**Mill Valley Oral History Program**
*A collaboration between the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library*

# Jeff Davidson and Mike St. John

## An Oral History Interview
## Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2019

TITLE: Oral History of Jeff Davidson and Mike St. John
INTERVIEWER: Debra Schwartz
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 42 pages
INTERVIEW DATE: March 8, 2019

In this oral history, retired Mill Valley firefighters Jeff Davidson and Mike St. John discuss their careers in the fire service. A fifth-generation Mill Valley resident, Jeff joined the Mill Valley Fire Department in 1979 and became fire chief in 2011 three years before his retirement in 2014. Mike started his career in 1985 with the Marin County Fire Department. He went on to join the Mill Valley Fire Department in 1987, becoming captain in 1997, battalion chief in 2011, and finally retiring just a few months before this oral history was conducted. Jeff and Mike discuss the history of fire service organizations in Mill Valley and Marin County and how both the theory and practice of firefighting has evolved at the local and state levels over the course of their careers. Jeff and Mike share stories of danger and trauma from their firefighting careers but also stories of camaraderie and connection with the community. Finally, Jeff and Mike discuss the history of collaboration between the fire department and the community and indicate what community members can do to keep Mill Valley from being ravaged by fire.

**Oral History of Jeff Davidson and Mike St. John**

**Index**

**Oral History of Jeff Davidson and Mike St. John**
**March 8, 2019**

**Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Jeff Davidson and Mike St. John, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.**

**0:00:00 Debra Schwartz:** Today is March 8, 2019. My name is Debra Schwartz and I'm sitting here in the Mill Valley Public Library on behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library with two pivotal individuals, Jeff Davidson and Mike St. John. Welcome gentlemen.

**0:00:21 Jeff Davidson:** Good morning.

**0:00:22 Debra Schwartz:** This is a unique interview for me in that usually I interview one-on-one, but I'm very pleased today to have the both of you together to talk about so many interesting things that are so pertinent to so many people here in Mill Valley, and to help the community understand your perspective too as firemen, as protectors of the land and of the people of this community, as the individuals that we rely on at sometimes the most difficult times of our life. So, I consider this to be a very important interview and I'm so appreciative, and so is the Historical Society and the Library, for the time that you're giving us today. Welcome.

**0:01:06 Mike St. John:** Thank you.

**0:01:06 Jeff Davidson:** We're happy to be here.

**0:01:08 Debra Schwartz:** Normally I introduce my interviewees as author, artist, musician. In introducing you two as firemen, you have such a long list of duties and positions that you've embodied that in this particular interview I would love it if you could introduce yourselves. So, let's start with Jeff.

**0:01:38 Jeff Davidson:** Okay. First off, if I may correct you on one point, "fireman" is a very old-fashioned term. Firefighter is a more modern term because it tends to be a little bit more expansive and inclusive.

**0:01:55 Debra Schwartz:** Thank you.

**0:01:56 Jeff Davidson:** I'll try to use that term where I can.

**0:01:59 Debra Schwartz:** Yes, thank you, and me too.

**0:02:02 Jeff Davidson:** Good.

**0:02:03 Debra Schwartz:** I think you can tell my age by the way that I use my language.

**0:02:08 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah.

**0:02:09 Debra Schwartz:** But for all of us, this is very important.

**0:02:11 Jeff Davidson:** Yes.

**0:02:12 Debra Schwartz:** And so, thank you for that.

**0:02:14 Jeff Davidson:** So, good morning. My name is Jeff Davidson and I started my time with the Mill Valley Fire Department in 1979. I had started a few years prior to that in my fire service career in 1976 at the age of 16 through a work experience education program at Drake High School, and I worked two days a week for a couple of semesters at the fire department and ultimately became a volunteer with that fire department before coming to Mill Valley in 1979. I was hired in Mill Valley as a cadet firefighter and during my 35 years with Mill Valley, I held every position that the department had with the exception of a paramedic.

**0:02:03:** So, I started as a cadet firefighter and went to a temporary higher firefighter as an under-fill and then went to a full-time position in 1982 as a firefighter. In 1986, I was promoted to fire captain. And then six months after that, we had created a new position in the department, which was a fire captain prevention specialist and I assumed that role. And then three years later in 1989, I was promoted to a battalion chief position. At the time we had three battalion chiefs, one on each of the three shifts, and I was assigned as the battalion chief on B shift. Then I spent approximately 21 years as a battalion chief before being appointed to the fire chief position in 2011, and held that position for just under three years until my retirement in 2014.

**0:04:01:** During my time as a shift battalion chief, as in most small departments, you have additional assignments. So, for a period of time, I was the department's training and safety officer, and for a large portion of the time I was the department's fire marshal, and I also was coordinating emergency management programs for the whole city. And then, in retirement since 2014, I have maintained my connection to the fire service through being an adjunct faculty at the Santa Rosa Junior College, which I've actually been doing for about 20-25 years, teaching in the fire academy and doing program management. I'm also on the North Bay Incident Management Team, which is a four-county team that helps support departments with escalating incidents, and I am one of the plan section chiefs on that team. I'm also a volunteer fire lookout up on Mt. Tamalpais for the Marin County Fire Department.

**0:04:59 Debra Schwartz:** Wow. Well, thank you for that. I'm glad I didn't [chuckles] have to introduce you. Okay, and now you, Mike St. John.

**0:05:06 Mike St. John:** I moved to Marin County in 1971. I lived in Novato for a time, I lived out in Inverness, which is a small community where I was first exposed to fire fighting. Both of my parents were volunteer firefighters for the Inverness Volunteer Fire Department. We had a fire phone in our house. It would ring in the middle of the night,

and so I was introduced early on. At that time when I lived in Inverness, I also started in volunteer search and rescue, which I still do to this day. So, I became very interested in emergency services.

**0:05:44:** I started my fire service career in 1985 as a seasonal firefighter for the Marin County Fire Department. Only a few months later, I also started the Kentfield Fire Protection District as a resident firefighter, which they call them sleepers, and I remained there for three years. And then, you know, when you're in that early phase of your fire service, you're doing everything you can. So, I went through the fire academy at that time; I worked for Marin Ambulance, which at the time was a private ambulance company; I worked as an under-fill firefighter for the city of Larkspur; and then I got my first break being hired as a trainee firefighter about five years after Jeff was hired in Mill Valley in 1987; and then I was hired full-time in 1988.

**0:06:31:** I had a great experience as a firefighter in Mill Valley, and 10 years later in 1997 I was promoted to captain. And then in 2011, I was promoted to battalion chief. Through much of that time in the early '90s I worked with the Marin County HAZMAT [Hazardous Materials] team and so I responded county-wide on HAZMAT incidents. And I only retired about 120 days ago, so I'm still getting used to the retirement thing. But I will continue to work part-time here and there for the city of Mill Valley, helping with the new vegetation management ordinances.

**0:07:07:** Additionally, I also serve with Jeff on the North Bay Incident Management Team. And then, what keeps me busy on my days off is, I'm very active state-wide in teaching and curriculum development on the volunteer search and rescue side, which is under the sheriff's office.

**0:07:24 Debra Schwartz:** Great. Thank you both for your introductions. Before we progress into the interview with more about the city and firefighting in general, I would love it if you could tell a little bit of contextual information about your families. For example, Jeff, in our pre-interview discussion, you talked about the history of firefighting in your family.

**0:07:47 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah.

**0:07:47 Debra Schwartz:** Maybe you could expand on that.

**0:07:48 Jeff Davidson:** I am a fifth generation Marin County resident. My family were settlers in Sausalito, Marin City, Waldo Point, and my aunt's house still stands in Marin City. For a period of time, it was a community center, and it's sort of now shuttered and defunct but it's still there. It's one of the last remaining original homes in the Marin City area. And my step-grandfather and my father both served as volunteer or firefighters with the Marin County Fire Department — actually, the Marin City Fire Department before it became the Marin County Fire Department.

**0:08:28:** So, a long history in Marin County and lineage in the fire service, and similar to Mike's experience early on having the fire service sort of just ingrained in part of your daily life. We didn't have a fire phone at the house, but our babysitter was the whistle on the roof of the fire station at 5 o'clock. Because when we were out playing in the creek or riding our bikes around before mountain biking was a thing, when we heard that whistle at 5 o'clock, we knew it was time to come home. So, the Fire Department always was present in our lives.

**0:09:04:** From a very early age I was interested in firefighting and just saw the people as larger than life figures and was awed by them, not even at a young age knowing exactly what they did, but just seeing them as people that sort of brought calm to chaotic moments. And when I was eight years old, I was in downtown Fairfax with my dad watching a bike race and we were talking to one of the firefighters at the station. And as we were talking, the 10-speed bikes were just flying by and I leaned out to look at one of the bikes as it went by and all of a sudden, there was a hand on my shoulder and I got pulled back just as a bike went flying by, and it was the firefighter who just saw it coming and intervened. It was a moment in my life that could have gone differently had someone not been there. And I'm like, "I wanna do what that guy does."

**0:10:01 Debra Schwartz:** I think you got a moment of, "Aha, I think this is what they do." [chuckles]

**0:10:03 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah. Wow! That's cool. So, very early on, I knew what I wanted to do and I was also at that young age range — and Mike might have been on the tail end of this — but in the late '70s, early '80s, I can't remember exactly the time frame but the TV show *Emergency* was hugely instrumental for a lot of people of my age because it introduced the world to firefighting and paramedicine, and it actually influenced the profession and the service we provide beyond just getting people interested in the job. Perhaps we can talk about that a little bit more too.

**0:10:40 Debra Schwartz:** The names of your relatives if you would share them please, your father, your grandfather, your step-grandfather.

**0:10:44 Jeff Davidson:** Sure. Yeah, my father is Bob Davidson. He's 94 years old, he lives in Novato. He was born and raised in the Sausalito/Marin City area and just prior to his service during World War II, and right after when he was discharged from service in the army, he was a firefighter with the Marin City and then Marin County Fire Department. And his stepfather, Arthur Ebertizsch I think, was a stone mason. I can't remember exactly, but he was a volunteer firefighter like many people in the communities, before the communities were even organized, and was engaged socially through things like volunteer firefighting. And in fact, the Mill Valley Volunteer Firefighters were an organization formed in 1893 and the City of Mill Valley wasn't even incorporated until 1901. So, the volunteer firefighters were formed up and organized before the city was even an entity.

**0:11:56 Debra Schwartz:** And then, you have another grandfather too?

**0:11:58 Jeff Davidson:** No, just —

**0:11:58 Debra Schwartz:** Just the one.

**0:11:59 Jeff Davidson:** Just the father and the step-grandfather.

**0:12:01 Debra Schwartz:** And you were born what year?

**0:12:02 Jeff Davidson:** I was born in 1960 in Larkspur at, I think it was called the Cottage Hospital, but it was Marin General Hospital, and I spent my whole life in Marin County.

**0:12:12 Debra Schwartz:** And your mother's name?

**0:12:13 Jeff Davidson:** Dorothy.

**0:12:14 Debra Schwartz:** And any siblings?

**0:12:16 Jeff Davidson:** I have four brothers, one passed away in 1993; he was 33 when he passed away. And my other brothers, we're all married and living our lives here in Marin County. We're all still in the county.

**0:12:32 Debra Schwartz:** Any firefighters?

**0:12:33 Jeff Davidson:** No, no. Contractors, CFO, and I'm the government employee in the family. [chuckles]

**0:12:43 Debra Schwartz:** And so we don't forget them, their names please.

**0:12:46 Jeff Davidson:** My oldest brother is Larry and my second oldest brother is Ken. My brother who passed away is Tim and then my younger brother is Mike, and we we're all three years apart, except my younger brother and I who are four years apart.

**0:12:59 Debra Schwartz:** Okay, great.

**0:13:00 Jeff Davidson:** And then I'm gonna talk about my wife, too.

**0:13:02 Debra Schwartz:** I think that's a good idea.

**0:13:06 Jeff Davidson:** Sure. I've been married for, I think, 31 years, if I did the math correctly. My wife's name is Leona George, Leona George Davidson now, and she was born in Brooklyn and came to Marin County, I think, at 16 or 17. And when I first met her, her mom was the owner of the Old Mill Bakery on Miller Avenue.

**0:13:30 Debra Schwartz:** Oh yes.

**0:13:31 Jeff Davidson:** So if you met my wife, she'd probably go, "Oh, cheese danish and a coffee." She remembers —

**0:13:38 Debra Schwartz:** Jam and bread.

**0:13:38 Jeff Davidson:** A lot of the old timers by what the order was.

**0:13:40 Debra Schwartz:** Yes.

**0:13:41 Jeff Davidson:** She was involved at the time with the chamber of commerce and we connected up through a fire department event, and we've been together for 31 years, and no kids. We decided that we didn't wanna have kids, but she needed kids in her life, so we formed a non-profit about 20 years ago and we do service work in Mexico, and she gets her kid fix by working with youth, by bringing them to Mexico, for house building work or working with the youth in Mexico.

**0:14:21 Debra Schwartz:** Great. Thank you so much. And how about you Mike? Can you share a little bit about your family's history?

**0:14:29 Mike St. John:** Yeah. So, we came to Marin County, and I didn't have a lot of immediate family that surrounded our family. I have two younger brothers and a younger sister and —

**0:14:43 Debra Schwartz:** Their names.

**0:14:44 Mike St. John:** My next youngest brother is Daniel and he lives here in Mill Valley. I have a brother, Douglas, that lives in San Francisco, and my sister is Sarah, who is married to a retired firefighter, and they just recently moved up near Bend, Oregon, and then my mom actually lives here in the community at the Redwoods.

**0:15:03 Debra Schwartz:** Her name?

**0:15:03 Mike St. John:** Barbara. And then my father Charles lives near Pinerolo, Italy with his wife there. So, we started up in Novato, and my parents wanted to have a more rural lifestyle so we moved out to Inverness. We had an amazing place. It's now a bed-and-breakfast in Inverness, and that's where I spent a lot of my formative years. I did some stuff that I might be considered a little bit outside the box there. I did vaulting, which is gymnastics on the back of a cantering horse, being lunged in a circle and where you get up to three people doing acrobatic exercises on a horse. So, I did that for seven years and competed in Europe.

**0:15:48 Debra Schwartz:** Did you train in Inverness for that?

**0:15:50 Mike St. John:** Point Reyes Station actually had the vaulting club, and then later I was with the Nicosia Vaulting Club and that was an amazing experience. And then

once I graduated high school, I actually struggled in college a little bit with direction and whatnot, and then one day I really became focused on pursuing a fire service career. I had worked in the printing industry for a couple of years running printing presses, doing binder and customer service, but I realized that was my dad's life and I didn't wanna do what he had done. I wanted to do something that was closer to my heart and I really enjoyed my search and rescue experience up until that time and what we got to do.

**0:16:36:** So that's what kinda pushed me into the fire service. I really love firefighting. I was married in 1993, had a child by the name of Erin, who's 21 now. That relationship ended, and I've been with my current wife, Holly, for the last nine years, and she works in Oakland for the University of California.

**0:17:03 Debra Schwartz:** Did you tell me what year you were born?

**0:17:06 Mike St. John:** I was born in 1963.

**0:17:07 Debra Schwartz:** Okay, great. I think that gives us a better idea of who you were before you became the men that you are today. So, let's jump into the firefighting, shall we? What would be great in this interview, I think, is to be able to capture over time the evolution of your careers, and also firefighting itself, how it's changed, and where you'd like it to go in the future, and the whole dynamic between your experiences — learned, earned, wisdom gained, lessons learned the hard way. What I'd really like to be able to discuss at some point here is the ways that the community can support the fire department in a way that everybody benefits. So, where would you like to begin in this complicated and very meaty discussion?

**0:18:12 Jeff Davidson:** It was interesting in the early stages of the fire department, and you don't notice it at the moment but when you reflect back, at some levels, it was a bit of the wild, wild West mixed with the Keystone Cops, because it was very much just like throw a lot of stuff at a problem and then problem usually went away. The problems presented themselves as being a little bit more straightforward, but in retrospect they were just as problematic as they are nowadays. We just didn't recognize from a health and safety standpoint the things that we did to attack fire. So, as an example, we wouldn't have the same level of safety equipment that we have now or we wouldn't have the level of organization or command and control. So, it would be sort of ants on a hill to put a fire out.

**0:19:07:** And nowadays, it's much more structured and organized. It's still chaotic but it's controlled chaos, and it's designed to provide the quickest response but keeping the firefighters as safe as possible, because we recognize now the long-term health effects of the exposures to chemicals or to the injuries that we can put ourselves in by not being organized, not being thoughtful, and not having the appropriate safety equipment. The second or third fire I ever went on, I got burnt because we didn't have the kind of facial protection that you have now, so it was a very common thing back in the day to tell how hot it was by whether your ears were getting singed or if the tip of your nose was getting

hot. And we didn't wear the pants that we wear now, we just wore regular Ben Davis black pants or Levi's.

**0:20:08:** And so, the evolution of the equipment has given us a better level of protection. The training and education that we have gone through and continue to go through has made us a much smarter firefighting force. I've looked back on some of the early fires that I went to in my career and thought, "Oh, boy, if I was in charge of that now I would be answering — before the man, if you will — for, "Why did you put them in that circumstance? And why did you make that decision?" And a lot of times, there wasn't a lot of good thought behind the decisions. You saw a problem and you just threw a lot of people at it.

**0:20:47 Debra Schwartz:** It's a science really, isn't it, firefighting, as it evolves and you've got more technology and more understanding?

**0:20:55 Jeff Davidson:** Well, in the old days, I would say it was very blue-collar. It was just — you saw a problem, and you just got a bigger lever. And now, it's very much a white-collar lifestyle. You have to have a head to be able to think, to educate, to train, to impart information. When the bell rings it becomes very blue-collar, but you have to then not just revert back to knuckle-dragging, but you put the science and the training together and do it smarter, not harder. So, it's a combination of two skills. There's very few jobs that are out there nowadays that are not just one or the other and ours is that combination of both. You have to be able to live in both worlds and it has to be able to happen in a moment's notice.

**0:21:45 Debra Schwartz:** Right.

**0:21:47 Mike St. John:** So, when I came into the fire service — there had already been a significant transition before I came, and it was still in a massive transition. People that I had ultimately started working with came into the fire service 15 or 20 years prior to me and very little had any college education. The vast majority came up as volunteers and it wasn't, back in the '70s and the early '80s, as competitive to get a job. When I started taking fire tests in 1987, '88, '89 — actually, '87, '88, you would have between 50 to 300 people applying for one or two jobs. It was very intimidating to go to a fire test and look at all these incredibly capable people that were super eager to get a job, and that was kind of a recent shift. And so, it was intimidating to continue to go to test after test, and I ultimately took 14 tests — before I landed here in Mill Valley — across California.

**0:23:00:** When I got into the fire service, they had just started to wear bunker pants, and this is about probably seven years after Jeff came in. There was more emphasis on safety equipment. There was more emphasis on prevention but you still had a lot of the old school blue-collar firefighters that had a very old approach to doing things. And from the time that I started, which is before there were computers in the fire station, to the time that I ended, a huge amount of stuff was thrown on our plate. We can come back to that later but definitely the training back then was very basic.

**0:23:48 Debra Schwartz:** Give an example when you say very basic.

**0:23:52 Mike St. John:** Compared to where we are today, back in that time, if you went out and did a few hose lays, did a SCBA [self-contained breathing apparatus] drill —

**0:24:03 Debra Schwartz:** People listening won't know what that means.

**0:24:06 Mike St. John:** That's a practice of putting on your self-contained breathing apparatus.

**0:24:11 Jeff Davidson:** The tank that we wear on our back with the mask in front.

**0:24:14 Mike St. John:** Exactly. Throwing a ladder — those were skills that are still today foundational in the fire service but that was really all we focused on and we didn't do it in a scenario-based training. We didn't keep times as much. We didn't make it at a realistic training environment. We had some outstanding firefighters, and I wanna be clear about that, but certainly today most of the applicants that I saw in the last five years, I would say three-quarters of them had college degrees, and many of them had bachelor's degrees. The sophistication that they have to go into today with technology, the realism of training, all of that's dramatically evolved over the last 30 years since I've come in.

**0:25:09 Debra Schwartz:** Do you —

**0:25:10 Jeff Davidson:** And if I may, when I started the criteria to get hired was that you drove a dump truck on your day off so you knew how to drive a fire truck and the badges were all numbered. So, when you got hired, if there was 10 firefighters in the department, you were the new guy, you got badge number 10. And then somebody above you retired and the badges moved up, and then when you became firefighter — well, actually back then it was "firemen" number one — you were gonna get the next captain's job, and it was all just seniority-based, it was not merit-based and it wasn't a balance of education and performance. Nowadays, a firefighter comes in and has multiple task books that they have assigned to them.

**0:25:58:** You have to get checked off on the ambulance. You have to get checked off on driving the ambulance. You have to get checked off on driving the ambulance at night. You have to get checked off on operating the equipment in the back of the ambulance. So, there's check-offs all along the way to validate and certify the work that you're doing. So, it's become much more comprehensive, much more realistic, and like Mike said scenario-based. We would bring a new firefighter on in Mill Valley in 1980 and you'd take them out back once and make sure they could raise and lower the ladder and then you never went to the ladder again unless there was a call, and it was just train when you have to but the training came when you had a fire call.

**0:26:39 Debra Schwartz:** Yes, the training. You know I was a volunteer fire-person in 1979 and I recall well the drills, or really not so much drills but you just went out, you

learned on the job and everybody helped each other. Well, those that were willing to help, it seemed to me that there was a prove yourself attitude going on too. And that's part of the training as well, but now you're describing something that's more systematic, that's more with like the checklist before a pilot takes off where nothing can be missed and trying to avoid the hard way because we are talking about people's lives here, the integrity of structures and the town.

**0:27:27 Jeff Davidson:** The people's lives that you're going to protect but also your lives. You need to rely on each other so you can perform as a team to serve your community.

**0:27:35 Debra Schwartz:** Yeah, so when you talk about the slow evolution of change, were there pivotal events that propelled the change at a greater speed than would have naturally happened over time? For example, in earthquake safety each new large earthquake offers many opportunities to protecting for the next. Is this how your technology changed or was it a gradual? How did it proceed?

**0:28:11 Jeff Davidson:** I would back up and describe that when I came in at the end of the '70s into the '80s, it was the influence of the TV show *Emergency* that everybody just expected that the fire department showed up to any kind or type of call, and any compartment door you opened, you had the piece of equipment needed and it was primarily around the paramedics. So, paramedicine became huge in the 1980s. Where the fire department sometimes didn't even respond on medical calls, it became a primary mission. Then in the '90s, hazardous materials became the new thing and we all geared up and started doing entry-level awareness, which became operational, we became specialists, which became specialized county equipment.

**0:28:56 Debra Schwartz:** So, you're talking about HAZMAT [hazardous materials] materials. Can you unpack that a little bit for people that don't know much about firefighting?

**0:29:01 Jeff Davidson:** We're talking about anything from a gasoline truck driving through town with gasoline that's topping off your gas stations to a rail car along the side of the freeway, to a natural gas line explosion or rupture, hazardous chemicals which we now realize are on the shelves of every grocery store and packed in every house because of the cleaners and the solvents and the chemicals. We learned that just throwing a fire fighting approach to solving those problems could sometimes make them worse.

**0:29:38:** The '90s were very big in our gearing up towards the awareness of and the response to that. And then in the 2000s, and probably as a direct result of September 11th, was the terrorism and weapons of mass destruction [thing], and now into the 2010 decade I would say active shooter and sort of home-grown terrorism. So, with each decade we add to the toolbox of tools that we have to carry, but then going back to your question about earthquakes, the fire department has historically and traditionally been seen as an operational responsive organization. The problem has happened; go out and stop it.

**0:30:27:** What we also started to do during that time was, we realized that we needed to get more aggressive with preventing or minimizing impacts through working collaboratively on building codes for earthquakes or working with the planning department so that homes weren't built without driveways or that homes built in a wooded area were less susceptible to the effects of a wildland fire. So, that we became more of a preventative and mitigating arm rather than just a responsive arm.

**0:31:01:** Because when the problem occurs, they call us and then they ask us how did it get this bad? And we are now able to say well, we're gonna respond to this, but we need help designing it better on the front end. And that's where this collaboration comes in with our community partners, other departments within the city or a county, neighborhood organizations, 'cause then it comes down to that individual preparedness, and we can only respond at a certain level without people taking that step to help us. We're behind the curve because we're being called after the problem is already happened.

**0:31:37 Debra Schwartz:** When you talk about the community organizations, let's get some names.

**0:31:40 Jeff Davidson:** Sure.

**0:31:41 Debra Schwartz:** Okay.

**0:31:42 Jeff Davidson:** Mill Valley has been at ground zero for community preparedness since the '90s, 2000s. It started out as a couple of people that were involved in what was called the NERT Program in San Francisco, Neighborhood and Emergency Response Training, which came out of the Lamar and the Northridge earthquakes. There was a lady named Meryl Good who still lives in town and you should interview her. She was banging on our door about, "We gotta get this NERT Program going, and we gotta get this going," and then Skip Gosser, Susan Ferris, Susan Moxin very early on, people that were not taking no for an answer. The city was smart enough to realize that there was a community interest, and at the same time we had the Oakland Hills fire.

**0:32:37:** And so the city organized a fire safety task force, and one of the recommendations that came out of that was more community engagement, and out of that came the emergency preparedness committee, which is now a permanent emergency preparedness commission, and their initiative was to organize and educate and support the efforts to get the word out. And to our great luck and benefit, we have Mike St. John in the fire department at the time, who had a parallel life, organizing volunteers in search and rescue, and knew what it was like to work with volunteers and to bring people with different interests together, and he created what is the model county-wide, and in some cases around the state, for how to organize neighborhoods and communities around disaster preparedness. I'll let him chime in on some of that.

**0:33:33 Debra Schwartz:** I look to you now Mike. Are we talking CERT [Community Emergency Response Team] here?

**0:33:37 Mike St. John:** Yeah, so you wanna cover CERT now?

**0:33:38 Debra Schwartz:** Proceed as you wish. If you wanna talk about other things first and then go to CERT, that's great too.

**0:33:45 Mike St. John:** I think it's important to understand that up until probably the early to mid 1970s, the Mill Valley Fire Department, when they had a significant incident, it was a badge of honor not to have to call for help. And so, the mutual aid agreements and the collaborative nature of the fire service today was very different back then. And it evolved quickly, I would say, from the mid to late 1970s moving forward where mutual aid became more active.

**0:34:15 Jeff Davidson:** And that wasn't just Mill Valley's badge of honor. Every fire department respected boundaries, and you didn't go to a neighbor's fire unless you were asked, so it was a much different world back then.

**0:34:26 Mike St. John:** And so on a national level, the fire service has evolved and I think that was probably the biggest influencing factor to the professionalization of the fire service, that focus on better training, and certainly in the late '90s and early 2000s we're influenced by agencies around us to train harder and to become more capable. In addition to that, we became more and more aware of not only the challenges we faced in the wildland-urban interface, but also the challenges we face on having almost a third or half of our community as hillside homes, which pose unique challenges. So, a lot of that kind of fed off each other and people started going more and more to national conferences.

**0:35:15 Debra Schwartz:** People being —

**0:35:17 Mike St. John:** Firefighters. Firefighters began going to more and more national conferences, and throughout the county collaboration on a training level, which Jeff really played a big role in, from multi-agency drills that were county-wide or even regional exercises.

**0:35:33 Debra Schwartz:** When you say multi-agency, we're talking all within the fire department here?

**0:35:37 Mike St. John:** Yes.

**0:35:38 Debra Schwartz:** There's no outside agencies you're collaborating with yet.

**0:35:40 Mike St. John:** No, no.

**0:35:41 Jeff Davidson:** We involved law enforcement partners in our early mutual aid exercises.

**0:35:45 Debra Schwartz:** Okay.

**0:35:45 Jeff Davidson:** But it was primarily firefighting driven.

**0:35:47 Mike St. John:** Primarily firefighting driven. But when I say multi-agency drills, there could be 15 or 20 agencies from across Marin and Sonoma all training together.

**0:35:55 Debra Schwartz:** So these are all the different departments.

**0:35:57 Mike St. John:** Starting to really work closely together.

**0:35:59 Debra Schwartz:** Yes.

**0:36:00 Mike St. John:** And that really took off, I would say, in the 90s, probably post the Oakland firestorm. We realized that these significant fire incidents were nearby. And then in 1995, we had the Vision Fire, which was an all hands —

**0:36:17 Debra Schwartz:** This is the fire than in Pt. Reyes. So basically what you're describing is that attitude of being self-sufficient really wasn't going to be as helpful as working with other departments and collaborating as a whole together to help each other.

**0:36:35 Mike St. John:** Right. And you have to understand when you're facilitating a training program, which takes a lot, from curriculum building to having subject matter experts, it's a lot easier if you can rely on your surrounding agencies to help facilitate that stuff. You can put together, oftentimes a better training by involving more people. It's actually less effort 'cause you're sharing that. So a lot of that started to occur probably beginning in the late '80s but really took off in the '90s and 2000s, where today in Marin, even though we're a number of different agencies, we routinely, across the county, share significant training exercises, stuff that was unheard of really back before the early 1980s.

**0:37:23 Debra Schwartz:** And of course, this is facilitated by the ability to communicate through the internet.

**0:37:28 Mike St. John:** Right.

**0:37:30 Jeff Davidson:** It helps.

**0:37:30 Debra Schwartz:** Yes.

**0:37:30 Jeff Davidson:** What helped prior to that though was, as Mike said, when we started going to conferences and getting formal education. I was one of those younger ones coming up, and you go away to a training program and then you come back and, well, you get to be in charge of putting something together. I realized that my neighbor across the way in a different fire department was at the same class with me, so we would get together and collaborate on the sidelines, then we'd start to share, and then pretty

soon the manuals all start to look the same. Then instead of you doing training and me doing it the next day with the same instructor, we'd bring one instructor in and come to a border area, 'cause we couldn't leave our own towns, but we slowly, over time, just opened up the sieve a little bit so more and more of that cooperation filtered through.

**0:38:21 Debra Schwartz:** It's funny to hear you talk. I can imagine in my mind the tender capillaries that are going out and then connecting and then becoming larger capillaries and then veins and arteries, and all the ways it strengthens in a really natural fashion.

**0:38:38 Jeff Davidson:** Very much so. And it's not uncommon for a battalion chief like Mike in Mill Valley to be in charge of his incident in Mill Valley but the next day could be going up and reporting to a captain in Novato on a HAZMAT call. It doesn't matter about rank, it doesn't matter about borders, it's your capabilities and your skills that are brought to bear on a problem, and you blend in very naturally together. There aren't barriers in between those things anymore.

**0:39:10 Debra Schwartz:** Was there resistance initially when the individualist attitude of "We take care of ourselves," well almost a macho attitude really, that ownership of space, and this is where we take care of each other. Was it kicked back when that started to change?

**0:39:28 Jeff Davidson:** When I was first in the fire prevention assignment, I wanted to get a computer-based program to help manage the inspections and my boss was dead set against it. "I've got the Rolodex on my desk and why do I need this fancy computer thing?" And I said, "Look, I'm gonna get you the first computer and you're gonna — " And I went and I bought one of those display computers that's on the desk at Office Depot. It was just a cardboard cut-out, and I put it on his desk and it was my way of saying —

**0:40:01 Debra Schwartz:** This is happening people.

**0:40:03 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah. So, there was definitely resistance to change, and there always is, and that's inevitable, that's human nature. But the fire service is not immune to that.

**0:40:17 Debra Schwartz:** The resistance.

**0:40:18 Jeff Davidson:** Even an old guy like me, when Mike would come back from a class to go, "Hey, I just went to this class — "

**0:40:23 Debra Schwartz:** Here we go again.

**0:40:26 Jeff Davidson:** Here we go again.

**0:40:26 Debra Schwartz:** But back to you, Mike, and the training, CERT, the ways that you were starting to engage the community in a more active way. Because let's just say this flat out: one of the biggest concerns that we have here in Mill Valley and Marin County is that we have all this natural beauty but we are so vulnerable to fire, and we live on a transform fault margin. These are some of the most active fault margins in the world.

**0:40:55:** So, we don't have hurricanes necessarily, we may not be pelted by lightning strikes, but everybody that lives here is worried about natural disasters. Some more seasonal, although that seems to be changing for many people that live in Mill Valley — September/October can be a very tense time. Things are dry and we're worried about fires more than ever now with how things have changed. But if there's an earthquake, there could be a fire sparked from that. And we've got landslides; we have El Niño, La Niña; we have variation in our weather patterns. All these things render us vulnerable. But in particular I have to say, I mean living here, that fires are a yearly and now monthly concern.

**0:41:49:** So CERT, and having community involvement, I imagine — I'd like to know actually. I'm not going to presume, but I remember when CERT started and the neighborhoods had their own neighborhood meetings and then we had the fire department come and talk to us — evacuation routes, preparation, and so on. Would you address that whole aspect of your experience?

**0:42:19 Mike St. John:** I was pursuing a promotion to captain in 1997, and up until that time CERT was separate from the fire department. We would come in and occasionally help teach the courses, but it was largely community driven, and it was largely out of the brand new emergency preparedness commission that was pushing that. And what I saw after two or three years of training, they probably started in around 1994-95, is that we had 30 or 40 CERT, maybe even probably close to 100 CERT volunteers at that time, but that there was no plan to utilize them. There was no structure to utilize them.

**0:42:59:** And so, I took the experience that I had gained managing a volunteer search and rescue team, where I had about 70 or 80 volunteers that were actually fairly active in the program. How can we make them volunteer firefighters in a way? Only if there is a major disaster or a significant incident would we pull them in, but if we're going to do that then we should put together training once or twice a year, make it a light touch but something where people feel like they belong to an organization, so we're not spending all this time training people and then we never see them again.

**0:43:33:** At this time Mill Valley had put a ton of work into organizing neighborhoods, which had been the primary focus of the emergency preparedness commission, and so as part of my captain's test, doing something new and innovative that I really never thought I was gonna have to carry out, I put together a proposal of how you could organize your CERT volunteers as part of that project. To be promoted to captain at that time, and even today, you go through what's called an assessment center, which is a multi-discipline test that includes written evaluation of personnel issues an oral board and a tactics dimension.

And part of that was writing a report of what you would do to improve the city? So, I got promoted and never thought about it again, and a few weeks later Jeff called me into the office and said, "Hey, I have been talking to the public safety director and we want you to proceed with this project."

**0:44:33 Debra Schwartz:** And CERT is an acronym for it.

**0:44:33 Mike St. John:** Community Emergency Response Team.

**0:44:37 Debra Schwartz:** Okay.

**0:44:37 Jeff Davidson:** Or training if you don't have teams organized in a community.

**0:44:41 Mike St. John:** Right.

**0:44:42 Debra Schwartz:** Including radio training.

**0:44:44 Mike St. John:** Yeah, some radio training. So with that, I had the list of people that had been through CERT training, and I just started cold calling people until I had a nexus of about six or seven, and we had our first meeting and then through that delegated assignments. Actually, Mill Valley is made up of a whole bunch of people that are super dedicated to their community, and it was an area that really appealed to a number of people to get involved, and so we did our first advanced CERT training, and I was very surprised we had 45 people show up.

**0:45:22 Debra Schwartz:** Do you remember the names of the first few you worked with?

**0:45:26 Mike St. John:** Yes. Stephen Podestà, Maggie Lang, a little later Stephanie Moulton-Peters, who later became a city council member. In fact, we've had a number of people go through CERT that later evolved into emergency preparedness, like Peter Brownman.

**0:45:45 Jeff Davidson:** Skip Gosser.

**0:45:45 Mike St. John:** Skip Gosser. A number of people stepped up to be a part of that.

**0:45:51 Debra Schwartz:** Okay, so you're working here, you're strengthening and collaborating beyond the confines of Mill Valley, you're evolving as firefighters in your technology and your ability to understand the actual science of it, and you've got community support at this time.

**0:46:15 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah. And then the other thing that I think helped us really evolve and become more cohesive is that when a person worked in Mill Valley in the 1970s, and probably up to the mid-80s, you stayed in Mill Valley, you rarely left Mill

Valley, but the mutual aid system in California started to be exercised more and more, and so by the early ’90s, and it’s continued to expand to this day, it was not uncommon for an engine company or firefighters to be out for a couple of weeks at a time fighting fires throughout California. And so it really opened up in the late ’80s and the early 2000s. You got to see a lot of significant incidents, get a lot of experience, and also work with firefighters from across the state, or sometimes across the country. I think that also began the evolution of our awareness of the challenges we face back here in Mill Valley.

**0:47:17 Debra Schwartz:** Yes, of course, because now you’re working in a different environment and preparing for everything. Well, that’s fantastic. Very interesting.

**0:47:27 Mike St. John:** I wanna add a piece in here that has always been important for me. And yes, you’re correct when you say we had community support, but we had 100% of support from about 6% of the community. I would say the challenge is that when we hold public meetings or we put information out we get the same 30 people at the meeting, and so there’s a lot of people that aren’t aware of the threat, who should be aware of the threat, and if they are they want someone else to solve the problem. So for me, as a chief at the 30000-foot level, my biggest tactical challenge was trying to get the community to acknowledge the problems that existed.

**0:48:26:** And how do you do that without scaring them to the point where they just put their head in the sand or just turn it right around and say, “Well you’re government, you solve my problem for me.” A big problem is just awareness, and not just in Mill Valley but in most of the communities that are in California nowadays. People just don’t seem to understand that an earthquake can happen in any moment or that when it rains, power could go out, or that if there’s a hot dry day in the summer and there’s a power line that goes down, it could be the significant catastrophic fire. For me, one of the biggest threats is lack of awareness.

**0:49:06 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah, lack of personal preparedness, lack of personal responsibility, that you’re responsible to take care of yourself and your family. Any given day, if I queried a bunch of people, brought a bunch of people together in Mill Valley or other communities, and asked how many were truly ready to take care of themselves for three or four days after a major earthquake, the average response of people is about 30% of the room, at most, is really ready for that. And then when you drill down into that, “Oh well, I guess I don’t really have as much as I thought I had.”

**0:49:39 Debra Schwartz:** I think when we think about what our threat is as community members, it’s not so easy to go a little wider in the examination of how we’re threatened — not being able to do what you want to be able to do, and how important it is that the community supports you, and to do our part as a community to help educate ourselves and others. One of the reasons why we’re sitting here in the library today is actually to have this discussion, and it is important to the historical society and me personally to do our part to educate.

**0:50:28:** Things have changed in Mill Valley, in the demographic of those coming in, and we don't have as many firefighters able to actually live in this town or even nearby because of the cost of living now and the cost of real estate, which is a problem for our community because it's always nice to have first responders right there as you described earlier on when you were firefighting in the early years. Everybody stayed close to home.

**0:50:59:** So this is an issue now, a pertinent issue for right now as to what we can do, 'cause especially as we have a lot of people coming in, perhaps from other states, perhaps they're too busy in their worlds to even understand the geology and the biology of this area. They can certainly appreciate how beautiful it is, but there's a price to be paid for living in an area like that. How have you been dealing with this issue? How do you try to engage the community? And not only that, but what can the community do to help you do better in your efforts?

**0:51:37 Jeff Davidson:** I'll take the first part of that. I think it's important for people to understand that we as firefighters across California — and there's no debate about this — are seeing longer, warmer and drier fire seasons. In 2017, despite having significant rain, probably one of the wettest years in California, by July we were seeing fires such as a Detwiler Fire burn faster and larger than fires during a drought year. So, having a wet winter, which traditionally meant that we weren't gonna have a very active fire season has changed because it warms up more in spring, gets dryer quicker. And we're also seeing the magnitude of fires, the kind that we've been seeing in Southern California, migrate north. And so, for example, the Camp Fire that burned nine out of 10 homes in Paradise. I can name half a dozen others that have involved significant structure loss or threatened entire cities, and they're much more common. The level of personal responsibility people have to take today is even greater than it was then, not just for firefighting but I also think for earthquakes.

**0:53:03:** The reality is Mill Valley has a community of 14,000 people, plus or minus, and there's only eight firefighters on duty and three police officers. For a community that's placed in several large canyons with narrow streets and difficult access, our utility infrastructure is very vulnerable during significant storms. We also have communities like the Redwoods that have over 300 people that are high needs, or seven schools that may end up being the focus of initial response efforts, 'cause that's where the greatest number of people are.

**0:53:41:** And during major storms, particularly after an earthquake or wildland fire, we've always had challenges of gaining access just due to the nature of our community, which is what makes it desirable to live here, but the shadow side of that is it makes it a challenge to provide emergency services. So there's gonna be new ordinance changes coming out to even push vegetation management back to a new level 'cause we're really trying to prevent a fire disaster. Mill Valley's lived under the cloud of the 1929 Fire for years. Certainly, that could happen again, but that's not the only significant fire in Mill Valley historically. Going back to the early 1900s and late 1800s, there were a number of significant fires.

**0:54:32:** So it's part of our history. We've done a good job of suppressing it, but if you look at Mt. Tam today — this is a quote from Jim Selfridge, who was a battalion chief, and he's done a lot of research — Mt. Tam has never looked the way it does today in it's history, because it used to burn every 5-7 years and now we have an accumulation of vegetation that's easily 70 years old, that's taller and has more dead content material than it ever has. So the threat's real.

**0:55:06 Debra Schwartz:** And in studying the natural environment here, I think I read that 75 percent of the natural biology of this state proliferates with fire. California itself, and Bay Area as well, in long history, has had fires as frequently as every 25-50 years, which clear the undergrowth, which allow for proliferation of certain kinds of grasses and plants, sawgrass type grasses which are now gone and so we have a very different environment.

**0:55:41:** When I was studying the history or the health of Mt. Tam, they were talking about drought being two kinds of drought, the green drought and the blue drought: the blue drought being the water that humans worry about consuming and the green drought being the amount of moisture within the plants themselves. Each was a very serious factor when you're looking at how to manage a mountain and its health and safety. And when I was interviewing Otis Skye, a firefighter, a couple of weeks ago, he was talking about the recent fires that he's watched where he saw trees explode into flame without contact to actual flame itself or embers. Literally, the heat was so great that it was terrifying and he worried that there wasn't any real science to be able to battle that kind of fire other than run for safety and protect human beings. Would you agree with this?

**0:56:42 Mike St. John:** I had the opportunity this summer and last to serve as a division group supervisor working over multiple shifts to save the city of Lakeport, and in traditional times, five, 10, 15 years ago, you would have a several wide, dozer blade wide break. You'd reinforce it with hose lays and you'd have aircraft prep it and fire equipment, and you would generally stop the fire, I'm gonna say, seven out of 10 days. And on the most recent fires during the river fire, the Mendocino complex and a number of other fires, a car fire, none of that worked. The fire would roll over your fire breaks nine out of 10 days. I would say that because of the dryness of the fuel, the changing climate, we were not able to stop the spread of the fires until really it burned around communities and we could stop it there.

**0:57:49 Jeff Davidson:** Or the weather shifted.

**0:57:50 Mike St. John:** Or the weather shifted.

**0:57:51 Debra Schwartz:** Which is what saved the town in 1929.

**0:57:54 Mike St. John:** Right. But I think that was a better day period of time to be fighting that fire.

**0:58:00 Debra Schwartz:** It wouldn't necessarily stop the fire today.

**0:58:06 Mike St. John:** So yeah, it's very concerning. A lot of the traditional tactics and strategies that we're utilizing aren't working, and so we're adapting. We have what we call VLATs, Very Large Air Tankers, and so we're switching to much larger firefighting aircrafts. Type 1 helicopters, which are the largest helicopters that can drop the largest amount of water, are much more in demand than they used to be just because that volume is really the only thing on a good day that makes a difference.

**0:58:39 Jeff Davidson:** And all of that goes back to, "The problem has already happened, how do we try to attack it?" And then that kinda gets back to the question you asked about changing attitudes, or how do you get inroads in the community. We were doing CERT classes, the preparedness courses, and the adults are so busy that they don't have time to do it, or you get the same 20 coming to it. So someone got the idea — and I think it's ingenious — to introduce a scaled-back version of the Get Ready Program to the fifth grade. And that requires the kids to have a take-home homework assignment that they have to do with the parents. It's the beginning of a generational change, and we're ingraining early on in those kids the idea of preparedness and resiliency.

**0:59:35:** And if we have 100 kids go through Get Ready in fifth grade tomorrow, and we have a problem the next day, we may not have moved the needle much, but year after year as more kids go through that fifth grade program, which has now been adopted, I think Bay Area-wide, as a model taken out of Mill Valley, you create a generational change.

**0:59:55:** When I started in Mill Valley in '79, fire sprinklers in buildings were only required in commercial buildings over a certain size if it was brand new. I retired 35 years later and 20, excuse me, 18 percent of our community, including residential buildings, have fire sprinklers in them, and it's not uncommon now to go to a fire in a residence that the fire is put out by the sprinkler system. That's 35 years to only get to 18 percent, but it's those things that you have to do to pre-engineer and build in the ability to mitigate or reduce the impact, so that we don't have to buy bigger airplanes and buy more helicopters and buy more toys and tools, because you still have to have them in the right place at the right time when the fire occurs. We could have 500 engines parked here in Marin County and still lose homes. It's just that once the fire starts, you're behind the curve. So CERT, EPC —

**1:01:00 Debra Schwartz:** EPC?

**1:01:01 Jeff Davidson:** Emergency Preparedness Commission, the Get Ready programs, are trying to make generational changes. And then going back to our community, it was very blue-collar back in the '70s. People have moved out. A lot of people that are now living here are white-collar professionals, higher education. They telecommute or they travel a lot so they may not have the same level of ability to invest or commit.

**1:01:33 Debra Schwartz:** They may have —

**1:01:33 Jeff Davidson:** Let's teach the kids. [chuckles]

**1:01:34 Debra Schwartz:** They may have a very robust sense of entitlement that this should be handed to them as well.

**1:01:39 Jeff Davidson:** Well, after a big fire or an earthquake occurs, the meetings are packed and the window is wide open, "What should we do?" And then you put the same initiative out there and they're like, "Oh, my gosh, this is wonderful. Why didn't we think about this?" And then the next day, the next news cycle, that window starts to close. People are very interested in what can we do after the Paradise Fire. But now that it's pouring rain out and there's mudslides, people are gonna be resistive to being told to cut their brush because now they're gonna say, "Well, wait a minute, if I cut my brush because of the fire problem, then the mud's gonna take my house out." So we're constantly having to fight the battle of apathy and awareness.

**1:02:21 Debra Schwartz:** After the Sonoma fires, I was talking to a gentleman who actually works for a cable company, Comcast or something. I'm a hiking guide and I hike with a lot of people and I hear a lot of stories. He was talking about some of the anecdotes about the fire, and he works with firefighters in the area, and he was describing the reality of when you're doing triage as a firefighter, choosing which house you can fight from which you can save, and this gentleman told me when the firefighter saw a defensible home, someone who had put the effort into making their house defensible, they were very inspired to help that individual versus somebody who didn't make those efforts.

**1:03:10:** And I thought that was really putting it quite politely and also putting the onus on the homeowner to show how much you care. Because no firefighter wants to give up their life for somebody — it's not so easy to give up your life for somebody who didn't take precautions, but you can fight for those that are helping you fight. I think that psychologically it's got to matter.

**1:03:34 Jeff Davidson:** Well, we have a phrase or a saying, "risk a lot to save a lot, risk a little to save a little." We're gonna size up a problem and we're gonna make a decision as to whether we go inside a building that we know is abandoned and there's nobody in there and it's already so well-involved in a fire that all we're doing is putting ourselves at risk and ultimately it's better to contain it while it burns down 'cause it's gonna be easier to bulldoze and rebuild. Same thing on the wildland environment: we're gonna be triaging homes, and if someone has taken the effort, it also tells the firefighters that if I get overrun and my access gets cut off, I can have a safe refuge in this home or in this driveway.

**1:04:21:** So, it's a two-way street. You know they've done the work to give you that option of protecting their home, but it also tells the firefighter that if it gets bad and I can't get out of here, this is a place that I can take refuge. And so it very much is part of the thinking that firefighters go into, and I would stand before the city council or the

planning commission on a development of someone who didn't wanna put it in a driveway or didn't wanna pave their driveway or they didn't want the drive way to be too wide because it would destroy the *chi* of the neighborhood.

**1:04:56:** And I would get the question like, "Well, you guys know this address, and just take the small truck if there's a fire there, or just put a note on there that this driveway is problematic." And I said I have to plan for an engine from L.A. County being at the end of this road and making decisions about this driveway or from Alameda County or from Tiburon because when it's all hands on deck, you never know which fire department is gonna be there. And yes, we know our community. Yes, we know the nuances, but out of fairness to anyone who's gonna come and lend a hand, I want to give them all a fighting chance, including the resident who needs to be able to get in and out of their every single day and get out in an emergency.

**1:05:42 Mike St. John:** I'll expand on what Jeff said. Never in a million years did I imagine if I got on a radio and requested additional engines that they were gonna be far away. I was one of the initial strike teams rolling into Sonoma County during the beginning of the siege, and we got there and we quickly realized that there's a few local volunteer engines and us for probably several miles of open fire line threatening the town of Sonoma and a lot of the communities around it. And so, we worked through that day over the next night, and when you put in a request for engines, they said there's nothing there that we don't have any to send you. You have to understand that whenever there's a fire siege, and this is historically, it's not just the one community but those fires pop-up, and in the case of the Sonoma Fire siege, they had fires in Bird Butte County, Nevada County, Mendocino County, plus multiple fires in Sonoma County and Lake County.

**1:06:51 Debra Schwartz:** These aren't seeded fires from the first fire, these are simultaneously happening.

**1:06:54 Mike St. John:** These are just simultaneous events, and it's always based on wind, typically an eastern wind where the low humidities drive this, and so there's a complete lack of resources. And during the Sonoma Fire siege, our strike team operated for four and a half days without relief. Taking two or three-hour naps here and there. Moving around doing the best we could. So when you look at triaging structures, it was what can we put the least effort into, to save the most homes and so defensible space and more importantly survivable space, which is why homes that have such a good defensible space that we don't have to put an engine there really became key. And so what we did, particularly in the Sonoma and Napa County, was tie fire line to houses that had good defensible space and wineries, but there were homes that were like, "It's gonna take us hours to prep this and we don't have the time, but we can put in a little bit of effort on these three or four homes and save all three."

**1:07:52 Debra Schwartz:** When you say "tying fire line," what does that mean?

**1:07:54 Mike St. John:** Tying fire line is to build fire line. And so, in Sonoma and Napa County, you had wineries and actually the vineyards were great fire breaks and so

we would look at where we could tie in and stop the fire at a vineyard or other types of agricultural fields. Sometimes that was possible, sometimes it wasn't, but certainly in the area we were operating in, that was something we utilized multiple times.

**1:08:22 Jeff Davidson:** And tying it in is anchoring it and securing it so it doesn't continue to outflank you and have to chase it. Two stories that I heard out of the strike team at the Sonoma County fires that Mike was on were just indicative of how crazy it can get in these fire sieges. One was you were sending engines out one at a time, lights and siren off the hill, down to the local gas stations to get fuel to come back because they were operating for days on end and were running out of fuel. And normally, you get off after 12-24-36 hours and you go into a base camp and you get some food and you get some fuel and you get a new assignment.

**1:09:03:** They were sending engines out one at a time to refill 'cause they were running out of fuel. The other one that was an interesting story was when someone from the incident command team made their way out to Mike to do some advanced recon to see what was going on, he rolled the map out and there was the drawing on the map of where the fire was and Mike's like, well actually, keep unrolling the map, we're actually way over here. They were on a fire that the command team still hadn't gotten their arms around to even now was an active fire that had people that had been on it for what, three days already. So very dynamic and fluid and you know, the drought, multiple fires, all these factors make it fantastic storytelling.

**1:09:48 Debra Schwartz:** But it's distance storytelling. We're talking about this, we're talking about the mechanics of all of this, but we're a little distanced in a sense. I'm looking at both of you right now and you're human beings that were under a great deal stress and I should think there's a lot of fear for your own life as well as those that you care about and you're fighting with. This, the human aspect of this for you individually, the emotional impact that this job — when you're looking, when you're unrolling the map and they're way over there and you're over here and you have limited engines coming and everything's burning, what it's like for you as people, as people in your work?

**1:10:40 Mike St. John:** So, I feel really blessed that I made it through my retirement 'cause that's actually not a normal thing for a firefighter. Most guys retire on disability, just the toll that it takes to lift people up and down stairs, three or four times a day to where the equipment is, to be sleeping and then be at a fire or be at a critical medical aid. It takes a toll on a human being. It's just not a natural thing. And there's also a constant stress of just being on 'cause you never know when the bell is gonna ring, you don't know what's gonna happen when the bell goes off, what kinda call.

**1:11:36:** You look at Mill Valley or any other community and it's a beautiful picturesque community, but there's also a shadow side to that, you see the underbelly of people with severe behavioral health issues, people committing suicide, small children being impacted by accidents or other types of events. You see the factors of abuse. And it's not just unique to firefighters; law enforcement certainly sees all of that as well: the

aftermath of bar fights, the aftermath of domestic violence. People that aren't able to care for themselves but society is, there's no really good way to get them the help they need 'cause that costs money. You have to deal with all of that type of stuff.

**1:12:22 Debra Schwartz:** The pain and suffering.

**1:12:23 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah.

**1:12:23 Mike St. John:** Yeah.

**1:12:24 Debra Schwartz:** You see that in your job.

**1:12:28 Jeff Davidson:** Like Mike, I was very lucky to retire and walk out the door. I had injuries. I had back surgery, various other ailments that are slowing me down a little bit in life, but I was blessed to be able to walk out 'cause not all of us get to. But something very funny happened within six months of retiring, and that is I started crying at movies, and I started allowing myself to be emotionally vulnerable. Because for 38 years, you put that into a box so that you can do the job. I think I was telling you earlier that more firefighters died from suicide in 2017 than from line-of-duty death. We're learning more and more about how to deal, throughout our career, with the emotional toll that the job takes to be able to process that, but still be able to keep it in the right lane so you can do the job, because it does take it's time and you never know when that's gonna pop up.

**1:13:41 Debra Schwartz:** When that thing that you see.

**1:13:45 Jeff Davidson:** When that trigger —

**1:13:46 Debra Schwartz:** That you can't unsee comes —

**1:13:47 Jeff Davidson:** Comes back.

**1:13:48 Debra Schwartz:** Percolating up.

**1:13:48 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah. Three months after retirement, I was at a city council meeting, a follow up on a program that we were getting some closure on, and one of the city council members says, "So how's retirement going?" And I said, "I'll give it to you in one sentence: It might rain tomorrow." And she looked at me and is like, "Huh?" I said, "Well, in retirement that sentence has a period on the end of it. And if there's a comma, the comma is, 'And I'm in the middle of a really good book.' Or 'And I might go for a rain hike.' But when you're working, 'It might rain tomorrow,' there's always a comma. And the comma is, 'Oh my gosh! Is it an atmospheric river? Is it a king tide? Is it Pineapple Express?[1] Do we have the sand bags out? Do we have generator fuel?'"

**1:14:34 Debra Schwartz:** Adrenaline flush, adrenaline flush.

[1] A Pineapple Express is a variant of the weather pattern known as an atmospheric river.—Editor.

**1:14:35 Jeff Davidson:** "What's our staffing level? Are we gonna open up the command center? Do we have to recall the off duty personnel? Are we gonna activate the CERT teams, and do we do a notice on the website?" You are in this constant foot on the gas, emotional adrenaline, endorphin, for 35 years, and even when it's just rain, you're going through that. And when it comes time to take your foot off the gas, other stuff happens. Like I've seen a movie five times, and all of a sudden I'm watching it again and I'm crying, going, "Where's this coming from?" I'm allowing myself the ability to do that now because for all those years we had to be the non-crier, so that we could help the community that was crying. I say we spend 30 years of our career helping people having the worst 30 minutes of their life.

**1:15:32 Mike St. John:** Yeah. It's probably not as suitable for a recording, but Jeff and I saw some horrifying things.

**1:15:41 Debra Schwartz:** This is the truth. This is your oral history. You can say what you like to say.

**1:15:45 Mike St. John:** Jeff and I, in the early 90s, were on scene of a murder suicide that was incredibly graphic, with disembowelment, and that took a toll on firefighters. Some of them that needed help for a number of years afterwards. Small kids having life-ending events that you're in the middle of. And the hard part is, we can solve some problems, but there's a lot of problems we can't solve, and so you go back to the station and it was a bad outcome. You did everything you could, but nevertheless a family is without their child or their spouse, and you see the community reaction to that sometimes, depending on the nature of the event. So all that stuff definitely takes a toll.

**1:16:50 Mike St. John:** It's sometimes interesting 'cause you'll go through a really dramatic call and then the calls are over, the ambulance goes to the hospital, you drive back to the station and there's dinner still waiting to be finished on the table and you finish your dinner, and you try to push it out of your head so that you can be ready for the next call. Many times that worked, but there were days where it was like, "This isn't working for me," but you just push through.

**1:17:17 Jeff Davidson:** Back in the day, we dealt with it by either not talking about it or by gallows humor. We would make jokes around the table, not necessarily about that person per se but just calls that we had been on before, or things that were a stress, a de-stresser. But that call in particular, I've reflected on it over the years that I did not do my job as a battalion chief by recognizing the post-traumatic stress potential and engage — 'cause we really didn't have the mechanisms back then to identify it, to be trained to identify it, and then have the resources to do it. Generally you do it after something bad has happened, and then you go out and try to find how to prevent that from happening again, but —

**1:18:04 Debra Schwartz:** And so, you can't be too numb to not deal with it. If you're too numb, you may just shuffle it under, so you have to keep yourself open enough to

understand that you just took a wallop and everybody else did and you're suffering, although you may not know how to handle it when it's happening. So, you have to be aware not to have that, but also numb enough to be able to function.

**1:18:28 Jeff Davidson:** And going back to what I said at the very beginning when I corrected firemen to firefighter, back then we were firemen and we didn't talk about [chuckles] — I'm doing air quotes for the —

**1:18:38 Debra Schwartz:** Yes. [laughs]

**1:18:38 Jeff Davidson:** We didn't talk about those kind of things, 'cause that was a sign of weakness or vulnerability. So even if you had a struggle with it, it usually manifested with sort of that clandestine behavior: alcoholism, or physical abuse.

**1:18:52 Debra Schwartz:** Right. That was supposed to be my next question. Is there a higher incidence of alcoholism or drug addiction, or you said physical abuse, men going home and taking it out on others?

**1:19:03 Jeff Davidson:** Taking it out on others or on yourself in an extreme physical sense like climbing to the top of a mountain when you should only have climbed halfway or doing some intense workout to get it out of your system.

**1:19:17 Debra Schwartz:** To beat it out.

**1:19:17 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah. I'm sorry. I lost my train of thought.

**1:19:24 Debra Schwartz:** That's okay.

**1:19:27 Mike St. John:** I think it's important to note that the fire service has really undergone a cultural change, 'cause back in 1991 when this call occurred, if Jeff had asked me, "Hey, Mike I just wanna pull everybody together and do after-action review and de-stressing," we would have all said, "No chief. We're good. We don't need that." Today, we do that on a regular basis when we face significant calls. And firefighters today are much more vulnerable about it just because we've slowly, very slowly, come to recognize that all of that does take a toll on us and that we need to focus more on our behavioral health.

**1:20:07 Jeff Davidson:** I think the health of the fire services has also shifted. When I started, we still had 75% of firefighters in our organizations that smoked. There were only a few people that exercised truly, exercised on a regular basis. I don't wanna say it's totally gone away, but I think people self-medicated to work through it. I think today, there's no firefighters in Mill Valley that smoke, and the athleticism of your average firefighter is amazing. People take better care of themselves, eat better and are more athletically able to do the job.

**1:20:51 Debra Schwartz:** In our pre-interview chat, you talked about this murder-suicide event and what was striking about this particular event, without going too much into the horribly graphic details, is that you didn't know when you walked into this particular event. Maybe you can speak to the confusion that you faced, you weren't sure what was happening or what had happened. It wasn't a clear-cut case of what was going on so you didn't know if there was somebody potentially nearby that you had to be worried about or what even had happened.

**1:21:29 Jeff Davidson:** All those things.

**1:21:30 Debra Schwartz:** So maybe you can talk about just in this particular incident the brain scramble that occurred for you.

**1:21:36 Mike St. John:** I was working with another firefighter on the ambulance and we were called Code 2, which is no lights and sirens, to an assault victim.

**1:21:49 Debra Schwartz:** And this is in Mill Valley?

**1:21:50 Mike St. John:** This is in Mill Valley; actually, in Tam Valley. So we jumped in the rig and we're driving there and a captain, about half way to the call, who I know well and who is someone who's always calm under stress, in a very stressed-voice comes over the radio and says, "Increase the medic unit to Code 3. Additionally, start Rescue 30 in another engine."

**1:22:11 Debra Schwartz:** What does that mean, "Rescue 30?"

**1:22:13 Jeff Davidson:** The paramedic unit.

**1:22:13 Mike St. John:** The paramedic unit. And so we knew that something was not right. When we pulled up, he met us at the base of a long driveway and said, step over the first body and help the firefighter with the other person.

**1:22:30 Debra Schwartz:** They're inside the house?

**1:22:32 Mike St. John:** They're inside the house. So, we walked into the house and the first body, through a knife, was mutilated to the point that was beyond recognition. Something I haven't revealed before for a moment: I wondered if it was my girlfriend 'cause it was a similar body/make. Although it was very difficult, I pushed that out of my head, stepped over the first body and there was blood everywhere, even on the ceiling, the walls. And then we came in to the second person that had probably 100 stab wounds and who was breathing out of a hole in her neck and she was also disemboweled. And so, we started life-saving interventions.

**1:23:13:** And there was a sheriff's sergeant who came up to me and said, "So you know this is a suspect. And up until that moment and I still had a hard time believing it, just because she was so significantly injured, but all of it was self-inflicted, and the sergeant

when he'd walked in the room had knocked a knife out of her hand, and unfortunately that day this woman killed a house cleaner, who was totally uninvolved in anything. And interestingly enough, the same woman who was the suspect, and also who we were working to save her life, had put poisoned Gatorade bottles in various drug stores around the community, so law enforcement was already looking for her, but it had not been connected to this incident yet. So, that's just one example.

**1:24:04 Debra Schwartz:** You couldn't even comprehend what had happened or put it together and there you were probably in psychic shock of some kind, just the visuals alone.

**1:24:14 Mike St. John:** Yeah, so the paramedics did some magic. She survived. I'm pretty sure she's still incarcerated at this time, and that was an event that was almost 28 years ago.

**1:24:25 Debra Schwartz:** So you can't un-remember that.

**1:24:28 Jeff Davidson:** No. Certain visuals never go away.

**1:24:32 Debra Schwartz:** Do you ever feel tattooed by your work experiences where you literally had things embossed in your consciousness forever and you have to live with that?

**1:24:42 Mike St. John:** There are definitely some events during the Sonoma Fire siege. I'm looking at a fire go to several homes and I go up there with my pickup. I have some hose, garden hose basically with my partner and we're able to save one or two but I know if I pull other engines off what they're doing right now, those homes are gonna burn, so I had to let some homes burn to the ground, and I walked up to one house where you can see there's child's toys all over the place and I imagined this could be a firefighter or a friend of mine, and there's so much fire that there's nothing that we're gonna be able to do to stop it.

**1:25:29:** I just check to make sure there's nobody there, and you walk away from it. It was just so frustrating not to have resources. In the case of Sonoma Fire siege, we didn't get relief until engines from other states showed up: Portland Oregon, New Mexico, Arizona, those were the engines that finally relieved us on day four and a half, day five. So yeah, it was just not being able to do anything —

**1:25:56 Debra Schwartz:** You mentioned in our pre-interview too about the difficulty of working in a community that you're so engaged in and you've become friends with so many people over time as we do in our small town. And then, it might be you that's doing CPR on your friend's wife or child.

**1:26:16 Mike St. John:** A CERT volunteer you trained.

**1:26:18 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah.

**1:26:19 Debra Schwartz:** That happened to you?

**1:26:22 Jeff Davidson:** That's part of being in a community.

**1:26:28 Debra Schwartz:** Is that a slightly different kind of call for you? When you go into work mode, does that make it psychologically that much harder, or are you just going into work mode and do what you need to do?

**1:26:41 Mike St. John:** Well, I think you always stay in work mode, but it certainly makes it a different call when it's someone who you know. And that certainly happened multiple times a year. Sometimes these are people that were important in a community or the city, such as a business owner having a heart attack, that's someone who weeks earlier was at a big event, and so you definitely have a connection to all those people, but while you stay in focused and work mode, it also makes it real.

**1:27:11 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah, there's times where it's like a tunnel.

**1:27:13 Debra Schwartz:** You're putting your hands up like blinders.

**1:27:16 Jeff Davidson:** The tunnel is closing in on you, or it's like a gust of wind hitting you in the face, or you have that sort of body dilation, but you immediately just go right back to work, and you do the job you have to do because you're that duck on the surface that looks calm, and underneath or inside your feet are going a million miles an hour. But you're supposed to be that person or those group of people that are bringing that calmness to that moment.

**1:27:47 Debra Schwartz:** I have to ask you about another story you told me in the pre-interview too, about going to a house. Now this is a good thing to bring into this conversation of multi-level dwellings. Let's talk about that.

**1:28:01 Mike St. John:** So, we've lived in hillside structure environments, which is a common way to build a house in Marin 'cause we've got steep slopes. And so whether you're in Sausalito, Mill Valley, or Larkspur — pretty much every community in Marin has some, and some have many like Sausalito and Mill Valley. We had a storm night and we responded out to Tiburon and suppressed a well-involved structure fire, and we came back to the station, showered up, went to bed, probably late around 11 or so, midnight. And probably about an hour later, which is always the toughest when you get calls right after you go to bed, we get toned out for a structure fire in Sausalito. And so, you go out to the engine and you put on a very wet cold turnout coat 'cause its already soiled.

**1:28:51 Debra Schwartz:** Just been out there.

**1:28:54 Mike St. John:** And you try to warm it up on your way to the call, and then the adrenaline takes over as you hear the initial dispatch that we've got fire. So we showed up, Jeff and I. Jeff was a battalion chief that night. I was a captain and I had a four-person

crew that night. We show up to a hillside structure and when you're looking at your average hillside structure, the house goes below grade from the street and so we're looking at the garage and we can see the front door and there's another engine company that's getting ready to make access through the front door. We start to look at —

**1:29:32 Debra Schwartz:** And the front door's on which level?

**1:29:32 Jeff Davidson:** It's street level.

**1:29:33 Mike St. John:** The street level.

**1:29:35 Debra Schwartz:** And you're above.

**1:29:42 Jeff Davidson:** You're on the street level, so you see one garage door and a front door of a house 'cause it's all going downhill.

**1:29:43 Debra Schwartz:** It all goes down, right.

**1:29:44 Mike St. John:** The interesting thing is that this call came in as a fire alarm sounding to Sausalito engine one. They got on the scene, knocked on the door and the guy said, "Why are you guys here?" And they could look over the house to see the house was on fire and they're like, "Sir, your house is on fire." He had no idea.

**1:30:02 Debra Schwartz:** Oh wow!

**1:30:04 Mike St. John:** So, there is a crew that's behind the house at this time.

**1:30:10 Jeff Davidson:** And behind means down the slope at the bottom of the hill looking up at a three or four story house.

**1:30:14 Mike St. John:** Right. We learn from every incident, and during that period of time a San Francisco engine company went in through a garage door and the garage door closed behind them and they were killed. So, based on that incident, every garage door that I go through, I'm cutting a 4 by 8 hole.

**1:30:33 Debra Schwartz:** You are not gonna depend on the opening and closing.

**1:30:34 Mike St. John:** Yeah. I'm gonna make my own opening. So, we were getting ready to apply that strategy and another engine company just backed out of the front door due to taking a lot of heat and the entire house falls away from us.

**1:30:51 Debra Schwartz:** So wait, let's just be clear now. You have to be careful 'cause I remember from the classes I took in the fire department about how heat and smoke moves. And so, when you've got a tri-level or four-level house and you open up a window in the top and there's a fire down below —

**1:31:13 Mike St. John:** Right, or a door.

**1:31:14 Debra Schwartz:** Or a door.

**1:31:16 Mike St. John:** Which is the most common. Back then we would go through the front door and we'd open up the front door every day of the week, which is opening the top of the chimney.

**1:31:23 Jeff Davidson:** Sticking your head down the chimney and seeing what's burning.

**1:31:24 Debra Schwartz:** And creating an increased flow of oxygen.

**1:31:27 Mike St. John:** And so that would now be the new flow path of the fire.

**1:31:32 Debra Schwartz:** You have to be careful about that.

**1:31:34 Jeff Davidson:** Well, we do, but the awareness of that really didn't occur till two San Francisco firefighters went through the front door of a house and were killed in the flow path of fire that rapidly changed once they opened the front door and left it open to where they had come in.

**1:31:50 Debra Schwartz:** It just was a shoot of fire that came up.

**1:31:53 Jeff Davidson:** So as a fire service, not just in locally but across California, everybody really looked at that and then we realized how many near misses we had had from similar type events. So, we don't fight fire that way anymore. Today on a hillside structure, which is always difficult 'cause you have to understand that on your average house in Mill Valley, you might end up almost needing to rappel on a rope to access the sides of it and get to the back, that your only easy access is in front, so you're kind of sometimes almost steered to go through that front door. But you can't.

**1:32:26 Debra Schwartz:** You can't.

**1:32:26 Jeff Davidson:** And so, you need to go down to the same level as the fire or even below it and attack it from there. That's one of the little evolutions that we've done as far as strategies.

**1:32:37 Debra Schwartz:** Back to the house in Sausalito. So there had been a crew down below.

**1:32:41 Mike St. John:** And they saw how bad it was from the back that we could not see it from the front.

**1:32:45 Debra Schwartz:** So they backed out.

**1:32:46 Mike St. John:** They ran for their lives 'cause they saw it was about to fall.

**1:32:50 Debra Schwartz:** They saw the house was about to fall from the fire or was there a slide there?

**1:32:53 Mike St. John:** From the fire.

**1:32:54 Debra Schwartz:** And so, then you guys are up there about to make your opening and you go to make your opening and the house falls.

**1:32:59 Mike St. John:** Right. And when I say fall, there's cars in the garage and the whole house just peels 30 or 40 or 50 feet away from us down the hill.

**1:33:14 Jeff Davidson:** And again, this is right after two firefighters, as we were arriving, were backing out from the stairway with a hose line saying, "Oh we're not making enough progress. We're gonna need to reposition." And Mike's getting ready to make the cut.

**1:33:27 Debra Schwartz:** And suddenly you're cutting into air.

**1:33:28 Jeff Davidson:** Fractions of seconds and it went to the ground.

**1:33:30 Debra Schwartz:** And you're cutting it.

**1:33:32 Mike St. John:** It's all started —

**1:33:32 Debra Schwartz:** You saw it going. You literally watched the house just disappearing. You've got air in front of you.

**1:33:38 Jeff Davidson:** And the interesting thing is the house could have been built either way. The driveway was not attached to the house and so we're standing on the driveway and the pad remains there as a house falls away. In other days it could have taken the entire pad and us with it.

**1:33:52 Debra Schwartz:** And as the house crumbles, you've got your men below and you don't know what's happened to them then.

**1:33:57 Mike St. John:** Right. So, there's radio silence and there's numerous calls to them, which they can't answer 'cause they're trying to get out of the way and regain their composure. But I think that for a minute or minute and a half I was convinced that the engine company was dead, until they popped up on the street.

**1:34:14 Debra Schwartz:** That's rather shocking. How do you manage your feelings after that?

**1:34:22 Jeff Davidson:** Well, then you go back to your checklists and you say, okay accountability. "Engine seven, is everybody here? Engine one, is everybody here? Who's not here?" And you just start to chunk your problem up and attack it systematically. You go back to those systems that you use and that's what gets you through that moment.

**1:34:43 Debra Schwartz:** I remember one of the fire chiefs when I was working at the fire department saying that you've practiced something so much that you don't have to think about it and that's what can save you when there's a calamity going on. It's not your emotion going through incorrectly or whatever it's doing in a panic, making decisions, but the protocol that you've trained again and again and again is what saves you, and that's what you depend on in working with each other.

**1:35:13 Jeff Davidson:** We try to let rookies and people in fire academies know that you're training not only to get it right but when it matters to not get it wrong.

**1:35:24 Debra Schwartz:** Yes, exactly. Right.

**1:35:26 Jeff Davidson:** So, I wanna shift gears and tell another story that we didn't get a chance to tell you, but it's all sort of coming together in how do you deal with the unknowns and how do you deal with stuff that sort of is outside the norm? It's a bit of a funny story too but there's.

**1:35:44 Debra Schwartz:** We could use a little levity here.

**1:35:46 Jeff Davidson:** We were buying the GPS units for the engines, the Garmin that everybody has in their car, which is now in the smartphone, but we had only had them in the battalion chief vehicles. A couple of guys had gotten them at home and then we bought them and put them in the fire engines, and that day the captain says to me. "So, what if I put in an address and it's telling me to go all the way over there and I know — " and he's like pointing at it, part of the hill, and he goes, "And I know why I can go that way, what do I do?" And I said, "Well, this is an adjunct. This supports you but if you know a better way, use it. But this is an additional tool, just like the run book or whatever it may be. This is here to help you; it's not here to tell you how to run your life. It's a tool." So, a couple days later, we get dispatched again to a fire in Sausalito, and it's 11, 12 o'clock at night, Christmas eve.

**1:36:45 Mike St. John:** Christmas eve.

**1:36:46 Jeff Davidson:** Christmas Eve. And the fire is in an area where there's a dead zone in the radio system.

**1:36:52 Debra Schwartz:** No.

**1:36:53 Jeff Davidson:** So, Mike is being dispatched on the initial response. and they immediately upgrade it, so I get assigned as the second battalion chief. The fire's down in a pocket down here in Sausalito, and we can't hear the battalion chief saying, "We have

an access problem and a water problem. I need all the engines to come around the bottom."

**1:37:15 Mike St. John:** Actually, I did hear that.

**1:37:16 Jeff Davidson:** You did hear that but you might have been committed already so we had plugged it in to the Garmin, and it's saying to go up the freeway and then come down Spencer when he was telling everybody to come in from the bottom. So, the engines that followed that came in from the bottom and all got stuck at the bottom because of a bottle neck. And we're driving along, nothing's on the radio, we can hear nothing. I don't know what was going through your head, but I'm behind Mike in my pick-up going, "I really screwed up." I'm listening to this GPS unit and I don't hear anything on the radio and all of a sudden, we come around a corner and the radios come back on and they've got a second degree burn victim or third degree burn victim that's jumped out the window. The cop is walking them up the hill, put them in the fire engine, the firefighter immediately starts to treat them.

**1:38:07:** I backed my truck up 'cause there's a fire hydrant right there, Mike or his crew connects to the hydrant and I pull the hose off and we put first water on the fire from the top of the hill. So, we're all lamenting that technology isn't gonna do the right thing, and that it told us to go the wrong way, but then to be in the exact right place at the right time. We treated the burn victim. We had water on the fire from a different water source. We put the first water on the fire, and sometimes things just —

**1:38:35 Debra Schwartz:** That was a good day.

**1:38:37 Mike St. John:** That was a good day.

**1:38:37 Jeff Davidson:** That was one of the days when you come back and you're like, "I can't believe that that happened."

**1:38:41 Debra Schwartz:** So, we've talked about a lot of hard days.

**1:38:42 Mike St. John:** And they thought we were brilliant. It's like, "How did you know to go that way?"

**1:38:44 Debra Schwartz:** It could've worked differently, as arbitrary it is, but there must be a lot of good days. Any babies delivered?

**1:38:54 Jeff Davidson:** I got to observe and be in the room this big when it happened, but the paramedics were taking care of it. But yes, I got to be in a room and observe a home delivery. I was actually the first responder on scene with the paramedics about 20 seconds behind me. It's a rare occurrence in our careers, but it's one of those magical moments when it does happen, and those are the calls that you remember for your whole life.

**1:39:24 Debra Schwartz:** How many rescued people come to the station with banana bread and a hug to say thanks?

**1:39:30 Mike St. John:** Quite a few.

**1:39:32 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah, people are really grateful often times, and certainly we've gotten a lot of that. I think we've painted a picture of the shadow side of it, but it's incredibly rewarding to have somebody who's in a diabetic emergency and see the paramedics administer glucose and see them come, you know, to be conscious again. To see people that are in cardiac arrests, that have been resuscitated or people that have undergone severe traumatic injuries and come back four to six months later and bring you cookies or a carton of ice cream and say how thankful they are. There is a lot of great healing from people that have had heart attacks to strokes to traumatic injuries that you can tell that you've made a really big difference in their lives.

**1:40:23:** And we've had occasions where we've had a pediatric call, whether we saw it as life-threatening where seconds count or just a routine call where we're doing our job, but the family will come by every year on the anniversary of that call or on their child's birthday to help us blow the candles out on the cake or to be there for another photo. And so, there are those incredibly rewarding moments and it doesn't always happen but it does sometimes seem to happen when you need it the most. When you've had a bad day for whatever reason and someone knocks on the door with the plate of cookies and you know, "You guys came and helped me the other day" — and then, of course, the mischievous side of the fire department kicks in because then, "Oh, thank you very much." And then as soon as they leave, you look up the call and if it was another shift, you make sure to eat all the cookies and leave them just a couple of crumbs. You never wanna leave the cookies.

**1:41:24 Debra Schwartz:** Good to know. [laughs]

**1:41:26 Mike St. John:** Or you eat all the ice cream except one scoop at the bottom.

**1:41:30 Jeff Davidson:** The other rewarding thing in the fire service is just working with such amazing people, your colleagues in the fire service or on the shift. You're not close to everybody, but everybody works really well together 'cause we have to. But there are many people that will be life-long friends that went through and have undergone a lot, done a lot of stuff together. And just seeing how professional people are, overcoming significant challenges together, whether it be a structure fire or a rescue or critical medical aid, there's a lot of reward afterwards of successful outcomes. When I look at my fire service career and consider whether I wanted to do anything different, even though it's had it's challenges, I can't imagine having done anything else, and I'm really proud of my career and what I got to do.

**1:42:27 Debra Schwartz:** There must be pivotal individuals that have influenced your life or been heroes to you or mentors? Do you have any names that you'd like to share?

**1:42:27 Jeff Davidson:** Sure. There was a gentleman in Mill Valley, when I started here named John Keane and he ended up leaving Mill Valley as a battalion chief and going to work up in Valley of the Moon up in Sonoma County, but he was very instrumental in mentoring and supporting me as one of the young guys on the cusp of the department's changing and professionalizing and formal education. Another gentleman outside the department who was huge in my career and very sadly passed away unexpectedly last year, was a gentleman named Tom Forester. And if you're interested in looking at marinfirehistory.com, I think the work you see on that website of the history of Marin County fire services is all Tom.

**1:43:31:** I'm probably one of 500 people that can say that he was a huge friend and mentor and had a huge impact in my life. From day one when I interacted with him, he was open and accessible and willing to train and educate me and share his knowledge with me. He got me outside of my fire department, and it wasn't just about what Mill Valley's doing but how can Mill Valley work better with Tiburon and with Corte Madera and with Petaluma and Santa Rosa and all collaborate. He was really big about the relationships and working collaboratively. Huge, huge impact.

**1:44:12:** And then some other people, I would say Ken Massucco, who's retired fire chief from Marin County Fire Department. I think if Ken had one fault. He saw us as his family, but that was also one of the good things about Ken. Sometimes he held on a little too tight. But he treated me like I was a member of his fire department, even though I wasn't with the Marin County Fire Department. He was there, hands down, without question. He and a couple of other people at Marin County Fire Department have been huge, huge mentors in my life.

**1:44:52:** I would also say that I would vacillate between calling Mike a role model and a mentor for me because any of the success that I had in my 20 plus years as a battalion chief occurred with you being on the shift the majority of the time and experiencing a lot of good, bad and ugly together, and getting through that together. Seeing how he collaborated with the community, and brought volunteer groups together and challenged us for training and professionalism only made me better. So, this guy sitting right next to me has been a huge influence in my career.

**1:45:28 Mike St. John:** Well, thank you, Jeff. I would start off at the very beginning with Bob Mariani at Kentfield who was this kind of a legendary Marin fire service figure. Even the chiefs of some other agencies like Ritt Hewitt, and Forest Craig, I worked with on the HAZMAT team and Mike Angely. And then going to Marin County Fire, Doug Cole and Ken Massucco were certainly also major mentors for me. I certainly evolved. Jeff Davidson was a huge mentor to me, and he and I will talk in the sound booth of each other but we didn't always have good days. [chuckles]

**1:46:07:** There were days where I certainly got called out for things that I wasn't doing right, justifiably so, and all that made me a better firefighter.

**1:46:15 Jeff Davidson:** And it was a two-way street because Mike and I could speak truth to each other, and it was hard truth sometimes, but it was truth that needed to be spoken. It made us better and stronger and it was better for the organization.

**1:46:28 Mike St. John:** Absolutely. Captains like Jim McClure, Steve Komf. Greg Moore is a captain, one of my first captains and a battalion chief. He was someone who I learned a lot from. Jim Rey, I learned a tremendous amount from. He was just an excellent fire ground officer. I formerly called him my mentor, but also sometimes my tormentor. [laughs]

**1:46:51 Mike St. John:** I was influenced by a lot of firefighters that worked for me as well, certainly, so many that I couldn't even begin to name them.

**1:47:06 Debra Schwartz:** I remember in the EMT class that I took, the teacher said, "Trauma brings people together." And once I started hanging around the fire houses, I realized that there were unique and beautiful relationships that had been literally forged by fire between the people that work together. That there was a community of individuals working together. As you described, there was communication in which you were honest, you were able to be honest with each other and share, but also a sort of psychic connection. Because there are many times where words just don't do it. You're wearing masks. There's smoke between you. You have to know each other so well that you can anticipate that person's decision-making and their actions. That kind of relationship is what strengthens the fire department.

**1:48:08 Jeff Davidson:** So yesterday I was at the fire academy in Santa Rosa and one of the instructors that's up there is with Foster City now, but he was previously with the Larkspur Fire Department. Then in 1995, we were at a fire up in Lake County for a week and we see each other twice a semester, but it's almost like your taste buds come alive when you see each other 'cause you're right back in that moment, and that forging is never gonna go away. We just immediately go into the shtick about, "Oh, the vortex from hell and the fork fire." We go right into our sort of comic routine or something. We go right back into it and we'll never lose that connection.

**1:48:55 Debra Schwartz:** When we're talking about Mill Valley and we're thinking about our concerns here today, in a changing environment and with all this development and trees that haven't had any fire reduction, the materials they are waiting to burn, and we're able to see and smell what happened in the fires recently in Paradise, when there were so much smoke before that, we may not be in the flame but we're close enough to feel the devil's breath on our neck, for some of us, maybe it's more intimate. Like for me, I lost my identical twin sister as a result of the Sonoma Fire. She didn't burn, but she had a heart attack while evacuating. So, the care we need to take of our own home in a community isn't just about the houses that we can lose, but it's the people that are killed, the way our lives are changed and the people that die as a result of the whole process, the secondary deaths like with my sister.

**1:50:08:** There's so much to consider and so much at stake. I remember asking the fire captain in Sonoma, "What do you do in case of a true calamity? Where do you begin?" And he said, and these are words I've lived by, he said, "You start where you stand." Well, we're standing here in Mill Valley and I'm gonna ask you gentleman to help us help you. What can we as a community in Mill Valley do better to help ourselves as well?

**1:50:41 Mike St. John:** So, going back to there's only seven or eight firefighters and three police officers and 14,000 people, the realization that you're not probably gonna be the priority during a disaster. It goes to the heart of personal responsibility, which means having enough provisions and supplies to take care of yourself and your family for more than several days. We learned at Katrina that three days is not enough; you probably need five to seven and that may not be enough in a major disaster. So be ready. Take CERT training. Know how to turn off your gas. Know how to do some basic first aid and light search and rescue. If you have car camping supplies, all that stuff works in a major disaster because you may not feel comfortable going back inside your home and sleeping there.

**1:51:35:** Don't expect the local government, the city of Mill Valley, to be able to take care of you because we're not going to be able to, and our priority's gonna be life first, property second, and everything else third. We're gonna triage to what we can do the most good for the most people.

**1:51:56 Debra Schwartz:** This is my segue into what's happening in the future. We've got some changes going on in the town as to the fire prevention. Before we close this interview, let's talk about that a little bit.

**1:52:10 Jeff Davidson:** Sure. And before we get to that, my answer to that question is everything that Mike said, but with the sort of exacerbation, because we've been saying this for years.

**1:52:24 Debra Schwartz:** How frustrating.

**1:52:25 Jeff Davidson:** I feel like I'm sort of emotionally just at a dead end: why is it not sticking? How do we get that message out? And how do we move the needle pass because everything that we're saying is not brand new, hot off the press. It's the same book reprinted year after year after year, and I don't know how we get the community to engage. I know that we did the fifth grade Get Ready [program], and that's gonna have a huge impact, but that's a long-term thing. How do we get people to take that responsibility in the moment? I think it's not just an emergency earthquake/fire problem in Mill Valley. I think it's a societal problem. There's an expectation that someone else will fix or solve the problem, but that I'm not held to any standard because someone else should do it, and I don't know how we get past that.

**1:53:21 Debra Schwartz:** Let's try to blast that delusion away. Perhaps it's time to bring back the fireman's brawl, and use it as an opportunity. The Historical Society's been thinking about that.

**1:53:34 Jeff Davidson:** Fireman's Brawl, oh boy.

**1:53:36 Mike St. John:** I think the Fireman's Ball. We don't wanna brawl.

**1:53:38 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah.

**1:53:39 Mike St. John:** So, moving forward, in the last three years, we've seen more destructive fires more frequently than any other time in history. In Mill Valley where we already know that we are fire-prone community that could experience a significant fire loss, we need to do more. And so, starting right away, people need to be much more aggressive on their vegetation management. The code that the city's looking at enforcing is having no vegetation within three feet of your house and this includes wood chips because we learned through the recent fire storms what's igniting houses is the stuff that's directly adjacent to the house, oftentimes stuff we planted. And if you go back to the 1970s during the drought, we encouraged people to plant evergreens like Juniper and Cyprus and Bamboo and things like that because they require very little water. What's been happening, and we noticed this during the Oakland firestorm, is that that juniper that you planted in front of your house is what burns your house down.

**1:55:02:** Mill Valley is considering an ordinance that's going to outlaw bamboo, juniper, cyprus and acacia and also outlaw having any vegetation unless they're irrigated succulents next to your structure, and I think these are good first steps. The other thing we're gonna do is we're gonna be much more aggressive about enforcing existing code. We send firefighters into the hills each year to do inspections, but oftentimes they're called away on medical aid calls or other things, so it's hard to have that continuity. We're gonna have focused people doing inspections and we're gonna write stuff we probably haven't written before because we only have the bandwidth to do so much. But as a community, if you like your privacy screen which is bamboo, we're gonna ask you to reconsider that and you're probably gonna be able to see your neighbors a lot more but the reality is the ornamental vegetation that we're planting as privacy screens or because we like living in a dense forest is what's gonna burn our community down.

**1:56:04 Debra Schwartz:** I can just anticipate how this is gonna go over.

**1:56:11 Jeff Davidson:** It's interesting, and people are conflicted 'cause I'll have somebody saying, "Boy, I love everything you're doing," and I go out to their house and I point out what it's actually gonna look like and they're very concerned. It's like, "Well, no. I like that bush," or "I like that bamboo screen 'cause I don't wanna see that neighbor." I'm like, "Well, that's what has to go." So, I think people are encouraged to see it up until the moment they actually see what it looks like and the reality is that Mill Valley's never had this much vegetation in it. If you look at, if you go to the Mill Valley History Room and you look at some of the old photos on the walls, it's middle ridges grass lands. And now it's a big timber forest with thousands of homes on it and so we have to do something very different.

**1:57:06 Debra Schwartz:** Yes. Your life depends on it and your property. Something we haven't talked about and I'd like to include briefly is women in the fire department.

**1:57:15 Jeff Davidson:** Not enough, we need more.

**1:57:18 Mike St. John:** Yeah, I couldn't agree more.

**1:57:20 Debra Schwartz:** Has having women in the fire department changed the emotional, I guess I'll say, option. Do women handle the fall out after some kind of serious event differently than men?

**1:57:43 Jeff Davidson:** They can, but I think at the same time, we're becoming a more diverse workforce, we're also bringing in the tools for the existing workforce to be more accessible to dealing with the PTSD stuff. I just think a more diverse workforce that reflects your community allows you to engage the community at levels that a bunch of white males may not be able to. So, I think diversity is usually important, and if we all come from the same emotional box, we're all gonna see the problem the same way, and it would be better to have a broad breadth and depth of people looking at problems and situations and creating bridges to solutions.

**1:58:30:** Mike might be really good at telling somebody tactically what their neighborhood should look like from a fire fighting standpoint, whereas an inspector might have a psychological background or a sociology degree and be able to talk to them on a more empathetic level. Not to say that Mike can't or doesn't, but it's just bringing more people with different approaches in is a good thing, and diversity is I think a huge part of that.

**1:58:55 Mike St. John:** We have several female firefighters that work in the southern Marin area. One of them is Yvette Blount. She's every bit as capable as a male firefighter, but one of the things that I've seen over and over again is she's much better able to connect with a patient, whether it be male or female or a kid, than a male just by her nature. And it's not unique to her, I've seen some male firemen that have that charm offensive that is great with connecting with old people, and so I think everybody has their gifts and some of it is strength, but the fire service is not driven on strength alone, and being able to connect with our community, being able to connect with our patients and being able to have the technical skills to work up a critical call, that's not about strength, that's about a lot of other types of skills. So, I think the fire service in this area would benefit from having more females.

**1:59:54 Debra Schwartz:** Is there anything we haven't talked about that you would like to say before we close?

**2:00:01 Mike St. John:** It's just been an interesting experience to talk about the whole spectrum of topics that we've talked about 'cause I don't think I've processed some of the stuff fully until today and I appreciate the opportunity.

**2:00:14 Jeff Davidson:** I guess I just keep going back to the community. I want them to continue to understand that we are the tool to be used after the problem's occurred and we need their help to design the problem so it doesn't require so many of us. And again, that's that engagement piece and moving the needle slowly over time, but we may run out of time. We may not have enough time so whatever we can do to get the community to take personal responsibility and buy into this problem with us, we'll just make it that much easier for the next generation and generations of firefighters and public safety employees in this community.

**2:01:08 Debra Schwartz:** Well. I think we've captured a lot in this interview.

**2:01:13 Jeff Davidson:** Feels like it, yeah.

**2:01:15 Debra Schwartz:** I wanna thank both of you for your long service, for all that you've given of yourselves, of your bodies, of your psychology, of your time in service to us in the community, for the wisdom that you've gained over time and that you've shared with me today. I really can't tell you how much it means to me personally, and to everybody whether they know it or not that lives in this town and beyond. I've enjoyed being updated to how things are changing and the tendrils that have gone out as gentle fragile ones that have strengthened as we become a more cohesive unit overall.

**2:01:57:** I find it remarkably comforting to know that your affiliation with all these different units and different companies is overall strengthening the entire process of firefighting. It's incredibly gratifying to understand exactly what's been going on. I just wanna say thank you on behalf of Mill Valley Historical Society and the library, and the community that doesn't know this yet but will learn it hopefully when they hear this interview, for all that you both done for so long.

**2:02:27 Jeff Davidson:** Well, thank you again for doing the work to capture not just the interview today, but the work that the Historical Society does in general. It's a gem that this community probably doesn't fully comprehend and tap into to understand the history of this community and the people that have come before us.

**2:02:46 Debra Schwartz:** Well, we can try.

**2:02:48 Jeff Davidson:** Exactly.

**2:02:48 Debra Schwartz:** And reach where we can reach, and we can keep on trying and keep on reaching. So, thank you both very much.

**2:02:54 Jeff Davidson:** Yeah, thank you.

**2:02:55 Debra Schwartz:** I think that concludes our interview. On behalf of the Historical Society and the library, thank you very much.

**2:03:01 Jeff Davidson:** Thank you.

**2:03:02 Mike St. John:** Thank you.