

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With  
  
Ex-Chief James A. Interdonati  
Atlantic Hook & Ladder Company No. 1

conducted in association with the  
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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: Today is April 24th, 2006. This is an interview with James A. Interdonati. My name is Sally Olds. The interview is taking place at the Port Washington Public Library. Can you please state your name.

James A. Interdonati: James Interdonati.

Q: And which fire company are you a member of?

JAI: Atlantic Hook and Ladder Company on Carlton Avenue.

Q: How long have you lived in Port Washington?

JAI: Fifty-one years.

Q: What was it like growing up here?

JAI: What was it like? Well, the town was a lot smaller. Not as many people. You know, there wasn't as much--as many houses as there is today. Even the roads were smaller--you know, they weren't as wide as they are today. I remember Main Street, when it was concrete--before they even paved it over with asphalt, going back. As far as growing up, also, we had a pretty good time as a young kid here. We used to have a bowling alley,

you know, which there isn't--really, today, there isn't really too much for young kids to do in this town. But, at least, back in those days, I went roller skating, ice skating, went out of town. We had the bowling here, so I kept myself pretty busy.

Q: Do you have any childhood memories of fires?

JAI: Well, I had a fire in my house (laughs) when I was a child.

Q: Oh. Oh, what do you remember about that?

JAI: Well, my parents, in their bedroom, they had the only air conditioner in the house, at the time. It was a big window air conditioner. And I used to go in there at night sometimes in the summer and sleep on the floor. And my mother had floor-to-ceiling drapes that went from the ceiling to the floor. And the air conditioner, the cord wasn't long enough, so there was an extension cord. And that extension cord really wasn't heavy enough for the load that the air conditioner was pulling. So, one night, the connection overheated, caught fire, and caught the drapes on fire. Now, in the middle of the night, I'm dead asleep. My mother--I hear my mother screaming. And there's a wall of flame (laughs) from the ceiling to the floor. And I--my father's bed was right next to the drapes. And he pulled the drapes down. He dragged it off into the bathroom and put the fire out. So, I had a little experience.

Q: Did any of the firemen come?

JAI: No, we didn't--we didn't--no, my father didn't call the fire department. No, he didn't. And then, later on in your training, I mean it really wasn't that good of an idea to be dragging things burning through the house, but he had --my parents had their own bathroom, so he really didn't have to go out of the bedroom, just took it and threw them ...

Q: So, if that, the same kind of thing, would happen today, what would you advise somebody to do?

JAI: I would just try to put it out, you know, smother the fire where it is--have a fire extinguisher. I wouldn't drag burning things through the house. We had a fire in Sands Point, where a mattress fire, and the guy dragged the mattress through the house, and that made the fire worse. And another--when I was, I guess I was around maybe seven or eight years old--there was a house fire on Port Boulevard and where the dry cleaners is now--Port and Bernard Street or Maple, where that cleaners is across from--and that kind of like always stuck in my mind, because it was a pretty big fire. It was a big old house, and that was one of the early fires in my childhood that I remember, here in Port Washington.

Q: There was another fire on Bernard Street not too long ago. Were you involved in fighting that one?

JAI: Yes, but the fire that I'm referring to was--that was on the corner of Maple and Port Boulevard. The fire that you're referring to was on Bernard Street. I was Chief then--Assistant Chief. Where a couple--one or two people died in that. Yes, yes.

Q: What made you decide to become a firefighter?

JAI: Well, one of the friends that I--growing up, that I was hanging out with, became a member of Flower Hill, and I guess I just wanted to do it, you know, also. I really--I didn't join the fire department till I was like two years out of high school. But a lot of people, a lot of firemen today had joined when they were still in high school, as it is today. We have a lot of young kids in the fire department today that are still in high school. And, back then, it was common practice while the kid's still in high school.

Q: So what year did you join?

JAI: 1968, February.

Q: And, oh, so you were nineteen.

JAI: Yes.

Q: What made you pick Flower Hill?

JAI: No, no. I'm Atlantics.

Q: Atlantics. I'm sorry.

JAI: Oh, gee, I don't know. The bus drivers that I knew belonged to Atlantics that I rode on their bus. A couple--the other was a landscaper that was a long-time member who worked for my father.

Q: Do you remember his name?

JAI: He signed--Fico, yes. Joe Fico, Senior. He signed my app. He was one of the guys who signed my application, as a sponsor.

Q: And how did you feel when you were first elected to membership?

JAI: Oh, it was great. It's a great feeling.

Q: Did you have to wait a while?

JAI: You know, I don't remember how long it took me to get in. Years ago, there was

definitely, there was waiting lists, and you had to wait till either somebody passed away or somebody moved out of town or they dropped. Because the companies have limits of their membership. They're chartered for--we have the largest, a hundred and twenty-five. We're chartered for a hundred and twenty-five. The other companies--the other three companies -- have less in their charter. So, there were times when you did have to wait.

Q: Do you remember who the Captain was when you joined?

JAI: The Captain was Joe Fico, Senior. Yes. He was the Captain.

Q: And do you remember who the Chief of the Department was?

JAI: Oh, my gosh.

Q: It's okay. We're going back ...

JAI: It's okay. It's thirty-eight years.

Q: Yes, right (laughs), right. So, what year was that again? It was ...

JAI: February of 1968. Yes.

Q: What do you remember about your first days in the Department?

JAI: Oh, boy. Well, it was like what most people go through today. You had to clean the apparatus, clean the firehouse. You know, you were the probie, and the probie gets stuck with doing all the dirty work, which is expected.

Q: Did any of the more experienced members take you under their wing?

JAI: Oh, sure. There were guys there that helped you, as it is today.

Q: And what do you remember about the training?

JAI: Training. Well, you had classroom, and then you went out to Bethpage where they did the live training, which they still do today. But there's a lot more training, because it's a lot more complicated as far as hazardous materials and all this other-all this other extra training they have today. So it's a lot more today than what we went through, or I went through thirty-eight years ago.

Q: Was there anything that surprised you about the training?

JAI: No, not really. Not really.

Q: Yes. Did you find it hard?

JAI: No. No, I got through it all right (laughs).

Q: Yes. What was the first major fire that you responded to, or one of the first? It doesn't need to be the very first one.

JAI: I'm trying to think. I'll be honest with you; I can't remember. There's been so many of them.

Q: Well, which ones stand out in your mind?

JAI: When I first--when I first joined?

Q: Or even, if you don't remember the ones when you first joined ...

JAI: We've had the lumberyard fire. We've had boatyards. We had a couple of boatyards go up in the early '70s. When I was in the service, and I missed--I did miss some big fires, too. The Sands Point Golf Course, Manhattan Meat Market. That was on Main Street. That was in 1969; I was away at the time. Let's see. What other ones? There've been so many. Well, Shields. That was a pretty big fire. Sands Point Bath & Tennis. That was a pretty big fire.

Q: You were away in the service. You know, when did you join?

JAI: I went into the service in June of '68. I was done in July of '71. I only served for three years.

Q: Yes. And where did you serve?

JAI: Well, I went to basic--I had basic training in Fort Gordon, Georgia, and my advanced training at Fort Gordon, and then I went to Vietnam in April of '69, and I came back--my father passed away in November of '69 on Thanksgiving, and I got reassigned to--compassionate reassignment--to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, and that's where I finished up my Army career.

Q: How do you feel your military service impacted your service as a firefighter?

JAI: Well, the fire service is a quasi-military organization. You know, there's structure, you have officers, and you're expected to listen to their commands and pay attention to what they're doing. So, it's similar to what the Army is, and that kind of like gave me a basis for the fire service.

Q: And, all right, let's see. What were your early jobs in the company?

JAI: Well, early jobs were just, you know, when you first get in, you're only allowed to do as much of your training as you've been given. So, like, you might be the gofer at a fire, so you get certain tools. They want this; they want that. That's why, when you first get in, they want you to learn all the equipment and where it is on all the apparatus, so when someone tells you, "I want this particular tool," you know where it is right away. And then, as your training progressed, then you were allowed to do other things a little more serious, a little more difficult tasks.

Q: Did you have any like specialty? Like any part of the equipment or ...

JAI: No, we just learned everything. No, you learn everything. You learn all the facets and all the operations and how all the tools work and what they are, where they are, and what they're used for. Power tools, saws, hand tools.

Q: And then at a fire, I mean, what--would you be, say, assigned to the hydrant or a nozzle?

JAI: Well, I wouldn't be assigned to do that unless I was riding on an Engine Company apparatus. I'm in a ladder company, so it's all--the ladder company is putting up ladders, rescue, ventilation, salvage.

Q: And, even there, would you tend to do one particular thing or just whatever ...

JAI: It all depends what you are assigned to do at the time.

Q: And who makes that assignment?

JAI: There was no--there was no--you--nobody had a real specialty. You were supposed to know--at a point, you had to know everything about the operation of a ladder company and expected to perform if someone told you to do something. When you went to the call, whoever the officer was, they would assign you tasks to do.

Q: And the officer would be the Captain?

JAI: Could be the Captain or a Lieutenant.

Q: And is it still that way?

JAI: Basically, yes. Yes, yes.

Q: What offices ... [INTERRUPTION] ... What offices have you held?

JAI: Just about all of them (laughs).

Q: So, you started out ...

JAI: Well, I started out as an engineer. I was never *the* engineer. In the company, you have an engineer and assistants. I was Third Assistant, First Assistant Engineer. I didn't hold the position of the Head Engineer job. First Lieutenant, Captain. I was also Fire Marshal for the Fire Department, a Chief. I was the company Secretary. I just went out as President of the company. I was Financial Secretary at one time. So I held almost all of them, yes.

Q: What kind of training did you get for those particular jobs? Say--let's say for ...

JAI: You mean for line officer positions?

Q: Yes.

JAI: Well, engineering is like OJT. Like most of it's all on-the-job training, you know, for Engineer. You've got to know the equipment. You're expected to learn how to drive and to operate it. Know where everything is. You're expected to spend more time there than anybody else, making sure everything is running correctly. So, it's a learning experience, on-the-job training. As far as being a line officer, a Lieutenant, you have schools that you have to go to--officers' school. And, again, it's just--and also experience that you've had going to fires.

Q: And do you get elected as Lieutenant?

JAI: Yes.

Q: And as a Captain and then, of course, as Chief.

JAI: Right, uh huh, right.

Q: How do you think the responsibilities of Chief have changed over the years?

JAI: A lot more regulation from the state and federal governments, and a lot more schools that they have to go to--seminars. And, as well as having the membership attend all this, too.

A lot more than the early days, when it was really *fun*; it was enjoyable to be Chief.

Now it's--I don't think it's as enjoyable as it was thirty years ago.

Q: Why? What ...

JAI: It's just--there's just too much--the Chief has got really a lot to do. A lot of meetings and being more involved with the villages and the towns as far as when the contract time comes up, they want to talk to the Chiefs, and so it's a lot more involved. Thirty years ago, the Chief didn't have as much to do--didn't have a lot to worry about. Now, it's time

consuming. Really time--a lot more time involved than it was thirty years ago.

Q: And speaking of time, how did you find, you know, being able to integrate your responsibilities as a firefighter with, say, your paying work that you did?

JAI: Well, I was a firefighter in New York City for almost twenty-one years. So, I was getting paid to do one and volunteering in another.

Q: Yes. And what differences did you see between your paid firefighting stint and your volunteer work?

JAI: Well, you know, you had to be there. Well, it's a big difference. There's a lot of difference in the officers and the discipline. And maybe things out here might be a little bit more looser. You know, it's not as regimented. Your paid service, it's really a lot more militaristic than it is out here. Even all the fire service, like I said before, is like a semi-military organization, but, in a paid department, it's a lot more.

Q: But in terms of the actual firefighting ...

JAI: Well, when you go to respond to a alarm in the City, or any paid fire department, you basically know the position that you're going to--what you're going to do before you get there. Here, it's a little bit different. You're like assigned on the way. Your officer will

see who's riding, and the most experienced guys will get the most dangerous positions to take care of. And that's--it should run that way. But in the city, you are assigned position at the start of each tour. You walk in the firehouse, the officer has a riding position, and that's your position for the tour.

Q: What do you mean, each tour?

JAI: Well, tour of duty. A tour is--let's see, in the city, the day tour is from nine o'clock until six. And the night tour is from six to nine. It's a tour of duty.

Q: Oh, so it's a shift.

JAI: Correct. But they don't call it a shift; they call it a tour. Right.

Q: Okay.

JAI: So, you know right off the bat what your position is. The tools that you're going to carry and use.

Q: And ...

JAI: Another thing that's changed is the equipment the firemen have today. We didn't have

the power saws to make our job a lot easier when we have to open up a roof or walls. We had to use brute strength, use an axe. So, thirty-eight years ago, we didn't have that. We didn't have a lot of the--like the communications weren't as good as far as, you know, handi-talkies. We have thermal imaging cameras now where you could actually see fire that's hidden behind walls, so it kind of like takes the guess-work out. If there's fire burning someplace where you can't see it, we can look through the walls, and a thermal imaging camera will tell you actually where the hot spots are. We do a lot less damage that way, too.

Q: You mean, because if it doesn't show a fire, you don't have to break through ...

JAI: Well, you know that there's something there somewhere, and if there is something there, you could pinpoint it a lot--you know, it's more accurate in finding where it is than you just taking tools and start opening up ceilings and walls and looking for hot spots. That kind of like shows you where it is.

Q: Have you ever used a thermal imaging camera and found ...

JAI: Yes.

Q: ... a person or a ...

JAI: No, not a person, no.

Q: ... victim or anything?

JAI: No, no. No, no. Just fire.

Q: But would it show if there was?

JAI: Yes. Oh yes, sure. Yes.

Q: Going back to what you said about there being more regulations now for the Chief, what kinds of regulations?

JAI: Well, there's more, as far as, in the old days, everybody could just run right in and look for a victim--do search and rescue. You can't do that anymore. There's certain criteria that, you know, you have to have a partner. Unless you really know that there's a victim in the house or an apartment, you have to have a number of people standing by ready to help firemen that go in there that might be hurt, get trapped. You know, there's a lot more regulation that goes on, but it's not unfettered like it used to be. So ...

Q: And that's with the volunteer departments.

JAI: It's both. No, it's both. It's the whole service, yes. You just can't willy-nilly just run into a house and think there's somebody in there and start searching around for somebody. Unless you know that there's actually somebody in that house or apartment--a resident says, "My daughter's in there," or "my son ..." "My father's in the apartment." There's certain things that you have to do before you can go in like that now. Of course, there's ...

JAI: There's training. When you're doing training, there's requirements. There's certain OSHA [Occupational Safety & Health Administration] and NFPA--National Fire Protection Association-- rules. It's a lot more--it's a lot more the Chief has to think about for projects and things. It's not only the fire department. There's a lot of, like I said before, there's a lot of federal regulation and state regulation.

Q: Were you yourself ever involved in making a rescue?

JAI: In the city, a couple of times I've pulled people out--unconscious people.

Q: But not out here.

JAI: No, not out here. No.

Q: What kinds of programs in the department were you responsible for starting?

JAI: Well, on the company level, I was involved with a couple of truck committees, where if the company wanted to go out and purchase a piece of apparatus, a committee would be formed. People were picked, and you'd serve on the committee. I've been on maybe three or four committees in my career. Also, in the fire department, the police used to dispatch for us. And when we decided to go to another form of dispatching, I was on that--that was a department committee. I helped with that.

Q: So, how are they dispatched now?

JAI: Well, Nassau County has a Fire Communications Center where they--there's seventy-one fire departments in Nassau County. They don't dispatch for all of them, but they probably dispatch for most of them. Some departments have their own dispatcher. Some departments have other departments to dispatch for them. Which we looked into each way of doing it other than the way we had at that time, which really wasn't efficient. So, we decided to go with the county Fire Communications.

Q: And I heard that there's something, a driving program that you worked on? Can you tell me about that?

JAI: Oh, when I was--when I was Chief, I--I started EVOC [Emergency Vehicle Operation Corps], EVOC program, which would train people to drive emergency vehicles.

Q: So that would include ...

JAI: And that's ...

Q: ... the trucks and ...

JAI: Ambulances.

Q: What made you decide to start that?

JAI: I don't know. I just thought it was a good idea. It certainly wouldn't eliminate the liability in case somebody was involved in an accident, but it would show that the driver did have experience and had some training before he was allowed to go behind the wheel.

Q: I imagine they're pretty hard to drive, and if you just ...

JAI: Well, the big trucks. The ladder trucks are, yes. But we have smaller vehicles, too. But, and it's a lot different in an emergency situation when you're driving a vehicle like that. A lot of things you've got to worry about.

Q: Like how? How is it different?

JAI: Well, you have the public that's driving, you have to worry about them. When you come to an intersection, do people hear the sirens and the air horns; are they going to stop. You have a pedestrian problem--joggers wearing Walkmen; they can't hear you.

Q: So how do you allow for all of that?

JAI: Well, they have rules about how fast you can drive on Main Street, and there's certain signals that are given if the fire really isn't serious, you just slow down.

[INTERRUPTION] ... They have regulations for driving, you know, how fast you can go, where. You know, there's certain areas that you can't go over say thirty, thirty-five miles an hour--Main Street here.

Q: And you also worked with the Explorers Program didn't you?

JAI: Yes, the fire department had an Explorer Program years ago and it fizzled out. In my last year as Chief, I started the process up again. You know, I talked to people who--the Scout Council who ran the Explorer Program, had an interview with a couple of people. And when I went out, I was asked to co-chair a committee for the Explorer Program with another gentleman from Fire Medic company--Dick Borrelli. He's deceased now. And we had members from each company on the committee, and we worked--I think it took about six months to get the thing together. So, it's pretty successful. They have quite a

few kids that decided to become members of the fire department, which is actually, the whole idea of it, to get people interested in the fire service. And we have a couple of gals also from there. So it's a pretty successful program.

Q: Did you ever work directly with the kids?

JAI: No, I didn't. No. No.

Q: You set it up. Were there any problems in setting it up? Any obstacles you had to overcome?

JAI: Well, everybody had, you know, on a committee you have different ideas. But we finally came to an agreement on how it was going to work. It worked fairly well. I don't have anything to do with it anymore. I was just in there to get the thing going.

Q: What were the most challenging aspects of being Chief?

JAI: Well, it's, you can't--you can't keep everybody happy. So, you just--well, you just--you've got to do what you think is right. You have to put up with the criticism and everything, but that just comes with the territory.

Q: Can you think of any particular incidents or issues where that would, you know, that

came up?

JAI: Yes. One of the issues was, when I was Chief, I directed that the apparatus had to come to a full stop at stop signs and red lights before proceeding. I just felt that it would eliminate a lot of intersection accidents. And a lot of people didn't like it, and they said, "Oh, you're going to endanger the people you're trying to save." I said, "No, that's not-- that's not really accurate." So, for those couple of seconds--you know, you want to get there in one piece and be able to save the people. You get into an accident, you're not going to do anybody any good.

Q: So that's still in effect.

JAI: Oh, yes.

Q: Yes.

JAI: Yes, yes.

Q: Do you remember any other controversial issues that came up when you were an officer?

JAI: When I was an officer, or when I was Chief?

Q: Either way.

JAI: No, not really.

Q: So things went pretty smoothly for the most part?

JAI: Yeah. Little bumps here and there. There isn't a Chief that ever has a real completely smooth road from the beginning to the end. It just doesn't happen that way.

Q: Were you Chief when women joined the department?

JAI: There was women before I became Chief.

Q: But when you first came into the Department ...

JAI: There was no women. No.

Q: So, how do you feel their entry changed things?

JAI: As long as they could do the job, you know, I don't care.

Q: And they were--well, how about the rest of the--the rest of the force? Did they pretty

much accept the entry of the women?

JAI: Oh, there was moaning and groaning, but then they're accepted today.

Q: Not like in New York City?

JAI: New York City's a different situation. It's a lot different how-- a lot of the firefighters, their impression is they didn't get on the job the same way they did, as far as competing for the position, as far as the physical exam. That was challenged back in 1980, '81. And I got on the job in '82. And some of the women took the city to court because they felt that some of the--some of the--the test was broken down to certain things that you had to do in a certain amount of time. And they thought that it was not fair to women, because of their anatomy. So the test was thrown out. So, there is resentment as far as in the city, about women.

Q: So, what do you think accounts for the fact that there isn't resentment here. I mean, here, too, applicants have to pass the physical exam, right?

JAI: Well, but that's a medical. They don't have to--there's no physical agility test to get into this fire department. Just a medical. To becoming an interior structural firefighter. You pass that and you go to the schools, it's not a problem.

Q: And it hasn't been a problem?

JAI: No, no, no. Not at all. No.

Q: Well, what would you say makes a good firefighter?

JAI: Well, you have to want to help someone. You want to be able to help people. You want to have that drive to help people. That's the whole--that's the whole thing. If you don't have it, there's no reason to be a firefighter. It's the whole basis of being a firefighter--helping somebody, in their time of, you know, emergency.

Q: Now, talking about emergency, you were in the New York City Department--the Fire Department--when 9/11 happened?

JAI: Yes.

Q: Did you work down there?

JAI: Yes, I did.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

JAI: Well, I had worked that night, and I was in the kitchen of the firehouse the morning, and somebody yelled to turn the TV on, and the picture of the first tower was on fire. And it really looked bad. But nobody knew right off the bat what had happened. And then as we were sitting there another twenty minutes watching this, you could see the second plane on the TV screen come around and go into the South Tower. So they held-- immediately, they held everybody over from the night shift, and I guess I got down there about eleven-thirty, twelve o'clock. Very surrealistic scene. It was terrible.

Q: What did you see?

JAI: Well, it was just the collapsed buildings, heavy smoke. Papers flying all over the place. Debris.

Q: And what actually did you do?

JAI: Well, the first few hours, they had us doing absolutely nothing. We sat there, and it was like four or five hundred firemen were just sitting there. Which one of--another thing that I was a little angry about, the guys that should've been in there right away were sitting and told to sit, but in the meantime, everybody and their uncle from every other fire department for the metropolitan area just walked past us with their tools and everything, and we had to sit there and wait till we were given the okay. So, it wasn't till the afternoon we were actually allowed to go down to the site and start looking for

people.

Q: So, why do you think that ...

JAI: I don't know. I have no idea.

Q: Communication? I mean ...

JAI: Poor planning. Or ...

Q: ... have there been investigations into that since then?

JAI: No. No. There was just so much confusion going on, and I guess they really didn't have enough control over the scene and who was allowed in. It was just like everybody was just--you know, I mean, and it wasn't just firemen. It was cops, civilians. And there was really no control. No control at all.

Q: I've read, you know, and heard about some of the problems with the radio communications and ...

JAI: It might have been. That's an ongoing thing as far as the firemen who were in the towers, you know, working that the radio communication was not--and it's really possible

because you have a lot of people talking on those radios and maybe due to the interference of the building themselves, it's very--it's possible. I can't say, you know.

Q: How long were you down there?

JAI: Well, the first night, I think I was down there till about one or two o'clock in the morning. And then I came back for two weeks on and off for two weeks.

Q: And did you ever find any ...

JAI: Remains?

Q: Yes.

JAI: You could smell it. You smelled the remains, but you'd see something, and really there wasn't anything left. There wasn't too much left.

Q: So, what would you say the impact of being there was on you personally and also on our fire department out here.

JAI: Oh, I think it's just that the tremendous loss of life of three hundred forty-three firemen and the three thousand civilians. It's just overwhelming. We just had the--in June we had

the Father's Day fire and story where three firemen were killed. You know, one person-- one fireman getting killed is terrible. The fire department's a family, so everybody feels it. But, on 9/11, now, you had three hundred and forty-three guys got killed, you know.

Q: Did you know them ...

JAI: Murdered, as far as I'm concerned, yes.

Q: Yes. Did you know any of them?

JAI: Oh, sure. Yes.

Q: Any from your company?

JAI: No, there were nobody from my company, but there was a fellow who just, in July, he was new in the fire department--new on the job. He was actually a paramedic in the fire department and then transferred to firefighting. And he was in our company for like a year. And he was just rotated out in July to the company where he was assigned, and then he was killed in that--he was killed that day.

Q: But what do you think the impact was on our volunteer fire department here in Port Washington?

JAI: Well, again, the whole fire service is one big family. So it affected everybody.

Q: In terms of actual procedures, did anything change or ...

JAI: No, not really. Not too much procedure-wise, no. I don't think so.

Q: At what point did you feel you had bonded with the other firefighters? Let's talk, you know, about the Port Washington department.

JAI: Well, you know, it takes time, because they've got to get to know you; you have to get to know them. And then you get a relationship. If you're going to be a wise guy and you're not going to do what you're supposed to do, then guys are not going to--you know, they'll tolerate you, but they're not going to like you.

Q: So, do the wise guys last in the department?

JAI: Some do and some don't, you know.

Q: Yes.

JAI: Some skate their whole career, and some don't make it. They get dropped, or they resign.

Q: But has the social aspect of being in the fire department out here been an important asset for you?

JAI: Yes. Yes, some. No, it's not an important asset. I mean, I joined to be a fireman, not to, you know, picnics and the parties and stuff really didn't, you know..

Q: But at the beginning?

JAI: In the beginning, it didn't. That wasn't really--that's not what I joined for.

Q: And we talked about the impact on your work life. What about on your family life, you know, in terms of ...

JAI: When I wanted to join the volunteer fire department, my father was dead set against it. He didn't want me to.

Q: Why?

JAI: I don't know. He never told me, but he just didn't want me to do it. So, finally, he said okay. I joined.

Q: Had anyone else in your family joined?

JAI: No. Well, my two sons now belong. But I had an older sister and brother at the time. They were like already through college and married.

Q: Excuse me. I'm going to have to turn the tape over. ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ... So, your two sons are in the department?

JAI: Uh huh. Oldest son is Steve and my youngest son is Daniel. And my older son joined in August of '01, and my younger son just joined, oh, let's see, he joined in August of '05.

Q: And are they both in your company?

JAI: Uh huh, yes. And just, there is a few--you have a--you know, like the companies do have one or two generations more in the fire company. Protection especially, they have them there. But my company--John Salerno, his two sons were in the fire company.

Q: Now, how did ...

JAI: So there's a few.

Q: How does your wife feel about having ...

JAI: Well (laughs), when I was still working in the city and then doing this, she didn't see me that often (laughs). And, even though I'm not--I'm not President of the company anymore, I still go up there on Thursday nights, on work nights. There's other things that I'm involved in.

Q: What things?

JAI: Well, they have committees, like the By-law Committee, which I'm involved in in the company level and the department level. And, you know, just coming around, I do still spend some time up there.

Q: What were your responsibilities as President?

JAI: Well, the president basically ran the company meeting and he was there just to make sure that all the officers did what they were supposed to do, basically. That's the president's job.

Q: And you also served as Fire Marshal.

JAI: I was Fire Marshal for about three years before I became Second Assistant Chief.

Q: Were you ever involved in any arson investigations?

JAI: Well, really, the arson--anything that's actually involved in arson is handled by the County Fire Marshal. We do--the Fire Marshal here in Port Washington would request the County to come in, do an investigation, and does some fire inspections.

Q: And did you do that ...

JAI: Fire Prevention week, the fire ...

Q: ... automatically or routinely with every fire or ...

JAI: No, not every fire. No. If the fire was over a certain amount of damage, then the Fire Marshal would be--would be requested, whether or not the Fire Marshal here thought it was suspicious or not.

Q: So, do you remember any particular fires that you thought might be suspicious?

JAI: As Fire Marshal? Yeah, there were a couple. There were a couple.

Q: Which ones?

JAI: There's so many fires. You know what? I'd rather not say, I think.

Q: Okay.

JAI: Yes, just for legal--for legal reasons. I'm not going to say.

Q: Okay. What were your other responsibilities as Fire Marshal?

JAI: Fire Prevention Week was a big thing. You go around to the schools. A couple of guys would bring the trucks. They talk about fire prevention to all the younger members. They do a fire drill once a year at the schools. You know, like the Pride in Port, they set up a booth, bring the trucks down to the town dock. Do some fire inspections. That's it. And does the paperwork. The Fire Marshals, you know, do keep track of all the calls. You know, what they were. They're broken down. The state requires that you do an annual report.

Q: So, there's a lot of paperwork?

JAI: Yeah, there's some. But the computers now, they help a lot. So, it's not too bad.

Q: What are you proudest of in your firefighting career?

JAI: Well, the proudest is I made it to—I went to the top. I became Chief. That was probably my proudest moment.

Q: Would you say that was your best day as a firefighter?

JAI: As Chief--becoming Chief?

Q: Yes, or ...

JAI: Well, one of the days, one of the best (laughs).

Q: What are some of the others?

JAI: Oh, becoming Captain. I was actually sworn in as a firefighter in the city the same day that I was sworn in as Captain of Atlantics. So, that was a special day.

Q: That's a big day. Was your family there for the swearing in?

JAI: Yes. My mother-- and my brother was there also. So, it was pretty special.

Q: And what would you say was your worst day?

JAI: Probably the worst day was when Bobby Dayton was killed, and 9/11.

Q: Did you work that fire when Bobby got killed?

JAI: No. I went to work that day, that morning, in the firehouse. And I heard the call come over. And I drove up Main Street and I saw that it was really burning pretty good. And I said, this is not good. To myself, I said, this is not going to be a good fire. I went to work, and about maybe a half hour later, somebody, one of the guys says, "You know, there was a guy killed in Port Washington." So that hit me pretty hard.

Q: You knew him.

JAI: Yes. And another good friend of mine died in a fire in his house on Pequot. And both these guys were members of Flower Hill. Tony Sicinolfi. And he was a good friend of mine, and that hit me pretty hard, too.

Q: Did it alarm your family? Did it make them feel that you shouldn't be as active?

JAI: No, not really. You know, my wife never, she never said, "You know, maybe you ought to quit or, you know, scale back." No. No.

Q: She was supportive.

JAI: Oh, yes.

Q: Yes.

JAI: I mean, she was concerned when I went out the door every night. And, to this day, you know, "Be careful." You know, "Be careful." "Don't worry about it."

Q: Do you still go out on calls?

JAI: Sure. Oh, yes.

Q: So, how do you set it up so that you're prepared to go out of the house on a moment's notice?

JAI: Well, my keys are always in my truck, so it's just a matter of getting, you know--in the wintertime it's a little more difficult, because you've got to get dressed for it. In the summer, you're out -- shorts, sandals, and you're on your way.

Q: So, in the winter, do you keep your clothes ...

JAI: Yes. You try to keep everything close by and, you know, just jump into them, and wear

an extra pair of sweat pants if it's really cold--you know, your bunker pants. I have two sets. I have one--I have a set in the firehouse here and the one up on Avenue A at our Annex, so I can respond to both like in the middle of the night. I would normally go to the Annex.

Q: That's closer to your home?

JAI: Yes, it's closer.

Q: Okay. Let's see. Have you been active in any fire-related organizations?

JAI: Yes. I belong to the North Shore Fire Council, which is an organization that's made up of departments from the Fifth and the Eighth Battalion. Now, a Battalion is-- in Nassau County, it's divided up into nine battalions. We're in the Eighth. This is the Eighth Battalion, okay. The Fifth Battalion is like Roslyn, Oyster Bay, Glenwood, Sea Cliff. So, the North Shore Fire Council consists of the fire departments from the Fifth and the Eighth Battalion. I was also President of that organization, too.

Q: And what does that organization do?

JAI: Oh, just, you know, we discuss problems facing the fire service, you know, locally. You know, how it affects us. And, I've been pretty active with that organization since 1980, I

think.

Q: So, what kinds of problems have come up?

JAI: Oh, just like the additional burden of certain types of equipment that you have to have, and the training and how that affects the fire department as far as getting the membership to go to all this extra training, and things like that.

Q: And what about the increase in automatic alarms?

JAI: Big problem. Big problem.

Q: You know, how do you think this can be ...

JAI: Enforcement by the county. They don't have the manpower. They don't, you know, whether the funds are there to hire more people. More marshals. More fire inspectors to do something about this problem.

Q: What do you mean, enforcement?

JAI: Because there's a county ordinance in a private dwelling. If the fire department responds to more than three in a ninety-day period, you are subject to a fine of, I think, it's five

hundred dollars. In a commercial building, it's five thousand dollars. But, it's not being enforced.

Q: And there are a lot of false alarms being tripped?

JAI: Yes. Now, I work part-time as a fire inspector in Hicksville.

Q: Now, you do?

JAI: Yes, uh huh. And they have their own dispatcher. So, what they do is, if a resident -- they get an alarm, you know, an alarm comes in from the alarm company, they will call back to the resident to find out what's going on. Now, if the resident says, "Well, yeah, the cooking set it off," or "the steam from the shower," then they're not going to send-- they won't send the fire department. They check a mark and and that's it. If they don't know why the alarm went off, then or when they call they can't get any answer, then they send the fire department. And it cuts down on a lot of their false alarms. Here, we don't have that luxury of doing that, because the county just won't do it.

Q: Because you don't have enough people? Is that it?

JAI: They don't have enough people. There might even be a liability issue. But, you know, there's a liability when we go out the door for no reason. You're putting the public at

risk. You're putting the people who ride on the apparatus at risk. It's a big problem, and a lot of guys just won't go. They'll roll over in the middle of the night--"I'm not going." Because it's the same one all the time. And I don't blame them. You can't blame them.

Q: You mean, when the notice comes in to their radio, they'll know ...

JAI: Yes. You here the same ...

Q: ... where it is.

JAI: Yes, well, you get the address. So you know, you know, I mean, I won't tell you what street it was on, but there's one up in Beacon Hill where they have gone, because they're doing construction in the house. So, they don't have the wherewithal to cover the smoke detectors with plastic bags. Or shut the system off until they leave. And they've gone up there a half dozen, dozen times.

Q: It's a danger. And it's a tremendous waste of resources.

JAI: Of course. The fuel that burns. The wear and tear. Which is minor compared to having an accident and killing somebody for one of these ridiculous automatic alarms. Now, I've been to automatic alarms where there was a fire. So, it's not a majority of them, but once in a while, you'll get a fire. And that, you know, I mean, the smoking being set off by

cooking. Well, the smoke detector's doing what it's supposed to be doing. Even with steam from the shower. They're that sensitive that it will, when it's doing its job. But when they just go off for no reason, that's a problem.

Q: Well, I was advised not to put a smoke detector in the kitchen ...

JAI: No, because the cooking's going to set it off.

Q: But to put it in the next room.

JAI: Right. Or a boiler room. You don't want it in the area of your furnace. Especially if you have an oil burner, because you get that puff back, and you have a little smoke come out, and it'll set it off.

Q: How would you say that-- the things that you learned or experienced as a firefighter have impacted you in your personal life or your professional life?

JAI: Well, you learn how to deal with people. You know, you're dealing with the public, and you're dealing with--as Chief, I was dealing with three hundred individuals. So that gives you a little little help in that respect.

Q: Can you think of any particular times when ...

JAI: No, not really.

Q: ... it was really a challenge?

JAI: No. You know, I was--I had my little bumps, like every Chief does, but nothing really serious.

Q: What about some of the humorous things that go on in the department? Do you remember any of the pranks that ...

JAI: Oh, there's always pranks. There's always pranks. Always.

Q: Yes. Like what kind?

JAI: Especially in the city. Not as much out here.

Q: Oh, yes?

JAI: They don't like it too much out here. But the city there's always, always pranks. All the time. It's part of the fire--that was part of firehouse routine was the pranks.

Q: Do you remember any specific ones?

JAI: Oh, there's so many. In the summertime, it was the water. They had, in my firehouse, they had guys that were professional at it. You were going to get wet before you left the firehouse before your tour was over. So, they'd hide on you, and you'd go out the door; they'd be on the roof, and they'd dump a bucket of water on you. It was just, they'd set up traps. It was unbelievable. You know, it's like, remember the TV show, "McGiver"? No? Okay, well, it's something like that.

Q: Now, why do you think there aren't so many pranks out here?

JAI: Well, because, you know, the older guys don't--they're not into that. Yeah, there's not that many of them.

Q: So, there are more older people in the force here in the department.

JAI: Yes. There's a lot of oldtimers here. Not well received (laughs).

Q: You also worked in the fire department in Washington, D.C., didn't you?

JAI: Yes, I did.

Q: Well, how did that compare ...

JAI: Two and a half years.

Q: ... with New York City?

JAI: Well, the operation was just a lot different. Everything, it was a lot different.

Q: In what way?

JAI: Well, in the response and the actual fire ground operation was a lot different. I think I'd be too technical if I tried to explain it to you. It would be-- I could talk to another fireman about, but trying to explain it to you ...

Q: (Laughs).

JAI: Don't get me wrong. I'm not ...

Q: No, it's not a problem.

JAI: ... you know, it's just that it's--there's no other job like the Fire Department of the City of New York. Just no other.

Q: Are you still in touch with the other firefighters?

JAI: Oh, sure. Oh, yes, sure. I go to their functions every once in a while. Picnics and stuff like that. And some of us--there's a group of us that get together like and go out to dinner. You know, just the guys. Play cards with them every once in a while. We're still in touch, which is important, you know.

Q: Yes, yes.

JAI: But some guys have retired and walked out the door; you never hear from them again. I saw that a few times, but, for the most part, I try to stay in contact.

Q: And how about with people out here—with the firefighters out here? Do you keep up a social relationship?

JAI: Oh, sure.

Q: And get together occasionally?

JAI: Yes. Yes, we have all our company dinners, and we have a picnic and Memorial Day. And we've got a fishing trip coming up in June, which we have every year.

Q: Oh, yes? Every year? I haven't heard about that. Where do you go?

JAI: We go out of Freeport.

Q: And take a boat out?

JAI: Yes, we take a boat out. Party boat. About thirty to forty guys go out.

Q: What do you fish for?

JAI: Flounder, basically.

Q: And then you cook it?

JAI: Yes. Well, they--the guy in the boat, the mate, they clean the fish for you and you take it home and then you eat it. Cook it, sure.

Q: Have you ever done any cooking for Fire Department functions?

JAI: Oh, yes. In the city, I cooked a lot. I was one of the cooks. And out here, I help. I help cook. But they've got some of the guys that do most of the cooking. I help occasionally.

Q: Do you have any specialties?

JAI: Do I have any specialties? No, not really. No.

Q: Have you ever saved any object from a burning house, any possessions?

JAI: Not, no. No.

Q: Okay. What about the future of the Port Washington Fire Department? What do you think that is?

JAI: The future. Well, the future is contingent on maintaining a volunteer force. It's very difficult for people to remain in this town, because of the high taxes. Middle class is being chased out of Port Washington. These kids, they go out, they go to college. And for the most part, they're not going to stay here in Port Washington. They're gone. They get their degree, then they go get work someplace in an area where they can afford to live. So, unless you're fortunate to live with Mom and Dad, or somebody gives you a house, which you still have to pay the taxes and the upkeep and everything else, like, you know, it's going to be difficult. It's going to get difficult.

Q: I know it's already gotten difficult, and do you see it getting harder and harder over the

years, or has it pretty much plateaued?

JAI: Yes, definitely. Because we've had people that resigned from Atlantics that moved out of town because they couldn't afford to live here. I mean, I want to see it stay volunteer, but unless they do something about the taxes in this town, I can't see how any young person who wants to buy a house--or even rent, because the rents here are phenomenal--how're they going to stay?

Q: So, you think ...

JAI: And there's a lot of people from the fire department that have left for that reason.

Q: So, you think eventually it's going to be all paid or ...

JAI: I don't know. But I think--in my opinion, within maybe fifteen years, there's going to be some kind of a change. I don't know whether it's going to be to an all paid, or part paid, you know.

Q: So what do ...

JAI: It's hard to say. I can't--you know, it's hard to say. But there's going to be a change, but what it's going to be exactly, I can't tell you, but I think there's going to be a change.

Q: What do you think the value of this project is? The oral history of the department?

JAI: As far--you mean, as far as what?

Q: Well, as far as having all the interviews from the firefighters.

JAI: Well, it's good, because it's--it's good for the younger members of the department, where they can read, find out about the history of the department, the guys who made this department. And for the public, too. But the time and the effort that we've put into it.

Q: How do you think the department is seen by the public?

JAI: I've never read anything--you know, I guess the--the elected officials question some of the spending. But, I mean, from the general public, I think they love us (laughs). Never really read anything to the contrary from people-- from the people that live here in Port Washington.

Q: How would you like to be remembered?

JAI: Just somebody who had a desire to help their fellow man.

Q: Is there anything that we didn't cover that you think is important to say about your years in the Department or ...

JAI: I think you--I think you've covered everything.

Q: Okay. All right. Thank you very much.

JAI: No problem.