

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With  
**Ex-Chief John E. Salerno, Sr.**  
Atlantic Hook & Ladder Company No. 1

conducted in association with the  
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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: Today is June 10, 2004. We are at the Port Washington Public Library. My name is Margaret Dildilian and I am interviewing John E. Salerno, ex-Chief of the Port Washington Fire Department. John, I would like to know a little about your early years and family background.

JES: Born in Port Washington, here. I was born on Avenue A. And then my parents built a house right around the corner on Cross Street, so we moved there in early 50's. I went through the local schools. I got married in 1963 and moved to Manorhaven, Inwood Road, for one year. Then I moved back up to the Avenue A area, and which, in 1968, I purchased my grandparents' house and am there to this day.

Q: Before I ask about your childhood, why did you purchase your grandparents' house?

JES: Well, I was very fortunate at the time. I worked with the local School District and I had only been there for a few years. And naturally, the salary wasn't the greatest, but when my grandfather passed away, a friend of my family approached me and asked me if I'd like to buy my grandfather's house. At the time, I had like \$500 in the bank and we weren't purchasing a house. But he went around to my entire family and set up all kinds of mortgages with my aunts and my father and I purchased the house.

Q: It was a meaningful purchase, no doubt?

JES: Oh yes, yes. Well, we had the child and you always want to have a yard for your children and that was an ideal. It was a two-family house, so that I would get an added income, and would help support my family. So we've been there ever since. One addition after another addition was added to the house, but we finally have what we want.

Q: Your grandparents were born here?

JES: No, they both came from Italy. My grandfather used to work in the sand banks until he was injured. He was .....

Q: How was he injured?

JES: The story I had, they used to take steel spikes and hit the bank so that the sand would come down. And somehow, one of the spikes went through his foot, so he became an invalid and no longer could work. But he had owned my house. We had the firehouse right next to me. He owned that property and then the house behind me, which was my parent's house. He owned all that property and he used to farm it.

Q: He used to what?

JES: Farm it, with tomatoes and all kind of vegetables and everything else. And, you know, that's how he ...

Q: What years were those?

JES: Oh, that's in the 40's and 50's. They had to can all the vegetables: the potatoes, the tomatoes and the peppers and everything else for the winter. That was their winter supply of food. And I can remember as a kid, helping them put tomatoes in bottles and then boil them in the backyard; you know, help in the garden.

Q: And how did they choose Port Washington so that you became a Port Washingtonian?

JES: I really don't know. It's been so long ago... I tell you the truth, I never even asked that question. But the entire family's been here and I had many uncles and aunts that... only a few left that are alive, that live here in Port Washington. But they all stayed in Port Washington.

Q: Were they from what city in Italy?

JES: Around the Salerno area, believe it or not. But that's the section they came from, and I don't know what year they really came over.

Q: Can you remember what your earliest childhood was like in Port?

JES: Well, childhood in Port Washington years ago, I think, was a lot more fun than it is for the kids now because we had a lot more open space. We had the sand banks to roam around in. You could go hunting and....

Q: What did you hunt?

JES: Well, I really wasn't a hunter. I was like the dog. My cousins used to hunt and I used to run through the briar patches to chase out the rabbits because I was really not a good hunter. I wasn't a good shot, so... but, you know, it was a lot different then, I think, because of the open space. Now, it's so crowded and we just lost too much in Port Washington from building, really.

Q: Did you have a nickname when you were little?

JES: Not when I was little, but as I was an agent in the Fire Department, they called me Bubba.

Q: Now, what does that mean?

JES: Well, I don't know. Just, I guess about ten years or so, where there was a TV program on that was a football team with two guys – one was Jethro and one was Bubba. And I had a tenant upstairs, a young fellow that was in the Fire Department, and his name was Jethro. So, they all started calling me Bubba, and it stuck. And that's the way it's been for years now.

Q: So they all know you as Bubba?

JES: Yeah, yeah. Even my sons call me Bubba, you know, so.....

Q: How were your middle school years and your high school years?

JES: Well, just regular, I guess, there's nothing outstanding. I really didn't... I had no intentions of going to college or anything, so.....

Q: Why was that?

JES: I was always looking just to work. I guess you want to call it, I was just probably a lazy child, didn't really appreciate school that much, so... I wanted the outdoors more than anything else.

Q: And the most important thing that you learned in your childhood? What was that?

JES: That's a tough question. I guess, basically, it's just to be with everybody, and be fair with everybody and respect everybody. That's the way I was brought up, and I guess it continued with the school.

Q: And what did you do in summer vacations?

JES: Oh, worked mostly.

Q: Where did you work?

JES: I either worked at home, 'cause we always had a little garden. It was our job was taking care of the garden. My father was always laid off in the wintertime, so we had a garden to take care of, too. And I worked at a local gas station, Nogo's Gas Station, down on the corner of Manorhaven Boulevard. It used to be there years ago, but it's a Sunoco Station now. It used to be the Nogo Brothers owned it. And that's about it. I only had very few jobs.

Q: Why did you choose to be a firefighter?

JES: I guess it's more a family tradition. My father was fireman, all my uncles were firemen. And then we had the drill team, and I just used to love to go watch the race and the drills. And so I wanted to be on the drill team. That's when I got in the Fire Department.

Q: So, actually, the sports in the Fire Department is what enticed you?

JES: Well, one of them. But the thing was to be a fireman, to help out the community. And like I say, my entire family...that's what I was grown up in, fire service, like all my uncles, my father. It wasn't too hard to follow right in suit.

Q: Why did your family have so many members in the Fire Department, do you think?

JES: I don't know. I guess it's the same thing, community, to help out the community. Every one of my uncles,...we had many people, we have a big history in the Port Washington Fire Department, especially Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company, as far as my family.

Q: And who influenced you the most in your family, or was it your family?

JES: I think my whole family. And my father. My father was a very hard-working man. I would say that would be it.

Q: And why did you choose Atlantic Hook and Ladder?



JES: That's where most of the family was members.

Q: And why do they call it Atlantic Hook and Ladder?

JES: There's four companies in Port Washington and we are the ladder company, which we come with the tower ladders or aerial ladders. And our job is to ladder a building when there's a fire and to go in for a rescue. And each company has a specific job, but that is our job to do.

Q: And your initial years, when you went into the Fire Company as a rookie. Can you remember what life was like?

JES: Oh yeah. I went in 1961 and, back at that time, you had to join... you had five years probation. At this time, now you only have two years' probation. You were compelled to be there every Thursday night to work on the trucks. On Saturdays and Sundays, if they had different stuff to do, details to do, you'd be there. And you had fire schools and Tuesdays... you had a big commitment. You had a lot of time spent in the Fire Department.

Q: When you joined the firefighters as a volunteer, how old were you?

JES: I was eighteen.

Q: So, then did you have another job outside the firefighting?

JES: Oh yes. I started working for the School District in... I graduated in 1960/1961 and started working with the School District, and I worked there for forty years. I retired two and a half years ago.

Q: And what did you do at the school?

JES: I was outside groundsman and I worked myself up to being the head groundsman. My uncle was actually was my boss. He was head groundskeeper there and...

Q: And what was it like working there?

JES: Oh, it was challenging. A lot of work. Low pay, but a lot of work. We did everything. It wasn't just a groundsman's job. We did anything from cutting grass to doing plumbing to carpenter work, to marking fields. It was an all-around job, whatever. They had crews for everything, but when anybody needed help, you went and helped them.

Q: How many hours did you put in at the School District?

JES: It was an eight-hour day. If you were lucky enough, you'd get some overtime. That always helped.

Q: So, if the fire alarm rang and you were in the School District, how did you manage?

JES: Well, we were very fortunate. The School District let all firemen respond to fires. Back in those days, you had the Water District, the School District, Lewis Oil. And they let all the employees that were firemen respond to fires. So we were basically the daytime fire crew. We had quite a few guys. Nowadays, it's a little tougher for businesses to release kids that are firemen because of the economy.

Q: Now, how did you come up in the ranks in your middle years?

JES: You run for election. You're around the firehouse doing a job and the men that are in the company see that you're doing the job, so you get nominated for a position in the November and December meeting. And the elections are in January, and if you are fortunate enough to have enough membership that believe in you, you get elected. I've been fortunate. I've held quite a few offices in the fire service. I worked my way up from the bottom to the top, basically.

Q: Going back to your childhood earlier years, what was memorable about working in the garden with your parents or your grandparents in Port?

JES: Watching things grow. When you're a kid it's amazing. You plant something small or a seed and the next thing you know, in a few months, you're eating something from it.

Q: Did you ever sell any of your produce?

JES: No. The family mostly just gave it amongst the family. And everybody, all my aunts and uncles used to come to my grandparents and they would help can and bottle everything. And then they would split it for the winter. It was a big project in the fall. Like a harvest of any farmer. Basically, we had a small little farm.

Q: Were they farmers back in Italy?

JES: I don't know. I don't know what he was.

Q: Your entire family belongs with the Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company.

JES: Yes.

Q: But your son-in-law, where does he belong?

JES: Protection Engine Company.

Q: Why is that?

JES: Well, he was a member there. My daughter happened to be at one of the tournaments or parade and met him and they started going out together. He's the only one that really didn't come over to the good company. We didn't talk him into switching over. It was always a joke that the Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company was the Italian people, and then Flower Hill was most of the Polish people in Port Washington, and Protection was the mixed breeds. Everybody went to Protection. It was always a little joke we used to have. I don't know if you heard of Chip Dodge.

Q: Of what?

JES: Mr. Dodge. He was a member of Atlantics for over fifty years.

Q: Of the Dodge House?

JES: Yes. He was quite a character.

Q: What years were those?

JES: It was way before me, but he was still in when I was there. He used to always tell us, back in his days, it was “Iron-Men” and “Wooden Horses.” And now we got the iron horses and wooden men. It was just a joke. And the same was that when we’d have a dinner or dance and he’d be on the dance floor the whole night. And he was in his eighties, seventies and eighties, and us young twenty year-olds would be sitting at a table talking.

Q: So what years were these?

JES: In the sixties, I guess. Middle sixties, when he was still alive. He was a very great person.

Q: And he was what generation of the Dodge’s?

JES: I don’t know, I guess, he was the last of them, I think. I don’t know if he has anybody after that, unless he had a daughter, I’m not sure. But.....

Q: What was your goal when you first went in with the fire company? Did you have a goal in mind?

JES: Not in the beginning. Not in the beginning. I guess, basically, just be a fireman and be on the drill team.

Q: What is a drill team?

JES: We still have it to this day. We have two different style trucks and we jump off the back of the trucks and put up ladders and climb, and we do all these events. We compete around the State of New York. There's probably ten different tournaments a year. We compete against forty/fifty different teams, fire departments from Long Island and New York. And you compete for trophies.

Q: The purpose is to keep the company sharp?

JES: Yeah, because it's all... what you're doing is basically training with the ladder and training with hoses; it's something you would be doing at a fire. It just, I guess, builds your nerve up to do it more easily. And it's a sport, it's a camaraderie thing that everybody sticks together.

Q: How hazardous is it?

JES: It's like anything else. If you do it right, it's not hazardous. If you do it wrong, you can get hurt. We've had a few, not Port Washington, but a few young kids have died in the different events. But, you know they.....

Q: What happened when they died? What did they do wrong?

JES: Well, years ago you didn't race with helmets and, like anything else, like motorcycles you rode without helmets. And then one of the kids fell off a truck, hit his head and died from it. So then the rules came out that everybody wears helmets. Some things are just freak accidents and you just can't understand why they happen, but they happen.

Q: Has anything ever happened to you?

JES: Oh, I've gotten injured a few times. A few legs and arm injuries. We pay for it now because our backs hurt and our legs hurt. To do it over again, I'd do it 100 times because I loved it.

Q: Why?

JES: I just loved it.

Q: What is there, what's the mystique about the Fire Department, being a firefighter?

JES: I just think it's a brotherhood. No matter where you go in the country, probably even in the world, you can stop in any firehouse, every one. You just walk in the door if you need assistance and they would help you. It's like a giant family. I've broken down, where



I've gone to a firehouse and they replaced a fan belt on my car. They got to their local gas station guy and brought a fan belt for my car where I was traveling one time.

Q: Where was this?

JES: Upstate New York. And a lot of people don't have this. They don't have the places to stop or they wouldn't even think about stopping at a firehouse. But we have the luxury. I've met a lot of people around the State of New York. I don't know them, basically, probably their whole names...

Q: Tell us some of the stories of what's happened to you.

JES: When you go to conventions, you go to tournaments, and you meet so many people. And you know them by the first name basis and you probably see them year after year. If you don't see them, then you go to people that they were with and find out what happened, if they're sick or the reason they're not there. It's a tremendous amount of people you meet. Tremendous friendships. I remember going Upstate where people have given us, our drill team, the firehouse to stay in and treated us like kings. Or we've had them come down here.

Q: What did they do for you?

JES: They get beds for you, cots and blankets and pillows, and they make your breakfast and lunch. It's the same thing. We invited them down here and we had them come to our firehouse and stay. It's really hard to explain. It's such a tremendous group of people. Everybody knows, we're all doing the same thing and, sometimes, you'll look at it one way and sometimes you can go into a fire and not come out.

Q: And how do you feel about that, for yourself, when you're going to a fire, you're called to a fire. What goes through your mind?

JES: Basically, you're going there to put out the fire, you don't really think of yourself. I don't think there's one fireman that's really going, when he goes to a fire, is thinking, "Oh, gee, I'm not going to do this because, you know, my life, or this." I'm trained, I go into the fire, I put it out and I come out. If I need to rescue, if I'm there for a rescue, I'm going to go and attempt to rescue to the best of my ability. But, I can't ever remember really sitting there and saying, "Oh, gee, I'm not going to do this." I guess the training and everything.

Q: Are you an active member up to today?

JES: Yes, I am. I mean, not as much as I used to do before, but....

Q: When you became Chief, who were the men around you, that were under you?

JES: Goeff Cole was my Asst. Chief, first Asst. Chief and John O'Reilly was my second Asst. Chief and then James Interdonati was my Fire Marshal. I came after Peter Zwerlein and Charles Lang was above us before that. I had good people in front of me that taught me a lot.

Q: Did the previous chiefs then, tell you what the score is?

JES: It's like any time you become a chief and you run into a problem, you always go back to the ex-Chiefs. Most of them have been through things you haven't been through. You can contact anybody in the Fire Department, any ex-Captain, any of the old-timers, if you had a problem with something, they were more than willing to help you. It's not much of a problem to get help.

Q: How does your family feel about you being in the Fire Department since it's so....?

JES: Oh, my wife understood. I probably spent more time at the fire house than I did at home when I was a young kid.

Q: How do you now, in retrospect, feel about that?

JES: The biggest loss I had, I think, was seeing my family grow up. I had two boys and a girl and being so involved in the Fire Department and work...they were born and the next thing, they were sixteen years old. So I missed a lot of their childhood, but I'm making it up with my grandchildren. I have six grandchildren so, they're with me every other day.

Q: And how do you feel about it in terms of having lost those years?

JES: Disappointment, because when I see what I do with my grandchildren, then I know I never had the opportunity to do with my children.

Q: And how do your children feel about it? Or how did they feel about it back then? Did they say anything?

JES: No, they understand. They're both firemen now and they both have young children. My oldest boy just moved out to Nebraska, but my other son, he's still a fireman in Atlantic.

Q: Why did he move to Nebraska?

JES: He was a New York City Policeman and he retired. And his wife comes from Columbus, Nebraska. So they decided, instead of being with the rat-race here and everything goes on, they'd go out to Nebraska. They built a beautiful home, just moved in a couple weeks ago, and they're happy. He stays home, takes care of the two girls, and my

daughter-in-law goes to work. It works out great for them. She's a court stenographer, so, it's a lot easier for her to get work out there in Nebraska than it is for him right now. But once the kids go to school, then he'll work. They're doing really well.

Q: What are some of the most memorable fires that you dealt with?

JES: Let's see, we had the Riviera fire that was one night that was so cold that your helmet actually froze on your head.

Q: And how do you deal with that when it freezes on your head?

JES: After the fire you go to the firehouse and wait until it thaws out and you can take it off. That's all. 'Cause your hair is actually frozen into the thing. We had the Bradley Building down here, that was another a big local restaurant, and that was another freezing night. I can remember that because they had a hedge in front of it and the entire hedge was a block of ice. You couldn't even walk in the streets, it was so icy.

Q: So fighting fires in the winter is really more hazardous?

JES: Yes, it just gives you that much more problems. 'Cause then you have to worry about the water, you've got to worry about frozen hydrants, frozen hose. The Bradley fire we actually had our aerial ladder frozen in the air. We had to lower it down and get it back

to the firehouse so that it would thaw out. You just don't know what's going to happen in the wintertime. And the conditions to get the men to the firehouse. But mostly, any kind of major storm, the officers would call standby and we'd have people sleep in the firehouse, which they still do today. Just to make sure that we have trucks to get out.

Q: How many people are on standby?

JES: It's all according to who's available. You always have twenty,twenty-five,thirty guys.

Q: But they don't all sleep there, do they?

JES: Yeah, they'll stay overnight. They don't sleep. Most of the time they're talking or playing cards or something.

Q: So what do they do while they're waiting?

JES: I guess they talk and watch some TV. Not too many of them sleep. So you're up...you get a lot of small alarms in inclement weather. There's recorded alarms, or wires or something and arcing. So, you know, you're on the run.

Q: Do you talk about what happens with your family after a fire?

JES: Not really, not me. I don't know about the other fellows, but my wife always complains that I don't talk too much about anything, so.....

Q: Why is that?

JES: I don't know. It's just the way I am. I'm not the greatest talker. Even on the telephone when I call my friends, it's like a five minute conversation. That's it.

Q: That's not good. That doesn't bode well for my interview.

JES: I've talked more now than I've talked in my life probably. Except when I get in a good heated argument in the Fire Department, then I talk a lot.

Q: Do you save your talk to talk with the men rather than the family?

JES: I don't know. Well mostly, we all talk, all firemen talk about the battles and all the different big fires they've been to. I really haven't talked to my family much about it.

Q: Were you chief during 9/11?

JES: No, I was ex-Chief. I got out in 1991. But on 9/11, we were called. We had taken over the Sterling, the boat that's out here in the bay, that's the party boat. And I took it into

the... we went over to Great Neck first, because we had set up the "R" battalion, which consists of the Great Necks, Manhasset, Williston Park and all.... We set up an aid station at the Merchant Marine Academy over there. So then I took a few of the Merchant Marine AMT's with me and we went into the City into, right into around by the World Trade Center, which was not there. And, unfortunately, there was nobody there that we could help. We stood there for a while and then came back. But we had men that went over to Belmont Race Track, stood by there to assist the City wherever they needed. And they ended up just being there for like nine or ten hours just waiting with our trucks, two or three of our trucks. And we had men standing by in the firehouse. We were there to help whenever they needed it.

Q: How has that affected the company?

JES: We actually we had gained membership after that. We had quite a few young kids that did join the Fire Department after that, and we also lost some young kids then.

Q: Why is that?

JES: I guess with the fear that it could happen to them.

Q: You mean, they left after they joined?



JES: Yeah. A few. Not too many from my company, but a couple from the other companies left after 9/11. I just guess seeing what happened and what could happen to a fireman. I don't know whether it could have been family pressure or... but some of them resigned.

Q: So it had a positive and negative effect.

JES: Yeah. But I think more for us probably was a positive with more membership joining.

Q: What offices have you held?

JES: Engineer in my company. I was Second Lieutenant, First Lieutenant, Captain. I was a Trustee. Then I was Fire Marshal of the Fire Department. I was Asst. Chief, First Asst. Chief, then Chief. I've been Vice Chairman for the Board of Directors. Up there for two years. Quite a few. I worked myself all the way up. I've been president of our drill team, both drill teams, because we combined. At one time, each company had a drill team and then, in about 1975, we all were, all were... everybody went together. First, Flower Hill and Protection went together earlier, and then my company went in with them in '75, I think it was. I became President there. I've been captain of the drill team, I was captain of my own drill team, President of our Rowdy's Club that we formed after we disbanded our drill team. I've been past President of our "Exempts Association." I'm still a Trustee there. I've been a Trustee there for about over twenty years. Pretty busy.

Q: So how many hours does all of this take in your.....?

JES: Oh, I couldn't count the hours I give to the Fire Department. It would be totally impossible. When you're Chief, you have to be at the headquarters every day. You have to stop by, check the mail, check the messages. Thursday nights was our meeting. The other deputies and all my officers would meet there every Thursday night and go over whatever we had to do. Very busy. That's why I say, a lot of hours go by. That's what I said before, you kind of miss your children growing up because you're so busy with the Fire Department.

Q: And how do you feel about the trade-off?

JES: Well, I love the Fire Department and I'm kind of sad that I missed everything with my children. But, like I said, I made up for it. I'm with my kids all the time.

Q: You mean now that they're grown?

JES: Yeah. I'm with them all the time. We're more like close friends than father and son. We're together quite a bit.

Q: And how do they feel about that?

JES: Well, I guess they, they're.... my youngest son is involved in a drill team. That's it. If the grass has got to be cut and he's got to go to practice... practice, and the grass stays long. You know, he's like me, back when I was young. You just get it in your blood and you love it and....

Q: What is it that gets into your blood? Why is this? Have you ever thought about it?

JES: Not really. It's just something you love. Some people like baseball, some people like football, but I never cared for any of that. It's the thrill. It's the thrill of doing this and it's a competition. You're going out there. If you can beat forty or fifty different fire departments, it's a thrill.

Q: Now this is when you're in the drills?

JES: Yeah.

Q: What about when you're at real fires? What is it inside of your blood that makes you jump up and go to these?

JES: I just was born to it. My whole family has been involved in it. So, it's just something I guess I was born in.

Q: Peter, your best friend's in the Fire Department? Would you consider the entire department?

JES: Well, I've got four or five really... I would consider my best friends in the Fire Department. We socialize more. We're out together all the time. But, you have your friends and your enemies, like any other association. You know, some people.....

Q: What happens with the enemies?

JES: They're the ones that vote against you. I mean there's nothing that anybody's gonna be... do anything to you, it's just that....

Q: They vote against you in what?

JES: When you run for a position. They have their opinion like I have mine.

Q: Is that when you had the "black ball?"

JES: We used to have that, years ago. When I joined Fire Department, there was the black ball system, where they had a box and they had all white balls and three black balls. And if three people didn't like you, they put three black balls in there. There could be one hundred members and you were out. Then that was changed where it came to a majority

vote. So, that's what it is to this day. Now, it's a majority vote of members. The black ball system... that was, I guess, started out in the 1800's, when they first organized.

Q: How do you feel about the women who have come into the Fire Department?

JES: We have a lot of fine women. We have a few that are fighting fires and are just as good as men. Some of them could even be better than some of the men we have. Our fire medics, I don't think you can find a better one in the State of New York. They are terrific. They do a great job and that's probably three quarters of women down there. But I would never be worried about any one of them coming to take care of me. I've had heart attacks, I've had ...[?]. . . but I wouldn't be afraid to have them work on anybody.

Q: Do you feel that paid firefighters are better than volunteer?

JES: No, I don't. I think we're equal. I think they have their job to do. They have training for what they do and we have the training for what we do. Basically, it's sometimes a lot of different fires; they have high-risers more often than we would and we have single-family, two-family homes. But I think we're just as professional as they are. I'd say 90 percent of the paid firemen would agree with me. There's always a few that don't think the "vollies" are any good, but I don't think Port Washington or any of the communities in Nassau/Suffolk would survive trying to pay a paid Fire Department, because the price would be just...

Q: What do the paid firefighters generally get if they're paid in other communities?

JES: We only have a... We have a partial paid in Garden City, and I think Long Beach is partially paid.

Q: And what do they get?

JES: I guess they're up in the \$60's and \$70,000 a year bracket, plus all the benefits. They're partially manned by volunteers too. They just are a more affluent community in Garden City, and they don't have all the people that would join the Fire Department because there's a lot of business people that are in New York. So they have a paid staff during the day.

Q: Do you feel any resentment that some people are being paid these salaries in other counties?

JES: No. That doesn't bother me at all. There's no way a city could have a volunteer force to handle it. It's a totally different thing.

Q: And the reason for that is because it's too affluent?

JES: Well, the city, it's just totally different. With the traffic and everything else. You wouldn't get people leaving jobs to try to respond to a firehouse because it would take them a half hour to get to a firehouse in New York City traffic.

Q: No, I meant in the other companies on Long Island?

JES: Yeah, I would say, because the people in the area are just really not interested in the fire service because they have their own type of jobs. You need a middle-income community of young people. Mind, you don't have too many people that are both middle income and have the time or the desire to become a fireman.

Q: What was training like for you as a rookie, compared to what it is like today?

JES: We had the Nassau County Fire Training Center, which we used to go over there in the summertime. And then we had Ed Picardo, who used to be an old-timer in my company that trained us here at the firehouse on first aid. He was a Red Cross First Aid Instructor and he trained us on first aid. Our company captains and all, we used to train right at our own firehouse. And we had a flat roof in the back. We used to ladder that and rappel off that, come down with a rope. There was always at least one day a week of training. I mean now, I think the younger generation has a little bit more because OSHA kind of compels a lot more school work and stuff for them to attend. It's a little more burden on a younger kid coming in now because he has to spend, I think it's like fifteen Friday

nights, to go to a central school, which getting an eighteen or nineteen-year-old to spend his Friday nights at a fire training center is a difficult task sometimes because, naturally, kids like to go out on weekends. But they do it. If they've got their heart in it, they do it.

Q: What were your first firefighting experiences like for you?

JES: I guess the first ones were kind of... It's a new thing, you're going to go into a building full of smoke and wearing a mask, and not knowing that you can't see anything. You're just feeling your way around and the heat. It's a big change. You're not used to that. Like the old story is, is that firemen are crazy because they run into a fire as people are running out. You get used to it. With the training. Part of the fire training center over in Nassau County, there's a live burn center. They set fires. We go in and put them out. And sometimes, they like to get funny. They have a tower over there. They'll send you up to the third floor and then set the second floor on fire. See what your reaction is, and how to get out. You train for it. You get used to it.

Q: Do you remember any particular stories or experiences from those days?

JES: We've had some real tragedies. We had a fire down at Pine Street where we lost a few children. I mean, that's where it's really heartbreaking. When you can't get into a fire to save somebody, especially a child. It's terrible. And I've had a couple of friends whose fathers had died in fires. One father smoked in bed and the bed caught on fire, and he



died in his bed. And another young kid actually committed suicide. He set himself on fire on the roof of his house.

Q: When was this?

JES: Oh, back in the sixties, I guess. Or early seventies. You know, stuff like that it's really... When it's an outsider, it's one thing. When it's close to you, it sets in a different way. But, I mean, you don't want to see anybody lose their life.

Q: How do you cope with the trauma of that?

JES: I don't know, I just... It's inside you. Some people break down. Me, I don't know, I just seem to just keep it inside me.

Q: And doesn't that physically stress you to keep it inside?

JES: Yeah. I guess it does. Stress is all part of life. You know, there's stress in everything. There's many things in the Fire Department that are positive too. So you put the positives and negatives together. You know, the positives really outweigh the negatives. That's the way you've got to look at it.

Q: How good is our department compared to.... ?

JES: Oh, others? I think we're probably one of the finest Fire Departments on Long Island. We have a great ambulance crew. We have three companies. We do have a manpower shortage during the daytime, sometimes. But we haven't missed a fire. We're always, we're there. All Fire Departments in the whole State are having hard times now because of the economy. Young people have to work two, three jobs. Their wife's got to work. So the guy comes on board and the wife may go to work, and he's staying home taking care of the children. It makes it tough. We're still doing our job.

Q: What is the rank and file's feelings towards a Chief? Do they listen to everything he decides?

JES: You're there whether you agree or not. Or the Chief, if he's at the scene of a fire and he tells you to do something, and it's not life-threatening, you're gonna do it. I mean, that's his job and that's your job. You may come back after and disagree with him, but at the point of the fire, you do what he tells you to do. He's elected to that position and he has the training for it. We have our old ways and the young Chiefs have their new ways. I may not agree with something he does...

Q: What are those differences, between the old Chiefs and the new Chiefs?

JES: Oh, sometimes maybe the new ones react a little quicker. And some things we may sit back and think a little bit more about. But, you know, the training these days is a little more intense, a little more quicker than we had, too. So, that probably has a lot to do with it. You're there, I mean, I'm an ex-Chief and I go to a fire and the Chief tells me to do something, I do it. That's my job. I'm there, even though I've got.....

Q: What if you think that your analysis is better than the Chief at the time? What happens?

JES: Well, you can... nothing's stopping you from going to a fire and saying, "Hey, Chief, maybe you should think about doing this. It's still up to him to...you could say, "Gee, I had a fire similar to this when I was Chief, and we worked it this way." But there's nothing compels him that he has to do that. But, most of the time, any Chief that somebody comes up and gives a suggestion and, if they think that it's worthwhile, they're gonna change their opinion and do it that way then. They're not out there to be God or anybody else that you have to bow down to. They got a job to do. They know that. And if the job is to put out a fire and there's a better way of doing it, or something that an assist can do it. Because your mind is doing so many things when you're at the scene of a fire. And you may just miss something. You're directing a hose line, you telling this guy to go here, there, this that and the other thing. It's very possible the other thing in the corner you didn't see. So, if somebody sees it, that's why you have your captains and lieutenants too. They'll radio back to the Chief and say, "You told us to do this, but this is happening over here." The attack will change. Everybody works together. It's

something that you have to do. I can turn around and dislike the person. But still, that's his job, that's my job when I go. My opinions at a fire don't mean anything to him.

Q: How have you dealt with firefighters who've been disobedient?

JES: Well, you know....

Q: Have you had that?

JES: You always have somebody that doesn't agree with you. So you try to sit down. You explain. To me, I like to get together and I go out and see, and call him in the office and say, "What's going on. What kind of problems you have? And then maybe... It may be definitely something you're doing wrong. Like I said, that you weren't thinking about. And says, "you know, you may be right." But, maybe if we work it this way. We'll do it half your way and half my way. But I try to talk it out with the people.

Q: There aren't reprimands?

JES: Well, if it gets bad enough, then you have to bring a person on charges. We have a whole charge system where you bring them up on.....

Q: Tell us about the charge system.

JES: If somebody... we have a bylaw book that there's all kind of rules and regulations in. If somebody drastically breaks a rule or regulation, you write them up on the charges, and put down whatever bylaw he broke or did, and you submit it to the Fire Department or the company, whoever is involved. Then they'll hold a hearing with the Board of Directors. And both cases, both sides are presented and the Board will make a decision on what they want to do. Whether they want to give it... they can give a person suspension, they can give him a ten day suspension, they can give him a six month suspension. There's different things. Like in my company, if you're not up to par in your fires and you may go on a social suspension, which you wouldn't be invited to any of the picnics or dinners or be allowed to stay at the firehouse. Your job would be just going to fires and coming back in the fire schools and stuff, until you get your points back up. And then you're allowed back in to do the social things.

Q: And is this severe enough?

JES: It works on a lot of fellows. You know, a lot of guys, like I say, they like to be around the firehouse talking. So, we have a Board that sits down with you before the social stuff goes. We have a board of ex-Chiefs and ex-Captains at the company that will sit down with the gentlemen, the firemen, and find out what's the problem. Maybe the guy has problems at home. Maybe he has problems at work. So, it all blends in. What kind of

punishment will be involved in it. We don't want to drop anybody from the fire service unless it's really something drastic that they did. We try to work with everybody.

Q: How do you deal when you are called out to other fire calls, car accidents, shootings? Have you experienced any?

JES: Oh yeah. I've been to many accidents. I've been to accidents where we've lost lives of young kids.

Q: And what do you do at the scene?

JES: Basically, we have to secure the car, in case. We don't want anything going on fire. Or, if it is on fire already, put it out. Then, if we have a loss of life, you just have to secure the whole scene and wait for the... you have to bring out the Nassau County Police Department detectives and everything else. And you stay there, and if it's the nighttime, we light up the area and we assist the Police Department and the medical examiner, whoever comes out. We have to be there to assist them until the people are moved and transported.

Q: Tell me about the amount of service that your family has given to the Fire Department.

JES: My father is past Chief. He was Chief in 1973 and '74. He passed away in 1979. I think he had thirty something years in, or he would be there until this day. My uncles, my one uncle is still alive. The oldest has sixty-three or sixty-four years in, possibly sixty-five, whatever. And my other uncles have passed away. Some of them had fifty and forty. My son had twenty before he moved. My other sons got probably eighteen, seventeen, eighteen. My brother-in-law's got thirty. My other brother-in-law's got twenty-five, twenty-eight years. Cousins have been in and out. Son-in-laws. And we've got a tremendous amount of service time by the Salerno family.

Q: Do you think that your grandfather in Italy started this tradition? Or do you think.....

JES: I don't think my grandfather had really anything to do with the fire service, any place. My oldest uncle that passed away, I think he was, well my two uncles. The one that that's still alive now, with the sixty-seven years, the two of them joined in 1940 prior to the war. My father joined, I think in '42 or '43.

Q: Were they the most influential in your joining?

JES: My father, being that he was in. But, I would say it's all, my uncle Joe, my uncle Jim, my uncle Tony, my uncle Frank. They were all.... I worked at the School District, and my uncle Joe worked for the School District, my uncle Jim worked for the School

District, my uncle Frank worked for the School District. So, working together and being firemen together.

Q: And have they all now retired from the School District?

JES: Yes. The only one left is my uncle Jim that worked in the School District. My other uncles are all passed away, and I have two aunts that are still alive. One's ninety-eight or ninety-nine and the other one's, I think like ninety-three or ninety-four. But they're both sick now. They have Alzheimer's. The oldest aunt's blind.

Q: And how do they cope with that, or how do you cope with that?

JES: They live up in the Terrace. They have a person come in and help them. We don't see them too often because my aunt really doesn't... you know, with the Alzheimer's you can talk to her, in two minutes and she doesn't know who she was talking to. So, we don't see her that often.

Q: Were you ever called up for the war? Any of the wars?

JES: I joined the reserves in 1963. I was in the Army reserves and I was never... I just went through basic training and then I had training. I used to go to New York City every weekend for my training. The only scare we had was President Kennedy was killed and I



was going to New Jersey that weekend for training. And they were trying to tell us that we may not be going home. That we might be going to Libya. Because at that time, they thought it had something to do with Libya. But, we came home that weekend. So, there was a threat there for a while that we might be activated. But to me, if we were activated, we were activated. It's just, I joined the service to be in the service... if I have to go, I have to go. That's all.

Q: Are there many in the firefighters that are in the reserves?

JES: We have a few, but not many. There's not.... When they stopped the drafts, I think that kind of stopped the majority of all the military. Before, you either were drafted and you went for two years or you joined. And I was getting married, so that's the reason I joined the reserves at the time.

Q: What was the best day that you've had in the Fire Department?

JES: I guess, becoming chief of the Fire Department. It's probably one of my best days. It's quite an honor to get that far. It means a lot. It's a lot of years of hard work and that's one of my finest things was to be the chief. Like I say, my father was chief in the past. And I think we were the only father-son team that ever's been in the history of the Port Washington Fire Department.

Q: That were both....

JES: That father and son, that both became chiefs. Just like the Zwerleins, Peter and Billy. I think they're the only two brothers that ever became chiefs.

Q: So you're unique in that way?

JES: Yeah. The only thing is, I missed that my father wasn't alive to see it.

Q: Oh, he....

JES: No, he passed away in 1979 and I was Chief in '91. He got to see me as Captain of the company, but he never got to see me as the Chief.

Q: And how does that make you feel?

JES: You always like to have your father there, but it hurt. But, he watched. He's always there. They're always there in your heart.

Q: And what would you consider one of your worst days?

JES: I think the time we lost the children down at Pine Street. It's the hardest thing in your life to see a child that's.... Especially when you have young children around the same age, it's always in your mind. I've, for my friends who are firemen, and a couple of them went home and went next to their kids' beds and cried. Yeah, it's just... That's the worst thing any fireman could see is a death. I had a fireman die when I was Chief. He was a City fireman and we lost him in a house in Manorhaven. Before that we lost Bobby Dayton, a fireman of our own. And then a year after that we lost Ingrid Sowle, one of the fire medics. They were all tragic things.

Q: When you were chief, who died?

JES: Tony Siconoifi, he was a city fireman. He was trapped in his house. He was redoing his house and he took all the smoke detectors down. He was painting. He was a painter on the side, as being a city fireman. And apparently, something happened in the house, caught the house on fire, no detectors went off. We found him in his bathroom and the entire..... He was upstairs, the entire stairway was totally burnt down. He was gone well before we got there, we got the alarm. But it's very tragic. We had major funerals here with the City Fire Department. You know, it's heartbreaking when you lose a young kid and a friend.

Q: Do you have a certain time that you could get to a fire? What is a limit of the time?

JES: It's just as fast as humanly possible. As years progress, it's harder and harder because of the traffic conditions. We have radios now and we have pagers, but when I first joined the Fire Department, you just went by the horns and the whistles. I lived on Cross Street and I would hear the horns blowing at Protection's building here. It's something that your brain would key in, even in wintertime with the storm windows down, you would hear that horn blow. And you'd just get up in your car and drive up here to the fire. But, now, naturally, you get up here a lot faster than you would now. You could come down here to the corner and you could wait three lights before you can get up around the corner.

Q: Do you find that the traffic moves aside for you, now that it's so congested?

JES: A lot of people do. Some of the people don't even hear you because of the air conditioning in the summertime and the stereo radios that are in all these cars. And then the people with the cell phones, talking. Some of them don't hear. It's a big difference driving a fire truck now, because you have to watch out for more. Years ago, people would pull over for you in an instant, right away. Same when you had your blue light in your car, they would pull over. But a lot of people are too occupied, their minds are too occupied. They don't see you and some of them don't even understand. They have a lot of New York City who have moved out here and different people come into this community and, to this day, a lot of them think it's a paid Fire Department. They don't

even know we volunteer, until if you get to do something for them and then they know that you're the volunteer service.

Q: And how do they thank you when they know?

JES: Oh, people always appreciate. We go to fires and, if it's the wintertime, neighbors make us coffee. If it's summertime and it's hot, they'll bring us out soda, iced tea, lemonade. The majority of people treat you nice. I guess there's aspects of people in everything you do in life that somebody's not going to agree with you.

Q: What is the biggest change for you in the Department since you came in and what it is now? What do you feel is the biggest change?

JES: I think the dedication. I don't think the younger generation has quite the dedication that us older fellows have. If I came up on a Sunday and, seeing our fire truck, and it was dirty, I would pull it out and wash it. The younger generation knows that they've got to be there on Thursday night or different nights, and that's the only thing they do. The dedication, I think the pride. I think we had a lot more pride. But that was one of those... Back when I joined, the Fire Department was one of them big things. These kids now have so many things to do in their life, compared to what I had to do, so I can understand part of it. But, just the dedication part, I think, is a little lax.

Q: And how do you think that can be remedied?

JES: I don't know. I really don't know. Everything is changed.

Q: When you train them in the Department, how would you instill that?

JES: Well, I think, probably you've just got to sit down and talk to them a little more than what they're talked to now. Now it's just train, train, train and it's really not the sessions... We used to.... After a meeting, I wouldn't get home until two or three o'clock in the morning, sitting and talking around. Now, a meeting now, you get the meeting's over ten o'clock, the firehouse is empty at ten fifteen. So you don't have the opportunity to sit around and talk. The young and old don't really have the opportunity to sit and talk that much any more.

Q: Do they get along?

JES: Oh, yeah. They get along. It's just that we're not there when they're up there and when we come down, they have so many things to do, they're gone. I know from my own kids, they're busy. It's a whole different thing.

Q: And what other qualities are in the old-timers aside from dedication, that is not visible in the younger people?

JES: The way you work. The older people seem to have put their heart and soul into working more than the younger kids. I guess because when you got a job years ago, that was like your life and you were going to be there. So you had your heart and soul into it. Now the kids, a lot of kids don't.... they trade off jobs. They keep bettering themselves, keep moving along. So, they don't really put their heart and dedication into one thing. That's the only way I can figure it out. Because, like I say, I was on my job forty years. These kids may have ten jobs in forty years. That's the difference. But, they're forever and ever bettering themselves.

Q: So, it's more the individual for himself than for the community, you would say?

JES: They have to be community-minded to join. They still want to help out the community. But it is individual. But, it's the same thing. How you're raised, you're born and raised. It has a lot to do with it. How your parents raised you. It's with any type of thing. It starts from home and works its way out.

Q: Have you ever done anything medically on people?

JES: No, I...that was never my cup of tea, the ambulance part. When I first joined, I was eighteen years old and that's when we didn't have an ambulance company, and you just responded as a fireman if you wanted to do it at night. I tried it a few times and I just

didn't like that phase of the fire service, so I never really got into it. I have all the basic schooling on first aid and all that stuff, but I never had the desire. Firefighting was my thing to do, not the fire medics. You've got to be a whole different breed of person, in my opinion, to be a fire medic. They have a big burn-out factor. They'll lose their memberships in ten or fifteen years. Because, how often can you, every day, seeing sick people or dying people. It has an effect on you. It's a very tough job for them. You get to appreciate what they do a little bit more, when you know what they do.

Q: Now the equipment... how has the equipment really been better now?

JES: We have always prided ourselves in getting the finest equipment for the community of Port Washington. Years ago, we used to have like three engines, and they would only pump like 500 gallons of water apiece. And now you can get one engine that's gonna pump 2,000 gallons of water. One truck can do a bigger job, more of a job than the other ones. The same with the aerial ladders. When I first joined the Fire Department, there was a 75-foot aerial ladder. Now we have 100-foot aerial ladders, so you could reach, extend a little further. And you get Hirsch tools and all this stuff which we didn't have years ago. It's all automatic. What they call the "Jaws of Life" that can open a car and bend steel and everything. I mean, before we had to do it with axes and hammers, all by hand, basically.

Q: And who trains, to know how to operate the "Jaws of Life?" Is that special training?



JES: Yes, we get cars from the community and we have a school at the firehouse. One of the captains or lieutenants or one of the fellows that was prior trained in it, will give the school and we'll tear a car apart. And they do that quite a bit during the year.

Q: Have you done it?

JES: Oh, yeah. You take the doors off, the hood, the windshield, the roof. You just learn all the phases of it. And we have a good team and we can get a person out of a car quite rapidly now compared to years ago. And then, if we have major problems, we have Nassau County service that comes in, Emergency Services, will come and give us a hand in case we don't have enough of the equipment. But 90 percent of the time, we have anything we need in Port Washington. We have airbags that we can lift a train up if we have to.

Q: What air bags?

JES: It's a huge rubber bag that you can just put under it and apply air to it, and it will raise up so much weight. And you can put one bag, two or three bags on top of each other to raise it to get the height.

Q: Where do you put that? Under the car?

JES: Yeah, you can put it under a car, put it under... Like I say, we have ones that will lift up a train off a track a little bit if you had somebody trapped under it. It's just...

Q: It would move what from a track? I didn't....

JES: Lift a train right off the tracks if you had to. Just a corner of it or something.

Q: Really?

JES: Yeah. It's a rescue procedure that they invented and came out with.

Q: Is it the same type of airbag that's in a car?

JES: No. These are real heavy duty. It's a flat, square air bag, a rubber bag, that's different sizes, that's real thick rubber. And each one will lift a different weight. There's so many different modern things they came out with now that enable you to do a better job.

Q: Some of the committees that you were on... how do you find time for the committees after?

JES: That's nights and Sundays, Sunday mornings you meet. I'm in the Bylaw Committee, which you're forever changing rules and regulations as the times change. Building Committee. I was on the committee when we built our new firehouse. That was a tremendous amount of meetings when we did that. I don't know, I just...probably, the Kitchen Committee, I love to cook. So I cook every meeting night.

Q: Oh, tell me. What do you cook?

JES: Oh, we cook anything. You name it, we'll cook it. I've been on the department Kitchen Committee. When we had department meetings, I cooked there. I cooked for the drill team on weekends. I barbeque when I go to the tournaments. I barbeque for them. Do all the shopping for them. It's something, my father always cooked. I taught my sons how to cook, and I think....

Q: What are some of your favorite recipes?

JES: I'm known for a hot steak. I cook a lot of hot peppers. There are a lot of real hot, hot peppers. I usually take a very thin steak and a mixture of, I cook hot peppers and onions, and roll it up and then cook it on the grill.

Q: Is that an Italian dish?

JES: No. I guess it's my dish. It's something I started at tournaments. And I've got guys from different drill teams that just come over looking for it, because I cook it towards the end of the day. And just see which ones can face the hot peppers. Because, whenever I'm around, they figure there's going to be hot peppers there. Which I get a kick out of. But, it's fun to watch some of these kids that think they could eat hot peppers. They really can't. And they burn up a little bit.

Q: What do you have, eating contests?

JES: No, not really. It's just that, they'll come... I've got fellows that from different places that could eat any kind of hot peppers in the world. It doesn't even bother them. And then some of the young kids say, "Oh, look at this, let me try it." And I always warn them. I tell them, "Hey, this is very hot. It's not a normal pepper." But I tell them, "If you take it, you're gonna eat it, because you're not throwing it away." They don't realize after the first bite, it happens. And then I force them and say "That's it, you're gonna eat it." And, I mean, it's funny. What some of the antics of them trying to drink water and ice and everything else to put out the fire. But, it's just one of the traits I'm known for around. Cooking. Every year I go into the Sportsmen Club. I cook hot peppers down there when we cook. We cook the whole month of March, just us guys from the Fire Department that belong to the Sportsmen Club.

Q: What's the Sportsmen Club?

JES: The Manhasset Bay Sportsmen Club from out here. And we cook the whole month of March. They have a lunch every Saturday down here. So we go down for four Saturdays and cook for everybody. And we just have a good time. It's a lot of laughs. Everybody knows. We never probably can do the same recipe each time, because everybody throws their little bit of seasoning in as they go by the pot and stick something else in it. It always comes out good. But, it's fun. We have a good time.

Q: And these are just for the men. The women are not at the tournaments?

JES: Oh, yeah. The wives and the children are at the tournaments. We cook for them all. Most of the time, when I raced, my wife would bring along three kids and I was involved, I raced. I didn't really... she took care of the kids and watched the tournament and at the end of the tournament, I'd be with my wife and kids, because I was running every event. I really didn't have enough time to come back and see them. But, the family's always there. You've got to have strong woman to understand a fireman. I've been blessed, I have a great wife. She put up a lot of nonsense, a lot of years.

Q: What nonsense has she put up with?

JES: Well, I mean, with me being dedicated to the Fire Department so much. Being out so much. She's a good woman. And I should tell you, I started going out with my wife when she was in eighth grade and I was in ninth grade. So, we've been...

Q: So you've known each other your whole life?

JES: Yeah. We've been in a pretty big commitment all our lives.

Q: Tell us how you met. In eighth grade?

JES: Eighth grade in the study hall. After having to sit at the same table. That's where we met.

Q: And you dated?

JES: Yeah. We dated and..

Q: And when did you get married? When you graduated from high school?

JES: I graduated in '60 and she graduated in '61 and we got married in '63. But, it was funny. It's just a funny little story that back in high school, when I was a senior and she was a junior, we were walking in the hall holding hands one day. And they wanted to suspend

me from school for holding hands. Then I worked for the School District for forty years and watched what was going on there.

Q: So tell us the difference now?

JES: Forget about it. The School District can hardly do what they want with these kids. But it was funny. The assistant principal wanted to suspend me, because I was walking down the hall holding... and I invited him to the wedding. When I got married, I sent him an invitation. He didn't come, though. Just to let him know that I got married.

Q: And what year was this that holding hands was prohibited?

JES: In 1960. Fifty-nine or sixty. It's funny when you think about how liberal everybody is now. Holding hands in school. Just like wearing dungarees in school.

Q: Well, how has that changed?

JES: Now you can do whatever you want. Any way you want. The thing that sticks in my mind when I worked at... I mean, I shouldn't even say that on tape. A girl was up there with a see-through blouse and the school sent her home. And the parents came up there and they told the School District, "You're not here to tell my child how to dress, you're

here to educate her.” That’s why I say, they’re different in the world, people. I’ve seen just so many changes, with kids. We went through the hippy period up there.

Q: Tell me about the hippy period and how you dealt with that, not only in the school district, but in the fire station.

JES: We had the long hair, the guys with the long hair. When we raced, we had Chief John Edmundson. You weren’t allowed to be in a parade with long hair, because that was one of his orders. And we used to have the women sit there and pin the guy’s hair up so it would be under their hat. If they ever had to take their hat off in a parade, their whole hair would fall down. But, they were just the way he wanted them. Some of them bought wigs and put wigs on. It was funny. But, the kids, some of the kids... like I say, like everything else, some of them went wild, some of them just got into the movement because it was a peer thing and they were into it, but not as bad as the radical ones. But I’ve seen them where they pitched tents around the flagpole at the school and spent the nights, back then.

Q: And how, as a groundskeeper, how did you deal with the people that were in tents on the ground?

JES: They really didn’t do damage. They just wanted to make a statement and that was their statement, spending the whole night around the flagpole there. Naturally, you probably



had, we had trash to pick up and stuff. But, they... not too much damage, the kids. You had your broken windows and stuff, but that's normal, all the time, regardless if it was the hippies, and all the way up 'til now.

Q: Was there ever any destruction in firehouses?

JES: No, not that I can remember.

Q: They didn't try to trash the firehouses?

JES: No. Kids were always at the school, trying to make their statements up there.

Q: And how did you feel about that? Did you feel that they were, what?

JES: The main issue then was the Vietnam War. I think that you've got to support the people that are there, whether you believe in the war or not. I don't think I believed in the Vietnam War, but I still believed in the men and women that were there. Just like the Iraq War. We're there. You've got to support the people that are there. The government's got us there. You can't just disregard all the people. They're down there, they're losing their lives. They don't want to be there, I'm sure. Some of the people that disrespect... I can remember when I was back in reserves. I came home in uniform on

the Long Island Rail Road and, the crowded peak hour, I was on one of the double-decker trains, and nobody would even sit with me because I was in uniform.

Q: What year was that?

JES: In the sixties. I can remember that. I'll never forget that. I said, "What did I do?" I'm just in the reserves.

Q: And how did that affect you, in terms of.... Did it change any of your views?

JES: No, because, like I say, people... their opinions are their opinions. Everybody can't have the same opinion. If we all had the same opinion, we'd probably be in worse shape. As long as they physically didn't try to do anything to me. That's their problem. If you don't like me, you don't like me. But most of the people respect the services.

Q: What do you think is going to be in the future for the Port Washington Fire Department with all the changes?

JES: I think in the future, they're probably going to have to probably scale down and form, instead of having separate companies, have one department. Because right now, you have like sixty in there, sixty and one hundred in this one, or something like that. So you're going to have to band together and form one. I think that times are going to

basically dictate that they're going to have to do that. You know, consolidate. And the cost factor for Port Washington with these school taxes and town taxes and county taxes. We're getting taxed out of the community, out of Long Island. The Fire Department is watching this. Just this year, we have property down in Roslyn/West Shore Road where we were going to try to build a building down there and put a training center in, and all that. When we figured out the money, they just, with the school tax and reassessment. We had the plans, everything drawn up, we just backed down out of it because we didn't want to give the community the burden at this time. So now we've got to wait a little, until the future, to do what we really want to do.

Q: How long can you afford to wait?

JES: We were trying to do it this year because of the lower rates, but it's just too much...

Q: The lower interest rates?

JES: Interest rates, yeah. But it's just a little...with all the taxes. Nobody knew what the County tax was going to be. So we have to wait. And that's still really not accomplished for what they want to do. So you've got to wait and see what happens. Maybe scale down the project, too. Quite a bit from what we were planning on doing. Making it smaller or something. But I think eventually, they'll do something down there. We're going to have to because with the housing going down there. And the county's talking

about selling off their land and who knows what.. if they're going to sell it for homes or what, so....

Q: You mean on West Shore Road?

JES: Yeah.

Q: And how does the Fire Department feel about that? If homes go in there, is that going to make the Fire Department have more work?

JES: Well, they already made it more difficult because they allowed them to put that six-story building in there.

Q: And how are you going to cope with that if there's a fire there?

JES: It's just different training. They're doing the training already for high-rise fire training. High-rise rescue.

Q: So this is turning into what, Queens?

JES: Yeah, it's getting close to it. It's not Port Washington any more. That's for sure. People are moving in and out of this Town. You don't get to even know your neighbor long enough anymore because they're running out of here.

Q: Now, the six-story building there on West Shore Road is almost complete, I believe?

JES: Yeah. It's very close.

Q: Do you have equipment for that?

JES: We have a new tower ladder. We'll probably get up to about four, and then four stories.

Q: So then what happens to the other two stories?

JES: Then you have to just do it, you have to work your way around it. Getting down through the internal staircase or whatever, to the point where you can get them down. Now, it's just like a high-rise in the City. They could never reach the top.

Q: But that makes it more dangerous for the firefighters.

JES: Oh yeah, it definitely does. It's a whole other phase of fire service.

Q: And did the Fire Department fight that?

JES: We wrote letters, but they don't listen to Fire Departments. The Town doesn't listen to Fire Departments. There's one thing about firemen. We fight fires together, but we all don't vote together. If we ever got together as a voting group, we probably could vote anybody in office and vote anything we wanted, but we really don't vote as a block. So the towns, like any politicians, they promise you the world and give you nothing. I think we were fortunate that when Tom Gulotta... I was on the committee, I guess 25 years we were trying to get a piece of property down there and we finally secured a property. Tom Gulotta gave it to us. We were lucky. We got almost thirteen acres down there. And that took us twenty, twenty-five years going through everybody that would promise this, promise that. But finally, Tom Gulotta signed it over to us.

Q: Where was this now?

JES: Roslyn/West Shore Road. We just got a grassed area down there in the woods now they train a little bit in.

Q: Roslyn/West Shore?

JES: Yeah. That's the Bar Beach by Roslyn, whatever.

Q: Is that in the forested area?

JES: Yeah. Just before you turn into the golf course there. That area there. That's our property.

Q: That's the area they're thinking of selling off, isn't it?

JES: Well, that's the other, before that. But we have thirteen acres. If you go down there and you have that sand, Nassau County sand thing, where they keep the sand and the trucks. Well, right past that is our property. Right there to almost....

Q: You mean where the dumpsters used to be?

JES: Where the Dept. of Public Works. They had their building there. Right from their fence all the way down to the driveway to the golf course is our property. We have a piece in there.

Q: On the right or left?

JES: On the right side, in the woods, which eventually we hope to develop.

Q: Develop into?

JES: A firehouse and a training...

Q: But you don't have the money now and you've financed it, but I mean....

JES: We looked into all the financing, but we didn't want to burden the community right now. Because too many things are going on. So we just have to wait. Unfortunately, if they would have gave us the property twenty years ago, we would've had everything built already, and it would've been when the community could afford it.

Q: Why were they dragging back then?

JES: I guess because they really didn't know what they wanted to do with the property. But they had master plan after master plan down there. They had schools in there, they had so many different things. Middle income homes and this, that and the other thing. And that all went out the window. And it ended up, this last time, there was supposed to be, Marriott was supposed to put in a big assisted living quarters. And that went out. This other guy put a partial... so many things have changed down there. They don't know really what they're... there's supposed to be two golf courses down there with the County. That never materialized. Who knows what's going to happen. So many plans. They used to send you the plans. You'd look at it and say, "OK, let's see what you're going to give me next year." I mean, that's how it was.



Q: We'd like to ask you about your major programs and your major events that you've been involved in with the fire company.

JES: There are a couple items. Chairman of the Parade Committee for Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company, our one hundredth anniversary— 1986. We had invited high area Fire Departments and had a parade through Main Street and then we had a block party right at the firehouse, which was a lot of fun. Then we also had Tom Murray, ex-Chief, Tom Murray. He became president of Nassau County Firemen's Association. That's a membership of all seventy-two Fire Departments. When you become president, you host the parade and a drill. So, we had a parade here in town and I was the chairman of the drill over in, we held it over in Roslyn, I mean over in the Town Park in Evergreen Avenue in New Hyde Park. So that was a big thing. It was a lot of work.

Q: As Chief, what programs are you proudest of?

JES: I don't know, I just think just to keep the membership intact. Everybody doing their work together. I think I was really blessed when I had still a lot of firemen in Town. Still a lot of people. I think the chief now has it a little harder because of little less manpower. I had complete manpower. I never had to worry about it. I think one of my major things was that during the one northeast storm we had when I was chief, we had over one

hundred calls on Friday and Saturday. And we made them all, took care of everything in Port Washington. I think that was quite a feat that our Fire Department did.

Q: How did you handle one hundred calls?

JES: Well, what we did, I set my command post up in our department headquarters and I put trucks in our Atlantic Ladder Company. And then we ran captains and lieutenants as teams. And we would send a ladder truck and one engine to one location. Then I would call and send... And if we had another call, I'd send another engine to another location. We would just send them with the officers and then they would call us back with their needs. We totally handled it. We've come close, but I don't think we've had one hundred calls in twenty-four hours like we did.

Q: What storm was this?

JES: It was the northeast storm?

Q: Nor' easter?

JES: Yeah, nor' easter that, I don't know if you remember, it flooded Bayville.

Q: What year?

JES: Probably in '92. I think it was. And then we had flooded... I remember the Mayor of Sands Point calling me, and down at Half Moon Lane, the water had come over and filled up all the houses and the street and everything. It like made it's own lake. He came over and asked me if I could come down and pump it up. I took a ride down there and I said, "I'd love to help you, but there's too much water." The only way I could see him doing it, is getting a bulldozer, digging a trench to let the water out. That's eventually what they did. They went between two homes and pushed the dirt and let the water run back into the Sound and then closed the hole up again. Because it was an interminable amount of water. People came out by boats.

Q: So your hoses can't suck that up?

JES: Not that amount of water. I would have to tie fire trucks up for too many hours. There was too many other things that were happening that we just couldn't do it. Just a tremendous amount of water, and the debris and everything. It would just be... there was no way you could actually pump it out. It was just too much. And like I said, it was almost like a lake. It was a huge amount of water.

Q: And who finally dug the trench out?

JES: I think they had a bulldozer come in. They called a contractor in. That was quite the sight to see down there. But that's freak storms. You don't know what's going to happen. I'm in hurricanes, I've been here at the firehouse. So that's one thing too, the firemen, when all the storms and all the houses are gone, we're in the firehouse and our families are home. We leave our families to come to take care of the people of Port Washington. A lot of people don't realize that. All our families are home. The wives are taking care of it.

Q: So you not only have to think about your men and what you're doing, but your families?

JES: Yeah. The training I've got, if there's a major hurricane, kind of like a phase-four hurricane ever came to hit out on Long Island, they tell all the fire services actually to bring their families to the firehouse. Because the guys can't really react as much if they have to really sit and worry about their families. So they have to bring the families to the firehouse, then the firemen have no problem. You can get them to go around. This is one of the things they tell you in training that you should do. I guess it makes sense, because if I'm up here and my... I mean I don't really have to worry about water on Avenue A because I live on a hill. But a lot of firemen live in Manorhaven, and half of Manorhaven may be gone in a hurricane, phase four, the way they say.

Q: Have they ever been called to the firehouse during your time?

JES: The hurricanes?

Q: The families called to the firehouse?

JES: No. We never had anything major. Years ago we had Ladies Auxiliaries that used to come, any major fire, come up to the firehouse and cook. Anyone that didn't have children would come, two or three o'clock in the morning, and make coffee and stuff and bring it to the fires to us. They used to do that. The wives with kids, naturally, couldn't leave.

Q: What would you like to be remembered for as Chief in the Fire Department?

JES: I don't know. I just think we all did our job. That's all. And the membership did their job. I'm not a person that's going to blow my horn, think I'm the greatest guy in the world, or nothing like that.

Q: A firefighter who won't blow a horn?

JES: I just think everybody works together. We all do our thing. And if we all do it right, then everybody's right. Everybody deserves the credit for it. I don't think there's one individual in the fire service who really patted himself on the back and said he's the greatest and he did everything. Because if it wasn't for the people behind you, we

couldn't accomplish it. It has to be a whole man project or it's just impossible to get done.

Q: And how do you instill this teamwork in the newer generation when they're so individual?

JES: That's up to the younger chiefs. They have to sit down and train them and talk with them. I personally...

Q: Do you feel that the younger chiefs now have a harder job than you did?

JES: Yes. Because they do have different types of things going on than I did. That are more complex fires than we had. As the years progress, it's different chemicals that are burning. Before you'd just run in... I could run into a fire without a mask on and now, you just basically can't, because you don't know what's burning in a house. Every little plastic thing is throwing off this gas or that gas, or something else.

Q: So, with the advent of plastics, it is.....

JES: Plastics, foam rubber, all that has a big change in fires, big change in fires. Chemicals. Even a car. The cars are greater gas, bigger gas tanks, magnesium wheels and all this stuff. It's all a whole different thing.

Q: Suburban vehicles. Have they been a problem in terms of safety and rescue?

JES: Not too many around here. But they've been a problem around the country because they roll over easy.

Q: And has the Fire Department here had to deal with any of them?

JES: We've had a few roll-overs, but not as many as around the country. The only place you really get the speed is Roslyn/West Shore or Port Washington Boulevard. So there's not the major areas where they speed like in other communities where they have the wide-open roads. They're dangerous. Those cars. A lot of women don't realize how dangerous they are. That they're so easy to roll over. But men too. They roll over for the men too, so I can't just say women. They'd be shooting me.

Q: And what lessons have you learned from being a firefighter that you can apply to your life in general, your later years, after having all this service?

JES: Lessons I learned is, probably, slow down and get rid of the stress. Now, I sit and relax. I don't let too many things get to me like I did before, because you're on the go and you're active.

Q: So when the horn blows, you don't go anymore? You're not...

JES: Not as often.

Q: Are you a retired fireman or are you active?

JES: No. Basically, I don't go as much because of my health. I've had a couple of heart attacks and I'm a diabetic.

Q: And are the heart attacks, you think, the stress from being a firefighter?

JES: Well, I had the first heart attack when I was chief, and the day I got out as chief, I had my second heart attack. But, I don't...

Q: So, you feel that it's the stress of the job?

JES: It's the stress of my job, stress of life.

Q: So it's taken a toll on your health?



JES: Yeah. Because the only thing I'm allowed to do... I can't go into a fire anymore. I can drive a truck. But, I don't do it too much anymore. Between the diabetes, and I babysit now for my grandchildren. I can't leave my grandchildren.

Q: So you're making up for lost time?

JES: We've got at least one grandchild. I take my one grandson to school every day because my daughter bought my mother's house that's right behind my house. So, I take him to school every day. And then I have my youngest son's two girls, two days a week, so that his wife can work. And then, before my son moved to Nebraska, I had the other two girls twice a week. So we keep pretty busy with the grandchildren.

Q: So, now that your daughter lives behind you...

JES: Yeah. She lives in actually in my house, my mother's house. Where I was born and raised, my daughter lives.

Q: In your mother's house. Have they now planted a garden just as you did?

JES: They have a small garden.

Q: So it's come full-circle?

JES: Yeah. I still have a small garden. I plant my tomatoes and my hot peppers.

Q: So now, they are doing what you did, and you are now taking care of your grandchildren.

JES: My grandson, I have my grandson come over and help me plant the plants because he loves that. He likes to watch the things grow. This way, maybe when he gets old enough and he gets a home, he'll plant a few plants. Nothing like fresh vegetables. Can't get it. They're not fresh in the store.

Q: Well, thank you very much.