We had house fires. We were a pretty busy department. A lot of working fires at the time, between the marinas and houses under construction, and various stuff like that.

Q: Now, you worked for the Town of North Hempstead?

MP: Yes.

Q: So you must be at most of the fires, then, since you're around?

MP: During the daytime, we were--if you were working within the boundaries of the town, or you-they allowed you to go.

Q: They did?

MP: They would allow you to go, because, basically, the town, in a way, was paying your insurance, because we contracted to the Town of North Hempstead, so ...

Q: Right.

MP: And at that time--at that time, also, the people that were running the town, they were in--very behind the fire departments. So they really didn't--never really bothered the employees from going.

Q: What kind of training did you receive back then?

MP: We went out to Bethpage Fire School. Similar to what the training they have today, except today is a little more stringent because of the OSHA laws. But we went through the basic fire training out there and advanced firefighting training out at the Bethpage Training Center, which is probably one of the state-of-the-art training centers in the world, they say.

Q: And how about your family? What did they think about you joining the Fire Department?

MP: Well, my father had been a fireman in Williston Park also. So, I was--always enjoyed the Fire Department, and I couldn't wait till I was 18 to join that Fire Department. And it sort of ran in the family.

Q: How about--you were married? Were you married, and what'd your wife think?

MP: She had no problem with it.

Q: She didn't?

MP: No.

Q: What about the social activities? What do you remember about those?

MP: Well, actually the--one of the major things, I guess, was the block parties that the Road Runners drill team used to run in the '70s. It was--first time I ever helped set it up and work it, it was amazing. It was--everybody contributed--all three--all--at that time, it was Protection and Flower Hill that were made up of the Road Runners. And it was an effort from both Protection Engine Company and Flower Hill. And setting everything up, we would take a week to set it up.

Q: Where was it located?

MP: On Channel Drive.

Q: Oh, right. Right.

MP: Behind Protection's Annex. And the cooperation from the oldtimers at that time--I call them the oldtimers ...

Q: Were like who?

MP: Like Al Wyatt was a Chief. Eddie Gormand who was a member of Flower Hill. Harry Hooper. I've forgot all the names. It's tough to remember. But just the pitching in of everything. Stanley Bukowski from Flower Hill. Cliff Hults from Protection. Donny Curtin from Protection. And all the members of the team would chip in. And it was an-- actually, it was a fundraiser. We did it to raise money for the drill team, rather than using all the tax dollars. We had money budgeted for the teams. But over and above, we-- that's the reason they ran this block party, and it was--I was amazed at how crowded it was, how much--how the people would just come from all over. I mean, one of the most amazing things was the clam chowder.

Q: (Laughs) Who made it?

MP: All the oldtimers. They had their secret recipe. It was amazing. It took two days to make it.

Q: In vats? Did they make it in big vats? How'd they make it?



MP: We used to go to Al Wyatt's house. He had a garage on, I guess that would be Old Shore Road where the Delco Plaza Shopping Center is now.

Q: Uh huh.

MP: There were houses back--if you remember the houses back there?

MP: Yep.

MP: Probably on a Wednesday before the block party, we would go to his house--his garage--pull all the grills out. And he had these huge, cast-iron pots. And we used to make 195 gallons, almost 200 gallons of clam chowder. And it was amazing. They would start on Thursday, and cutting all the vegetables up. And it was so funny to see these guys. They would put their ingredients in it. They had their recipe in their heads, because they were the old-time fishermen ...

Q: Right.

MP: ... you know. They were the oldtimers from Port Washington. And they sit there, taste it, "Ah, it needs a little more of this," and believe me, people would come out of Thompsen Industries, bring their own containers, and buy it so they could take it home and freeze it.

Q: My God.

MP: It was pretty amazing. And we would sell out. We would sell out by Saturday evening, we would be sold out of clam chowder. And that's running it from Friday night from six till midnight and starting Saturday from four until midnight. And by seven o'clock Saturday evening, a couple of these--it was gone. It was totally gone. There wasn't anything left. It was pretty amazing to see the oldtimers work at it.

Q: So you must have raised a lot of money, too.

MP: We made enough--we raised quite a bit of money for the drill team. And we had a cocktail party for thanking everybody, around Christmastime, that helped out with the block party. So we gave something back that they helped us.

Q: Does Flower Hill have other special recipes of food that--food's a big part of this (laughs)

...

MP: Flower Hill, I don't know. I don't know if we have our special food. I know Atlantic's has their sausage and peppers they're known for, you know. And we would just make anything that whoever the steward at the time was.

Q: Are any of your family members members of the Department?

MP: No. No.

Q: What about the changes that you've seen over thirty years?

MP: Changes over thirty years is the decline in membership. And ...

Q: What's that about, do you think?

MP: The cost of living in this town. There's no doubt about it. There were people that were members, and they really couldn't afford to buy a house in this town. And if they could, they would have to work two jobs, sometimes three. And they would move out of town to an area they could afford to live in. And I don't think this town ever adjusted. When this town changed from a--I think from a total blue collar town in the '80s to--not that it's bad, but it changed. You have a lot of commuters now. I mean, more so than I believe we had in the '70s and the early '80s.

Q: Right. When you could afford to be here.

MP: Right, exactly.

Q: What about the equipment now?

MP: Equipment now is, I would say, it's a little more modernized, but basically it's the same equipment. You have a pump or you have a ladder truck, and it has to put fires out and has to put water through it. I mean, there's different designs nowadays, and different OSHA aspects of it with safety regulations, with the crew cabs where you have to ride inside. Whereas, years ago, we'd get on the back step, jump in the hose bed, and you're putting your gear on as you're going down Main Street, and you're throwing a Scott Pack on as you're going down Main Street, or someone's, you know, throwing you a pack. And you're just throwing packs, and you're up on top of this hose bed, and you--it was amazing. I think the young kids today would look at us like we were crazy (laughs).

Q: (Laughs) Maybe you were (laughs). What do you think is the future of the volunteer service of the Fire Department?

MP: That's a good question. I don't want to see it happen, but I see the decline in membership. I see that somehow they're going to have to come up with some kind of crews during the daytime. People just don't have the time. And I don't know why we don't get the members. I guess people don't have the time. They work in the City, and they get home and they just don't have the time. And, believe it or not, nowadays there's a lot of people in this town that don't even know there's a volunteer Fire Department in Port Washington.

Q: Really?

MP: I've been asked that many times. "Oh, you guys are volunteer?" And, yes, they have no clue--some of the people in this town. And I think a lot of things--I know a lot of stuff changed in Flower Hill after we lost Bobby Dayton on Main Street. He was a--he was a good friend. He was on the racing team. And a lot of things changed after that.

Q: Why?

MP: It took a lot out of everybody, I believe. And a lot of people didn't really show it, but inside, it took a lot out of them. And there was ...

Q: Danger factor? Was it that it became real, or ...

MP: That might be possible. I really couldn't put my finger on the exact cause. Maybe that has a lot to do with it. Or the fact that they actually saw somebody--a member, a friend, you know, you see him in the morning, and you didn't see him after that. And that was pretty--that was a really tough time. I was a good friend of Bobby's, and, like I said, I raced with Bobby for a lot of years, and Bobby was a good guy.

Q: If you had to do it all over again, would you do it?

MP: Oh, without a doubt. Without a doubt. Even so, back in the '70s and '80s. We were very busy with fires. We used to have a lot of fires. Not that you want fires.

Q: Right.

MP: But we were very busy. We had quite a bit of calls. Like they had the arsonist with the boatyards, and we had a lumberyard, which was another big fire that was active.

Q: Where is the lumberyard?

MP: Willowdale and, it was actually right--it's where the storage place is now.

Q: ... [Beacon Hill] bungalows between ... [?] ... and Sands Point?

MP: Beacon Hill bungalows.

Q: Riviera.

MP: The Riviera Marina. Well, that was actually before I got in--the Riviera was probably ...

Q: ... Sands Point Bath Club?

MP: The Sands Point Bath Club in the '80s, that wasn't--that was during the daytime.

Q: Shields in 1990.

MP: Shields Hardware. The Bath and Tennis Club was amazing. We could see it, going down Main Street. It was--I think it was three or four o'clock in the afternoon.

Q: Really?

MP: And you could see the smoke, going down Main Street. It was--I don't know what they ever came out the cause of that, but there was no electric and no (laughs) heat to the building. So that--like LILCO was there probably that morning and shut everything off to the building. So, it's kind of suspicious (laughs).

Q: Wow.

MP: And we had the sandwash building down on West Shore Road. It was an old--it was on-- I believe it as ...

Q: Sandwash Building? What is that?

MP: Yeah, the--as you were going down West Shore Road, on the right-hand side, there was a

big green building with the conveyor belts coming out.

Q: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Right.

MP: Yeah, that burned. That burned a couple of times. But one night, about three in the morning, I guess it was, it was burning. It was burning up at the top. And that was--that was a tough fire. That was--you had to go up them--all them stairs, a couple hundred feet up. And there was all machinery above us. And the floors were pretty charred, and we actually, (Peter Zwerlein was the Chief inside the building with us), and we almost backed out of the building because of the fact that there was a possibility of collapse, because there was so much heavy machinery up above our heads and stuff. And we actually hung in there and we never had to back out. And we did a good job of knocking it down.

Q: Wow.

MP: That was pretty memorable.

Q: Wow.

MP: Nowadays, if some--I would say sixty percent, sixty-five percent of our calls are recorded alarms.



Q: Really?

MP: And--yeah, at least.

Q: Now, since you're the hook and ladder, what's the tallest building in Port Washington?

MP: Oh, probably, I would say, hmm, that's a good question.

Q: (Laughs).

MP: Actually, I'm in an engine company.

Q: Oh, okay.

MP: Probably buildings on Main Street. The Brower's Building, which is across from Dunkin' Donuts.

Q: Yeah.

MP: Which is another building that I hope never burns, because ...

Q: Yeah.

MP: ... we've been in there a few times, and ...

Q: It's pretty solid.

MP: I really don't think that the--I don't know how some of these buildings get away with what they get away with. Whether it's the county doesn't have enough time to come and inspect them or ...

Q: You mean the fire codes?

MP: Uh huh. Yes, that's correct.

Q: Now, how about does Flower Hill have special traditions that they pass down from generation to generation, or is there ...

MP: Well, actually, we don't--nowadays, you don't really get too many father-sons anymore, you know. That stopped probably around the '80s and stuff. I think things are changing now with the times. As far as response goes and with all the recorded alarms, which we don't get a lot of turnout for at times because people're getting tired of going to them.

Q: Right.

MP: You know what I mean? If you go to a call six times, seven times in a month, the same address, something's wrong, you know. Like Dunkin' Donuts nowadays is one of the big recorded alarm problems we have. I'd say we've probably been there twenty times this year already.

Q: Really? What was your first job with the Fire Department?

MP: First job. Learning--my first job was actually learning how they operated, because, like I said, I came from a Fire Department that was really pretty slow. And going to a Fire Department that you had two or three calls a day, or seven or eight calls a week, it was-- you learned quick. You really learned quick. And everybody pitched in. Everybody taught you, and the oldtimers gave you their theories. And we had a lot of backing of the Road Runners from the companies, from Flower Hill and Protection, at the time. And then, I believe it was in '76, Atlantic's folded their racing team, and ...

Q: Why?

MP: Lack of members. They just couldn't get enough members to field the team. Actually, at one point, there were three drill teams in this town. Flower Hill had their own, which was the Runts. Protection had theirs, which was the Rangers, and Atlantic's had the

Rowdies. And we all merged and became one team. And that is probably one the highlights, I guess, that I enjoyed the most over years, because the camaraderie of the racing teams. Not only the fellows you raced with, but the people you met from other fire departments.

Q: All around the country?

MP: All over the Island. Upstate New York. The different teams when you had the State tournament where you raced, and then you went to Lindonhurst or you went to Central Islip. Became good friends with those guys. If you needed a part, you could always count on them to call somebody, and I think the kids today don't understand that. I really don't, and I don't think they know what the camaraderie is. Because it's amazing. I must have known--God! I couldn't tell you. I actually remember the sunrise fires, because we went out there. And there were a couple of young guys in the back.

Q: What are sunrise fires?

MP: Those are brush fires out in '95.

Q: Oh, yeah, out East in the Hamptons.

MP: Yes.

Q: Right.

MP: And a couple of young guys were in the back of the rig. And we got there, I was walking down Sunrise Highway, and about fifteen people said hello to me in twenty feet. And one kid says to me, "How the hell do you know these people? We're in the middle of no place out here." I said, "It was from playing softball and racing all the years. You know, you become friends with people. You might not hang out with them all the time. You might not see--you might see them once a year at a tournament. But they know you and they say hello to you, and they remember you." And it's the competitiveness and it's the camaraderie of racing, you know. And I try to tell some of that to the young guys today that racing--because a lot of them don't want to do it. It's dangerous. They don't have the time.

Q: It is dangerous, isn't it?

MP: It's dangerous. But if you're cautious ...

Q: Did you ever get hurt?

MP: Not really. A couple of road rashes, but nothing serious. Nothing serious. I actually got hurt worse playing softball.

Q: And did you play on the Fire Department softball team?

MP: Yes.

Q: And so who was on the team with you in the early days?

MP: Oh, let's see. There was Peter Zwerlein and his brother Billy. Ronny Henderson. Tony Ciginoffi, Richie Edmondson. Wow. Now, you're really asking me a tough question, to remember everybody. Frank Pavlak was the manager, the player/manager.

Q: Sounds like a good team.

MP: Frank Pavlak was the manager. He was the player-manager. Buddy Stetz.

Q: Oh, my God! I remember Buddy.

MP: Well, he played for probably--I joined in '74, so I believe he played for three more years or four years after, then he moved. But we had a really good--and that was another--we had a good team. And that was another thing that was, after the softball--the Eighth Battalion League--you would go back to the home team's firehouse. And, you know, they had hamburgers, hot dogs, and, you know, and ...

Q: Maybe a beer or two? (laughs).

MP: A couple of beers. Yeah, a couple of beers. A couple of times we drank a couple of firehouses dry.

Q: (Laughs)

MP: Especially when we played Manhasset. We had a great rivalry with Manhasset. Port Washington was always knocking heads with softball. And just the people you meet. And, you know, you could be on the field screaming and yelling at each other, and game's over, you're back at the firehouse having a hamburger and a hot dog, and you sit, having a beer, talking about the game, you know.

Q: Now, were--did--is there--is there like a friendly competition between the Fire Departments in Port Washington, or is that gone, too?

MP: There is still some friendly competition. You mean, as far as rivalries between ...

Q: Yes.

MP: ... the different companies? Sure there is. Not as much as it was in the '70s and '80s.

Q: Right.

MP: I think nowadays, they just don't understand it. As much as you, you know, like we call Atlantic's Lasagna Ladder Company, you know, because years ago it was all the Italians. We used to call them actually the Guinea Garage (laughs) years ago. And they used to call Flower Hill Pansy Hill.

Q: (Laughs) Why?

MP: Well, it's "Flower." And they said, "Okay, a flower, the pansy." And they called it "Pansy Hill," you know. And there was always rivalry who was the first engine on the road.

Q: Right.

MP: I actually didn't live ...

Q: For bragging rights?

MP: Yeah, actually yes. Actually, I lived in Manorhaven, so I really didn't catch the first engine out of Flower Hill when I--in the '70s and the early '80s. But there were people



that lived right around the firehouse--Donny Kurz and Otto ... [Nicholisak] ... There were quite a few people who lived around there, and the engine would be out like a shot--two, three, four o'clock in the morning. Midnight, whatever time it was, the truck was out like a shot, and it was amazing to see that engine get out so fast. And everybody'd be breaking their chops to get to the Annex and see if we could beat them uptown. It was a good rivalry. It really was. And, you know, I don't think you have that that much nowadays.

Q: Right.

MP: Because I really don't think they understand what it really was all about.

Q: Who was the--as a character, who stands out in your mind, like a person that you would, you know, think of as the most unforgettable guy that you met?

MP: Wow. Through the racing, I guess it was Harold Leeds back in the time, back in the '70s.

Q: Tell me about him.

MP: He was the climber for the Road Runners drill team, and he was just a crazy guy. I mean, he was a gymnast, I guess, in high school, because he would always do back flips, and he was actually a good climber. He was a very excellent climber. And the Road Runners

held the state record for a couple of years. But I guess it was, after his bachelor party, I believe it was, and his brother-in-law, Johnny Morrison, and you put the two of them together, it was--they actually had a farm tractor and a little tag-along trailer that they were driving up Main Street about two o'clock in the morning, drunk off their banana. And the cops pulled them over, and the cops just were like, "What are you doing?" (laughs). It was--it was--and the cops would--they just, "Get that thing off the road." But nowadays, that wouldn't happen. You'd probably get locked up nowadays, you know.

Q: Now, is he still with the Department?

MP: No, actually, he lives in--I believe he--I know he moved to Texas, but I am not sure if he's still down in Texas or--but I know Johnny Morrison moved to Georgia, so, you know, he work for--actually, he worked for the phone company, and got transferred down there, you know.

Q: Oh.

MP: There were a lot--you know what? There were a lot of crazy characters, and to describe them all or to try and remember them all, it's--it's pretty tough. There were so many good times, and some sad times.

Q: Like what?

MP: Well, I guess, like I said, when we lost Bobby Dayton, that was probably the toughest thing this Fire Department probably ever went through. I mean, everything, like I said, I think everything--a lot changed after that. A lot of people lost interest. Not that they lost interest. I still can't come up with the right words for it, but it took something out of a lot of people. And we had a tough--we lost another member of our company--Tony Ciginoffi. He was killed in his own house. And he was a City fireman.

Q: Where the rock rolled on him? Is that the one?

MP: Oh, no. That was Joey ... [Tita] ...

Q: Right, okay.

MP: That was another--that was another call that was--I was on that call. That was just a heart-breaking call, because it was we tried everything to get that rock off him. And ...

Q: He was alive when you got there?

MP: He was alive the whole time. He was alive until they took the rock off him. Because that's the only thing that kept him alive, was the rock. But it was probably pressed up against him and kept every--everything here was shot, but from his waist up, just when

they removed the rock from him, he--he died. And that's some of the cra--not the crazy, but some of the incidents we've had in this town are just--Ingrid Sowle from the Fourth Company was killed by a drunk driver on ...

Q: Out on Beacon Hill?

MP: Beacon Hill Road, you know. And, like I said, Tony Ciginoffi who was killed in his own house.

Q: What happened to Tony?

MP: He was a--he was a City fireman also.

Q: Really?

MP: 217 Engine in Brooklyn. And in his own way, he was--he was probably, he'd give his shirt off his back if you needed it. That's the type of person he was. And, you know what, everybody has their quirks, and I guess he got home one night, and he was renovating, or he was painting, I believe, and he had taken the smoke alarms down. And a fire started in the basement, I believe, and he got trapped upstairs. And they found him actually in his--in the bathroom, in the bathtub. And ...

Q: Were there other people in the house?

MP: No, it was just him. He had a--he--he was a--he was divorced. And he had a girlfriend, and she had passed away, so I don't know if this ...

Q: It's all right, no, no.

MP: She had passed away, so that kind of took a lot ...

Q: Out of him.

MP: Took a lot out of him, you know. And--but he was--he'd give you the shirt off his back. He really would.

Q: Was he a member when you joined?

MP: He joined probably a couple months before me, I believe. And he--there were a lot of people that worked for the schools at that time, and there was a lot of people from the schools that worked. And that was another--that's how I met these guys also, through softball and stuff. And when I used to work for the Town, I worked in the incinerator on shifts. And they would say, "Well, you know, what are you doing after work?" "I'm working four to twelve this week." "All right. Meet us down at The Lighthouse." And

that was one of the hangouts.

Q: Right.

MP: The Lighthouse Lounge.

Q: Yep.

MP: And we'd usually hang out there till the donut man brought donuts across the street ...

Q: (Laughs).

MP: (laughs) ... till the wee hours of the morning.

Q: Well, what's across the street? Oh, the Harbor Deli?

MP: No, it was actually a place where the two pillars are in there.

Q: The White House Laundry?

MP: There was a place where a bakery guy would drop off, right across the street. And we would hang out there. "He's coming! Let's go. Let's get some donuts." And we'd go

back into the bar (laughs). But you'd get away with that back then.

Q: That's true.

MP: You know. I mean, whether it was wrong or not, we were just having fun. Because everything we did was--nobody ever got hurt. That's for sure. It was all clean fun.

Q: ... [All those ? strangers?] ...

MP: Exactly (laughs). Exactly.

Q: And a lot of the policemen were fire--you know, fighters. And it seemed like there was just a general camaraderie ...

MP: Oh, it was totally.

Q: ... everywhere.

MP: Every--yes, it was. It was amazing. I mean, at fires, I mean, you could have the rivalry with the other companies, but as soon as the whistle kicked in, it was all business. And, like I said, we had quite a few fires. And it was business, and we did the business. We knew what we were doing through the training, and guys would come and, you know,

and, regardless of the rivalries, everything was put aside. One of the funniest things I remember was Atlantic's had a City Service truck.

Q: What's that?

MP: It's all ground ladders.

Q: The City Service truck?

MP: Well, they used--that was the type of vehicle they called it. It was a ladder truck, but it didn't have an aerial on it.

Q: Okay.

MP: It had all ground ladders, and it was all compartments.

Q: Right.

MP: And they had--they were doing renovations there old firehouse, or they were doing something, and they needed--they put it up in the firehouse for a couple of days. So we put signs all over their truck. Every compartment, we put like a large pie on one compartment door, sausage and peppers on another, meatball here on one or another.



And one of their officers come in; he went crazy. "Hey," he said, "get me..I'm taking my truck out of here!" The truck was gone the next night. I mean, gone! (laughs). It was kind of funny when they came running in to get on it, and actually you stood on the side of the truck on the running boards on the side. It was like the Key ...

Q: Yeah.

MP: Like pictures of the Keystone cops, years ago, that's where they'd stand.

Q: Don't they do that now?

MP: No, everybody has to ride inside.

Q: Oh, they do.

MP: Yeah, OSHA laws.

Q: Okay.

MP: There was a mandated change, I guess--I'm not sure what the date was, but ...

Q: It's in the '90s, or the '80s?

MP: Probably the '80s. Yes, it was in the '80s, where you weren't allowed to ride on the back step anymore.

Q: Oh.

MP: So there was probably grandfathered clauses in before, like the Department couldn't afford a new engine or a new ladder, but every new engine or ladder that you bought after a certain date had to have an enclosed cab or jumpseats. But those are the seats that you can sit in, where you're not standing on the outside of the truck.

Q: Now, your department, didn't it have a dog?

MP: You know, I've heard that one of the companies did, and I--that is a good question. I do remember, I think it might have been Protection had a dog; I'm not sure. Because Protection was the first engine company. Flower Hill was formed after Protection, so ...

Q: Right.

MP: ... Protection goes back quite a bit further.

Q: What kind of ceremonies do you have at Flower Hill?

MP: We have our annual dinner with our awards. Used to have our own ...

Q: Where do you hold that? At the firehouse?

MP: Every other year we have it at the firehouse. When a new Captain comes in, we usually go out and we'll go to the Swan Club or one year we had it at the Polish Hall. The Mariott. Different places, but it's every other year, when a new Captain comes in and we go out. And the dinner gets smaller. It's amazing, when you were a member of a company with a hundred members and remember when there was a waiting list for people to get in, and you're down to probably fifty.

Q: Really?

MP: I mean, you know, that's a big change.

Q: How about when they let women in? Did that change the Department at all?

MP: I don't believe so, because the women we had, we had two, I believe. And ...

Q: Who were they? Do you remember the names?

MP: Rene Balderi. She was in probably for four, five years--maybe three or four years. And she got a job as a City cop I believe. And at the time, I don't believe her husband, or I think it was her boyfriend or fiance, was kind of against her being in the Fire Department, so she resigned. And then we had another one--Sherry Gearson, which she just resigned last week. She graduated college, and I believe she's been a member for probably six, seven years. Good firefighter. I mean, she'd go in there on a line in a fire. Wouldn't back down. Do a lot better than some of the guys.

Q: Really.

MP: And there were some jokes. I never had a problem with it. If they can do the job, let them do the job. That's what the name of the game is, you know. But you had people that had their--their ...

Q: Bias?

MP: Against it, so to speak. You know, or gave them a hard time, or wouldn't give them the right time of day.

Q: What about other ethnic members? Do they--did other ethnic members join the Fire Department?

MP: We had a--we had a few. I believe there's quite a few now in--between Protection and Atlantic's. And back then, though, you really never--you really didn't have many members, you know, people--other ethnic groups applying. I don't know the reason why, that maybe they were afraid, or, you know, not being accepted, because years ago, the voting aspect to get in, become a member, there was a what they called ...

Q: Yeah, how did it go? What was the voting procedure like?

MP: Years ago, before they decided that it was--I guess it was discriminatory--it was called the blackball system.

Q: Oh.

MP: And there was a box with a little hole in it. There was red--black and white round little marbles. If you were accepted, you got a white marble. If you didn't--and if you had three ...

Q: Blackballs?

MP: ... blackballs, you were denied membership.

Q: Really? What's it like now?

MP: Now, it's just voting on a piece of paper, and you have ...

Q: Yes or no?

MP: Yes or no. And if there's forty people voting, you could have thirty-nine, or you could probably have fifteen for and fourteen against, or whatever, or twenty-five for and twenty--whatever. As long as you didn't have the majority that were against, you're a mem--you had to let them in. Which is the way it should be.

Q: Yes.

MP: You know, I mean, you have two years of probation, whether you're going to make it or not. You know, whether you're here for the social aspect of it, because you have to make calls. You have to go to schools. And you have two years to be judged, so ...

Q: Right.

MP: But I think today one of the problems is the school.

Q: Why?

MP: It's too--it's so strict. You have schools every week.

Q: Really?

MP: Yeah, with the OSHA. With the OSHA, again, comes out with these laws. NFPA laws. In my opinion, I think they're trying to break the volunteers' backs by putting more stringent training on them. And knowing that, in this day and age, people work two jobs. And I think they want to try and bust the volunteer and have paid.

Q: Do you see Port Washington going to a paid fire department in the future?

MP: I see possibly more like a paid maintenance staff of maybe four or five. And they would respond during the day. A total paid? I don't believe so. Not in my lifetime.

Q: Because of the expense?

MP: I--yes, I believe, the expense.

Q: So what about the--do you remember the first fire you ever went to?

MP: Wow. The first working fire? Whew! No, I can't remember my first working fire. I remember the boatyards. The boatyards was prob--when I got in, the boatyards were

going, so that was probably one of my first working fires. Actually, I was still a member, one of--I think it was Sigsbee's fire.

Q: Was that a big fire?

MP: Yes, that was amazing.

Q: Was it all-wood structure?

MP: Yeah, it was boats and the wood structure. And I believe--I think Sigsbee's was the one that they had the Norwegian sloops or something that there was only so many built in the world--like ten of them--and three of them were in this building or something. It was one of boatyards that that happened at. But I actually--I had my application in Flower Hill at the time, and I was still an active member of Williston Park. And I was hanging out in Port with the guys, and when that--when Sigsbee's came over, I just went over to the Chief, and I said, "Listen, I still have my insurance at Williston Park. My application's here." He says, "You go ... [buy] ... insurance and get some gear, and give us a hand." Because it was--it was amazing.

Q: How long did it burn?

MP: Oh, probably five, six hours at least. And at that time, it was almost every full moon,



we'd be getting a boatyard. That's how bad it was that--at that particular year.

Q: Every full moon?

MP: Every full moon, they would torch a boatyard, whoever was doing it. Then they got brazen and set two in one night.

Q: Oh, boy. Wow.

MP: But the all-time accident that the--probably the best memories of what the oldtimers taught you how to--you know, "This is the way it's done," and the camaraderie aspect of it was--the oldtimers rubbed it right off on you, you know. It was--it was amazing. Which I don't think you see a lot of today.

Q: How about the equipment that you wore back then when you were first--in 1974. How much different is that?

MP: Actually, the boots have changed. They've--you can have leather driving boots they call them now. They're a lot more comfortable. Bunker pants, which is a tremendous aspect that was--we actually--the members actually bought them themselves, before the Department actually ...

Q: What's the difference between that and what you used to wear?

MP: The actual were the rubber boots, or the hip boots. You pull 'em up and they would come up here. Actually the bunker pants are the same material as your coat, and you just step in the pants, into the boots, and you would pull the pants up. So now you're legs are protected, you know. Because there were times when with just your coat and those hip boots on, we'd get a lot of radiant heat burns. Hot water--if you're kneeling in hot water, you can feel it. Even though you can feel it through the turn-out pants now, it's--they're made out of the same material as the coat and they're--what a difference. What a difference with the protection.

Q: How about the hat?

MP: Helmets, they're basically the same, except the--the New Yorker helmets, which they call, that's made by ... [Karns] ... which was an all-leather helmet. Now, they have a shell in them, protective liner in whereas years ago there was no liners in them. They just-- again, this was safety changes in the equipment. But the design of the helmets is still the same. The clothing is actually really updated for your safety.

Q: Why do they have the lip on the back of the fire hat?

MP: So the water--when you have--if your water's running down, if you're in a--in a building

and ...

Q: Right.

MP: ... you're fighting a fire, and you have a hose line and the hot water's coming down, it's going to run off the back of the helmet instead of down your neck.

Q: What makes a good firefighter, in your opinion?

MP: He has to have the heart. You have to have the heart and determination, I believe.

Q: What about courage?

MP: That comes in. I think that comes with the heart and the determination. Courage comes-- courage, I don't know, I just look at it as you got to do what you got to do. That's what you put your right hand up for, you know.

Q: What's your proudest day as a firefighter? Or your best day.

MP: Actually, probably it didn't have anything to do with the actual fighting fires and stuff. I think it was when we won the state softball championship.

Q: And where was that?

MP: That was in Hudson, New York. We actually won--I was on the team.

Q: What year was that?

MP: 1986.

Q: Uh huh.

MP: We won '86, '87, '88, '89, and '90 I was on the teams for. And then after that, I stopped playing, and they won in '91, I believe. Won six years in a row. No fire department's ever done that.

Q: What position did you play?

MP: I played third base. It was--because we were the enemy up there. We all--we knew we had a good team. We had a very good team. And went up and played these upstate teams, and they're a bunch of big farm boys (laughs) up there, and they had some big teams. And I think it was the second year we won that we came from the loser's bracket, and we had to win every game on a Sunday. We played six games in a row on a Sunday, and I think it was ninety-five degrees--one game after the other. And we just kept

winning and winning. And that was--that was a whole team effort, because we knew that we were better than the game we lost that Saturday that put us in the loser's bracket.

Q: Right.

MP: We put ourselves in that position, and we knew we weren't going to go away from upstate without winning. The team we beat, they couldn't believe it. They couldn't (laughs) believe that we came back. Because we actually were losing to them. I believe it was eleven to seven in the seventh inning. And we ended up beating 'em. And that was the first game. And then the second game was just like we took the sails right out of 'em. And we beat them, I think it was five-one or something. I don't remember the scores of the second game. But the second game was like--but to come back from eleven--I think it was eleven to five, or whatever it was--we just--we didn't have a lot of--we had good ball players. There were maybe a couple of real super stars, but nobody acted like a super star. And that was one of the main reason we won, because everybody played together. And that was definitely a team effort. That was--nobody--nobody actually bragged that they--that "I did this" and "I did that." It was the team that did it. And that reflects back to the Fire Department, too. You know, you do everything as a team.

Q: Yep. What was your worst day?

MP: Bobby Dayton's death.

Q: When you're fighting a fire, what are you thinking about? What goes through your mind?

MP: What dangers we're going to go into, or if I'm in there looking around, what could possibly happen if we go in any further, or digging ahead to actually look to see what dangers exist. For instance, at the McCormick's--I don't know if it was McCormick's, but the sandwash building. When we were in there, I had looked up, and Peter was the Chief, and I had said to Peter, "Peter," I said, "these beams are really bad." I said, "There's a lot of heavy machinery above us." And he actually called the Chief, he says, "Listen," he said, "we might have to back out of here," because there was heavy--and there was some real heavy stuff and the beams were charred. And they could--that ceiling could have collapsed. So you look for stuff like that, you know. That's what you're trained for. I mean, you can't run blind and just charge in, you know. A lot of people want to do that.

Q: Right.

MP: But there's a lot more to it. You've got to take your time and focus on what your job is. Knowing that how--what your limitations are. Put it that way. I mean, I've been in--I've seen fire--we've had people--where people were killed in fires--homeowners and stuff. Up on, oh, off the Boulevard next to Park Avenue, what's the street next to Park Avenue?

Q: Street next to Park. Fairview?

MP: Not Fairview. Begins with an H. Oh, I can't remember the name.

Q: Going out of town, or coming into town?

MP: If you're coming into town, it's the street after the second Getty gas station.

Q: Which gas station?

Q: Yeah, diagonally across from Chester's. My God.

Q: Is it High-something?

MP: Highfield.

Q: Yeah.

MP: Or Highland.

Q: Highland, right (laughs).

MP: My God. One of our members used to live up there. We used to go up to his house to

see him. It was New Year's morning, and we had a house fire up there where somebody was killed in there.

Q: Really.

MP: And there was actually, I believe, probably caused by smoking. Lady fell asleep, smoking on the bed, I guess. And a couple of guys went through the--couple of guys went through the floor into the basement.

Q: From the first floor or the second floor?

MP: From the first floor into the basement. And we got them out. They were shaken up, but not real bad. The lady was in the living room on a bed in the living room. Actually, you couldn't even tell there was a person, because the only thing that was left was the torso. Everything else was burned off. No legs, no arms. Pretty scary sight.

Q: And her husband?

MP: Not at home. I think she was either divorced, or he had passed away.

Q: She was alone?



MP: Yes.

Q: Oh.

MP: She was alone.

Q: Wow. So--and when you have a fire like that, where it's kind of a trauma, how do you handle that afterward?

MP: Well, knowing that you did the best you could. I mean, that particular case, there was nothing we would have done that--to save the lady anyway. She was gone when we got there. And you've got to just hope you don't have to have that happen again, you know. Where you would have a chance to go and save somebody, this person was gone long before we even got the call to the fire. That goes through your mind?

Q: Yeah. ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ... able to bring them into your life, into your regular life, or vice versa?

MP: I try to relate to the young guys what the oldtimers were like, you know.

Q: What do you tell them?

MP: You guys couldn't handle their boots, you know. I mean, you guys couldn't even smell their coffee, you know. You think you know it all. Some of them do, you know. And in my opinion, I think they--with the training today, and with all the alarm systems in the houses, we're really not--we don't really get the fires we used to get. In the beginning of this year, we did. We had quite a few working fires. But with the automatic alarms, you don't really see what we used to see, because they didn't have automatics--that many--back then ...

Q: Right.

MP: ... automatic alarms. When we got a call for a house fire, it was generally, it could have been something.

Q: Right.

MP: I think the young kids today, they don't want to listen. You know, they want to learn their way, and you're--you're an old goat. You can't--you can't tell me anything, you know. You know.

Q: Right. Do you ever dream about fires?

MP: Not really.

Q: Do you do anything special, or does anyone in your department do anything for good luck?

MP: (Laughs). I have a little angel on the back of my helmet--my fireman's helmet-- somebody had given me for good luck to put on my helmet.

Q: As an ornament kind of thing?

MP: Yeah, like an ornament. It's a little pin, actually. It's on a strap. It's a little tiny angel with a fireman's helmet on, you know. And ...

Q: How long have you had it?

MP: Oh, my God! Ten years. Fifteen years on there. And somebody had said to me-- somebody I was seeing at the time said, "This will keep you safe," you know.

Q: And it has (laughs).

MP: Yeah, so far. Then, one of the guys--one of the young kids, actually--last year, he gave me a little (laughs), little thing. I have it hanging on my--where I keep my gear in the firehouse. It's almost like a--what the hell are those things they came out with--the

Beenie Babies type thing. But this is like a little thing; it's a--almost like a monkey or something. And it's got "Old Goat" on it. And when I went to get my gear one night, and I see the thing, and I--and I know the kid who had said that. So I said, "Did you put that up there?" He goes "Yeah." I said, "That's cool, man." I said, "That's cool." Because I really--see, I can relate to the young guys, you know. One of the things I know--I realize is you can't forget where you came from, you know. Just because you're older, you've got to, you know, you can't--if somebody does something wrong, you can't condemn them ...

Q: Right.

MP: ... you know, because we did it. You know, if we didn't do that, or do something similar to that, how can you criticize somebody, you know. You just can't forget where you came from.

Q: How did you overcome your natural fear of fire?

MP: Wow. I guess it was through the training you have at Bethpage. My first time, when I was eighteen, I guess, when I joined, back then in--that was in 1968. The training center, that's where they taught you. They walked you into the building. Basically, I believe, it's the same way they do the basic training now. They brought us in a building. They lit it. It was wooden pallets, and you stood there and you watched the smoke get thicker and

thicker. And you'd have your break. Put your hand up to feel how hot it was up there. Take your glove off, and you just watch the smoke till the smoke was banked down on the floor. They kept you in there and kept--you'd feel the heat and taught to respect it. And that's one of the things--they taught you to respect it, and I think that's one of the biggest things. You respect it. So, that's probably what overcame my fear--you respect it and knowing you'd better than it. Depending on the situation, you always can put it out. But I was never really afraid of it after that. I was a little nervous.

Q: Yeah.

MP: But, of course, you get nervous every time, you know.

Q: Right.

MP: But I guess you know your limitations.

Q: What have your children's attitudes been about it?

MP: I don't have children.

Q: Oh, you don't have any children. Do you have a wife?

MP: No.

Q: Oh, you're divorced. (Laughs). She didn't like the fire part of it.

MP: Actually--this doesn't go on the record?

Q: No, go ahead.

MP: The Fire Department probably had part to do with the divorce anyway. You spend so much time up there, you know, and you're hanging out with the guys, and, you know.

Q: Uh huh. There you go.

MP: That's off the record.

Q: That's right.

MP: That's happened to a few people, but ...

Q: I'm sure it has. And when did you first feel a part of like the team there, or did you--I guess maybe you already did, because you came in knowing all those guys. But was there a time where you felt like, "Okay, now, I'm with the Port Washington guys"?

MP: Oh, well, I guess our first--the first time I actually went to a tournament with the Port Washington was, I think we came in third or fourth in the tournament, and we won like seven trophies. And the Fire Department I was previously with, we won one trophy in four years. I said, "My God!" I said, "We got six trophies in one day!" But, again, they had a good team. They had a really good team. I just happened to be--move over here, and I was--had knowledge of racing, and I didn't jump right into any spots. I had to earn my spots in there.

Q: In the Road Runners, how--what do you need to be a good Road Runner?

MP: You've got to be crazy.

Q: (Laughs).

MP: You've got to want to learn, and you've got to want--if you want to jump the truck, they'll teach you. And once you learn, believe it or not, it's as dangerous as it looks. Once you learn how to jump the truck and run a particular spot, it's--I would always consider it, it's like walking up your stairs. You know, it's a natural thing. You could finish the year in September, and then you start practicing the following year in April, and you take two mediocre runs in April or whenever you started and jump the truck nice and easy. "Okay. Throw everything on. Let's go. Let's get ready." And you go into your full runs, you

know. Again, that's training. You know, a lot of people say, they say it's practice, but it's still training. You're still learning.

Q: So who are your best friends from the Fire Department?

MP: Oh, my God. A lot of my best friends moved.

Q: Retired?

MP: Actually, they were part of--probably a part of the group that couldn't afford to live in town ...

Q: Right.

MP: ... that were members, and they had to move. And I have quite a few good friends in the ...

Q: Do you still see them?

MP: ... Ray Ryan. Ray Ryan, actually I'm good friends with them. Danny Salerno from "Lasagna Ladder" (laughs). Actually John Salerno Sr., which is--that's the famous Salerno family from Atlantic's. There's probably been, I couldn't tell you how many



members. Always involved in the racing. Johnny Salerno was another crazy guy. He's probably one of the, one of the craziest friends I had. He actually just moved to Nebraska. He retired as a City cop, and his wife was a nanny from Nebraska. And she was working in town, I guess. My God, in the early '80s, he met her, he started dating her, and they got married. And when he retired from the City cops, I guess he had an agreement, you know. So, packed up the kids and the wife, and he lives in Nebraska, and I'm sure he misses it, because he was definitely so into the racing team and did so much. I mean, everything. We'd run raffles; he would handle it. We needed parts for a barbecue, he'll handle it. God, I remember he was living with his grandmother, one morning after racing practice the night before, we were hanging out, and I had the day off the next day. Said, "Well, we've got to go get parts for the grill." "Okay." And we were hanging out in one of the establishments.

Q: What were the hangouts ... [??] ...

MP: McMEnamin's at the time. That was probably the biggest one later on. McMEnamin's. And I had to go--he said, "Pick me up at ten o'clock." I said, "Okay." And he was living with his grandmother. And I knocked on the door; his grandmother--and she was--she was up in age, and "Oh, he's upstairs sleeping." So I go upstairs: "Johnny, come on, man. Get up. Let's go. We've got to ..." and he got up; he was shot, hung-over. He gets up and he sits on the side of his bed and he reaches under his bed and he pulls a bag of White Castles out.

Q: (Laughs).

MP: I'm saying, "No, you're not, are you?" And he opens the bag and puts--starts eating a White Castle. He said, "I was hungry when I left the bar." He said, "They should be still warm, though. They've only been under there a couple of hours." I mean--I mean, if you tell people that, they would have never believed me, but I actually witnessed it. "You want one?" "No, I don't want one. What, are you out of your mind?" (Laughs). But again, that was the camaraderie, because people, they had that--some jobs had to get done. The parts had to be gotten, you know, and he would take charge of doing that. He really didn't jump the trucks a lot. He had bad knees when he did jump the truck. But he would still take charge of something that it's got to get done, but still, because, if you don't get it done, nobody's going to do it, you know.

Q: Right.

MP: And, but he was ...

Q: Did you guys ever pull pranks on each other?

MP: Oh, like--oh, yeah, my God! There was--there was a guy from my company. Actually he was a Williston Park fireman also. And when I moved over, he moved over a couple--

about four months later.

Q: What's his name?

MP: Ronnie Young. And he's no longer a member. He was in for probably eight years and then he moved--got married and moved to West Hempstead. But his bachelor party (laughs). We had him so hammered, and one of the fellows--Tiny, this guy Tiny from Hempstead, and the reason they called him Tiny because he was a gigantic guy. And he brought this--the casting where you can make a cast of somebody. Back then, you dropped it in water and you just ...

Q: Yeah.

MP: We had him so drunk. We had him on the table. And we shaved his leg. And we had a clam bake the next day at Manorhaven Park. And we put the cast on him.

Q: On this guy Tiny?

MP: On this guy Ronnie Young.

Q: On Ronnie Young who was a member of ...

MP: Flower Hill.

Q: Right.

MP: And everybody had to be at the firehouse--we had the bachelor party at the firehouse--and everybody had to be at the firehouse, the rookies, the next morning at six, to go down and set up for--so we just stayed there. I mean, we crashed in the back. And he's laying on the couch, and he's got this goddamn cast on. And Ronnie Pickney was a Port cop at the time, who was also ... [a Roslyn fireman] ... And Ronnie Pickney was probably the funniest cop I've ever ...

Q: One of--yeah, I remember Ronnie the Cop.

MP: Yeah. So, he comes in the firehouse to get coffee. We said, "Ronnie, listen, you've got to ..." so we tell him the story. He's the one that wakes him up. He says, "Come on, Ronnie, wake up. I need the rest of the information for the report." And he gets up and he says, "What report?" "Well, you fell down the stairs last night. You don't remember?" He said, "They took you to the hospital. You're just getting..I need the information." "Holy Christ! I'm getting married," and he's got this cast on. And down at the clam bake, the whole morning, he's hobbling around in his cast. And guys would go up and like kick him in the cast, and he'd go, "Aieeee!" I guess until about three o'clock in the afternoon, we told him, "You can cut the cast off now." "What?" He was fuming

(laughs). And everybody knew it, too. And he was--so we made clam chowder at the clam bake also, you know. He's over there stirring chowder, hobbling around in his cast (laughs).

Q: (Laughs). Did he get married the next day?

MP: No, actually, he was getting--he got married two weeks later.

Q: Oh.

MP: But it was--when Ronnie the Cop was, "Come on, I need the rest of the information," I thought he was going to have a stroke there. "What do you mean? The information? For what?" (Laughs).

Q: Have you ever saved any objects from a burning house? Anything that was on fire, any place that was on fire?

MP: Geez, I couldn't recall.

Q: Okay. What advice would you give to homeowners about avoiding home fires?

MP: Well, that's a good question, because we had a--I can't believe how naive people are.

People should read about fire safety, because some people have no clue. We had a call just last Sunday. Was on--up on Guilford Road up there. And Port Washington police were there. They just hit it with an extinguisher real quick. It was a small fire on top of the stove. But as soon as we walked in there, into the kitchen, the homeowner turns to me and he says--this was like eleven o'clock, I guess it was eleven-fifteen in the morning--"We cooked breakfast at six-thirty this morning. Nothing's been cooked on the stove since." Okay. They had the front of the baby's high chair--the thing that locks in--they had that sitting on top of the stove. Now, they have one of these stoves with no burners. It's ...

Q: Yeah, ceramic.

MP: And the stove's hot. Obviously, the stove wasn't off. And I actually said to him, I said, "Sir," I said, "you can't put anything on these stoves. Do you realize ..." "Well, we had just got back from shopping. We put things away. I went upstairs. My wife was upstairs. She came down, and our kitchen was full of smoke." I said "Had you not got home," I said, "this whole house could have been burning." You know, the automatic alarm went off, and what it's supposed to do, but, I said, you know, I was amazed that people don't even have--could be so naive ...

Q: Common sense.

MP: Yeah, don't have the common sense. They might have all the brains in the world, but, boy, they don't have any common sense. You know, and it's tough not to get harsh with them, because, you know, you're actually thinking, you're saying, well, this guy could have jeopardized guys coming in here, if this thing was burning, because of stupidity.

Q: Did you ever yell at anybody?

MP: Yeah, a couple of times. I can't say what I yelled, but a couple of times when people do something really ignorant or ...

Q: Like what?

MP: Couple of serious auto accidents where people--I know they're concerned. They're trying to get into--you can't go over here. You can't, you know. "I'm going." "You can't," you know. And you've got to scream and yell at them, you know. As much as you want to yell at them, I hold it in a lot, believe me, because I can--I would--I tell it like it is. I'm just the person, I like, I always believe in being straightforward and call a spade a spade, so to speak, you know, and just be honest. No fooling around and ...

Q: Did you have anything to do with 9/11?

MP: Yes. We actually, the day of 9/11, we were on standby at Atlantic's. And that was the

following Thursday, which was the, probably the 13th, I think it was. They were taking groups of volunteers to go in to work shifts in there. And I had spoke to the officer from Atlantic's. I said, "Listen, if you're going in, put me on the list." And he called me back. "Yeah, we're leaving at five o'clock." And we met at Great Neck's firehouse, because the Deputy Chief from Great Neck was killed in the Trade Center--Jonathan ... [Ayobe] ... He was a member of Squad 288. And we went in and had to work our way around to get into the area, too, because at that time, they were really trying to hold a--keep a lot of people out of the area. But we ended up walking through One World Financial Plaza. And we came right up dead center--dead center where the debris field was. And then the first thing I found when we were cleaning, I found a business card from Windows on the World. And ...

Q: Do you have it?

MP: No, I threw it away. I wouldn't--that's one thing. I don't take anything from there. They said, they told you--nothing. And you do what you're told. I'm sure there was other stuff people had taken, but me personally, no. I remember I picked up the business card; I'm like shaking my head. And the most amazing thing about it was there was probably fifteen hundred, sixteen hundred people working in that area passing buckets back and forth. And they blew a whistle for silence because they thought they heard something. Fifteen hundred people, dead silence in that debris field. It was amazing. It was amazing. They'd call for a dog, or a camera. Mostly you heard "body bags." Body bag



here and body bag there. I actually never saw anybody. Right behind where we were working, there was an engine. Actually, the first thing I saw was an engine in the Plaza. And ...

Q: A fire engine?

MP: A City engine.

Q: Right.

MP: That was--cab was fully intact. From the cab back was crushed right to the--right to the railings. And I'm looking at it, and I'm like looking. I see the driver's seat's perfect; the officer's seat's perfect. Where the guys were in the back, it's perfect. Just full of dust. Right behind where the guys would be sitting, the engine was crushed. Crushed, flattened. And I'm like man, I wonder what happened with these guys. I'm looking around the debris field saying--and it's funny because I went to quite a few funerals. I was--happened to be at one of the funerals in March, and went over to the school across the street to use the restroom. And I come out, and there was five guys sitting in the lobby of the school, and they're talking about a patch. "Hey, well, it's thirty dollars for the patch," and, yeah, I really--I have the picture at home of the engine, and I don't really remember the number of the engine. I think it was forty-something. But I--and that bothers me, because I don't remember the name of the engine. But I heard these guys

talking, and I said, "Are you from engine ..." say, if it was Engine Forty-five, I said, "Are you guys from Forty-five Engine?" And they go, "Yeah." And I said--I went over and introduced myself. I said, "My name is Mike Pickering." I said "Our department went in that Thursday night when we worked, and I was in the Plaza area and I saw your engine sitting there." And the guy looks at me, and he goes, "See the guy sitting over there. That's the jack-ass that was driving that day." I went, "Huh?" He says, "Will made it." He said, "When the building started to come down, we ran into the underground parking garage of One World Financial Plaza. We made it by ten seconds." And then the one guy standing there says, "Yeah," he says, "I almost dove under the back of the truck. Good thing I didn't. They convinced me not to. We made it into the underground parking garage of One World Financial Plaza, and we all made it." And, to me, that was some kind of closure, because what were the odds of me being at that particular funeral and running into these guys. From September, I thought they were, looking at that engine, I said, these guys, whew! But, I mean, it's very--yeah, I don't know how to even explain it.

Q: Right. So, from September to March, and the funeral you had was unrelated to 9/11?

MP: Oh, it was a 9/11 funeral.

Q: Oh, it was.

MP: It was for a member of Squad 288.

Q: Oh, I see, okay.

MP: Bur, you're talking three, four thousand firemen.

Q: Yeah.

MP: I mean, at every funeral I went to, there was three or four thousand firemen. I probably went to probably twenty or thirty of them. Because I--personally I felt that it was an obligation, you know, to pay your respects. And what--how ironic it was, or whether you believe in it, or an act of God, or somebody saying to give this guy closure or whatever it was, to actually meet these guys that when I stood in front of that engine swearing that they were dead. I mean that's--and that was very strange.

Q: Yeah.

MP: It was very strange. But working in there was something you just, whatever pictures you saw, pictures were nothing compared to being there. And then again, I felt I was--I felt on the actual day it happened, wanting to do something more than just stand by at the firehouse, and I did have my opportunity to do something, go in there that Thursday night. And it made me--made me feel better, because I was able to even, for the seven or

eight hours we were in there, passing buckets back and forth, I was there contributing, you know. And it gave--it made me feel good. But, like I said, it was very strange to-- and more so to run into these guys, that was very weird.

Q: How would you like to be remembered through the Fire Department?

MP: Hmmm. They call me "Grumpy" all the time (laughs).

Q: (Laughs).

MP: Or "Miserable." "You're always miserable."

Q: Is that true?

MP: No, I don't know (laughs). You know, when you go through it, sometimes life is tough, you know, and you've gone through some bad stuff in your life, and how it just ...

Q: So your nickname really is "Grumpy"?

MP: No, no. My nickname is "Mugsy."

Q: OH, "Mugsy," okay. How'd you get that name?

MP: Through the racing teams. I have no idea how I got it, but it went through the racing team. So, one night they just came up and practiced. I mean, every guy on the racing team had nicknames.

Q: Right.

MP: I mean, everybody. And now, again, that was with the racing team, was camaraderie, you know.

Q: Right.

MP: But how would I like to be remembered? That when you put your right hand up, you do it for a reason. I mean, I've still get out of bed--I'm fifty-five, and I still get out of bed at two, three--I've been up--I mean, I was up at one-thirty this morning. Yesterday morning, I was up at twenty minutes to five we had a call. Even on the recorded alarms, everybody says you call them, it's going to be nothing. I still believe when you put your right hand up "to serve and protect," as long as you can still do it, you should do it. And that's a hint that the guys just stay in bed now and don't get out of bed, because years ago, at night time, if there was a call, you'd have Flower Hill's engine out; you'd have an engine out at Protection's main house, you'd have an engine out of Protection's annex down on Channel Drive. You'd have a ladder out of Atlantic's annex, and you'd have a

ladder out of Atlantic's main house. No matter what time of day or night it was, years ago. And you don't get that nowadays. Nowadays, believe it or not, we're lucky if we can get two pieces of apparatus on the road at two, three, or four o'clock in the morning. That bothers me, because I know people that, they live right by the fire.. ...

Q: Lack of commitment or lack of members?

MP: Lack of commitment. Because, even if you're down to fifty members, you still have people that live around the firehouse, you can function just as well with fifty members, if they're dedicated, as well as you can with a hundred. You know, I mean, granted, we don't have fifty active members. We might have twenty active members--young, you know, young enough to--but that's what you joined for, you know. And, yeah, I know it's a pain. But I hear the excuses of--I've heard of some good excuses over the last ...

Q: Like what?

MP: Like you have to get up and go to work tomorrow morning. If they would have said that to one of the oldtimers years ago, the oldtimer would have took his foot and put it where the sun doesn't shine. Well guess what? You're going to be hurting, so you won't be able to go to work tomorrow. What, are you kidding me? I mean ...

Q: Because everyone has a job.

MP: Sure.

Q: Right.

MP: Oh, I..you can't get out of bed because you've got to go to work tomorrow? What the hell you think I've got to do. I get out of bed. I got to work tomorrow, you know. And, like I said, the oldtimers--I learned--it's amazing with the oldtimers, when you've experienced what these old guys did. And these were the oldtimers that went through World War II, you know, so they grew up a lot harder times than what they have today. And I respected them so much that had, you know, those are the guys that, after a Department meeting, which they had once a year, there was--that's from the--you had a couple of card games and they'd be--have some games going on. They'd last till six in the morning. "This is my last hand. I've got to go to work." And these guys, well, they weren't oldtimers then. They were probably in their forties and fifties then, you know, "Okay, I got to go to work. Last hand." And they'd go. And they'd go home and take a shower and go to work, you know. These kids today--these kids today, they couldn't--if they don't get their eight hours sleep, you know. Or, "Well, I stubbed my toe, or I hurt my toe, I can't go," you know. It's a different generation. And I don't mean to begrudge that different generation. It's just that I think they should learn--they should know what the other people went through, you know. I always respected the oldtimers because of what they went through.

Q: And do the young guys respect you, now that you're an oldtimer (laughs).

MP: Yeah, some of them do. Some of them do. Actually, it was funny. We had a call a couple of weeks ago down at the--again, a recorded alarm--that new condo building down on West Shore Road, the golf course.

Q: Yep.

MP: So, it was on the fifth floor. We got up to the ele--we go up to the elevator on the first floor, and there was a couple of young guys from Atlantic's. And they got the tools in their hand, and I got a high rise pack. A high rise pack is with the full length of hose strapped up, so we can put it up to a stand pipe system. So I go over there to push the elevator button. This one kid turns and he goes, "Aren't firemen supposed to take the stairs?" I said, "Yep, young firemen. If you want to take the stairs, take the stairs. Me, I'm taking the elevator" (laughs). And he just looked at me, you know. Forty years ago I would have taken the elevator, I mean, I would have taken the stairs (laughs). There's a member from Flower Hill--Pat Caliendo.

Q: Pat Caliendo?

MP: Yes.



Q: Go ahead.

MP: And he joined the company. He lived right around the corner from the firehouse. And he wanted to race. And he came down from practices, and he was learning and he was running events, and before the first tournament he was going to go to, he actually--Joey Teta, the gentleman that was killed with the rock--had a Jeep with a Chevy engine in it. So they were down there, like I said, to practice, and he was going to take a ride in the sand pits with the Jeep. So, he comes back about ten minutes later, and Pat's got a towel wrapped around his head. When they went over a jump, half of them went out of the Jeep, and Joey grabbed him by the seat of his pants. But he hit his head on the hood of the Jeep. And he got like six stitches. He couldn't race. That was his--he was so psyched. He got the stitches out, and then two weeks later, we were getting ready to--we were having another tournament. And he gets on somebody's motor--Stevie Cychan had his motorcycle. "Oh, let me ride this." He goes uptown and apparently wipes the motorcycle out. He got like seven stitches there. He couldn't make the second tournament. Se, we're like oh, my God. So, now we're setting up for the block party, and he's there and he's got bandages around him, like he's still got a Band-Aid up here. His father comes down, and his father was the old school Italian. And he grabs Ronny Henderson. He says, "Hey," he says, "I'm a-going ask you," he says, "I raised my son eighteen years. I give him to the firehouse six months. He's a physical wreck." (Laughs)

Q: (Laughs).

MP: And that was the--he ended up no more falling and he ended up racing. He raced, and he was in the Department probably about ten years or so, and then he got a job. He still lives in town, but his job just took too much time up, you know. But I'll never forget it, you know ... [and he had like ??] ... definitely ... [?] ... all day. But it was so funny. "I raise up my son eighteen years. I give him to the Fire Department, in six months he's a physical wreck." ... [END OF RECORDED INTERVIEW] ...