

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

Transcript Of Oral History Interview With

Chief John Walters III
Protection Engine Company No. 1

conducted in association with the
Port Washington Public Library Local History Center

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pertaining to the subject being discussed

Q: This is Christina Southard, and I'm interviewing John Walters III, a member of the Protection Company. So, John, how old were you when you joined the Department, and why did you join the Department?

John Walters III: I was eighteen years old, because that was the youngest you could be. And just--I grew up doing it, so it just fell in line.

Q: And what do you remember from your childhood about firefighting, because your father and grandfather were members.

JW: Always--he was just always taking off every time the whistle went off, and you never knew what was going on, other than you saw occasionally, like they had a big fire at the lumberyard, probably like around '76, '77, something like that. Saw that fire and a couple of big fires here and there. But you don't really know what they do. You just know that they go.

Q: So your father's been a member since ...

JW: '67.

Q: And your grandfather?

JW: I'm not sure what years he was in, to tell you the truth.

Q: Was he in Protection, too?

JW: No, he was in Atlantic.

Q: He was in Atlantic. And was your father in Atlantic or ...

JW: No.

Q: ... he was in Protection. And what about your brother?

JW: My brother was in Protection. He just moved down to South Carolina.

Q: So what did you learn from them regarding ...

JW: Well, from my brother, I didn't really learn anything, because he joined well after me, and, you know, obviously, he's not there anymore. But--well, I can't say that. You learn a little bit, because you get--it depends, you know, like you're brothers, but you also have a relationship in the firehouse, too. But, now, my father, I just grew up--you know, he knew--all of his friends and everything were all from the firehouse, so you learned the

whole camaraderie aspect of it.

Q: Who were his friends?

JW: Oh, guys like Frank Pavlak and Billy Zwerlein, and, you know, that whole--the whole--the whole group is all like intermingled. Like they grew up together, you know. So, when I grew up, I was always hanging out with the Zwerlein family or the Smith family--they live down in Florida now. But, you know, that whole group was all--Hendersens--there's a whole big group that's all friendly with each other.

Q: So, did you learn any traditions from them?

JW: Yeah. How to miss dinner (laughs).

Q: (Laughs). What happens?

JW: Well, it's--you know, the whole tradition of serving is the biggest aspect of it. You know what I mean? And, I mean, learning stuff, yeah. But I'm the type of person that goes out and learns everything on my own, and when I want to do something, that's, you know, I take it to the next level. Some people think I'm a little nuts with that, but you take it to the next level, because I like to not know something; I want to be an expert at it.

Q: Was it an advantage or a disadvantage that members of your family were involved?

JW: Well, I can't see how it really could hurt you. Unless, like if your father's a Chief when you're a young kid going in there, it's kind of tough to walk into those footsteps. You know, my father had--there's five kids in my family. He had a full-time business of his own, so he didn't--he didn't have time to do the officer thing. He just did what he could do. You know what I mean? But I would imagine if, for some of the other guys that have come in when their father was the top end of the echelon, it's tough to walk into that. You know, it'd be like a kid walking in as a professional athlete when his father is a hall-of-famer. I mean, no matter what you do, if you do it good, you're supposed to, and if you don't do it good, then there's something wrong with you. You know what I mean?

Q: Who was the Chief when you joined Protection?

JW: When I joined, the Chief was Donald DuBarry. And he was from Atlantic's.

Q: And how did you feel when you first walked in there?

JW: Oh, it was great, because all these guys that I grew up with--calling them Mister whatever, you know, the day you get elected, they said, "You don't call me Mister anymore. You call me ..." Bill, or whatever their first name is, "because you're one of us."

Q: What do you remember the most about your first days there. You said you were eighteen?

JW: Yeah. Well, you're excited, because you want to get your set of--you get your set of gear, and you know, it's yours, and you can do with it what you want, you know, within reason, I guess. But you've finally got something that you can go to. But the worst part is that you've got to wait. They send a letter to the Town, and then they have to wait for confirmation that you've got insurance before you can do anything. So, now you're in, but you can't do anything until you get your insurance.

Q: Right.

JW: So, you're kind of stuck in limbo for a week or two.

Q: What were your early jobs in Protection?

JW: Well, when you're a probationary firefighter, your job is to keep your mouth shut and do what you're told and be seen and not heard. You do everything. You check all the equipment and learn it--what it's for. You check, you clean everything. Professional gofer, I guess. That's your job is to learn as much as you can and be on top of all the equipment, learn how it's used and what it's for, and maintain the company apparatus--

cleaning it, cleaning the floor, take the garbage out.

Q: So, I see here, you went from Assistant Engineer to ...

JW: Yeah, I went through all the ranks.

Q: So what exactly does the Engineer do?

JW: Well, the Engineer is in charge of the equipment that the company owns. In other words, the fire trucks, everything on the fire trucks, the stuff inside the truck room. The Engineer is basically like a junior officer, if you will, underneath the Lieutenants, and the Head Engineer is charged with the upkeep of all the apparatus and the equipment that's on it. So, then they check it whenever--they check every Thursday they have a work night and then any other time that they need to, also. And he has the probationary guys assigned to him and the rest of the membership, and he executes getting done everything that needs to be checked and cleaned and polished and whatever. Annual maintenance, monthly maintenance, weekly maintenance.

Q: So is it hard to be the Chief?

JW: That would be an understatement (laughs). It's not hard to be the Chief, it's hard to be the Chief and do a good job. Anybody could just wear the badge that says, "I'm the Chief,"

but the badge doesn't make you; you've got to make the badge. You know what I mean? Like the badge, you don't get the magic wand waved over you that you know everything and that's it. You have to make that badge and uphold the traditions of it and make it better for the next generation. It's--you're leading three hundred men and women in the busiest fire department in Nassau County. You don't get paid for it, and it's a full-time job. And you don't have any set hours. It could be any hour of any day. So ...

Q: Who was the most memorable character that you remember in the Fire Department?

JW: You mean as far as like being funny and stuff like that or ...

Q: Just like you really remember this person. He really, you know ...

JW: Well, it's not really a person, but when I first joined, we had a bunch of oldtimers. They called them the Apple Dumpling Gang. And some of them are still around. But they ...

Q: Who is they?

JW: Oh, it was Porky Poole--Sassy Poole, Harry Hooper. I mean, a whole lot of them. And they were all retired, so they hung out at the firehouse every day, and they said--I mean, they were all like World War II guys--Rab Rankin, and I mean, they'd just break each other's chops till you fell off the chair laughing. But, you know, like I'll give you a funny

story. I go away on a cruise, and we get stuck in this hurricane. And I'm on a boat that's a thousand feet long, so it's a big cruise ship, you know. And we hit this hurricane, and I'm with one of the guys in the company--Billy Davis. And the waves are thirty feet. Now, you're looking--I mean, thirty feet's a big wave. So, we're looking on the third floor, we're looking out the porthole, and we're looking out over the water, and the next thing you know, we're looking underwater. And then the wave goes by and then you're looking out over the water. Then, another wave would go by, and you're looking underwater. So, I come home, and I--you know, I work shifts, so sometimes I'm off during the day. So, I'm having coffee with these guys in the morning. And they started telling this story. Rab Rankin turns around and says to me, "You know, I was on this air craft carrier, World War II, and the waves came right over the bow, they were so big." And I'm like, well, that kind of ruined my story. Well, these guys were World War II heros and stuff. How do you compete? I'm on a cruise ship in the Bahamas, you know. Now I almost feel guilty telling this story, because these guys have been there and done it all.

Q: Right.

JW: You know, the generations are just different.

Q: So what's happening for the hundredth anniversary?

JW: Oh, well, kind of unique, because each company is individual, and then they form the Department. So, we've already had Protection and Atlantic's hundredth, and Flower Hill's is this year coming up. So, the Department's hundredth is basically a unity of the companies--when they finally put them all together. We've got some stuff in store--kind of a low key celebration. Nothing crazy.

Q: Tell me about the block parties, and were you ever in the tournaments?

JW: Oh, yeah. Every year (laughs).

Q: Is that--that's the Road Runners?

JW: Yeah.

Q: And, so tell me about that. So, you were on the racing team?

JW: Yeah.

Q: And when did you start that? When you ...

JW: I went to my first tournament in 1969.

Q: And you were how old?

JW: When I was a year old. They won the State championship (laughs).

Q: And how is training for that?

JW: It's hard. It's--I can't do it now, because I just can't find the time for it. It's Monday and Wednesday nights and whenever else they need to, and they run on Saturdays. But if you could form the cliché that everybody in the outside world outside of the Fire Department knows that the Fire Department is a gigantic camaraderie thing, and that's a pretty well-known fact with everybody. But the actual guys that are on this racing team are in a little circle that they have of their own little world inside the Fire Department. The camaraderie, you couldn't even explain it. You couldn't even explain it. It--the rest of it pales in comparison to it.

Q: So, is there competition between the three companies?

JW: Not as much as there used to be.

Q: Why?

JW: Things have just changed over time. When I first joined, it was like you did not let the

other company beat you there, no matter what. You know, you just didn't. And it's changed, because--some for the better, some for the worse--but mostly, the task that's at hand is now the centralized feature instead of just trying to beat the other guy there. And so, mostly for training and stuff like that, and we put everything together. We pooled all of our resources together to try and get a better--I don't know what you would say--a better service to the community.

Q: How'd you do that?

JW: A lot of training. It's not something that happens overnight, because guys their take lifetimes to develop an ego. So it takes a long time to crack that. Basically, like myself and some of the other guys, we don't have a thing where it's written here, "This is how you do it." We have a clause called "Do the right thing," and you can't put that in words. You know what I mean? Things in life that, whether it's right or it's a law or it's indifferent, it doesn't really matter. Our thing is to do the right thing.

Q: How do the companies differ in their functions and in their ceremonies and things like that?

JW: Well, I mean, they differ right from the get-go somewhat. Both the engine companies now are primarily the same thing. But, years ago, they started off differently, because the apparatus was different.

Q: How?

JW: Well, in other words, in 1892, Protection bought a steam engine--a hand pumper. So that was--and it didn't have a back step and a hose bed and the tank, and--I mean, it had just a big thing that you pump. I'm sure Frank probably gave you a million pictures of it. But you needed the hose also. So, Flower Hill, when they started in 1905, they had hose wagons, and Protection had the pumper. And then Atlantic's had the ladders. So, they kind of put it all together. But now, your modern day fire engine, you know, is like we have now. We have five of them, and Protection and Flower Hill are basically the same thing. You just--you know, it's just more fire engines. And Atlantic's is still with the ladders and the rescue part of it. So, out of evolution, the two companies basically became doing the same job, which is fine, because you still need more than one fire engine anyway.

Q: Right. What happens at the annual dinners?

JW: The annual dinner is, you know, they install all the officers. And, you know, you get sworn in for their term of office, and that's basically it. It's a big dog-and-pony show, in my eyes, but it's got to go on.

Q: What about the block parties, you know, even as a grown-up?

JW: When I was a kid, they did a block party to raise money for the drill team--the Road Runners.

Q: Where was it held?

JW: Down on Channel Drive. And, you know, it was fun for the kids, because they had the kids, and a lot of the oldtimers, they made clam chowder, and they did all that kind of stuff. But, I mean, nowadays, it would be one law suit after another. And it's just--you can't do that kind of stuff anymore. You'd have to hire somebody to make food, because you need permits, and ...

Q: Do you still have it?

JW: No.

Q: You don't have the block party?

JW: There's too much liability. You would have to contract everything out, and then you don't really make the amount of money that you're supposed to. So, unless it's a specific, one-time deal, like for the hundredth anniversary, it's not worth the time and the effort to do it.

Q: So what changes have you seen in the Department in the years that you've been a member?

JW: Oh, where do I even start. Much busier, to begin with.

Q: Why?

JW: A lot of reasons. Automatic fire alarms, automatic carbon monoxide alarms, just regular carbon monoxide alarms. Just the nature of the business and what we do. The town is much more populated. We have a thousand houses, this year alone, going in.

Q: Where?

JW: Well, we have two hundred and fifty houses going in behind Pleasant Avenue. We have three hundred and fifty brand new houses down in the sand pits. We have a hundred and forty-five condominiums in a high-rise down there. We have a gated community going in at the end of Manhasset Isle. It's just--and, I mean, everywhere you look in Manorhaven is a house that's now a two-family house, or more.

Q: How has the community changed?

JW: You need a bicycle instead of a car. You can't drive anywhere. It's become much more of a commuter orientated town than it used to be. And it always was, but now, it's much more than that. Most of the time, we find that--and I get to speak to most of the residents now, being the Chief, that I go, you know, and actually speak to the person that called for 9-1-1, or whatever. And most of them are transplanted from somewhere else. It's about the school district and the commute. And pretty much, those are the top two things.

Q: Were there women in the Department when you entered?

JW: In the Fire Medics company, there's always been women since its inception in '79. Janet Kimmerly joined Protection right before I did, and she's still there.

Q: How many women are there now?

JW: Let's see. We have Sherry [Gerson], Janet ...

Q: Sherry what's her name? Sherry ...

JW: Sherry Gerson. She's moving to Colorado. Janet. We have Crystal Ross. I think that's it for firefighters. And then, I'll be guessing, but I'd say thirty-five to forty in Fire Medics.

Q: How did the ethnic situation change in the Fire Department, or did it?

JW: Well, it hasn't really changed. I mean, the diversity of the Fire Department is basically what the town is, which is predominantly white. But ...

Q: And Hispanics?

JW: I will tell you that in the last ten years, we've gotten a lot more Hispanics, and it's mostly because the firefighters are a blue collar job, and there's just not that many blue collar people in town. And it seems to me that the Hispanic race falls more in line with the blue collar worker, like myself. And that part's come up, and it's helped us tremendously, because now we have people that can actually speak Spanish to the callers, too. And that part's been a tremendous asset. So, we do have females; we do have Hispanics. We have ...

Q: Do you actively recruit them?

JW: Not by race. We just recruit anybody that's willing to give their time.

Q: How do you do that? How--what is ...

JW: Well, we're working on a thing now where we're going to have some--the local delis are all going to have coffee cups with our logo and asking for help on it. And, you know, the

delis were willing to just do that for us. As they basically said, "I gotta buy coffee cups anyway, so I don't mind putting your stuff on it." Instead of their own advertising, they're going to put ours on it. So that was a nice thing for them to do. We did some ads at the movie theater. When the slides go on before the movies. We put ads in the *Port News* all the time. We're going into the phase of being very heavily visible at public events. Which is--it takes a lot of time and effort, of which we really don't have a lot, because we're so busy to begin with, but we feel that we need to do that. In other words, they have the street fair on Main Street. We'll have a gigantic display this year, on Main Street and Haven Avenue there, with a lot of different stuff that we do. We went out and proactively got a grant for a fire safety trailer, so that we can take that to the schools, and it's basically for teaching the kids. And the fire safety trailer has a smoke machine set up in the kitchen. Teaches kids from any age, so you can make it more advanced as the kids get older, even how to get out of a window, how to climb down a ladder. It's got smoke detectors, carbon monoxide detectors. Teaches them the difference. It's got telephones where they can dial 9-1-1 and there's an operator on the other end. So, it's basically teach them fire education, and that's, you know, is teaching the young kids, because the adults don't listen (laughs). The kids listen, but they go home and teach the parents, which is a good thing.

Q: How do you think that the Fire Department is perceived by the public in Port Washington?

JW: The public that's been around for a long time knows the job that we do. Most of the newer public has no clue. Most of the time, we get from the so-called transplanted people like I told you about, most of them think that it's just a paid service, like it was wherever they came from--Manhattan or wherever like that. They don't really know.

Q: What surprised you about the training that you needed way back when?

JW: Well, again, I'm kind of very anal when it comes to stuff like that. And, not that I didn't like it, but I wanted to do a lot more of it. So, I went to the higher-ups before I became a Chief and asked them to give me the whole ball of wax, and they did. So, they--you know, be careful what you ask for, because you might get it. So ...

Q: What did they tell you that was valuable that you remember?

JW: Well, I mean, basically, you live in a town where it doesn't have a lot of fires. But we do have a lot of fire calls. So, you always have to be prepared. But, you've got to be prepared for anything and everything, and--you know what I mean? Just because we're not in the middle of the ghetto here doesn't mean that we don't have a fire once in a while. And the fire still burns the same way. You still get killed the same way.

Q: Tell me about your first fire.

JW: Oh, let's see. Well, the first real big fire that I went to was the Bath and Racquet Club at Sands Point, and that was right before I got in. But it burned for like five or six hours, at least. I don't even know how long it was. It seemed like two days to me.

Q: How old were you?

JW: Seventeen.

Q: And what other emergencies have been particularly memorable to you, or situations?

JW: Well, I mean, if you're talking about any incident in particular, I mean, the fire that Bobby Dayton got killed in has to be first.

Q: That was nineteen-- ...

JW: That was nineteen--November 26th of nineteen-ninety--no, 1988.

Q: And you were there?

JW: Yeah. And that's something that, you know, that's first and foremost, because that's what this business is all about is not going home missing somebody. I mean, you're supposed to go home with the same amount that you left with. So that's the biggest thing. Outside

of that, we had one of our medics get killed by a drunk driver. That was not good. We lost Tony Siconolfi in a fire in his own house; that was not good. And I'll tell you a funny story, though. Myself and Chris who is the Chief of the Department right now ...

Q: Chris who?

JW: Bollerman. We went to a--we had a little get-together. One of the guys was getting married, so we were at one of the firehouses. And I don't know, it was two o'clock in the morning. And they were having a party for the guy because he was getting married, you know.

Q: Who was getting married?

JW: My cousin Steven. And, at the time, myself and Chris were fairly new guys--maybe like two years in the Department, and they had a thing. If they're going to have a party--especially on the property--if guys are drinking and all, then some other guys got to be available to go to the call. So, you're the junior guy; you're stuck with the duty, whether you like it or not, because somebody you're not the junior guy. So, we get a call in the middle of the night for a house fire, and Geoff Cole, who was the Chief, was probably an Engineer or Lieutenant at the time, before he even made it to Lieutenant or Captain. What had happened is the people left the pots on the stove, and the stove went on fire, and the whole house filled with smoke. And I mean, it was pretty bad smoke condition.

So we go inside, and we've got these--and I remember that the kids were in bed, and basically, the smoke was banked down past their beds, so if they had sat up, it would have been like a bad situation. So, myself and Chris and Geoff and a couple of other people, we dragged these kids out of the house, and they were ...

Q: Where was it?

JW: It was somewhere in Manorhaven. I don't even remember where. I remember the kids were Asian. But--I mean, but that's what this whole job is about. I mean, that's the entire--I mean, would they have died in the bed? I can't say that. But, that's what this whole job is about. You know what I mean? I mean, that's the whole ...

Q: What makes a good firefighter?

JW: Guts (laughs). You've got to have a lot of guts. You've got to be borderline insane. You get to my point in my career of twenty years, as a Chief, not by accident. You have to work hard at it. And, for a new firefighter, like I said, you keep your mouth shut, keep your nose to the grind, learn your job. Listen to the people around you, follow orders, and go to school. And someday, you know, then, after--after--you can get all the nuts and bolts and the meat and potatoes of it, but to get all the intangibles, you're going to have to start doing stuff on your own, later on down the line. So, you know, we can only set you up for success, and then success is up to you.

Q: What was your best day as a firefighter?

JW: What was my best day? Oh, I don't know. Probably the day I joined. I don't know.

Q: What goes through your head when you're fighting a fire?

JW: Keeping my guys safe. Making sure nothing happens to them. I mean, there's a million things that go through at once, and that comes from experience. But, you know, fighting the fire; where is it going? what's going on around me? are my resources okay? am I in here too long? You know, a lot of stuff like that. But, number one is, first and foremost is my guys.

Q: Have you ever had a harrowing escape?

JW: I've had a few close calls. Jumped out of a few windows. It's a humbling experience. Been burned a few times.

Q: Badly?

JW: A couple burns here and there. I don't really know what bad is. I mean it hurts like hell (laughs), so I don't know what you want to consider bad, but ...

Q: Did you have to be hospitalized?

JW: I was in the hospital from--not from a fire, but from boiling water, I was in the hospital for twenty-something days.

Q: When was that?

JW: 2002.

Q: What happened?

JW: A guy dropped a pot of water on me (laughs).

Q: Where?

JW: At a firehouse.

Q: Really?

JW: Yeah.

Q: At the firehouse here at Protection?

JW: No, no. It was ...

Q: In New York City.

JW: Yeah.

Q: Where is your firehouse in New York City?

JW: Maspeth, Queens.

Q: Is that ...

JW: Well, I work for Special Operations. So, we don't cover just Maspeth. We cover like all of Queens and parts of Manhattan and Brooklyn and Bronx.

Q: So, were you ever in a fire in Port Washington where--other than the obvious, you know, Bobby Dayton fire--where somebody else was injured?

JW: Firefighter or civilian?

Q: Firefighter. Or civilian.

JW: Yeah, we've had plenty of injuries. People taken out with chest pains and cuts and bruises and sprains, and all kinds of stuff like that. We've had a boat load of fires where civilians have died, injured. Just all in, you know, in the course of twenty years, a lot of stuff happens.

Q: And so how do you deal with the trauma?

JW: Well, you're going into this knowing that at sometime you're going to fail. And you're going to fail again, and you're going to fail again. But it's the times in between that you succeed, and that's what keeps you going. I had a young girl from one of the medic companies come up to me last week and very, very upset about one of the ambulance calls she went to, and she felt that she could have done a better job and yadayadayada. And I had to sit down and talk to her and say, you know, every day I go to work, and sometimes we fail, sometimes we don't fail. But the part that you've got to keep you motivated is the part where you succeed on, because she's nineteen, I guess, now, so she's been doing this about a year and a half. And now she's a full-fledged medic where she can run the call on her own, and she's not just the assistant anymore. And that weighs on you, because you're ultimately responsible for that, for that individual. And I told her, you've got to concentrate on what you're taught and your basics and do all that stuff first. And sometimes it's out of your hands. You know, you're dealt a bad hand, there's

nothing you can do about it. But you didn't cause that person to be injured; you're just there to help them. You know what I mean? When I go to the house fire, I didn't cause the fire. I'm just trying to do what I can to help the person and save the contents. You know what I mean? So, I just take it as the point it's not my fault that any of this occurred. I'm doing the best I can to rectify it.

Q: What things have you learned as a fireman that helped you with your personal life? Obviously, it's helped in your professional life as a fireman.

JW: Patience. I'm terrible with patience. I don't have time or effort to wait for anything. And probably first and foremost.

Q: Did you ever save anyone's life?

JW: Well, I mean, I don't know. I took a bunch of people out of a fire last week at Jackson Heights. I don't know if they're going to live or not live. But, I mean, that's a routine thing, and it's not--you know, when I do stuff, I don't--you know, some people are in it for the medals and all that, and I could really care less about any of that. You know what I mean? When you go to bed at night and you put your head down on the pillow and you know what you did, it's irrelevant what everybody else thinks or what you think, or that you need to be written up for or ...

Q: Do you dream about fire?

JW: No. No. I mean, every minute that I'm awake, if I'm at work, I'm going to fires; if I'm home, I'm going to fires. So it's, you know ...

Q: How does your family handle that?

JW: Well, it's not easy for my wife, you know. She plays second fiddle to everything. And it's not easy. You know, it's definitely not easy for her.

Q: Do you have children?

JW: No. I don't know how--I don't know how Chris has kids. I don't know how he does it.

Q: ... [How come?] ...

JW: I really don't. Because I'm the type of person, unless I can do it my way and do it a hundred and fifty percent, I don't even want to do it. So, I don't know--I mean, God bless them. I don't know how they do it.

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

JW: You get good at it (laughs). Well, it's part of your motivation for training and getting better at it. You know, when the bully kicks you in the rear when you're a kid, you learn how to defend yourself. You know what I mean? So, if you don't learn, you're not going--you're going to be a shortlived career if you don't learn very fast.

Q: So, do you talk to your wife about your firefighting, or ...

JW: No. I talk to her about--sometimes, you know, when I come home pissed off that there's some internal politics or some villages or mayors or whatever, you know, and my world is very black and white, where I'm not dollars and cents; I'm right or wrong, you know. And people that deal in dollars and sense, I'll just tell them, I don't care what it costs. If it involves somebody's life, we're doing it. That's it. Period. End of story.

Q: What about the social aspects, which are big in the Fire Department?

JW: Funny you should say that. Used to be very, very big. Not so big anymore.

Q: Why?

JW: It's more of a job now.

Q: Why?

JW: It's because we're just too busy. We don't have time (laughs).

Q: Really.

JW: Don't have time for--when I was a kid, when I'd go down to the firehouse with my dad on a Sunday, there'd be thirty, forty guys at the bar watching football and doing stuff. Now, nowadays, not ten altogether in the whole Fire Department. Just different. Apples and oranges. Just different society, different world, different everything.

Q: What about the work nights? Aren't there those work nights?

JW: Work nights are every Thursday, but you have to remember that when I joined the Fire Department, we were doing three hundred calls, and we're doing almost three thousand now. So, when you're talking seven to ten calls a day, I mean, just you, yourself, outside the firehouse, life is different. You know what I mean? Kids, there was no computers; there was no videogames. There was no--I mean, kids went out and played. You played cowboys and Indians, or you did what--I mean, people don't do that anymore. The free time that one has, even as a child, is not what it used to be. So ...

Q: So, guys don't go down there on Thursday nights and drink some beers and ...

JW: Not really. We don't even have a refrigerator at the bar anymore.

Q: Really?

JW: I mean, the guys will still get pizzas after work night and hang out, and sometimes they'll play Texas hold 'em afterwards and stuff like that. But it's six-thirty, work night starts, and it goes till you're finished, and usually there's a school after it, and it's business. It's completely different than what it used to be. When I was a kid, we'd stay there till four in the morning playing cards and drinking beers, and that's out.

Q: Really.

JW: All out.

Q: So what about the dinners. So, you don't have the fair anymore, the block parties ...

JW: You know, society's changed so much that, I mean, drinking and driving and the whole--I mean, the whole thing is, and even if you look at outside the firehouse, just the business at the bars and everything, it's not what it used to be. I mean, years ago, this was a town that was known for having more bars per square inch than anywhere on Long Island. You know, and now, there's like nothing. I mean, just society has changed, and so has the firehouse.

Q: So what are the social activities they do?

JW: Hanging out, going to calls.

Q: But that's it.

JW: It's so busy, that we don't have any other choice.

Q: And what about--so you don't have dinners or ...

JW: Well, we have--we just had a Christmas party, you know, at the Polish Hall where we had--and that's something different, too. Each company used to do their own Christmas party; now we did it together.

Q: So that's a good thing.

JW: Yeah. And it also saves money, because you're doing it all together instead of having four separate parties.

Q: Is it everyone's family comes?

JW: No, just you and your guest. That's it. And stuff like that. I mean, more of the socializing is done standing there talking in gear and stuff after the calls. I mean, that's-- the socializing was done in the barroom, and now it's done in the truck room with the gear on (laughs).

Q: What about that bonding experience you had with your men. You did--I guess you've experienced that.

JW: My men come first and foremost to anything. And, you firmly have to--you know, I believe that you have to do that as a leader.

Q: Are your best friends firemen in the town?

JW: Yeah.

Q: Who are they?

JW: All my friends are, basically. Well, funny, because now that I'm Chief I don't really have any best friends anymore. I'm just--I'm like a ping pong ball getting bounced all over the place. In the last two years, being that I deal with Chris and Glen every day, I mean, Chris and Glen, first and foremost, because I see them more than I see my wife.

Q: And what about when you were young? Did you bond with any of the young guys?

JW: Oh, yeah, sure, like guys like Ray Ryan who is in--you know, he's a few years older than me. So, you know, when I was a kid, you'd go to the Christmas party with--you know, and he was a kid, too. And then, all of a sudden, he's one of them, and I'm not. And I'm like, hey, what's going on here, you know. And then, finally, you get in, too, and then, you know, I followed up the ranks with him, and he was a Captain, then I was Captain after him.

Q: Is that Ray Ryan, the police ...

JW: Yeah, right. And Scott Wood. You know, there's a whole bunch of them that are in that age group.

Q: So what other young guys joined with you?

JW: Oh, with me?

Q: Yeah, like around the same time. Guys that you knew.

JW: Oh, let's see. John Mahoney, Chris Bollerman, Tommy Golden, Michael Black, Scott Wood, Chris Volo, Pat Cicoch. I mean, there's a whole bunch of them. But it seems to be

when you get a couple of guys in and they drag their buddies in and it's all like one little--big clique at a time. You know what I mean. And then, it might be like next year, nobody in their age group comes in, but then the following year there might be somebody and they drag a bunch of people in. It just goes on and on and on.

Q: Do you ever carry anything for good luck?

JW: For good luck.

Q: A coin or something?

JW: It's tough to say. I don't really--I'm not a big jewelry guy, because jewelry gets--it conducts heat. So, I don't wear anything at work. I wear this bracelet whenever I'm not actively at work.

Q: What is that?

JW: This is a bracelet that was made for the guys from my firehouse that were killed. And I don't wear--I don't wear any 9/11 paraphernalia, other than that. I mean, I just--I don't talk about it. I don't--some guys used it as a trump card, you know, getting free vacations and doing all kinds of stuff. I don't--I don't do any of that. And I just let my actions speak for myself, and ...

Q: What surprised you about being a firefighter?

JW: How incompetent the public is. People don't care. We're the largest industrialized nation in the world, and we lead every year in fire deaths. And nobody cares.

Q: Why?

JW: Because they're ignorant.

Q: What is it? Carelessness?

JW: Yeah. Yeah, it's ignorance and lack of education, and people just don't care. You know, you're not telling somebody--if you look directly around this town, there's a lot of people in this town with a lot of money, and a lot of them are very important people at their jobs. They tell people every day what to do. And they don't listen to stuff (laughs). You know what I mean? They--when they want something, they want it. And the cost is not an object. But, when you're trying to tell them about something else, it's always "not in my backyard," and, you know, like that kind of routine. But it--I guarantee, if you ask any person that's a civilian that's been through a fire or any portion thereof, they'll give you a completely different story. Guaranteed.

Q: ... [?] ...

JW: Guaranteed. You go and speak to Matt Walsh who lives in Plandome, who just had a gigantic fire in his house. And he was a Chief of the Plandome Fire Department. And he'll give you a completely different story about having a fire in your own house.

Q: What kind of annoyances have you experienced with other firefighters in Port Washington?

JW: Well, I'll give you what I refer to as the tee-shirt and tattoo club.

Q: (Laughs).

JW: There's not specifically Port Washington, but in the whole realm of Long Island and the Metropolitan area, I'll say. There's this group that likes to think they know what they're doing because they've got the badge and they caught the tee-shirt and got the tattoo, and that doesn't teach you anything, other than you look the part. But, when you go into a fire and you can't see, and you feel like you're in an oven and you've got to produce, and it's like being in the military. When you're on the front lines, you're exposed for your weaknesses. You're either producing or you're not producing, and there's nowhere to hide. So, if you're not in there on the front line, then you're not getting it done, and there's nowhere to hide. And those tee-shirt and tattoo guys usually will be the guys out

on the front lawn somewhere, what I would refer to as a fresh-air firefighter. So, and those are the guys that have all the accolades. You know, their car is like a billboard and they've got all the tee-shirts. And the guys that just go about their business and get it done are the guys that don't talk about it, that don't have all that. And that surprises me the most. People want to be the hero. You know what I mean? But you don't go looking for it. It finds you. You know what I mean? And you don't--you get to be a hero by training and doing it a lot and getting better at it, and being very good at what you do.

Q: Have you ever played a prank on anybody? Or know of any pranks that you thought were pretty funny?

JW: Oh, man, well, we used to have water fights all the time and ...

Q: Where?

JW: All over the place. We used to go to each other's firehouse and sneak attack them.

Q: What was your favorite place to go do that?

JW: Well, in the back yard at Protection, they have an air tank for the horn. You know when the horn goes off, it has a tank full of air, and it's below grade, so you have to take this manhole cover off to go down below. So, when they get a new guy in there, we used to

tell him that he's got to go down there and change the light bulb like at the work night, you know. And they'll stick the cover right back on, and he's stuck in the hole. Either that, or they'll dump a bucket of water on him while he's climbing down the ladder, or, you know, they just ...

Q: And what about with other firehouses?

JW: Well, you know, one time, we had gone to Flower Hill and we had--I forgot. We did something to them, and they wanted to get us back. So, they were going to come down here with the rig and try to blast us with all the hoses. And, you know, Protection and Atlantic's are next to each other, back to back. So they called Atlantic's to ask for help. So, they were like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." So, as soon as they hung up the phone, they called us and said "They're on their way down to get you." So, we were sitting there ready for them, and as soon as they pulled up, we opened the garage door and bombarded them.

Q: With water?

JW: And they didn't know what happened.

Q: With the hoses?

JW: They didn't know what hit 'em. They were like coming for the attack, and they got killed
(laughs).

Q: (Laughs).

JW: And they were like, "What happened?!" (laughs).

Q: And who was the leader of that attack? Who was ...

JW: You know, I think it was Bobby Dayton, because what happened, one of our guys ended up shooting him in the eye with the hose, and that was the end of the water fight. And the Chief flipped out, and "No more water fights," and, you know. Everything is fun and games. Like when you were a kid. Fun and games until somebody gets hurt, and then Mom has a cow, and that's the end of that.

Q: (Laughs). What kind of--are there like any in-jokes at the--at Protection between the guys.

JW: There's always something, you know. Somebody's always doing something stupid, and it goes right through everybody, you know. Everybody finds out something, and it's always something. I mean, you could go there any day of the week, and it's always something else, you know.

Q: Now, you said before that you had been burned. So, what--did you ever get any other injuries?

JW: I've had stitches. I've had smoke inhalation. You know, just normal, routine stuff. Bumps and bruises, stitches.

Q: Have you ever been second guessing yourself ...

JW: All the time.

Q: ... at a fire?

JW: All the time. Because you're not a real good fireman unless you do that. Everything could always go better.

Q: Have you ever saved anything from a burning house?

JW: Anything as like, what? What, you mean people? Money?

Q: Like an object or something.

JW: Oh, well, we just had that fire in Plandome, at Matt Walsh's house. And he had--I mean

...

Q: What street is that on?

JW: Don't know.

Q: It was recent. I remember all of the ...

JW: Yeah. Not far from the country club, right up the road there.

Q: Right.

JW: He had--had to be thirty or forty autographed guitars in his house, hanging on the walls. He had like a recording studio in his house, and yeah, so. But indirectly, now, because now, as a leader, I'm getting guys to do it. You know what I mean? But it's also my job to think about it, to get it done to begin with. You know, nobody tells you what to do anymore. You've got to be the guy figuring it out and then telling somebody to do it.
But ...

Q: So you saved his guitars?

JW: We saved a portion of them. Not all of them. Some of them had already burned up. But, more importantly is we saved his house, because the roof--I mean, the whole fire was in the whole attic, going--it was burning through the roof already.

Q: How did it start?

JW: Somebody threw ashes in the garbage can in the bathroom. One of--a friend of the kid's that lived there. But, you know, every fire we go to, we save stuff.

Q: Tell me about the drill teams and when you were doing that. How long did you do that?

JW: For--oh, let's see. We had a team for--originally, from thirteen to seventeen years old, for kids. I mean, obviously, they don't use trucks. They use like a hand cart like they used to use years ago. Then, so I did that for about three years.

Q: Before you joined.

JW: Before I joined. We had a junior team. And, actually, myself and Chris and a couple of other guys were the ones that got it started. Flower Hill had an Explorer Post where--we have an Explorer Post for the Fire Department now, which is run through the Scouts, for kids. And myself and Chris were the first ones involved in that, years ago. So, then, when we got into the Fire Department and, you know, started racing, you know, with the

drill team, you went--a lot of work before the summer, in the springtime, to get everything ready. And then, during the summer, you practiced on ...

Q: Now is that at Sandy Hollow?

JW: Yeah, Monday and Wednesday nights. Friday nights, we'd pack everything up, and then Saturday we'd go to the tournament. And then, it's an all day thing.

Q: All over the state?

JW: Yeah. Mostly on Long Island, but some of the stuff was upstate. And then, you'd come back home, and on Sunday you'd have to clean everything up so that Monday you'd be ready to go for practice again.

Q: Sounds like a full-time ...

JW: It's a lot of work. It's a lot of work. But when I first started, we were terrible. And we had a basic like changing of the guard. All the old guys got out and all the new guys started. So, it was like the Bad News Bears the first year. It was pretty pathetic. But we were all in the same boat, and, you know, like there's referees. They call them officials. And they'd come up to us and like, you know, like joke around. Like, "You got an i.d.? I don't think you're old enough," you know, that kind of thing. And then, the group of us

stuck it out, and, you know, eight years--ten years ...

Q: Who was on your team? On your drill team?

JW: Danny Salerno, still there. John Mahoney's still there. Dennis Swiaki, myself, Ray Ryan. There's a whole multitude. But the core guys stuck together. And once you get into the five years, six years, seven years, you're going to--remember, you're practicing twice a week. So, you can imagine how intricate it can be. And one little thing goes wrong, and it's over. So, you need to be good, and you need to be doing it for a while, before you get to be competitive. And then--so we started it in like '86. Around 1990, we started to get pretty good. And then, like we came--we were the top team in Nassau County and we came in third in New York State. And every tournament, you're talking about forty, fifty teams at a tournament, maybe the State would have seventy-five or eighty. And we were coming in the top five every tournament for the year, which was a great accomplishment. Because I remember as a kid in the '70s, that these guys were winning every weekend, you know. And then, now it's my turn, and everybody was like, "What the hell's the matter with you guys. You guys are terrible" (laughs), you know, and here I am, thought my generation was going to be the group that kicks butt, and we're terrible. So, but, you know, this is what I mean about patience and virtues. And it takes a while to get to that point. You know, you want to be that guy that's got twenty years in, you know, like when I go to a fire, "How come that guy knows exactly what he's doing?" And the answer is because he's been doing it twenty years. Not because he's been doing

it for a week and a half. So, that camaraderie on the racing team, sticking together, and there was a lot of--it's tough, man. When you're losing, it's tough. And then ...

Q: It's hard work, isn't it?

JW: ... we started getting real good, you know. And it's a lot of hard work. And then, when you have families and stuff, it's real--I don't know--I mean, it's tough. And then, like I said, from the middle of the '80s till now, life itself has changed a lot. You know, like-- I mean, everything's just different nowadays. People don't sit around and have two minutes to do anything. Now, they don't have two minutes to do nothing, rather. Everybody's always got something going on, you know.

Q: So, well, now, is there competition between--so were you the only drill team at that time in Port Washington, or was it ...

JW: Yeah.

Q: ... oh, so there ...

JW: There used to be three. There used to be three.

Q: Yeah, right. So is the Road Runners ...

JW: Then, they combined to two, and then they combined to one.

Q: So it was--what was the other name of the other ones?

JW: There was the Rowdies, the Runts, and the Rangers.

Q: That's right. And now, it's just one.

JW: Just the Road Runners. So what happened was each company had their own team.

Q: Did you compete against each other?

JW: Yeah.

Q: Uh huh.

JW: So, in other words, when you went to the track and there was eighty teams, four of them were from Port Washington. You know, or three of them, rather.

Q: So that's pretty tough competition.

JW: Yeah. And then, the teams were pretty good then, too. And, you know, nowadays, there's just the one team, but ... [END OF SIDE A; BEGIN SIDE B] ... to do that kind of stuff anymore. You know ...

Q: How many people are on a team?

JW: Roughly about twenty.

Q: That's a lot.

JW: You know, anywhere between like fifteen--you need about fifteen good guys. But, you know, the more you have, the--you know, then you don't have to run--there's eight events, so--but if you don't have many guys and everybody's running every event, you get tired at the end of the day. You're talking about every Saturday in the summer, and you go out on a Saturday and you get up at five in the morning to leave at six, and you're there until, you know, ten o'clock at night, you're in that sun all day on an August afternoon. I mean, it wipes you out. And then, there's a parade involved after the tournament. I mean, it's a--it's a long day.

Q: Now, so is there competition between the Road Runners, the Rowdies, you know ...

JW: Oh, sure. That's one of the reasons why, years ago, the companies were in competition

going to fires together, too. Because they all, you know, it was a big company thing. And now, that's what I mean, like we're all condensed into the Department now, where even the team is one team. So, the thing going to fires is not the same as it used to be.

Q: Right. If you had to give people advice about home fires and avoiding them, what would you tell them. Or what do you tell them?

JW: Well, I mean, first and foremost, I think everybody should have a sprinkler system. But that involves money, so that's never going to happen. But, you've got to at least have a fire alarm, and you should have, you know, an extinguisher, and you should have an escape plan. Because what happens is, is that-- if you look at an apartment building, they have a stair well. And the stair well's usually enclosed by a door on the bottom or a door at the top or whatever, or a door from the hallway into the stairwell, and that stops the fire from spreading. But in a house, the stair well, which is--I mean, if you look at a perfect way for heat and smoke to escape is a chimney. That's what it's designed for. And your stair well is exactly that. So, in a private house, your stair well is the worst thing in the entire house, because the fire goes right up--phrumm. Nothing to stop it.

Q: True.

JW: So you've got to have a way out, and then you have an alternate means of getting out, because where the fire is may dictate to you you're not going that way. So you need to

have a way out, and you need to practice it. Because the first time to practice it is not when it's for real, because it's not going to go well.

Q: How does the Port Washington Fire Department interact with other fire departments?

JW: Well, that's kind of interesting, too, because years ago there was very little socializing and stuff like that. Now, we actively train with them. More of going to the other alarms when they have them, backing each other up.

Q: You mean like Manhasset and ...

JW: Yeah, right, exactly. Roslyn ...

JW: ... Roslyn.

Q: ... Manhasset, Plandome. And that kind of thing. One of the things that we've instituted is the Firefighter Assisted Search Team. And when you have an active fire, like an actual fire, the department where the fire is will call for a Firefighter Assisted Search Team--we call it a FAST team as an acronym. And the FAST team's job is to go to the fire and stage right where the incident commander is, and their job is to stay there, and if something goes bad, is to rectify the problem. In other words, get the guys out.

Q: So, how did belonging to the Fire Department help your decision to become a professional firefighter in New York City?

JW: It's just, you know, what I like doing. I mean, most people ...

Q: How old were you when you decided that? To do it?

JW: Probably about twenty. Maybe eighteen, where I actively started. But, you've got to-- you know, you have to wait for the test to come up, and then you have to pass the test. And then--and it's a multitude of tests. There's a written and then there's a physical. And then, when you get through that, you've got to go for a medical. And then, when you get through that, you've got to go for psychological. And it just goes on and on and on.

Q: So, how many years have you been with them?

JW: Ten years.

Q: Ten years. And did the Port Washington Fire Department prepare you well for that job?

JW: Yeah. Basically, yeah. But, you know, again, the way I do things and, you know, like I went--and New York City Fire Department is the biggest fire department in the world. And the busiest. And, you know, being that we're--I mean, right next to it, basically, I

went to New York City Fire Department, and then--because this didn't stimulate me enough. So I went and did that. And that didn't stimulate me enough either. So I went and interviewed and got into the Special Operations Command. And now, I'm at--there's four hundred of us out of the twelve thousand firemen, there's four hundred of us that are the top echelon of the whole entire Department that that's all we do is the specialized stuff.

Q: Like what? Like what specialized stuff?

JW: Well, we do like--we only go to a fire if it's a confirmed fire. We only go to major incidents--train derailments, building collapses, airplane crashes, hazardous material incidents, trench collapses, like elevator rescues, people stuck on scaffoldings, like in midtown and like anything that's ...

Q: I guess 9/11 then was included.

JW: We lost nineteen guys in my house from 9/11.

Q: Really.

JW: So, we lost the most of the entire City, from my firehouse, and that's the nature of the beast, because we're Special Operations. So we go anywhere in the City. So, you know,

and plus, when I got in the Fire Department, I worked in Bushwick, Brooklyn, and it was a real ghetto. And coming from--a small white boy from Nassau County, I thought I was going to die when I first got there. And--but, what you don't realize is that there's so many companies there, because they built all these firehouses when they all had horses, and they're all wood-framed buildings. They're not--you go to Harlem, or if you go to Bedford Stuyvesant, there's parts that are ghetto, but the buildings are cement. So, they just burn down, and they rebuild them. In Bushwick, they were so old, but the buildings were all wood--the outsides, the insides. If they burn down, you can't rebuild them. And they're all attached in rows. I mean, they call them row frames, you know. And if a fire goes in one, it goes phmmm! right down the block. And you've got to be fast and proactive at these fires.

Q: Wow.

JW: You know what I mean. And--but that's what I didn't realize. All these companies are all over the place, but you only went ten blocks to cover a ten-block area. That was it. So, when I got there, I'm like, phwst! I want to go out there to go to everything. You know, like I don't want to listen to a fire on the radio that's down the block and I'm not going to it. So, that's why I went into Special Operations, because there's not a fire that goes on that I don't go to.

Q: What do you think the future of the Port Washington Fire Department is?

JW: Well, the future's happening right now. I mean, we're going very hard-core into technology, computer-aided dispatch, computer-aided run tickets. You know, so that the information at the incident commander's hands at the inception of the alarm is ten times-- I mean, maybe even more than that--what we used to have. Before I even get there, I know where my hydrants are. I have all the info on the building. Hazards. I mean, everything like that. I mean ...

Q: Wow.

JW: ... we have keys, most of the time, to get into buildings now. I mean, it's just fast, like this. Boom, boom, boom, boom.

Q: Do you think you'll grow old with the Fire Department?

JW: I hope so. One of the problems that we're having is, you know, the guys in my age group are all disappearing, because nobody's a millionaire (laughs).

Q: So, tell me what they're doing to recruit people. I know you said before about the coffee cups. What else are you doing?

JW: Yeah, well, we're doing--we're actively, you know, we have a recruitment committee, and

we're doing strategic plan--ads here and there. And we're doing, like I said, we're trying to get out into the public. Whenever there's something going on, we're getting out into the public's eye. And twofold. Recruiting is one of them. But we also like--education is our big--you know, the firefighters, we're not supposed to be just putting fires out; we're supposed to be in a prevention mode. So, by doing public prevention and education, we're also doing recruiting.

Q: And why do you think people aren't joining anymore?

JW: It's an effort (laughs). I mean, plain and simple, it's an effort. And, it's not just the fire service. It's any organization. It's just people don't have the time. If you go to the Elks or the Sons of Italy, if you go to anything in town, they're all--you go to the Lions Club. I went to the Lions Club with my father, and I was probably half the age of anybody else in the room. They're all that way. I mean, it's just--it's sad to see, but everybody's like that right now.

Q: I know, I realize that 9/11 had tremendous impact on your station in Queens, but did 9/11 impact here?

JW: Sure. These--I mean, I wasn't here. I was in the City. But these guys here--our Department went to the Trade Center.

Q: They did?

JW: Yeah. These guys here packed up and went. And, not only that, they were ...

Q: That day?

JW: Yeah. I mean, and--I mean, you have to face it. We're right next to the City, basically. These guys here started--you know, they started taking in donations of all kinds of stuff. People bringing it to the firehouses. And we now have a plan in place to go to New York City in case of another thing where they strategically have a place that they're going to be sent to. And Nassau County and New York City made an agreement--and it's kind of a technical thing that you don't need to know all the stuff--but there is an agreement now where if something happens, we will be sending equipment to a certain location, and it's organized now.

Q: Were they able to get near the Ground Zero?

JW: Oh, yeah. These guys--some of the guys have pictures working down there.

Q: Really.

JW: Yeah.

Q: Wow.

JW: So ...

Q: What's the most important lesson you've learned?

JW: Important lesson. Oh, out of everything? I don't know. Never give up.

Q: How would you like to be remembered?

JW: I don't know. Just doing my thing. I'm just doing what I can to educate the people and, you know, to--my members, I educate them as much as I can and hopefully I'll make them better firemen for it.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to talk about that we haven't talked about?

JW: You know, if there's one thing that I can really make an impression upon is I wish the public really knew what kind of effort these guys are doing, because I don't really think that they do. And it's mind-boggling, the effort. I'm not talking about me. I choose to be this way. You know what I mean? But I--you know, I'm not the average guy that just signed up because somebody talked me into it and I'm doing it now. But those guys that

are out there, you know, they're--everything, you know, they might have something else that they do first and foremost, and then they do this. You know what I mean? And they don't get enough credit for what they do. And nobody--we go to, like I said--two or three times a day, we go to somebody's house because they're doing construction at the house. Nobody cares. Nobody cares. We're just going endlessly to all this stuff. Nobody cares.

Q: What do you mean they don't care? They don't care about preventative stuff or ...

JW: All the complaints--yeah, exactly.

Q: Or it's like, "Who are you and why are you here?"

JW: I'm sending fire trucks racing all over town seven to ten times a day for absolutely nothing. Nobody cares. You go to the government, they don't care.

Q: ... [They don't thank you] ...

JW: Not the people. The people are ignorant. They don't know that they're not supposed to-- that they're supposed to call their alarm company to say, "We're going to be doing construction here ..."

Q: Uh huh. And shut it off ...

JW: Yeah.

Q: Do you expect thanks?

JW: No. No, it's not about that.

Q: And so ...

JW: It's nice, but it's not about that.

Q: So, do you educate people when you go to the fire that's ...

JW: Absolutely.

Q: ... not a big deal. I mean, what do you say to them?

JW: Even more so than that, we went to the government and got pamphlets on what to do when you have a fire in your house, because, you know, it's all well and fine that we went there and put the fire out in your house, but then we walk out the door and leave you hanging with the house in ruins, and you're, "What the hell do I do next? I don't know which way to turn or who to call." And then the insurance adjustors are like sharks

showing up at your house, salivating over the money. And talk about being weak and vulnerable at that point ...

Q: Right.

JW: And they're looking at it's like being a young female that just got widowed and being in a singles bar. I mean, forget about it. They're all over you, and you get taken advantage of. So we made up some pamphlets and stuff to try and--I mean, because we're in the fire service business, and this is a service orientated business. So, we're going to take you from before there is a call to 9-1-1 straight through to after there's a fire and cleaning up. And that's part of being in a good community. In New York City, they don't do that. They don't have the time. But this is a community-based organization here, so ...

Q: Are most of the firefighters in Port Washington, are they blue collar workers?

JW: Yeah.

Q: So ...

JW: Most of them.

Q: ... so, what do you see with like the houses in Port Washington being so expensive? How

do you think that affects ...

JW: Well, here's--I'll give you a perfect example. Across the street from me, a guy tore a house down and put up two houses. They're selling for one-point-three each. Now, someday, you're not going to have enough firemen; you're going to have to pay them. Firemen don't get paid enough to buy a house for one-point-three either, so you're going to be getting guys from out of town that live somewhere way out in Suffolk County, and they're not going to have the same passion in their heart for the people that's not their community. It's going to be a job to them. And that's what's going to happen. Because people say, "Well, what if we paid you. We'll help you out." No. Because you're not-- you're not paying me enough to buy a one-point-three million dollar house. Unless you're going to pay me two hundred thousand dollars a year to start, which you're not, then it's irrelevant whether you pay me or not. I'm still not going to have enough money. So, it's got to be something done with the housing. And the guys in their thirties to forties, they're gone. Gone. And when you talk ...

Q: They've been hired elsewhere?

JW: Well, everybody moves and goes out East, or upstate, because they can't--I mean, they're buying houses for two and three hundred thousand, not eight hundred thousand.

Q: Right. How far do you think we're away from that?

JW: Well, put it this way. If you had the need for a hundred and fifty firefighters at a scene, if you had a decent size fire and you need a hundred and fifty firefighters, I'll just put it to you this way, the police department is about fifteen million dollars a year, and they have sixty people on their payroll. So, I'll just leave it at that. So, you're talking about your property taxes -- skyrocketing is an understatement. You're paying three million dollars a year right now--and, by the way, we're the only one of all the service things in town that cover the entire peninsula. The Water District doesn't. The Police Department doesn't. The Sewer District doesn't. We're the only entity, besides the School District, that services the whole peninsula. But, I mean, talk about skyrocketing. But, you know what happens, there's not enough fires, so people don't care. The one time they care is when somebody gets killed. Then, all of a sudden, there'll be an uproar. People are getting away cheap in this town, and they don't know it. Cheap.

Q: It's true.

JW: Very, very cheap. But, you're looking about, I would say, probably closer to twenty million dollars.

Q: Wow. So, how far, in years, do you think that's away?

JW: Well, I think, down the road what you might see is you're going to have to have like a

paid crew to be augmented by volunteers, because you'd never be able to pay enough guys to be able to do the whole job. But, what you can do is for the guy that works cutting lumber as a carpenter, and every time the horn goes off, he's got to drop what he's doing and making his money, to go to an alarm that's complete nonsense because nobody cares about that, either, those paid guys would be handling all that kind of stuff. And then, when it's something for real, everybody else is going to have to help him out. Because you'll never be able to pay enough guys to cover a real fire.

Q: So, when do you think that will be happening?

JW: Within ten years.

Q: So, there'd be like a skeleton crew?

JW: Yeah, basically, yeah. But, now, you know, you can't pay guys and only pay one or two of them. You've got to--you're going to either have to pay enough guys to get the job done initially--like you can't pay them to stand there and not have enough guys on the crew to do something. Because that's--I mean, you didn't really accomplish anything (laughs). You know what I mean? So, I would say, if I had to guess, that'd be somewhere--in a happy medium, there'd be like maybe one engine with paid guys on it during the day, or maybe around the clock, but mostly during the day, or something to that effect. We--you know, we have--we hired a couple of maintenance guys that work

for us now that help check all the equipment and maintain everything, because we just couldn't keep up with it with the way, how busy we are.

Q: As a professional firefighter, what do you think of the Port Washington way of--the Port Washington firefighting? When you look at it, is it a hundred percent?

JW: Well, I mean, realistically, you know, my personal opinion, and even at work, is things can always be better. And that's--I mean, if you're not striving for that, something's wrong with you, then. But, you know, that being said, for the amount of actual fires that we do get, and that's what really makes you better. It's not the training, and--training helps tremendously; don't get me wrong--but you need to have actual work. And it's tough to be real good without it. And it's also devastating to have it a lot. Where if you go to Hempstead and they have sixty or seventy fires a year, and we have three or four. You know, and Hempstead's--it's--I mean, just look at the area. It's different. For what--the amount of work that we do get, these guys do an unbelievable job. Unbelievable job. And, you know, that's a tribute to them, because they go and they're dedicated. And they drill a lot, and they show up on Thursday nights, and when I teach schools, they all come. And they learn, and we go out to Bethpage twice a year and we do actual firefighting out there. And you just keep going forward. I mean, new stuff's out all the time. I got my guys now, we're training in massive decontamination for stuff on the Long Island Railroad. I mean, these--they're just doing a lot of stuff that the public don't even know about. And they're out there doing it. We have, in the last two years, instituted radiation

meters, electrical sticks that can detect current. We've moved forward and we bought five thermal imaging cameras, and those things are almost ten grand apiece. But they're-- I mean, if it saves a life, what is it worth?

Q: Well, tell--what is a thermal imaging camera?

JW: A thermal imaging camera gives you a digital picture in heat.

Q: So, if someone's in a room that you can't see ...

JW: So it can scan--you can scan right through a room and pick up the body right on the floor. Like I said, they're ten grand apiece, but--Our air monitoring capabilities, we have quadrupled in the last year on what we can detect.

Q: Should every house have a carbon monoxide detector?

JW: Yeah. Yeah, because what happens is, years ago, your windows used to be very drafty, and your house used to, in other words, breathe. And then when Thermopane windows came out during the '70s--it was a big energy crunch and everybody tried to make everything energy efficient--but your house doesn't breathe anymore. So, your house is not--you know what I mean? Like the old windows, you used to get the draft coming through. You don't get that anymore.

Q: I have those with the draft.

JW: I do, too. So, you turn the heat up more. But what happens is if you have a malfunctioning appliance and the carbon monoxide builds up, you don't get that draft anymore. That draft is fresh air coming in or going out, or whatever. So, your house is sealed up, and it's--you know, sometimes it's for the good, sometimes for the bad. You know, it's good it's energy efficient, but you also, you know ...

Q: So, do you think the house should have a sprinkler system ...

JW: Well, the sprinkler system, unless you put it in when it's initially, you know ...

Q: Right. And an alarm.

JW: You've got to have a fire alarm; you've got to have a carbon monoxide alarm. And you've got to have an exit plan, and you should have a fire extinguisher. I don't really condone people going running around with the fire extinguisher trying to put the fire out as much as they can, unless it's absolutely a small little thing. I mean, that's what we're for, and I don't want somebody to get themselves jammed up, either. But ...

Q: Are most of the fires in Port Washington kitchen fires?

JW: No. We've had, in 2004, I would say off the top of my head, about eighteen fires, which is well over our average. And a lot of them were electrical in nature. And it just depends. You know, sometimes it's weird stuff goes on. Sometimes just a rash and you can't explain it, and wiring. I don't know.

Q: Okay.