

Mike West

in conversation with Pete Dutchick and Kelly Ramsey

March 13, 2021

Full transcription

KR ([00:00:26](#)):

I wanted to say, just in case this recording would ever go anywhere, that none of it, nothing that any of us are saying reflects the views or opinions of the Forest Service or any other government agency. This is just us as people saying our personal views. All right. So Mike, I know you know the general gist of the questions that I have for you. But yeah, I was just wondering if you could start with telling us a bit about your background, even if Dutch already knows a lot of this, but where did you grow up and how did you get into fire, and then what course did your career in wildland fire take?

MW ([00:01:12](#)):

So I was born in Vallejo in the California Bay area. And then when I was four years old, my parents moved us up to Susanville, California, in Lassen County, because they wanted to live in a rural area. So I grew up in Susanville and I was actually introduced to the idea of wildland fire at a really young age because when we moved to Susanville, our neighbor was the Superintendent of Lassen Hotshots. I was, you know, four or five years old, but I remember hearing about hotshots because he had a son who was about my age and he talked about it. I spent a lot of time in the summers with his son because his dad was always gone. Like his dad was gone the whole summer during Yellowstone.

And that was when I first learned about fire as this tiny little kid. And my first impression was that it sounded really, really scary and that I felt bad for him cause his dad was always gone. Like those were the two things I thought of like, wow, his dad's always gone. And then, I mean, wildfires were always a part of life in Susanville, but I never really had that much of an interest in getting involved. When I was in middle school, my older sister was dating a guy who fought fire for the BLM and he would come home from assignments and show me pictures. And then I kind of thought that was pretty cool. And then my first year of college a group of buddies of mine from high school, we all decided we were going to apply. So we put in paper applications -- this was in 2002 -- for the forest service, the BLM and Cal fire. And there was like eight of us and all my buddies got on with the forest service except me. I didn't get any jobs. I went back to school.

And then the following season, I got picked up on a type 2 hand crew in Susanville, and it was a newer crew. So that was the 2003 fire season and I was 20 years old and I was super excited about it. I didn't have any real concerns about the danger of it. I had grown up playing sports, so I thought this would be like a good replacement for sports. It would be fun and I'd make some money. And a bunch of my high school buddies were on the crew. So it was just like, this is kind of like high school football or track. Like here we are riding around in this little bus. Cool.

MW ([00:03:43](#)):

On the Forest, we were kind of a lower end of the totem pole crew. You know, the Lassen Hotshots were on the forest and those guys kind of looked down on us or whatever, but they counted on us for rentals when they needed a guy or whoever.

So my first season, our captain on that crew was a salty old smokejumper from Redding. And he was really cool and I really liked him and we were having a blast going to IA's and stuff. And then turns out the hotshots needed a few people -- a couple of guys got in trouble, a couple of guys got hurt. And so I filled in on a roll to Oregon that year and saw some -- it was a two week roll -- we saw some really

hardcore fire, which I didn't really know what hardcore was cause I was new. But that's when I had that first near miss and it was a hard line-cutting fire, and it kind of had me questioning well, is this really what I'm into? But then after the assignment, the superintendent was like, Hey, you did a good job. I'll hire you next year. So then I decided I was into it.

MW ([00:04:50](#)):

So I did two seasons on Lassen, 04 and 05. And then 2006, I left to finish school. So I went to summer school. I didn't fight fire 2006 or 2007. And then I came back to Lassen in 2008, nine and 10 and then I got this idea that I was gonna be a jumper. So I was training really, really hard for that. And I wound up injuring my back and that derailed that plan. So 2011, I went and worked on a type 3 engine on the Lassen. And I really couldn't get my back healthy, but then I just decided I was going to try to jump anyway. So that turned out to be a terrible idea. And then 2012, I tried to go jump, washed out right away, day one.

And then went back to the engine kind of like, tail tucked between my legs, not really sure if I wanted to stay in fire. I was pretty down. And then the next season I was offered a permanent job, I was almost 30 by this point. So I was offered a permanent job as a squad leader on the type 2 crew that I had started on and they had now become a type 2 IA crew. So I thought, yeah, I'll take this job. I had graduated college by then, but I wasn't using my degree. So I got on the type 2 crew.. kind of a rough season, a really good crew, but we didn't get along with the superintendent. He wasn't -- without going into too much detail -- wasn't really the best of character. So that was a pretty rough season and I wound up dislocating my shoulder on our first off-Forest assignment in June.

We demobed and I was on two months light duty at that point. My arm was a swollen mess, so we came home from that fire on June 8th, and I was on light duty. And then on June 10th, one of my childhood friends who was a Redding jumper was killed on a fire on the Modoc. So that was obviously the worst moment of my fire career, probably of my life. You know, it was just this horrific thing. I had known him since I was four years old. He had worked on Diamond Mountain hotshots in Susanville. So we had been on a lot of fires together. He worked for Cal fire as well, so my very first fire ever, it was a roadside start and he was there. And we were roommates, one off season, and trained together.

MW ([00:07:35](#)):

He was kind of training with me before I got hurt to try to get me ready to jump. And it was really hard, and he was a close friend with my family and my wife and my parents and all his siblings, we all grew up in the same neighborhood. So it wasn't really just a fire thing. It was kind of like this family and friends, community shock.

So that season I was just a mess and I was on light duty. I was doing things like working in the lookout, just kind of hanging out while my crew was gone. I was probably drinking too much alcohol. It was just a bad scene. And then I came back to the crew in August after my arm healed and really wasn't getting along with the superintendent. And on fires, I was super paranoid.

I kept thinking someone else was going to get hit by a tree. So I'd find myself taking the saw away from our Sawyer so I could cut the nasty trees, and kind of like mother-henning the crew. Cause I thought, you know, someone's going to get hurt on my watch. So that was rough, and we *did* have someone get hurt -- a broken leg -- and they had to be slung out by a hoist ship. That was on my first fire back. And so that happening (and he was, of course, a friend of mine from high school)..so a little more trauma to the stack of that summer. And by the time the season ended, I was just, I was kind of really questioning if I wanted to stay in fire. And I hadn't suspected any kind of PTSD by that point. Even though I was having full-on symptoms, I wasn't really suspecting it.

That superintendent wound up getting fired that off-season. So the crew got a fresh start; a good buddy of mine took over. So I stayed with the crew 2014, 2015 and part of 2016. And by that time I was running a 10 person mod like a captain, but I wasn't getting paid for it. I was a GS 6 Squadie, but due to staffing issues, I was running the mod every year, like a detailed captain, which you see [a lot] obviously. And then in the off season, December of 2015, my son was born, and that's kind of when I started thinking that maybe I didn't want to fight fire anymore. My first fire after he was born, he was six months old. Let me backtrack actually. So when my wife was pregnant with my son in 2015 I had two near misses on back-to-back nights with trees. I was really, really close to getting hit by a tree on the River Complex. I think that was on the Six Rivers. And so then I was like, man, I almost widowed my wife two nights in a row while she was pregnant. So all of these things were things I was thinking, but not telling anybody. And then 2016 came around and I went on my first fire with the crew. We went to the Klamath and I realized I didn't want to be gone on fires while I had kids. I just couldn't handle it. And so I applied for a prevention detail on the Plumas National Forest and I got picked up for that. So in mid July I went over to the Plumas thinking in prevention that I could kind of make my own schedule and do my own thing. But wasn't really the case. I was basically just IA-ing and IC-ing a lot of fires and they were sending me off as a crew boss.

So I was still taking crews out. And as much as I loved the prevention gig, when I wasn't on fires, like patrolling the forest and working with the schools and all that. And I loved my boss. He was a gung-ho battalion and I really did love working for him, but you know, his expectation was that his prevention people were going to roll on fires, you know? And so even though I wasn't sure, I applied and got picked up permanent for that job. So I came back in 2017 and did it and fought a ton of fire. And there was an arsonist on the forest and a lot of his fires had nasty injuries, and he set a fire below a kids' camp and it was just pretty hard dealing with that arsonist stuff. And then he was caught at the end of the season.

And then by that point, I just knew I didn't want to fight fire anymore. I had been out on a crew boss assignment and woke up in the middle of the night, like had this terrible flashback that our spike camp was getting burned over when it wasn't, but I was like half asleep. And the glow of the main fire made it seem like it. And I had a crew from Porterville, which is like a lot of migrant workers and such. And I woke up and I was kind of freaking out and a couple of them woke up before I realized that we were totally fine and I was just tripping out. And so after that season I decided I was gonna try to be a dispatcher.

So I live like two blocks from the Lassen dispatch center, so I applied and got hired for that. And it was cool. I did okay. But it was just so busy and so hectic. And it's inter-agency so it's Cal fire, Forest Service, BLM, all the city ambulance and air ambulance and all that. So even as a Forest Service dispatcher, I was expected to answer 911 and dispatch medicals and that sort of thing. And it was always super busy and it, it became its own kind of set of trauma because all these 911 calls are my local community. So I took numerous 911's where people I knew had died or just terrible car accidents, things like that on top of trying to dispatch very busy fire seasons. And I was working a ton of overtime, so I was two blocks from my house, but I wasn't I was hardly ever home. And so after the 2019 fire season, so that was two seasons in dispatch, I'd finally had enough. And I had just started applying for teacher jobs and I got picked up, I got a job offer last April. And so I worked until the end of July and then walked out, and that was the end of my fire career.

KR ([00:14:24](#)):

Wow. Thank you so much for that story. That's amazing just to hear it, all those years and all those experiences piled up together. And I also, I just want to say, I'm so sorry for all that you went through.

MW (00:14:43):

It was, it was tough. And I think I probably, once I get ranting like that, I probably focus more on the negative stuff, but there was just as many positive things, you know, and friendships and that sort of thing. So yeah, I mean the good and the bad was probably about 50-50, but I think the bad is definitely what pushed me out. And I think the primary reason really was just time at home. I couldn't find the balance between being a good firefighter and a good family man. Some people can do it, but all of my friends who fight fire and have a spouse who doesn't, they struggle, and I was struggling hard. So, yeah, it was just -- I'd had enough. And out I went.

KR (00:15:38):

Yeah, fair enough. There's like so many directions that I could take it from there, but I guess I want to talk about why you left and how you decided to leave. But before that, I was wondering if you could talk more about the PTSD -- and if this is too personal or too sensitive, you know, let me know, and we don't have to go there, but I'm just wondering how you figured out that PTSD is what was going on with you and then what you did like aside from, you know, leaving -- it's like you sort of stepped away progressively from being active on the fire line and taking these crew boss assignments. But, before doing that, or while doing that, how was the whole mental health aspect actually playing out?

MW (00:17:57):

So the start of the PTSD. Looking back on it, it started after that first near-miss in 2003. And I had no clue. And I know 2003 wasn't that long ago, but I think the attitude towards PTSD was much different. And my knowledge of it was very, very minimal. I associated PTSD with the Vietnam war just because, you know, I had some friends' dads who had fought there, and I just thought that was it. I didn't really, I didn't think it was something you could get from fighting fire. It wasn't even on my radar.

But that first near-miss, we were on a fire on the Umpqua. It was with Lassen Hotshots, and I was a rental. And there was a type 2 crew cutting towards us. And typical fire skunking around all day, and then the lid came off and it ripped. And I was oblivious to all this. I was just cutting, trying to not to get yelled at and, like, prove myself. I had this attitude like, alright, these guys think they're better than me. I'm gonna, you know, I'm gonna be tough. You know?

So we're cutting line all day. And then we got up to the top of this ridge, and then we dive down the hill. And there was a piece of line, oh, maybe quarter mile long. And when we got to the top of the hill, that Type 2 IA crew, I don't know who they were -- they had full brim, red hard hats, I remember that. They started working their way up towards us. And we tied in with them in the middle, mid-slope, and then they immediately left, they bailed.

And I remember as we tied in, it was starting to pick up with, you know, single tree torching. And then down below us was a meadow with intermittent lodgepole and grass, where -- looking back now, it was a safety zone if you improved it. And trees started torching up underneath us. And that was the first time -- this was like late July -- that was the first time I got scared on a fire. So now I'm scared, and it starts spotting, and I remember the lead saw yelling (you know he's a friend of mine now, Dutch -- Mike \_\_\_\_), "Let's get this," like get after it.

So we're chasing these spots. And I looked at my friend who was a fill-in on this roll, but he had spent numerous years on Lassen Hotshots in the past, and he was about 10 years older than me. And I looked at him and I said, "Are we in a bad place?" And he's like, "Oh yeah, we're in a real bad place."

And then shortly after he said that, the captain on Lassen yelled, "Double-time down the hill." And so you know, we ran down the hill, and it was just ripping on both sides. And I remember thinking, 10 of the guys, the bulk of that crew, was all local from Susanville. So like 10 of these guys are age 18 to 22, guys I went to highschool with. And I remember this guy [LB] who was, I played football with him and he was a Sawyer on the crew and he was running in front of me and I had this brief thought like, like, gosh, like are Laben and I both gonna get killed today? Like, are all these kids from Susanville going to get burned up?

And two guys got cut off up top. So it was a buddy of mine, also another fill-in, cause we had ton of fill-ins on that roll. And he got cut off up top because he was trying to save a pile of drip torches and some saws. Him and an apprentice on the crew ran up over the hill to a road. So they were separated from us. We ran down into the meadow, we made it. And I turned around and I looked back at the hill and by that point it was like fully involved. It was ripping. And that was the first time in my life that I really -- my mortality really hit me. It was just like, Whoa, I almost died. What the hell?

And I still wasn't sure if we were safe in this meadow. And then one of the captains was like, "Start prepping these trees. We're going to fire this out." So then we went to work, trying to prep this safety zone. And then another one of the squadies bailed out of the meadow down this dozer line to see if he could find another spot for us. And that dozer line tied into some cold black. So like 10 minutes later he came running out and we bailed down. We probably went through like a half mile of green going down the dozer line, and smoke was laying over, but there was no active fire. And then we got to the black and my buddy, the guy who had spent hotshot time but was now on the hand crew, he was really mad, because he had worked under that legendary Supt who had just retired -- the guy from my childhood.

And he was like, this is bullshit. This shouldn't have happened. And I didn't know what to think, because I didn't know anything, but all I knew was my buddy and the other guy were missing, but we were hearing him on the radio. And I think the Division picked them up on a road and brought them back. So there's no injuries and there's no real AAR. So I think the leadership on Lassen at that time -- these guys are all friends of mine and they're great firefighters, but they were all in new roles, you know, new Supts, one new Captain, a new Squadie. So I think they were a little shook, like, wow, we kind of screwed that up and we should have bailed earlier. So there wasn't really a lot of talk about it. And I think maybe they were like, well, we got a lot of rentals too, and we don't really want this getting out. But I was looking at the -- in my opinion -- the experienced hotshots, the guys who'd been there two or three years or whatever, and they were all spooked. But then we never talked. And so we just got right back into fighting fire. And I was so tired and just trying to do my thing and I just was like, well, that's normal, then. That's hotshotting. So whatever I finished the roll kind of with mixed feelings, but then the overhead took a liking to me and were like, You need to apply next year. So then in my mind, I thought, cool, well that scared me, but what's the best way to get over it? Just keep doing it.

So that winter, I thought about that a lot. And I asked one of the guys on the crew about it. And he gave me advice, which probably wasn't that good. But at the time he thought it was probably the best advice. He said, "Just don't think about it."

So then I went into 2004 on Lassen hotshots and our very first off-forest assignment was a fire called the Nutall Fire. And...another near miss. But this time we had to run uphill, and this time there were more crews on the fire. And this time, I think our overhead made the right decision by pulling the plug earlier. Cause there was a hotshot crew working down below us who didn't pull the plug and half of them wound up deploying. So then this fire, there isn't really any hush hush on it. Like there's a deployment. So it became pretty big news.

And I was spooked after that. Like I was legitimately spooked. I hated going into the hole. And I started some bad nervous tics. Like I remember that season, I was always scratching my head, to the point where I'd have like these scabs on my head, because when I knew we were going to go into the hole, I'd just sit in the buggy and like kind of pick at my head, but never tell anyone. Just terrible, terrible anxiety all the time. But in my mind I thought, I just need to keep immersing myself in this fire. So that way I can get over this fear. Because I didn't think it was PTSD. I just thought I was being, like, soft. So the harder I PT, the harder I swamp, the more I cut line, the more I volunteer to go into the hole and burn, it's going to go away eventually.

We had a couple other, I wouldn't say near-misses that season, but you know, like this is sketchy style stuff. And at the end of the year party, one of our apprentices announced he was quitting because of that Nutall fire incident. We had a guy quit mid season because of it.

After that season, I moved to Los Angeles for a little bit because I was doing standup comedy, and I was living at my cousin's house. And that's when the PTSD symptoms really started kicking in. Cause he left to go to New York to shoot a movie. He was into movies and stuff. And I was alone in this apartment in Santa Monica. And I -- oh, I was depressed. Like I was wanting to go to all these open mics and do comedy. And some days I would just sit in the apartment, afraid to go outside. It was right on the beach, beautiful, and I was super depressed and anxious, like freaking out, driving on the freeway, cold sweats kind of thing. Not telling anybody, of course.

And then for three months of that, I moved to Chico to go back to school. Cause I hadn't finished my degree, I was still in school. And I was just doing things to avoid negative thoughts, like going out partying, PT-ing hard, hanging out with only other hotshots. And that - I think that's another mistake we make as fire people, when you only associate with other fire people, sometimes you don't realize how strange your behavior is. And so I just thought it was, I was depressed and had anxiety and something was wrong with me. So I just was like, screw it: back to the hotshots for 2005. That was a great season, great crew. We traveled the country, fought a ton of fire, and never got into any tight spots with fire. One time we got pinned down on a ridgeline with lightning. I got pretty scared, but nothing scared me like fire did. But even though nothing bad happened that season, I was always scared to go in the hole. I was just like, I was like the guy that was always like, Hey, where's our safety zone? To the point, maybe where -- we had a really good captain, Mike Sherman, that year and he was great dealing with me, but you know, he was probably like, "Dude, you're fine." Like, Stop asking.

Then 2005 ended. And I thought that was it. I thought, I'm going to go finish school and be a teacher. I got a hotshot belt buckle. I did it. I'm cool. And off I went to finish school.

Mike Sherman called me in the spring of '06, asked me if I wanted to fight fire. I said, No, I'm going back to school. Huge relief. I just was like, I thought I was over it. And then during those two years away from fire.. bad depression. I lived alone some of the time in an apartment, and I just sorta would have these days where I would sleep til one. And I just worked odd jobs. Like I worked in a warehouse at Sears. I worked in a burrito restaurant. And the symptoms were all there: anxiety, fear.

Sometimes I was driving...I actually had a panic attack at my buddy's wedding that no one really knew about, but I was the best man standing there in this church, beautiful church in Arkansas, you know, big Southern family and all this. And there I am standing there and I felt like I was gonna pass out, like I thought I was going to fall over. I couldn't feel my legs. One of my buddies who I worked with on the hotshots had to grab me and steady me. He noticed I was kind of losing it. I was super embarrassed. And

then no one in the wedding really knew about it. But once again, this was a PTSD issue that I was dismissing as anxiety, depression, a mental health problem. "This is just something I have," [I thought], that -- I wasn't thinking fire at all. But it was there, you know?

During that time away from fires, when I first started kind of having suicidal thoughts, I was in my apartment in Chico in the summer alone, and just thinking, like, "I don't fit in; I'm a weirdo." But nobody knows, because that's just how we do it. And also I was the class clown comedian funny guy, so if I was to show [my feelings], it'd be really, really obvious.

So I graduated college and did a little substitute teaching, and then it was back to the hotshots. I thought, I'm going to make money to pay for my teaching credentials. And I went back to the hotshots. And once again, all the symptoms are there. Like I don't like going in the hole. I'm nervous, too; I started getting nervous to fly in helicopters, cause that season there was the Iron 44 crash on the fire next to us, and we went a couple of days without knowing who was on it, because we were spiked out. And I had friends on that fire -- so I was scared that it was maybe one of them. It wasn't. But prior to that, I always liked flying in helicopters. And then after that, I was getting really spooked. So I was having all this internal fear that I wasn't vocalizing. And I was getting spooked on fires when nothing bad was happening. But you know, we'd be burning and it'd be picking up and there'd be spots and it would be loud. And in my mind I just kept thinking, Oh, we're going to get overrun. We're going to get burned up - - when we weren't, you know, we were in a safe, a good safe location, but I couldn't shake the thought that that's what was going to happen.

Then I started kind of becoming an asshole outside of fire. Because when you're in fire, as you both know, it's like military-style and you have these rules and everyone's on time and nobody complains. And so I wasn't fitting in, in the outside world, because I was acting like a hotshot in the outside world. Like if I'm in a buffet line in a restaurant and somebody is not getting their salad fast enough, I start having this inside anger attack, like, Oh, Get the fuck out of the way, quit counting your olives. You know, in my mind -- when really that person's not doing anything wrong; I'm just insane. Or like, you're going to meet the family for dinner and you say, Hey, everybody meet at the Pioneer at six. And I'm sitting at the table at six and it's 6:03 and my sister's not there. In my mind, I feel like she's violating some code. In reality, it's like, dude, this is fine. Right?

So here I am like this, at this point, I'm just like, I feel like a total weirdo. And so I feel like it's easier to hang out with other hotshots as opposed to my friends and family outside of fire. And I'm nervous in social situations. But once again, still no [realization that it was] PTSD. Then when I was preparing to jump, and I was training really hard, is when I finally thought, "Maybe my problems are mostly related to fire." That's when it finally started to hit me. Like, you know what? This job is weird. And this job is making ME weird. And maybe the reason I can't handle things like the grocery store or people being late, and maybe the reason I'm anxious all the time, is because of firefighting.

And that -- that time is when I started having a lot of nightmares. And so then I'm like, okay, there's something really going on. And as you know, when you go to be a jumper you're supposed to be in the best mental and physical shape of your life. And by the time I got up there, I was sick. I was a mental mess, like suicidal thoughts. I was underweight; I was really underweight. My prior season on the hotshots, I did 35 pull-ups -- and when I got to McCall, I think I did like 15. Like, dude, I was just a shit-show. And they saw it right away. My name up there is probably like mud. They were probably like, What the hell is wrong with this guy? So I washed out of that.

And then luckily my engine picked me back up. And I remember going to the Chips Fire, and our captain was a guy I'd known really, really well. But we went to that fire and once again, we got into some extreme fire behavior, but it wasn't dangerous. And I started spooking and he was like, "West, what is wrong with you? Like, you're fine. We're fine. You need to trust me. I'm not going to get you hurt." And

that season ended. And then the following season was when Luke died. And then with me being like the mother hen on the crew and not letting anyone cut dangerous trees and all that I really was thinking, Okay, I'm mentally ill, probably. This is -- something is up. Still though, still, here we are 10 years later -- this is 10 years later, and I still won't admit it out loud that I think I have a PTSD issue. 10 years later.

In 2014 after a hardcore spike-out on the Klamath on the Happy Camp Complex, I was engaged to be married at this point. And I got home from the fire and my wife and my parents and her parents went out to dinner at the brewery to plan our guest list for the wedding. And I was having a panic attack. And granted, I hadn't been around people, I'd been spiked out in the wilderness for two weeks, and the crowded bar, and there was like a live band -- it was probably a terrible place to plan a guest list. But in any case I wanted to go in the bathroom and hide. I just wanted to run away. My whole family is super happy; they're having this great time, and I'm like, I'm borderline almost crying because I'm so scared. Everything's overstimulating in this restaurant. And it screwed up my guest list too, cause I invited people that I didn't really want to invite, and I skipped on friends. I had people mad at me because I didn't invite them, but I wasn't -- I don't remember planning it. I was really tripping out.

Around that time, all these events, you would think I would have just put a white flag up, right? So the years are just going on, and I'm just going down into the hole in my mind. And I had my first real flashback to something, to where I kind of left reality and went into another place. And my wife and I, and my parents, we went to the movies -- and I want to disclaimer this, obviously I was never in the military, this issue doesn't really have anything to do with the military -- but we went and saw a military movie. I was just fine watching the whole movie, nothing there, I'm not a military guy, so it's not really anything that would affect me. But at the end of the movie, one of the characters had died, and it was based on a true story, so they were showing footage from his funeral. And there's like, you know, the metal flag-draped casket, and there's bagpipes and a procession. And all of that stuff was at Luke's funeral.

And so...I kind of felt like I never really grieved Luke's death because I was in the middle of fire season. And so I'm sitting in the movie theater, and the movie theater has the same chairs that Luke's funeral had, cause it was in a big convention center -- like the big padded movie theater chairs. And it had a stage and it had all this stuff. So I'm sitting in the movie theater, and I'm watching this funeral unfold on the screen, and all of a sudden I'm no longer at the movie theater, and I'm in the Redding Convention Center at Luke's funeral. And my wife, she's sitting next to me just like she was at Luke's funeral. So all of a sudden I'm crying uncontrollably in this movie theater as the movie is ending. And so my family thinks that I'm like, you know, really touched by this film, which was a good film. But it had nothing to do with the film. I'm not even in Susanville, I'm like totally -- and I'm just bawling. I can't stop. I can't stop. And I started to come to, the lights come on and the credits are up, but there's still footage of this guy's funeral. And I see my high school football coach walking up the aisle and he looks at me and he kind of gives me this look like, what the hell? You know, and I know this guy really well, so I just put my head down, and I can't leave the theater.

So at this point my parents and my wife were like, this is bad. You know, they were very concerned, and they pick up on it, they get it. Now they know exactly what's going on. So I had to sit in there for a while. They basically kind of had to carry me out. And we were supposed to meet people at the brewery after the movie, I think we were meeting my sister or somebody. And we went, and I remember sitting down, and I'm exhausted at this point. I can barely - like I just want to lay down. And I do what you shouldn't do; I just pound a couple of pints of beer and shake it off. And then I never really discussed it after that. I told my parents and I told my wife, this is what just happened. And then at that point I was like, I haven't really discussed it much. I haven't really until now, because it's just so heavy.



But once again, I'm right back to the crew the next year. And my wife's pregnant at this point and I'm having -- I had those two near misses with the trees. And I'm really a hurting mess by this point. And I'm finally, I'm getting close to the point where I'm going to admit, okay, this has to be PTSD. So I took that prevention job in 2016, and the final breaking point for me was, I started losing my memory. I was losing my short-term memory. I was losing the keys to the patrol truck. I was forgetting where I was supposed to go patrol that day. I was driving to the grocery store in town, which is a couple blocks away, and forgetting what I needed to get. I got lost a couple of times driving around in Susanville, which I have memorized in my head. It's a tiny little town. I was forgetting people's names. Like I would see my friend's parents at the store, people I'd known my whole life...and I couldn't remember their names. Or I'd see somebody who knew me, and I couldn't remember who they were.

And at first -- this is so stupid -- my first reaction, instead of thinking PTSD, I thought, Oh, I know what's going on. I have brain damage from playing football. I have CTE. I'm losing my mind from concussions. Which, I mean, I had concussions and stuff, but that's not really the case, you know? And so I went that route for a couple months, like, Oh, I have brain damage -- which I did, but not from football, obviously. And then at the end of the 2016 season, which I forgot to include in my little narrative, another friend of mine died from cancer. He was the guy on Lassen Hotshots that was running down the hill in front of me on that first near-miss. So he was my buddy from growing up, and he was my wife's friend, and he got diagnosed with cancer shortly after Luke died. And he died three years later. And finally I went -- my memory was shot, I was a nervous wreck -- I went to a coworker who was a combat veteran and I said, Dude, this is what's going on. Can you help me? And what do you think? And he was just like, "Dude, you have PTSD for sure. Like, there's no doubt. You need to go get some help."

And so I went through EAP, and that just didn't work for me. And I know EAP probably works for a lot of people, so I don't want to bad-mouth the whole program. I know they do a lot of good things, but the guy I saw, the interaction...I went to him right after Luke died, cause my boss kind of talked me into it -- but not about PTSD, just about grief. And it didn't really work. And then all of a sudden, you know, it's three or four years later, I go back to him and I tell him, I said, I think I have PTSD. And he goes, okay, hold on. And he grabs this little book and it was like an index guide for mental illness. And it had a bunch of mental illnesses in it, and he goes, "Okay, tell me what you got going on." So we talked for about 90 seconds, and he goes, "No, you don't have PTSD." And he turned the page. He goes, "You just have a little bit of anxiety." Why don't you download the -- some meditation app, some calming app. Headspace. He goes, "Download Headspace, meditate for five minutes a day, and come see me in a month."

And I was like, even though I'm not a doctor, I was like, This isn't going to work. So I gave up for a little bit. Then I went to dispatching and the summer of 2019, I was losing my shit to the point where my wife was like, Dude, this is now or never. You've got to figure this out. Father's day 2019, I woke up in the morning, and I couldn't get off the couch. It was my day off. I was shaking. People were trying to talk to me, and I was just shaking, and I was having all these suicidal thoughts that were so intense. I had a shotgun in the house and I knew that my mind was so scrambled, I just knew I had to get rid of that shotgun. I took it outside and actually, by coincidence, I smashed it with this splitting maul right here, pretty much smashed it right where we're standing. So I smashed that shotgun, and then my wife got on the phone and called a PTSD place in Reno. Because in Susanville, there really is no PTSD specialist here. It's just, it's like Happy Camp, you know? Where are you going to find specific mental health treatment? So I tried a couple hotlines that didn't really work. They wanted to send me to rehab. Right. But I actually stopped drinking when my memory issues kicked in, when I was losing my short-term memory. I stopped drinking alcohol because I thought, well, maybe it's because I drink. Which -- the memory never came back. But I felt better, obviously. I just was like, I thank God I was smart enough to realize that the alcohol was a bad mix. So I stopped drinking. It's been about four years since then. So, but all the

hotlines I called for PTSD, they just, they associated alcohol abuse. So they were just like, dude, like, you need to go to inpatient rehab. We're going to get you there, give me your insurance. And I'm like, I'll go to an inpatient place, but I don't drink, I don't use drugs.

And they're like, no, it's drinking, drinking. And so I couldn't convince these people I didn't drink. So I gave up on the hotlines, and then my wife got me into the place in Reno. And now, that really helped. The woman who saw me there specializes in first responders, you know, military, medical people, firefighters, she knows wildland fire. She said she treats a lot of wildland firefighters. And her husband worked in the office too, helping her manage the business, and he was a combat veteran with PTSD. So she knows what it's like to live with somebody that has PTSD. So going to her, it didn't really completely fix everything, but it stopped the bleeding for a while, to where I was like, okay, I can go to work.

I can tell my friends and family that I have this. I can finally let go of all my perceived failings, like, okay. You know, not an excuse for washing out of smoke jumping, those sort of things. But I can finally go, okay. It wasn't just because I was weak or I was a bad person. It was just because I was losing my shit for 14 years, and I didn't tell anybody. And just by getting that diagnosis, telling people that I had it, acknowledging it..it's knocked down like 50% of the problem for sure. And a lot of people were like, "Yeah, of course you do." Because I thought I was like, Ooh. And people, you know, like my old hotshot captain who's, you know, one of my closest friends was like, "Of course you do, buddy. And guess what? Probably most of us do too, you know?"

And that was the other thing. I started saying "I have this," I would tell people I have these problems and they'd go, "Yeah, dude, that's fine, I have it too." And the guys that were telling me this were like, guys I looked up to and people I thought were so tough and hardcore. And they're like, Yeah, yeah, me too. Me too. Me too. So then it's like, all right, and then I felt terrible for not dealing with it in 2003, you know?

But it did persist throughout my time at dispatch. Things started getting better in 2017, or sorry, 2018 but the 2019 and 2020 fire seasons working as a dispatcher were really hard. And I had a lot of really bad calls, fatal calls, things of that nature.

That job is hardcore, man. Dispatching is, like, I'd never felt so tired coming home. So worn down, on edge, like losing track of time.. It's like being in a casino, losing track of the weather. Cause it's always dark and cold in a dispatch center. So coming outside in the summertime like, Whoa, it's 105 degrees. Where am I?

So finally now after whatever it's been -- seven, eight months away from the Forest Service -- I feel like I have a hand handle on these symptoms and that I can function, that I'm not weird. I feel like I can go and do things and socialize and I'm not, you know, tripping out. I feel like I can go to my job as a teacher and I'm not nervous, and I'm mindful and I'm present and I'm happy and I'm not afraid. And yeah, I think just getting away from it is probably the biggest thing that that's helped kind of take the symptoms from unmanageable to totally manageable.

KR (00:50:56):

I'm so glad. Oh my god, that's...yeah. That's such an insane, intense journey that you've been through, but I'm really glad you got yourself out of it and yeah, it's amazing. I think it takes a lot of strength because like you said, I think a huge percentage -- far more than we know -- many firefighters are dealing with this, and they're just not talking about it.

MW ([00:51:25](#)):

Yeah, definitely. And I feel like if you are a firefighter and you're a mother or father and you have small children, like if not for yourself, for your children, you have to deal with this stuff. Because even though my kids are small, they pick up on it, they can see; kids are dialed in. You know, you can feel the energy in the room, and they'd be like, Man, you know, Dad's crying, Dad's upset about something, dad's irritable. And I feel like if it wasn't for my wife and my children, if I continued... if I just been single and never had a family, I probably wouldn't have snapped out of it. I realized, okay, so there's three people here and we all count on each other. Or sorry, three other people here besides me, and the four of us all count on each other. And if I'm going to go into the abyss with this problem, I'm screwing over three other people, you know? If it had just been me alone, I don't know if I would have snapped out of it.

KR ([00:52:31](#)):

Yeah. So wow. I really feel like you covered so much.

MW ([00:52:40](#)):

I got off on a tangent.

KR ([00:52:44](#)):

It's great. It's such an amazing and powerful story. And it's really like it gives such a picture of how these things accrue over time, you know, like a near miss, the loss of someone you love, more near misses, the losses of more people, you know, like it just.. it builds. So I guess you might've already answered this question, but your decision to finally leave fire, like you said, it was because you got the teaching job, but it sounds like it was also about -- correct me if I'm wrong, but it didn't seem like you could find any position within fire that wasn't keeping you away from your family and causing trauma.

MW ([00:53:31](#)):

Yeah. That's exactly it. And as you noticed, I tapered down, you know, I went from being fully in the field on a crew to prevention. Okay, Prevention is not working. Dispatch. And then I was like, dispatch was the last straw. Like I almost, I was trying to kind of hold on, you know, like you do in a bad relationship. And it was like, okay, I'm going to fix it. Nope.

I felt like I was torn between two worlds, and I couldn't be a good firefighter and a good family person. I felt like one or the other suffered. And so when I went to prevention it was the first time I could actually say no to assignments, or I could say no to working a day off. And my captain or my battalion would call and he'd be like, "Hey, you know, there's lightning, can you come in tomorrow?" You know, your day off. And I'd be like -- my hot shot frame of mind, as you guys know -- I'm like, yeah, absolutely. Of course, yeah. Gung ho. But as dad, as husband, I'm like, I don't. I want to go to the lake, or I want to stay home with the family. I don't want to burn them.

So I felt terrible either way. If I told my battalion, no, I felt like a bad firefighter. If I went to work, I felt like a terrible husband and father. And it was the same with dispatch. So in dispatch, yeah, I had the option to work days off or stay late. Sometimes it wasn't always that way. Sometimes you had to stay, but, you know, I was turning down assignments. As a prevention, I would turn down a crew boss assignment. As a dispatcher, I would turn down an off forest assignment.

And I just felt like, I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to not be a hundred percent in, in firefighting. Some people can do it, but I was getting to the point where I was saying no more to fire than I was to my family. And I thought, okay, I just need to make the call. I just need to break up with

the Forest Service because I'm not the firefighter I want to be. I can't be, and I want to go be dad, and I want to go be the husband.

And I thought, whatever I'm missing in fire is stuff I've already seen. Like I've been out on the line, I've been in the shit. I've been in the hectic dispatch center when all hell's breaking loose. I've been in the Marble Mountain Wilderness and to Alaska and to Texas and Louisiana and Colorado. I'm not missing anything out here anymore. I've got a hundred different friends from fire. Fire was good enough to me. Let's go be dad.

And the breaking point was just some late shifts in dispatch where I had gone to work when it was dark and my family was asleep. And I came home after midnight when it was dark and my family was asleep. And I was just like, I can't do this anymore. And I imagined my kids as adults, you know, 18, 19 years old leaving home. And I imagine them thinking, wow, dad was not around that much, for at least six months out of the year. And so I was just done.

I started putting in applications in January of 2020, and I applied for the junior college to teach fire science. They actually had tenured positions to teach fire science at the junior college, and you didn't need a master's degree or anything. So I applied for those, and I applied for public school jobs. And the college offered me adjunct positions, but with no benefits. And the middle school that I went to offered me a job teaching eighth grade. My eighth grade teacher had recently retired, and they had trouble keeping anyone in that spot for more than a year. So I took the job, and he's mentoring me now. He's retired, but he and I talk like a few times a week and it's kind of a dream job at this point.

KR ([00:57:39](#)):

That's awesome.

MW ([00:57:42](#)):

Other than I realized that my writing skills and my grammar had tanked, working for the Forest Service. I look at my email and I'm like, Oh God, I should have put that through Grammarly. English has been the hard part. Social studies, I've got that down. Like I know the story and I can tell it for, you know, American history, but yeah, English, language arts, it's going to take me a couple of years to get my shit together.

KR ([00:58:08](#)):

People in the Forest Service cannot write.

MW ([00:58:13](#)):

I look at my old emails from the forest supervisor and from the forest FMO and I'm like, Oh my God, you guys would fail eighth grade.

PD ([00:58:27](#)):

Yeah. And on some occasions, too, those eighth graders might be more mature than some of the people we work with. So at least you're stepping it up.

MW ([00:58:47](#)):

Yeah. They really are. And that's the other thing I've noticed -- not to go off on an unrelated tangent, but young kids these days are dealing with a lot of mental health issues, and this generation of kids seems way more tuned in to be like, Hey, you know, something's going on. You know, when I was a kid, I didn't

ever talk about mental health, like with buddies, teachers, none of that. Whatever went on, you just swallowed it. And it seems to me like the up and coming kids are much better at talking about what they have going on. And to me, that shows a lot of strength. Like there's like that cliché, kids are soft these days, but in a way I'm like, well, a lot of them seem pretty tough, and I worry about a lot of them because of how crazy times are, you know, what they're growing up in.

KR ([00:59:44](#)):

Yeah. I mean, right now I feel like it's so hard for kids with the pandemic and the social isolation of it. But I think you're right, that there's like, there's a different kind of toughness, which is being able to identify your emotions and speak to them and then deal with them. And that if we could define that as strength instead of a softness, we'd really be in a better place. But that's my, that's like my personal high horse about mental health.

PD ([01:00:13](#)):

I guess to add to that, you know, children are growing up in strange times between just the way our society is, let alone school shootings, and mental health being brought to the forefront. But to speak to both your points: one, it does take obvious strength and courage to talk about that stuff. And yeah, Mike, I mean, everything you're sharing with us too, I mean, the letter that you wrote, the decisions you made...that takes courage too. I think we'll say that the previous generation -- and maybe this has been going on since the dawn of time -- but to say that the generation coming behind you is "soft," I feel like that's not uncommon. But I do feel like we're at somewhat of a tipping point to where folks can talk about this stuff.

And the Forest Service, you know, previously, and I've heard people refer to it as the "warrior culture," you know whether that's the parallel to the military but yeah, I mean, it's easy to be a warrior, right? But it takes courage to speak to what's actually happening more broadly. And yeah, I mean the warrior culture is not looking so hot right now. You know, if we look at numbers, we talk about what's going on behind the scenes and yeah. I mean, I'm grateful you wrote that letter. I'm grateful you're sharing now. And obviously we're, our group's trying to bring some of this stuff to light because at the end of the day, none of it is sustainable. All it causes is pain and, you know, a few things you brought up too. I just want to bring up, the dispatch side of the house and how often that gets forgotten about. Because you're not physically there, you know, on the fire, but you're dealing with maybe not just that incident, but all incidents on top of medicals on top of everything.

And that's something I think in talking with Nelda Sinclair, you know, she wants to bring, make sure that dispatch gets brought along for the ride and make sure they get the proper training and get included. And then, you know, circling back to just the family sacrifice. And certainly I, you know, I can attest to that. I reached my breaking point -- and none of this conversation is about me, but the broader issue is at the end of the day, even if you're the best hotshot in the world, you can't...you simply can't do both. It's one thing if it's temporary here and there, but to be gone an entire summer, you just can't be a good father, you know? I mean, it's just, I don't see that in any way, shape or form it's feasible. And I think you hit the nail on the head there, and obviously you made a great decision. By the time you were done, I was like, are you hiring? But yeah, you have to.. in some ways you have to compartmentalize when you're out there, otherwise you're not paying attention to all the things that can kill you immediately. But if you're, if you're not paying attention on the back half, you know, you're gonna lose your family and your support structure. Some really powerful things. I jotted down a few notes and I appreciate you sharing.

MW (01:04:08):

Yeah, anytime. And I think that family thing.. maybe they're out there, but I haven't found a single person [who hasn't struggled with this], and I know quite a few people who -- they're married and both them and their spouse were hotshots. And then the spouse stayed home to raise the kids while the other one continued hotshotting. And I know it on both sides. Like I have, you know, dude buddies whose wife used to be a hotshot and the struggle was real in that family. And I have a female friend who's a hardcore hotshot and her husband used to fight fire. And then she stayed in fire and he left fire and stayed home with the family.

And not that everything's all bad, but the struggle is real. And it's universal. Like all the same things that they suffer from is what we're talking about. And it's basically just not enough time. And then you, even if you're present physically, it's hard to be present mentally and emotionally during fire season when you're coming and going. And then even in the winter, like everyone knows how you come down after firefighting, like it's hard, man. Christmas time, Thanksgiving, sometimes you have that.. you feel like you haven't recovered from fire season and you're supposed to be doing the family thing, and you just like a zombie. And I know there were times around the holidays where I just was like, dude, I would rather go lay in bed than hang out with my aunts and uncles and kids. I just like, I'm tanked, and it's been three months or whatever.

KR: Yeah. I feel that.

MW: You feel that right now, you probably lost it..like the 2020 fire season.

KR (01:05:52):

I feel like I haven't recovered. It was my first fire season, but on a shot crew and it was so busy, but I don't have anything to compare it to. Now, this is not about me, but just saying I understand. And like, I felt like I hadn't recovered by January, and it's time to start training again. I was out there the other day trying to hike with a saw, and I got halfway up my training hill and I was like, I'm gassed. Like, I'm dead. I'm going to do this whole training hill another day. But then it's like, you're panicking. Cause you can't NOT do the hike. You have to get strong enough. You know, it's like, Oh my God, there's only two months left. I'm not in shape yet. "I gotta get better," but you're still..tired.

MW (01:06:38):

Yeah. And plus Happy Camp had a really nasty traumatic fire this year too. So you're dealing with that and you're dealing...when you live in these areas where the fires come, not only are you dealing with being on the line, but also your home community. I experienced that just as a citizen, because my last day of work at dispatch, there was an active fire ripping towards Susanville. (KR: the Hog fire?) Yeah. It was that fire. Oh yeah. Crazy town. My parents live right up at the top of town. And then the Sheep fire was burning. About a month later, when I was supposed to start teaching, school was evacuated, so school couldn't start. And it was coming down the mountain towards my in-law's house.

And me and another teacher who used to fight fire, we had our saws and we're like going to prep houses because there weren't enough resources. Luckily it never came down to the houses where we were going and they were able to hook it. But it was my first time as a scared citizen, and I was legit scared. We're getting the evacuation warnings, you know, my in-laws need to evacuate. Okay. The property I own is probably gonna burn up, now it's coming towards town. And they were evacuating streets three blocks away. And I'm just like, Oh, this is what it's like to be a public citizen. I'm actually kind of scared, this is a scary fire. Or, you know, then there's this terrible identity crisis, like, well, I'm

supposed to be teaching, but school's closed. I don't know how to teach anyway. Maybe I should be out burning. Right. It actually fried my brain pretty hard and made me question my decision to teach. And then as soon as the fire got hooked and school started, then I was like, Oh, thank God. No, I'm supposed to be here.

KR (01:08:40):

Oh, one last question that I had for you. I feel like both of you have touched on this -- that there's this, what feels like an impossibility between doing the job of fighting fire and being an engaged part of your family, being a father, being a husband. What could be done -- and I know, you know, you're not in policy; you're not in charge of federal firefighting -- but just in your opinion, could anything have been done that would have helped you, or kept you in the job, even if that means a huge change? I wonder if you could speculate.

MW (01:09:24):

Yeah. I mean, I think, I think there are things that could be done. It might be very, very difficult to pull it off. And like you said, I'm not a policy guy. And I think it would have to be a meeting in the middle between the ground forces and your, you know, your higher echelon folks. But it's blatantly obvious. We need more people, even to operate at the same level of like, you're always gone, you're always on fires. We still don't have enough people, but in order to have more family time and operate, you need to be able to feel like you can take time off when you need to, that you can rotate out. Okay. Now maybe in the seventies, eighties and nineties, you know, the fire seasons typically weren't as long or as busy. And maybe you had more time, but now the fire seasons, you roll hard everywhere all year long.

It never stops. And then in wintertime you're doing training, hiring, conferences. You need to be able to not just take the winter use-or-lose, but you need to be able to feel okay in July saying, you know what? I'm going to take two weeks of vacation. And it shouldn't have to be like my brother's wedding, for instance, or my dad's funeral. It's, "Hey, we're going to go up to the coast to Patrick's Point." Me and my wife and my kids, or me and my husband and my kids. And we're going to go be human beings, and I'm going to turn my phone off, and that needs to be okay. The fires are going to be there. Right? They're always going to be there. So who cares at this point? But in order to do that, you need more people. And in order to get more people, your job needs to be enticing.

And it's enticing for a little bit, and I experienced this as a young seasonal: the adrenaline, the fun money for college or whatever you're going to do. But then eventually that novelty wears off, and people leave for other agencies because they know, one, they're going to get paid. Even Cal Fire who rolls nonstop. I spent a lot of time with the Cal fire guys in the dispatch center. And those guys take vacation -- like in August, "I'm going river rafting for three weeks. See ya." And that's okay. In the Forest Service, the Forest Service that I worked in, that wasn't okay. You couldn't just bounce out. So I think what the federal agencies need to do. And I don't know if they will, and I'm not the expert, but there needs to be retention -- things to keep you, things like knowing you can take a little more time off, knowing that you don't have to count on insane amounts of overtime to pay your bills.

Especially if you're the single working member of the household, you know, better pay, better incentives, time off, more people -- get more people in there. How are they going to do it? I don't know at this point, because everyone I talk to is leaving, that's the scary part. And the people who are leaving are people with a lot of quals, people who the Forest Service has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in their training, like me. You know? I feel like right now things are kind of going in the right

direction, but it seems more like it's a band-aid on the issues. And I think they need to kind of...the elephant in the room that we all talk about is ground level folks. But the higher ups are still kind of seeming to ignore that times have changed.

It's not 1985. Every fire season rips. You've got to do something. You've got to change your style, get rid of the forestry tech thing, pay your firefighters. Maybe do some separating between your fire service and your other aspects of the Forest Service. You kind of have these Jack of all trades forestry technicians, which is great. But I feel like sometimes you count on those folks a little too much, the militia folks and all that. Maybe start to model yourself off of some of the things that other agencies do, more department oriented, but gosh, even then though, would you really have enough time for your family? Like, would you -- would people really take that time off that they needed?

PD (01:13:39):

I sure would love a summer beach trip. And Mike, yeah. I mean this whole, you know, hour and a half has been really powerful. And, and hearing you circle back to workforce capacity and schedule...myself, Kelly, and another person on our subcommittee were talking about some of this stuff. And I had one of those late night moments when everyone was asleep and I started writing a bit. But yeah, the schedule part of it is insane, right? The schedule and the response and the expectation of, "Hey, you're going to be on pretty much for six months nonstop," especially as fire seasons get longer. Yeah. Not sustainable. Then you get back and there's burning to be done. So what we're asking, you know, we're in a situation where we're trying to do more with less people, less qualified people.

And circling back to the incentives piece, the money piece. When you don't make that base wage that covers the bills, you're almost forced to have to take every assignment. So it is a work capacity issue with not having enough folks, it's a big time and incentives issue with having to take every assignment, otherwise you're missing out on, you know, potentially 20% of your pay for that year, if you don't take an assignment, which you're going to need to pay the bills. And it comes down to schedule. I mean, there's always going to be a need, right? But having opportunity and changing the culture to where they say, "Hey, now we're now staffing crews with 24 people, and we need 18 to go out the door," but "Hey, you four folks, are you doing okay? You can take this one off if you want, because it's going to be another long fire season."

And I mean, you hit the nail on the head. And then the funny thing about the family -- I was doing some digging with some old friends, folks that had worked on documents at the Washington level. There was something released about family and fire probably 18 years ago, and they never made it fully public. The day he released that, someone else had gotten wind of it and sent them a version that they had written four years ago that was also released to the Washington office and signed but never made truly public. So these are issues that are out there, and I'm not going to trash the federal agencies; that does us no good. But these things are out there, people know about it, and, you know, at some point change has to be made. At the end of the day, that takes money. Right? And we always, we can do what we can internally, but that's a bigger decision and it's like, all right, well, who's talking to Congress?

And that's where, you know, I guess that's where we're trying to focus our efforts. You know, these are complex topics, but to some degree they're easy fixes. It's the cultural change that makes it tough. You know, if we got allocated more money, if we got classified as firefighters, and that goes a long way to starting to fix it and giving us the potential or the tools, but it still would need to come from internal sources all the way down to really, call it the crew Supt level. And I guess I would ask you, I mean, do you think we're in a different place now than we were 10 years ago with the Superintendents in place, say, or the middle management in place?



MW ([01:18:05](#)):

As far as like dealing with the mental health and the family issues, than we were 10 years ago?

PD ([01:18:10](#)):

Yeah. Just acknowledging it's not all about work basically. Yeah.

MW ([01:18:13](#)):

I definitely think so. And I was thinking last night, you know, cause my letter, I mean, it does trash the agency a little bit, you know? And a lot of these topics, we want to push our complaints up, but I do think it's a 50-50. And what I have seen positive on our side is on our level. People are finally acknowledging the mental health thing. Right? And so I can't just sit there and blame the Forest Service for my mental health problems without blaming myself too, without saying I was part of a tough guy culture that tried to cover these things up. I can't sit here and cry, "Oh, the Forest Service didn't take care of me," when I wasn't taking care of myself at all for that time. Right?

How many people complain about the Forest Service not taking care of them, but they've got a mouth full of chew and they're drinking a Rockstar, and they drink every weekend and pound coffee in the morning? And, you know, they don't acknowledge their emotions, right? So yeah, they weren't taking care of us, but you know, we weren't taking care of ourselves. And I feel like now, especially like the last four years, five years that mentality changed. You know, not a single coworker or supervisor that I told that I was having these mental health problems gave me any shit about it. They were like, a lot of them said, "Yeah, I've got that too" or "Good on you. What can I do to help you?" I think as a culture, it changed from even the district, you know, FMO and Battalion down, has completely changed on mental health since I started.

And and I think too, it hasn't changed as much with the other issues we have like, like harassment, sexual harassment, bullying, those kinds of things that are still common in the Forest Service. I do think on the ground level, it has gotten much better in the last 10 years as well from my small window from the Lassen and the Plumas, when I was there the way people treated each other in that aspect had gotten much better too. And I would like to give credit to the folks on the ground who really implemented that stuff, because earlier in my career, I was definitely part of the problem, like hiding my emotions, trying to be the tough guy. I did and said things to other crew members that at the time I thought were probably funny that were just awful, like shameful, you know?

So I think the culture change is there on the lower levels. And I think it's going to continue to improve. And like you said earlier, the more people that come out and talk about these issues, like the mental health, or the hostile work environments and all these problems, it will change. And I think the agency, as the big, you know, green machine, it doesn't get off. It doesn't get a free pass for all these issues we have, but as we go and we petition them to take care of us and look out for us, we still have to kind of raise our hands as the big crowd and be like, "All right, we put up with a lot of this stuff for a long time."

So I am optimistic that the boots on the ground are gonna continue to improve. I'm fully optimistic on that. I'm cautiously optimistic that the higher-ups and that our folks in Washington are gonna make the changes to help us. I think they will, but it'll probably be...I think they're going to move slower than we are, is what I'm getting at.

PD ([01:21:58](#)):

Yeah. I think that's a healthy cautious optimism and yeah, I guess I would add that it certainly, I think it's okay to be angry at the agency. You know, I've had my moments as well, so I don't want to let them off

the hook. And you're absolutely right. And I saw it with the military veterans crew; there were a lot of similarities in that. We are...I don't know if I'd use the term "reckless," and I'll think of it later, but for folks that are surrounded by that level of intensity for that long, whether you're being shot at in the military (and this isn't my idea, this is, you know, long time combat veterans I spoke with), but when you operate at that level of adrenaline, you become numb to risk and to some degree find comfort in things that are bad for you, whether it's chew or driving drunk or taking risky -- yeah, you're essentially more comfortable in riskier situations. And to some degree people seek them out, you know, it's like the word I was looking for -- it lends itself to self-destructive behavior.

And I know I saw that from some of the veterans. And then I said, "Wait a second. I've seen this for the last, you know, 16, 17 years with a lot of firefighters." Yeah. And it's fascinating. It's sad. But again, there's some optimism there too, in that we start recognizing this and figuring out ways to try to improve it. But you hit the nail on the head. We can do everything we can at the congressional levels, being cautiously optimistic. But when it makes its way down, we have to respond and be accountable for ourselves and our modules.

Looking at Kelly's last question she had on the list, "What can change or should change and who should enact the change?" I think obviously, as you just said, we are the ones enacting the change. And I think if big changes do happen with mental health, as the ground folks we need to take advantage of it. And with that culture change, of all of us admitting these issues... I think one thing -- I know it's a lot of money or whatever, but I just, I feel like they need to figure it out and they need to make it happen, to get mental health professionals on board or contracted through each Forest. And they need to have people there to pick up the phone when you call. I know for a fact that the demand is very, very, very high for this.

MW ([01:25:01](#)):

So just last night, I got a call from a module leader that I used to work with, who was like, "Dude, I have a person on my crew who's having a very hard time with this. Who should they call? Who did you call?" And I was more than willing to give them all the information, but I thought it shouldn't come down to a former employee. There should be a number that this guy knows he can call that's going to work. And this guy had already used EAP. Right? So in however many months it's been since I've written my letter, that's been a very common phone call for me: either a module leader that I know calling me about an employee that's having an issue, and "do I have any advice," or the employee themselves calling me -- someone that I used to work with or someone that knows someone, and "Oh yeah, my buddy Mike went through that, here's his number."

I mean, this has happened like 10, 15 times, and I'm thinking, of course, I'm more than happy to help a person, give them whatever advice I can. But number one, I'm not an expert. And I probably shouldn't be giving a whole bunch of advice other than, "This worked for me." And number two, like, that ain't my job. The Forest Service needs people on site, like, you know, most police departments have a psychologist or a psychiatrist on staff. Like in the movie *Lethal Weapon*, right, when Danny Glover and Mel Gibson needed to call that lady, right? We need that on our Forests, you know? Because the demand is high, and I felt that way, I felt so lonely. Cause I'm like, okay, I admitted it, I have a problem. I called EAP. Nothing. I went to the 52 Club website and got these hotline numbers. I called them, it didn't work. They wanted to treat me for addiction. I wasn't addicted. So yeah, I think if there's one thing that would have really, really been helpful it would have been if, you know, the Lassen or the Plumas National Forest had a mental health professional that knew about trauma ready to answer the phone or the email or even the door, if I knocked on it. Whatever they gotta do to figure it out. I'm sure it wouldn't be easy, but it's also not easy to, like, get a Type 2 helicopter to a fire within an hour or, you know, get five Type One crews and a strike team of dozers. And I mean, working in dispatch, the IC calls

and says, Susanville, I've got a resource and a supply request tonight. I write it all down. And usually within a couple hours you have all that stuff. So if we can do that, we should be able to have mental health people available, like on the Forest level, it's got to happen. And like I said, do I have the answer of how to do it? No. But I'm not a GS Fantastic. So I don't, I'm not gonna come up with the answer. I just identify the problem like you guys.

PD ([01:28:02](#)):

Hey Mike, while I got you, this has been on my mind, but at what a GS level does "fantastic" status kick in. Shoot me straight man. 13?

MW:

13. I knew some 11's who were pretty down to earth. Like I don't want to make a broad prejudiced statement. I'm sure there's some super higher GS's who are fantastic, outstanding people. So I don't want to sound like I'm being prejudiced, but I guess that's my term for people who wear the uniform shirt every day.

PD ([01:28:44](#)):

Yeah. Gotcha. Good to know. All right.

KR:

So I was thinking, I love this idea of having a person who's just on staff, on every Forest, for mental health. But I also think that we should go a step further in terms of what they do. Like not just triage or a phone number that you call once you have PTSD, but like getting out ahead of the problem. So every firefighter, beginning of the season, middle of the season, end of the season, you go in and talk to somebody for even like 20 minutes. It's just like a check-in, or a "mental health check," I think people have called it, but there should be somebody kind of there for you that you've built a bit of a relationship with. So if a problem starts to happen, they're going to spot it. They're going to help you notice that that's what's going on.

Or you feel that somebody has already offered the help to you, you know? Because for a lot of people, that step where you have to *ask* for help, they won't even get there necessarily. But if you had to go in and see this therapist at the end of your season, then when they ask you how you're doing, you might say, "Well, actually, you know, my whole town burned down and I was on a different fire and I'm really struggling with some guilt about that." You know, just an example, that might be something someone struggled with.

MW ([01:30:05](#)):

Exactly. Yeah. I think that is a great idea. And maybe even some kind of a crash course... I saw this on the lessons learned center, I think, where they were talking about a family education at the beginning, when people first get into fire where they can bring their significant others in, or their kids, and kind of get a briefing on what to expect. And then also like the brand-new firefighter, get the briefing on like, "Hey, these are the signs and symptoms that you might have a mental health issue. This is what PTSD looks like. This is how people get it." Just so they're aware. Would a young person listen? Probably not in the beginning, but maybe they would keep it in the back of their mind. I know when I first got into fire, I noticed right away that the people who had been in fire for 10, 15 years or more were kind of strange.

Like I noticed, and I would joke, I was like, Oh yeah, you know, she's weird. Cause you know, she's been in fire for 35 years, and it fried her brain. Or like, Oh yeah, the old hotshot Supt, what a weirdo, like look at him pacing over there. And it was kind of like, we're not going to be like that. "The old timers are weird," but really some of those people may have just had legit PTSD or a chronic stress issue from fire. And I think it wouldn't help just to get a heads up on it on day one.

KR ([01:31:28](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. And if you got that heads up every year, every season, somebody saying like, "Hey, remember what PTSD looks like?" It might sink in sooner, or it might feel just more acceptable to admit to it.

PD ([01:31:48](#)):

I worked with Nelda and her staff on preventative -- kind of what you're talking about, Mike, like a pre-season "This is what to expect. This is what your body is going through physiologically. These are called chemicals and these are happening in your brain and this, you know, this level of adrenaline causes this." They talked about our oxytocin, I think hugging folks. And then yeah, they talked about the family side of it. And ironically, they had...you know, you walk into any Forest Service bathroom, even McClellan, you know, the training center, in the winter, and they have like a hydration chart. Well, what if they had one of those for suicide awareness? I just think it's so ironic that we post these hydration charts above the urinals in every men's room and yet the real problem -- you know, I mean, certainly we need to be hydrated. Don't get me wrong. Maybe not in the middle of winter in McClellan. I mean, we talk about these physical things, but you know, the mental side of it falls by the wayside, and I know that'd be a pretty powerful thing to look at. I have that chart somewhere.

But yeah, having tools out there...our group, the comprehensive health and wellbeing subcommittee, we're trying to come up with solutions. You just hit the nail on the head with the psychologist and or psychiatrist on every Forest, potentially contracted out to deal with those folks specifically. But yeah, the maintenance phase of just checking in, having a pre-established relationship to make it comfortable -- and then the education piece.

So folks know, Hey, if you're feeling a certain way, one, it's a normal reaction. And I've heard it described a few ways by combat vets, but you are essentially -- and this isn't to you, but for a lot of us, for all of us really -- you're having a normal reaction to a very abnormal situation. You know, whether that's close calls, whether it's just your job in fire, being gone...that's an abnormal situation, you know, to be surrounded by crisis for that period of time. Obviously there's different levels of that. And there's a point to where it's no longer sustainable, not manageable, but it speaks to everybody, I think. Yeah, anyways, we're looking into these things, we're looking into the cost of these things, or at least starting to, and I know talking with you here today, I mean it really hammers home the need and just the, you know, the notes that I've jotted down as far as solutions that's just been a huge, a huge help. So I am incredibly grateful that we got to talk to you today.

MW ([01:35:34](#)):

I'm happy. I mean, it's like I've been so focused on my teaching, you know, like one of the good things about it I guess is it gives you this mentality of -- well, I guess it's a good and a bad thing -- but it's good that you get this gung ho mentality where you just do things full throttle. And I know that had I not spent all that time fighting fire, I probably would have washed out of teaching because it's so hard. Oh my god. And I've just been so immersed in it that I haven't had a chance to really hash out all this old fire stuff. And to talk to firefighters about these things has been kind of like a good little therapy session

today, just to kind of put it out there. Because I haven't really thought about it much lately. I've been so sucked into teaching the Constitution and watching the Constitution fall apart recently, so immersed in my school stuff that I haven't really taken the necessary time to reflect on my fire life.

So to talk today about some things that, I mean, I've talked a little bit about, but not, you know, not anytime recently, certain incidents that are hard, but it's nice. And I think it's even better sometimes to talk about it with fire people, than, you know, your counselor, like it's sometimes nice to just talk to people who get it. So it, I mean, gosh, almost two hours in. I feel like I ranted and raved about who knows what, but it feels good to do it. Like I feel pretty relaxed, pretty nice.

KR ([01:37:27](#)):

You didn't rant and rave. Everything you said was so enlightening and so on point, and you're right. I'm new to fire, so I haven't seen even 1/20th of the shit that you guys have seen, but I've seen enough to know that we're all going through the same things, you know, and that stuff is going to happen if I continue in fire. But yeah, just like Dutch said, we're so grateful for you sharing this. It does make a difference. Knowing the full story of what people go through helps us all to understand what's happening and to understand what we need to change and how we might change it. So it's like, yeah, it's great for all firefighters, and I'm so glad it's good for you. You know, I think we do have to share.

MW ([01:38:22](#)):

I guess one last idea I had, too, on the idea of things to help people. I think that if there could be something for the family, for the spouses of firefighters or the parents or anything, because I know that my situation put my wife and my kids and my parents and my siblings and a lot of my non-fire friends, like it kind of put them through hell. They were very worried about me and they didn't know what to do. My wife resorted to calling the spouses of other firefighters and they were all kind of going through the same thing. So she had her little network of firefighter spouses that were like, yeah, you know, I go through that too. And a few of them that she called were former hotshots who left fire, but whose spouses were still involved, and they could kind of help her out and talk her down and tell her what was up and what to expect.

So maybe if we could get some kind of family support system in place that goes along with the support system for the fire folks, because I know that being married to a fire person is not easy. It's hardcore. And it's almost maybe more hardcore and more isolating and more lonely for those people than it is for the firefighter, because at least the firefighter has this huge family of other firefighters to go hang out with and vent their frustrations to. But, if your wife or your husband is always gone on these fires and they're doing their thing, who do you talk to about it? Like, Oh, you know what you're going through. So I feel like they kind of get left behind or get the shaft for the lack of a better term. Like they just kinda, I don't know, I think that's a pretty lonely experience and I feel pretty shitty for putting my wife through - and also my other family members through that experience of me suffering and them not knowing what to do to help me. That feels bad. It's pretty heavy, you know? And I think it always will.

KR ([01:40:22](#)):

That's a really good point and a really good idea. And Dutch, that echoes some of what we've been hearing from Kirsten and our subcommittee about the spouses of firefighters and the communities they find with each other.

PD ([01:40:37](#)):

Yeah. Mike, I echo that, and I don't think I realized it until I actually took this summer *not* to go out on any fires. And yeah, I know some of the things the group we're talking about working on, there's a lot of surveys for mental health out about firefighters, right, albeit they're hard to find. **BUT we're hoping to put together a survey for partners.** Because the Forest Service and other agencies are well aware, I believe, of the struggles that we go through, but they don't know what happens at home. And to some degree that's the real struggle.

Like, you know, I left for four or five years, after...we had a pretty traumatic birth experience. Our daughter was born six weeks early, she was in the NICU for four weeks, and then, you know, we had some close calls too, like with heart rate stuff and I mean, stuff that I'll never forget. And yet, you know, she was born in December kind of right around the same time as Luke. But yeah, it's just like that, you know, things stabilize and you're gone and now your partner has to not only continue their job if that's the case, but they also have to raise an infant pretty much by themselves. Again, it's not sustainable. And it's not fair. And I didn't realize the magnitude of that until I stepped out myself. So, you know, unwrapping some of that piece as far as Ella's birth and whatnot -- and that's a story for another time, which I'm happy to tell -- but having some kind of support system. We do want to release that survey, hopefully, maybe in the next two months or something like that, if that's possible. What are your thoughts on that?

MW ([01:43:11](#)):

Like a survey for partners? I think that'd be an incredible idea. And I think that you would probably get a host of really similar responses from most of them. And I think you might get some angry responses too, angry, dude. Like, "Fuck these guys -- like the Forest Service. Look what you put me through." Yeah, I think you would get people venting it out. And I think you get some really honest, honest answers, you know? Pretty universal. Like every fire spouse that I know, male or female, they all have the same feelings being the single dad or the single mom. The partners out there...it sucks, man. And you know, I think one of the big things you'll probably hear them say is like, "Yeah, they're gone for two weeks and we're in our rhythm and we're doing our thing. And now they're back for two days and they're trying to integrate back in the house, but we've got our own way, you know?" And then you're lonely and weird and out of place. Because things have operated without you. You don't know where you fit in, and they're doing their thing and then you're out the door again, you know? Yeah. That in itself -- like you said, that's traumatic.

Like, you know, or when I came home from my first fire, my son was six months old and I was up on the Klamath, the Pony Fire right there in Happy Camp. And he cried and didn't want me to come to him when I came home, like I was dirty and he hadn't seen me in two weeks, and he was small enough to be like, kind of tripped out, and he wouldn't let me hold him and he was crying and I was like, Okay this is..

PD ([01:45:10](#)):

Yeah, "my heart is broken." Yeah.

MW ([01:45:14](#)):

And no fault of his, right? Like of course, two weeks is a long time when you're six months old.

KR:

That's like one-twelfth of your life.

PD ([01:45:20](#)):

Yeah. Glad someone here was to convert that into fractions. Yeah, that's good. I almost said...I certainly echo that Mike and yeah, I know I felt the same and it's a pretty dark place for sure. And it creates a...I mean, for me there was a sense of apathy at a certain point where it's like, wow, you just -- it's not that you don't care. It's just like, there's a...you don't care at some point, you know, because there's very little you can do about it. You can never teach your partner how to feel, you definitely can't teach your infant how to feel or your kids or anybody for that matter. And that's a really hard, hard thing. And yeah, I know 2017 for me was rough in particular, at the end of it. But I do think the brunt of it is carried by families. And I will tell you that when I asked Nikki my, my wife about that survey, her response was a little too enthusiastic. "Would you fill something like that out?" "OH yeah."

MW ([01:46:59](#)):

Overall, she'd be like, "Oh yeah, fuck those guys!"

PD:

Let me get - let me get the red ink for that one.

(laughter)

KR ([01:47:15](#)):

Well we should probably wrap it up in the next few minutes. I don't want to cut off -- if there's anything anyone else wants to keep adding, but I don't want to keep you guys for too long either.

MW ([01:47:24](#)):

I think we covered it. I said everything I had to say, I took a few notes last night and I think I put it all out there. Yeah, I don't know. It's been, it was a good chat. I appreciate what you guys are doing and what Grassroots is doing. And gosh, I just wish you the best in your career. If you stay with it, if you decide to bounce out and do some other things, have at it. But if you ever want any advice from somebody who made a lot of mistakes, right, and probably could, you know, learn the hard way on what *not* to do, you can always call me or send me an email. But it sounds like you had a good first crack at it. If you're going to start, fire season 2020 is a good way to start. You probably probably got five good years worth of fire in one season, right there. I mean, that was, that was the apocalypse.

PD:

A doozy.

KR ([01:48:26](#)):

It was the apocalypse. I already have had that moment where I was like, do I need to keep doing this? Is this something that's really all right? But then it gets you, you know, it hooks you in, that's the weird thing about it is you're also like, I don't know how to *not* go back for one more year.

MW ([01:48:46](#)):

Yeah. It's like that. And the people -- you're making friends, and these are some people who are unlike anyone you've ever met, like complete weirdos that you love, and they become best friends in five months. And then it's like, yeah, it's super addicting. Like I went on and on about all these negatives, but I could also do a two hour interview about all the wonderful things that happen and all the great people I met and all the cool skills that I got, you know?

KR ([01:49:13](#)):

Exactly. And like you were saying, those skills that apply to the rest of life, like the perseverance that you learn, being a firefighter, being a hotshot, especially like how you learned to push through. Something's really hard, and you have to keep going anyway, you know. Or learning to work with people, whether you get along with them or not, you know, like all these skills that transfer into anything in life. And it just feels like, it feels like by doing the job you're growing so much so fast. And you're also getting beaten down. It's really a head trip.

MW ([01:49:49](#)):

Wow. Definitely.

KR ([01:49:52](#)):

Thank you so much, Mike, this has been an amazing conversation and I think it's going to be amazing for other people to read it as well.

MW ([01:50:01](#)):

Yeah. Thank you for doing it. And if anything comes up in the coming days or weeks or any more follow up, just give me a shout.

KR ([01:50:09](#)):

Yeah. Well, I'll definitely run anything by you, too, before it's going to be shared.

MW ([01:50:12](#)):

Ok, awesome.

PD ([01:50:14](#)):

Yeah. Appreciate it West. And yeah. I love you, brother.