



Red Light, Green Light, Blue Light – The Department

Joe Minogue:

Welcome to a special edition of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation After Action Review. My name is Joe Minogue. I'm a retired FDNY Lieutenant and the liaison to the FDNY for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Today, we're at the Fire Academy to discuss the tragic line of duty death of Carmelo Carmine Puccia, which occurred in 1970. Joining me today is Captain Brendan Connolly, Lieutenant Brian McNamara, and retired Captain Ed Ireland, a colleague of the late Carmelo Carmine Puccia. Also joining me today is National Fallen Firefighters Program, Fire Program's John Tippett. John, can you give us an overview of the life safety initiatives?

John Tippett:

Sure, Joe. Thanks.

Thanks to the FDNY members, active and retired, that are joining us today. We really appreciate the participation. In this particular episode, we're gonna be looking at six of the firefighter life safety initiatives relative to Firefighter Puccia's tragic death. The first one we're gonna consider is cultural change, and we're gonna be looking about, looking at what the FDNY has done since Firefighter Puccia's death to prevent a re-occurrence. We'll be taking a look at risk management. We'll be considering some of the risk management parts of what took place at Firefighter Puccia's tragic event and the aftermath. We'll also be looking at something called empowerment, where firefighters are given permission to speak up if they see something, so they can say something, because not every officer is capable of seeing everything that's out there. The fourth initiative we'll be talking about is training and certification. The FDNY took great strides after Firefighter Puccia's death to prevent a re-occurrence, and their efforts are a model for other departments. Initiative number nine is fatality and near miss investigations. As tragic as those events are, there are lessons to be learned, and if we don't take lessons from those events, we're bound to repeat them again. We'll be looking at initiative number 13, which will, which considers having behavioral health and psychological support for firefighters and families that lose a firefighter.

Joe?

Joe Minogue:

Thank you, John. Gentlemen, if you don't mind, could you introduce yourself?

I'm gonna start with you, Captain Connolly.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Absolutely, Joe. First of all, it's a pleasure to be here. My name is Captain Brendan Connolly. I have 19 years on the Fire Department. I was assigned to 88 Engine in August of 2003. I transferred across the floor in 2006 to Ladder 38. I was promoted to the lieutenant in 2013, transferred to the 15th division, and ended up getting a spot in Engine 236 as a lieutenant. I was in an unfortunate accident, which has now put me here on a light duty basis as a unit head at the subway unit.

Joe Minogue:

Thank you, Captain.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah.

Joe Minogue:

Lieutenant?

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

My name's Brian McNamara. I was, I'm a lieutenant here. I'm one of the instructors at the subway and extrication unit. Prior to becoming, getting promoted to lieutenant, I was a fireman in Ladder 38, where Brendan and I worked together. I got promoted to lieutenant in June of 2019, and then I went to the opposite end of the city, and I was out in the eighth division in Staten Island, South Brooklyn for three years. And I just made it back up to the Bronx and I'm now a covering officer, covering vacancies up in the Bronx.

Joe Minogue:

Thank you. Cap, it's up to you.

Captain Ed Ireland:

My name is Ed Ireland. I retired as a fire captain. I come on a job in 1968 with Carmine Puccia. We went to probie school together. We got assigned to the same firehouse, Engine 53 in Spanish Harlem. I stayed there. Unfortunately, he got killed in 1970. I was there until 1981. I got promoted to lieutenant in 1981. I was assigned to Engine 231 in Brooklyn, Brownsville area. I then made captain in 1992. And I was captain in the big house in Far Rockaway. And my last year, I was in the 313 in Douglas and Queens. And I was on the job for 34 years from 1968 to 2002. Yeah, loved every minute of it.

Joe Minogue:

Thank you. We have a lot of experience sitting here at this table, and I thank all three gentlemen for your service to the city and to the firehouses, you know, that you pledge, you know, an oath to protect and make sure that they know what they're doing on their way out the door to every call, regardless if it's a simple, or a EMS, you know, rubbish fire or a major conflagration that, you know, we all want to go to, but we don't want to be at.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Right.

Joe Minogue:

So, thank you. So, I'm gonna start with you, Cap. How'd you come up with the idea of dedicating this building to Carmine?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah. It's a great question. For me, I was always under the impression that we never lost somebody on the tracks in the line of duty. And I was doing a drill here one night with Captain Brendan Delaney of 58 Engine, and we were just in conversation. We were just talking. I said, "You know what? We're just operating on the tracks way too often." And it's just, you know, you roll the dice long enough, sooner or later you're gonna crap out. And it's just not a matter of if, it's more of a matter of when, right? So, last year, we had 156 people hit by a train. So, for us, we were on the tracks literally three times a week. Very dangerous place to work. And I was just in this conversation with Brendan Delaney and I said, "We never lost a guy on the line of duty on the tracks." And Brendan Delaney looked at me, he was like, "That's not true. My brother's company, 53 and 43, just celebrated Carmelo Puccia's 50th anniversary." And I was so taken back, and I was like, that I didn't know the story. The story did kind of get lost over the years. And Doug Eagan, Lieutenant Eagan, who has since retired of 9/11 illnesses, was in the office with me. And he right away says, "We gotta dedicate this building to Carmelo." And I said, "Damn right we are." And that's just how it kind of unfolded, just a normal conversation with Brendan Delaney, getting worried about how often we're operating on the tracks. We train extremely hard here to prevent another accident from happening. But in the back of your mind, it's just, you know what? We're just playing with fire a little too much. And it's, it was getting concerning to me, to the point where I brought it up to Brendan and that's kind of how the ball got roll, started.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, and who was the first one to talk to the Puccia family about this idea?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

So, Brendan Delaney's brother, Matt Delaney is a, he's a lieutenant in 43 truck. So, he had a relationship with them based on the 50th anniversary. So, I reached out to him. We started getting to work on the

building long before we got in contact with the family. But what happened was we were making a lot of progress with the family, with the building, and we just needed to start knowing Carmine personally, who he was, his family. And Matt Delaney made the introduction to me to actually Janey. Janey's the younger daughter. And we were able to make a connection there. And we just, that's how the introduction was made.

Joe Minogue:

Right. And what was, were they shocked? Were they surprised?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

They were very, very grateful, extremely grateful. You know, Janey was crying, as you see in the video, as everybody will see on the video. She was crying. She was overwhelmed. She was upset. You know, it just felt like, for years, he was forgotten, and the story was forgotten. But then the 50th anniversary and how she was able, and 43 and 53 took the ball with that and they got that whole dedication going. And then it just snowballed into this training facility that is now a living tribute to Carmelo's memory.

Joe Minogue:

And Ed, how did you find out that this project was being taken on?

Captain Ed Ireland:

I didn't know anything about it until Brendan called me up. The 50th, which I did a plaque dedication, it was the first time I had seen the family since the funeral, going back 1970. And to tell you the truth, nothing much was done at all for 50 years. And all of a sudden, out of nowhere, there's a plaque dedication. And the daughters come up to me, "How was my father? What kind of a guy was he?" And they didn't really know him. They were little kids. And honestly, he was a family man. He was a good fella.

And the evening that he got killed, he relieved me. When you're on the fire department, when you come in, "Ah, go on home." And I was kidding around with him, Irish, Italian jokes, all that stuff, you know. And I took a shower, and I heard what had happened and it was tragic.

I'm just looking at some of the pictures now, bringing back memories. But really, it was a very small type of funeral. Since then, they make a big deal of it. Then, it was our firehouse and a few people, and not many people at all.

And when Brendan called me, I said, I couldn't believe it. And when I got over here to see what's been done, unbelievable. Thanks to Brendan, thanks to everybody here. This is unbelievable, I mean, and the family was really, really impressed. I mean, they're crying, they're happy. The fact that the people remember him now, and this is a, it's a wonderful thing. But great job, guys.

Joe Minogue:

Can you tell me about Carmine?

Captain Ed Ireland:

Yes, I can. We got assigned together and we went to probie school together, which was over in, I just real, Welfare Island, which is now Roosevelt Island. I didn't know him at all, and I didn't realize he, we wound up living near each other later on. He was a quiet fella, a hardworking family man. Didn't even drink, I mean, which was unusual for guys, I shouldn't say that, that's not, erase that part.

(group laughing)

But he was very, very good.

So, I was telling the fellas, before I was assigned, the first night I, the next night, I worked my first night tour. So, I'd come in, we had a mattress fire, we had a few things. He's on the phone. "Hey, Ed, how was your first night?" I said, "Well, I tell you, we had a mattress fire." And the chief was yelling at the, Otto, the nozzle man, "What do you got in there?" He's, well, he said, "You wanna find out? Come on in yourself." He said, yeah, (grumbles). So, I said, okay. We had a few other little things like that, very interesting. And then we went about our business, and we didn't work together that much because when you're a probie, they put you opposite groups. They have different groups. So, I didn't work with him that often.

But Carmine was a very, very, very good man. And he was too young to, for that to happen. And hopefully, with the building and the training, which we never really had that much, I'm not gonna go into all that, but Carmine was a great guy.

That's all.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah. Yeah.

Brian, when you first came to work up here and you saw all this activity about this, what was your impression?

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

Right, so I actually start, I came to the building here in, let's see, so this was 2021 that I came to the building. I forget what month, but we hadn't had the dedication ceremony yet. We were starting to get rolling on everything. And one of the things we need to talk about is the fact that the MTA was a big help. Like they donated all the signs, they made all the signs for us. They were over, giving us the posts for the subway stop outside, and it was a lot coming in.

So, the funny part is, I had heard the story, but I never knew names. I knew that Carmine had been hit and killed by a train because my grandfather, John Tuohy was on our job in the New York City Fire

Department. He was the captain of 22 Engine, which was the same battalion just down the road from them.

Captain Ed Ireland:

That's correct.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

So, I knew the story. I had heard the story about like, you know, metro door tracks and train movements and, you know, and I remember some of the stories my grandfather would tell me, not particularly about that incident, but subway fires in particular, single unit response. Now, it's multi-unit response. So, there's a couple things culturally that have changed and response wise that have changed for the fire department from what I was told, which Ed could probably speak to at length, to the way it operates now, which is all I know, because I didn't get hired by the fire department until 2007.

So, it was many years later, you know? So, but there was a, it was a lot to take in, you know? And you learn a lot and it's terrible in this job, but we have, like they say, the regulations, right? Our regulations journal is the book of all the screw ups or mess ups, you know? And you know, that's for the regulations. But on line-of-duty deaths, what happens out of the line-of-duty deaths, we usually get safety bulletins or a change of procedure, which then benefits us all in the long run, right? We want to learn from our mistakes and be better at our jobs and be better professionals. So, it's definitely reinforced, well, where I was a fireman, we didn't really, we didn't have any subways in our first due response area at all.

So, when I got promoted and I was covering around the city, you know, being here and what I learned here at training was a big benefit to me because I didn't have a tremendous amount of experience as a firefighter operating on subway tracks. But then when I was a covering officer in the city, and now I'm dealing with Staten Island Rapid Transit.

I'm dealing with, you know, the subway in Bay Ridge underground on Fourth Avenue, and then I'm, you know, freight lines, out the Bay Ridge freight lines. And then if you get sent surplus to Manhattan, now you're dealing with all the subway systems in New York City and then you go to the outer boroughs and you have elevated subways.

So, there's, this particular, the training I received, you know, here at the subway unit as an officer and as a fireman definitely benefited me in my career and helped me as a supervisor better keep an eye on the men, right? 'Cause as the boss, you're really the safety officer, just 'cause the firemen and the firefighters, they know their job and they're gonna do it. And as the officer, we're just kind of back there as a safety guy watching, making sure.

Joe Minogue:

So, fair to say that we have to hone our skills.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

Yeah, hone our traits.

Joe Minogue:

No matter where, where we work in this city.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

Yeah.

Joe Minogue:

Ed, I'm gonna ask you to take me back to 1970 and tell me about the response area then. And then, you know, as we've gone through the years, you know, how that response area for 53 has changed.

Captain Ed Ireland:

All right, going back then, you had subways and you had indoor outdoor, coming from the outdoor going into the tunnel. We were responsible for it. At the time, handy talkies are the radios we used. All right? I believe the officer had a radio and the chauffeur had a radio. The firemen didn't have radios. So, we responded. I wasn't working. He relieved me, but he went down, I don't know, I think he might have grabbed someone's radio, I'm not even sure, and he took a fire extinguisher, a can we called it, went down, and he extinguished the fire on the tracks. He yelled, I don't even know if he had a radio, "Everything's okay," and with, told, "You don't need the truck." And I'm not too sure exactly what happened. You know more about it than I do, Brendan, I don't know, with the trains and thing.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah, so,

Joe Minogue:

So, between the two of you, let's put the story together.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah, so, in speaking to Vinny Esposito, who, again, Brian and I,

Captain Ed Ireland:

He worked at it.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

A total legend up in the Bronx, and him telling us the story that they didn't control power that night. They jumped the fence. It was a rubbish fire. They're gonna knock it down quick with a can and take up.

So, apparently, they, you know, they get a run, the alarm comes in, I think it was 6:10 at night, the alarm came in.

Captain Ed Ireland:

It was about that, 'cause he relieved me at about 5:30, about 6:00, little after 6:00. Okay, about 6:10.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah, for a rubbish fire on the tracks. And it was, we spoke about it before where the tunnel, it's actually where it's at the moment where you're going into the tunnel, right? So, the entrance into the tunnel, so there was like, I guess like wrought iron fences that you could actually hop over.

Captain Ed Ireland:

Right.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

So, the rig parked right next to this wrought iron fence, if they both jumped over the fence, and Vinny Esposito went to one side of the tracks trying to identify where the rubbish was. And that Carmine went to the other side.

Captain Ed Ireland:

Correct.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

And they were walking down into now that dangerous area where you get caught,

Captain Ed Ireland:

It's a tunnel.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

The tunnel.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Where the vision becomes a little obscured. And Vinny says he was either the left or right, or right or left, or they were on opposite sides of each other. And Vinny just remembers they didn't control power. They were going down on the tracks trying to find the rubbish fire. And then, from his perspective, it was, he remembers the train coming. And then at some point, it was still going. And then the train stopped at some point. And he told me that the conductor actually ran down, got out of the conductor's booth, and met up with Vinny Esposito and said, "I just hit a fireman." And Vinny said he ran across. And

now Vinny was now trying to get to Carmine underneath the train. And I guess maybe Ed can take it from here, but that's the story that Vinny was, told to us and...

Captain Ed Ireland:

We had been there many times before, and our captain was experienced. They were familiar with this situation. Unfortunately, that night, that evening, we had a fellow who had never worked in the firehouse before. He was experienced, but not, not, not there. And the chief, they were covering, they're not, they weren't assigned there. So, they came, okay, yeah, I'm not blaming them, but they weren't too sure what was going on. 53 did what they thought was right. They thought the power was off. I know, that's what I was told. I don't know any of the particulars, but if the experienced people were there, it would've been handled differently, okay? Inexperience there, was not good. And that was part of why...There was nowhere to go.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

I'll elaborate on something that Mrs. Puccia mentioned to me, and I'm sure she won't mind me mentioning this, but she did mention to me that she remembers very vividly at the wake, or it was after the funeral, I can't remember, the wife of the covering captain went up to her and said, "Please don't blame my husband." There was no, Mrs. Puccia, as you all got to know her, she's not blaming anyone. She's got a heart of gold.

John Tippett:

Right.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Her faith is second to none. So, she was, she's never gonna hold a grudge. But it was, it just stuck out in her that, you know, there was mistakes are made. We learned from our mistakes. We didn't control power. I don't know if the covering officer was now beating himself up, but the wife made a point to say, either please forgive my husband or don't hold this against my, or something to that effect. And it just carried with her for the rest of her life. And again, they're such humble people. They, they lost their husband in the line of duty. They're just so grateful and they understand the sacrifice, but they're just so grateful now that we're able to implement the mistakes and the lessons that we learned from that night, implement them here on a daily basis six days a week, so that our members of this great department can go out there and go home safely to their families, so they don't suffer the same fate that the Puccias did.

Joe Minogue:

We want to talk about, what's an AUC? And what's that all about, Brendan?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

So, it's an all-unit circular. Like, Brian elaborated to before, was we learn our lessons, right? So, after this tragic incident at Park Avenue Station, we start piecing together, right? You start invest, you do investigations. You start piecing together the mistakes that were made. You start piecing together, how can we learn better? How can we get better? And that's where it kind of is all evolved from. And we kind of say it all the time in the fire service and it's, the lessons we learn are always written in the blood of some other fallen firefighter, unfortunately, to keep future firefighters safe and AUC 207 was definitely...

Captain Ed Ireland:

It was written after the fact.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah, it was written after the fact.

Captain Ed Ireland:

They had nothing before that.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

And I would even go on further to say, a lot of the lessons we learned from that night, and I spoke to Captain Vinny Esposito, Captain Vinny Esposito for the Bronx guys, and anybody that's watching us and they worked up in the Bronx, was a legend in the Bronx. He was in my battalion. He aged out at 65 years old and he worked in 56 Truck as a captain, one of the busiest truck companies in the city. And he was working that night. And I had gotten to spoke, I had, I happened to speak to him and he was explaining to me what happened that night. And a lot of lessons I realized, and he explained, when they got there, they're didn't even control power. It wasn't until after the fact, and this was outta his words, and today, right? We're not going on tracks unless somebody's life is in imminent danger, right? Okay? Back then, they're jumping down on live tracks for a rubbish fire. And so, that's a big lesson that we learned now. We're not going down on tracks without the control of power unless somebody's life is in imminent danger. Eddie just touched on it before about the radios, communications, right? So, communications is tough. If you're going underground, it's extremely tough, right? So, communication's a big thing that we've learned from this accident. Again, to his, in his day and time, who was outfitted with a radio? It was gonna be the officer and maybe the chauffeur?

Captain Ed Ireland:

Officer and the chauffeur.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Right.

Captain Ed Ireland:

And the truck and maybe someone else, but they didn't have that then. And then they're going on by the word, "The power's off." Well, you hear that, you think it is.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, so that brings us to the hazards that we have down there and the hazards that were there in 1970. And what did the fire department do? What did all the transit authorities do to address those issues?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

In my own opinion, I'm gonna pass this on to Ed, I would think, from this question, I think it's a great question. I don't know. Ed would know better than me, but the, right behind you, we have a red and white diagonal sign, and for us, that says, no clearance. So, if you're down in the subway tracks and you're operating there and you're by a red and white diagonal sign and a train comes, you have nowhere to run. There are no cutouts and there are no niches in that area. And you will get clipped by the train, I don't, I believe there weren't...

Captain Ed Ireland:

Where he was, there was no,

Captain Brendan Connolly:

They didn't have niches.

Captain Ed Ireland:

They had no niche and they had no sign.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

And they had no written...I don't, I think the red and white diagonal signs were actually implemented,

Captain Ed Ireland:

After.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

After, right? That's what that was going to,

Captain Ed Ireland:

There was nothing. He went down,

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah.

Captain Ed Ireland:

And there was nowhere to go once he heard the train coming. Okay? A lot of times they kept the cutout.

No. We went back there and looked. And no, there's no cutout. So, now with a sign, plus you're more aware of it now on the fire department, knowing what had happened before. So, you know, you go down, you're a little queasy, but you're gonna try to do your job. But at that time, you're talking 52 years ago, no, it was just too bad, you know, terrible thing.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah. Yeah.

So, what about some of the other changes that the fire department has instituted since 1970?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

For me, it would be communication. Everybody's equipped with a radio. We have relays now, so we have a relay.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, can you expand on that?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah, sure. Brian probably would want to touch on it a little bit more. But yeah, the relays.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

We have like the standard operating procedure here in New York where, when we go below grade, our handy talkies always, don't always work below grade. Right? For a number of reasons. Structural steel, granite, whatever's in the ground, electrical interference, there's like steam pipes, there's so much stuff, utilities, packed in New York City below the streets. And then the subway as well. So, we have a lot of electrical interference with our communications. So, one of the things we have set up as a backup system is a relay, like point-to-point radio, so one portable to the next. And the guys will space out over a set distance from basically the street level on down to where they're operating at a certain distance, so standoff distance.

Also, one of the things we have in New York City transit system now, they should be working, hopefully they are, but they have repeater systems in the subway systems, right? So, we have a different radio channel for that. So, like, that'll almost be like a command channel. So now, the officer can speak with the chief up in the street, and that's a good, you know, point where they could talk directly from where

the incident is in the station directly upstairs to the chief and the street at his battalion car. So, I think that there's a lot of things, I think working with transit, the transit authority has come out of this and I think that's benefited both agencies, both the fire department and the transit authority.

And I feel that the communications, the upgrade and equipment that we've gotten, training, when I came to this, when I came to the fire academy in 2007, this was a brand new building. So, as a probie, I was instructed in subway safety. I, you probably, this building wasn't here.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

It wasn't here when I was, yeah, it wasn't here.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

When you came through. So, I mean, there's, you know, we've, as a job as a whole, the New York City Fire Department training has gotten tremendously better, I would say, throughout the years. It's all I've ever known was training. But that just has to do with when I was hired. I would say that Brendan and Ed would probably agree with me, that training's come a long way on this job. And I think it's good. And I think it's helpful. It definitely helped me as a covering officer, covering around the city, and now you're like, all right, I know tenements, I know row frames, I know projects and I know taxpayers. And now you're looking at a New York City subway car and you're like, well, what do I do with this thing? So, I think training's been very helpful to me personally in my career. And I think it's benefiting everyone on the New York City Fire Department.

Joe Minogue:

Ed, I'm gonna say, you know, you've seen the changes in the training aspects.

Captain Ed Ireland:

Definitely. Right before I come on the job, they used to train at 68th Street behind the building, and that was the training. They'd lower rope, you went down the rope. I was lucky. I went to Welfare Island, okay? And it was one building with the ropes, with the lift, a couple of things like that. Then when they come over here to this place, it was much, much better. I come, I haven't been over here in 20 years. I come in, I said, "What the heck is going on? This," which is great. Years ago, the city never gave us any money at all. We had rubber crummy boots. If I told you how many times I burned my legs, I used to write in reports, didn't matter. We used to put pot holders in our boots to stop the getting burns. I sent in reports on Scott Air-Paks, which is another thing, which is now improved. Now they have alarms on them. Years ago, they would run out of air, you were out of luck. So, they're finally getting money, they're getting better equipment, better training, better training facilities, and pretty good officers here too.

(group laughing)

John Tippett:

Ed's not even on the promotion list.

(group laughing)

Joe Minogue:

No, no, so out of out of tragedy,

Captain Ed Ireland:

Some good things.

Joe Minogue:

We've come a long way.

Captain Ed Ireland:

Yeah.

Joe Minogue:

We had, we spoke in the previous section with the family about a hero, you know? Was Carmine a hero? And we all agreed that he is and he's a hero to his family. He's a hero to the fire service, especially the FDNY. And I think that's represented in this building. What you did in this building and the training, the evolutions, AUC 207, the documentation that's been put out, I think, has covered that pretty well. But could you elaborate on the fact that Carmine is a hero to the younger generations?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I'm glad you touched that on it with the family as well, because I know that when I first met them, they expressed to me, and it was hard to hear, that it was a rubbish fire on a track, where that it probably would've been easier to digest or to process had he been saving the life of a baby in a burning building. And when they hit, when they said that to me, it just was really profound. And I said, "You know, we haven't had an accident since. And we take a lot of pride in that when we train here and he is saving all of his brothers and his sisters lives on a daily basis, six days a week in this building." Hands down, no doubt about it. He's a hero. He's turning into my hero personally. I never met him. I just, obviously, I just, I've grown to love him and his family through how this story evolved. And he, there's no doubt he's an everyday hero. His name will, is now immortalized with the FDNY and it should be immortalized throughout the nation for all firefighters to remember him. And whenever you're operating on the tracks, whether you're out in Oklahoma or on some open, wide-open track, or you're on an elevated train in Chicago, keep his memory alive, operate safely. But to me, no doubt, he's a hero, and his legacy will continue to live on and will continue to save lives.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah. Ed, you want to add something to that?

Captain Ed Ireland:

I agree. Here's a fellow, young guy, young kids, doing his job, didn't do anything wrong. He was told, "Eh, go down, check it out." He goes down, as you said, a simple rubbish fire turned into a tragedy. He went, he did his job the best he could, the best training that he had, and through no fault of his own, he got killed. He's a hero. I don't care what it was, bringing a child out, putting, doesn't matter. He did his job and he paid for it.

Joe Minogue:

So, my next question, I'm gonna start with you, Ed. What advice would you give to a brand-new firefighter joining this department or another department about this or any other training aspect that they should remember?

Captain Ed Ireland:

Well, first off, when they would come on the job, right? Which I would recommend, I came on for a short period of time, for 34 years I stayed. I really, I took this job for the summer. That's another story.

(group laughing)

Captain Ed Ireland:

I was supposed to start teaching high school, but I liked it and I still love it and I love all this too. Come on the job, pay attention in the probie school, which is a heck of a lot better. It's longer. Great teachers. Pay attention, do your, and they have a lot more to learn now. They didn't have AUC 207. They didn't have all these different things. And you do, you learn from experience, and pay attention when you get on there to the senior members because they know a lot more than you think they know. They've been there before. They've done this before. Pay attention and do the best you can. I mean, we're not all heroes. We try our best. Sometimes, oh, you get, oh, you pulled some, that's nice. But all the other times, you get down, some simple little rubbish fire can be a tragedy. Pay attention. Do your job and listen to the senior men and pay attention. And I dunno, how long it's training now?

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

18 weeks now.

Captain Ed Ireland:

See? We had six weeks. I'm not kidding you. 18 weeks is nice. You need it. I mean, you might not think so. It's more than putting out a little fire or hitting a door or coming down a rope, which you don't usually do that often, well, I won't go into all that, but pay attention to the senior men and that and pay attention in training.

Joe Minogue:

Cap, I'm gonna,

Captain Brendan Connolly:

I agree. You know, I absolutely agree. The training is phenomenal here now. We're able to train here on a daily basis, and not just third rail, power. That's always gonna be in the forefront of our minds when we're operating in a train. But we're also learning now how to lift up, in this building, how to lift trains up safely, all right? With air, whether we're using an airbag system, whether we're using a bottle jack, whether we're using, you know, if we could use a battery-operated HURST tool, if we're coming up with those implementations. So, the training here is constant. It's constant, with just constantly train, aiming to get better and better at it. And I agree, as, if you're gonna be a young fireman out there, out in the world or a firefighter out there, listen to your senior men, your senior firefighters, I should say, and never get complacent. A simple little rubbish fire on any track can end up costing you your life.

Joe Minogue:

So, somebody comes, somebody comes here for training. What do you want them to take back to the firehouse, to the station? What do you want them to take back? Besides the knowledge, what do you want them to bring back to the house?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Number one, first and foremost is Carmine's memory, absolutely, and the sacrifice that he paid. And it's pretty obvious when you walk through these halls that it's almost impossible not to. But again, always the biggest thing for us is, no matter when you're on the tracks, is always operate under the assumption that power is live even when we get confirmation that power is off. I would, the one thing I would say, always operate that power is live, okay? And in certain areas of the country, power may, might not affect the diesel train coming, right? So, power remover, in certain areas of the country, are not gonna affect that. So, it is another hazard, right? To think about. So, for me and for Brian and how we teach here, it's always operate under the assumption power is live even when we get confirmation it's off. - And once you get disconnect the power, that train is still moving.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

Yes.

Joe Minogue:

Right? One you disconnect power, that train is still moving. So, you have to remember that.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

Two biggest things that we preach here during training are: be mindful and treat power as if it's always live, and the second thing is train movement. Because even if you control power, transit will coast that

train into a station because they'd rather evacuate 300 people on a train in a station than in the middle of a tunnel going out through emergency exits, right? 'Cause now it leads into whole logistics. Now, if you have disabled people on the train, now you need extra manpower to get them out. The emergency evacuation staircases are more like ladders than staircases. That's what it is. So, it's, they'd rather discharge those passengers in a station. So, and then you have diesel work trains in New York City Transit that can come and go. So I mean, you always have to have your head on a swivel and be mindful of train movement and third rail power. And those are the two big hazards to us when we operate in the New York City transit system. So, if you know what the hazards are and you're mindful of them, you can operate pretty safely. Just like an electrician who's, you know, wiring a new circuit breaker in a house, right? He's not killing the power from the street when he's putting in a new panel in the house. But the electrician knows the hazards, he avoids the hazards, does his work, and he goes home safely at the end of the day. And if we can be mindful of the hazards in this transit system, once we pass on the knowledge of what those hazards are, then we can operate safely and have a good outcome at the end of the, the day.

Captain Ed Ireland:

You were asking about coming on, when you're the new guy or the probie, okay? You're learning, learning, learning. And you go to the firehouse, you ask the senior man what to do. The senior man is testing you too. You've just come out of training. What was the latest thing you learned? You know, years ago, you didn't have the training you're getting now. So, he's learning too. So, they help each other.

Joe Minogue:

And that's actually a pretty good point, John, when we're talking about empowerment.

John Tippett:

Empowerment.

Captain Ed Ireland:

Yeah.

Joe Minogue:

You know? There was many times in the firehouse, which you guys can remember, probie school was taught how to don the helmet with the chin strap. And many times, the probies were teaching the whole firehouse on how to put a helmet on. And it was like, "Oh, it's that easy?" So, there's a lot of lessons that are learned here at the fire academy

Captain Ed Ireland:

Oh, sure. There's a lot.

Joe Minogue:

That we can take back. And I'm gonna kick back to you, Brian, around the, even in this job and around the country, there are people riding as an officer that have not taken a test to become an officer.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

Yeah.

Joe Minogue:

It's just happens to sit in that seat because the lieutenant went sick or there's nobody else in charge.

Captain Ed Ireland:

An acting officer.

Joe Minogue:

You're the person that has the,

Captain Ed Ireland:

Acting boss.

Joe Minogue:

Right, so,

Captain Ed Ireland:

We call it acting lieutenant or an acting captain or whatever.

Joe Minogue:

Right, so, what advice as a brand new, well, not a brand new lieutenant, a fairly young lieutenant?

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

Right, as, yeah. I would just say that the biggest thing I've learned as an officer covering is that, you know, you are the safety, you're the safety officer now. So, you know, if you worked in the trades, you'd be the OSHA guy that'd be going around or the site safety manager saying, you know, you just have to be mindful that the firefighters underneath you are gonna work. You have to trust that they know what they're doing. But you also have to be willing to step up when you see something that's unsafe and rein it in. So, I mean, it's probably the hardest thing a boss can do is watch the firefighters operating in front of them, seeing that they're operating unsafely and that you have to rein it in because I guarantee you there's things that I did when I was a firefighter that I probably had a boss look at me going, what is he thinking? And I'm sure we've all done that at some point in our career. And the hardest part I've found

for me in my three years as a boss now is knowing when to say that something to rein that in, to bring that back to a safe operation. And it's a fine line and I don't think it's an easy thing to do.

Captain Ed Ireland:

Well, normally, no.

(group laughing)

Captain Ed Ireland:

Normally, the acting officer would be the senior man. So normally, you're not going to give it to a kid who just got on the job. I've biked past some of those.

Joe Minogue:

Generally speaking.

(group laughing)

Captain Ed Ireland:

'Cause they're not always the best person. Okay? So how come, no, no, no, no. I want him. So, usually you get somebody usually pretty good.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah. Yes, yes. So, you wanna add something to that?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

No, I,

Joe Minogue:

I think that was pretty well covered.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah, I think that was perfect.

Joe Minogue:

Right John?

John Tippett:

Yeah, I think so. I think the carry away point, especially looking at three grades of experience here of long-term captain, medium grade, newer officer is, where do you make the break between the hard

right and the easy wrong? The easy wrong is not recoverable from. The hard right is. You may not get a Christmas card next year, but you have done the right thing because that person is still there to curse you versus you let something get away and it had a tragic outcome. So, Carmine's case is a bit of an exception, based on what we've learned, in that it, you know, they were trying to do the right thing. But even in the forest service they have a saying that says, "You can do everything right and something can still go wrong." So, it is a matter of being the boss, of making sure you're watching what's happening and you're not afraid to step up and say, "We need to do an all stop here, or we need to double check ourselves. Are we all on the same page about what happening? Are we all experiencing the same thing here?"

Captain Ed Ireland:

May I interject something?

John Tippett:

Yes, sir.

Captain Ed Ireland:

Years ago, I was a fireman and I had a captain and we were at a tenement building, tenement fire, and he didn't wanna go any further. And I'm questioning, this guy's not a tough guy. He said, no, no, no, no, just stop here. As we were talking, the side of the building came down. I became a lieutenant about 10 years later, similar situation. And there's a lot of friction between regular companies and rescue companies, so on, so forth, which I won't get into today. So here I am, I'm saying "Something is wrong here. Everybody stop." I swear to God, the side of the building came down. Now I don't know if it was experience, the fact that my boss 10 years before that, God, training, I don't know, but you never know. But your intuition after you've been there a while, you know a little bit more than the new kid on the block.

Joe Minogue:

I'm gonna give, Captain, I'm gonna give you the last words.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Okay, sure.

Joe Minogue:

Okay? Before we kick you over to John. Brian, come on. Give me, what do you think about this facility?

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

You know, I'm biased because I work here, but I,

Joe Minogue:

That's all right.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

I think we did a pretty good job at driving home the point is to like, you're coming out here to training, a lot of times in service training, you know, you have a game plan in your head when you're go to work for day, what you're gonna get done for the day in the firehouse. And then you get a ticket for training, and sometimes you're not always enthused about it. But I feel that when you come to this building, at least, and like I said, I'm biased because I work here. I feel that you take something out of this building when you come here, whether it's the subway safety aspect or the airbags and cribbing drill or the bottle jack drill or the extrication drill out, behind in the back of the building that we do here as well. I feel that when you come to this building, you get something out of this building when you come here. It's a little bit more tangible than just listening to a PowerPoint and being PowerPointed to death. You're actually getting your hands on something. And even the safety lectures that we give here, we end up in the simulator. A lot of times, our instructors, they don't even use the PowerPoints, they just walk out into the subway simulator and start pointing it out on the subway train in the simulator itself. No clearance signs, workers cut out, power removal boxes, and all the different things that you can gain from this mock up of a New York City subway.

Captain Ed Ireland:

Hands on, hands on.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara:

And hands on, and I think the constant movement and actually having the tangible things here in front of you are a great training tool or a asset, whatever you wanna call it. And I think that this building, like I said, I'm biased because I work here, but I think it's a good thing and I think, I know I've personally benefited from it and I'm sure other people have as well.

Joe Minogue:

Cap, before I tee you up,

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah, yeah.

Joe Minogue:

I want to thank you for hosting this, for putting this together, for honoring the memory of Carmine, you know?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Well we wanna thank you, honestly. This has been our pleasure, right? It's been, we put a lot of hard work into this and we've all come to know the Puccia family very well and it's our honor as well. So, thank you.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, your team, Chief Leeb, his commitment to you and saying, "What you need is what you got," and in making this vision of everyone, because it was a vision of everyone. The graffiti, the art.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Yeah, yeah.

Joe Minogue:

On the wall, all of it. It does pay homage to a man that we lost too early in his prime.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Absolutely.

Joe Minogue:

It was too early in his prime. So, with that tee up, please, you know, tell us what this building, this dedication means to you, and what do you think it means to the firefighters that that come through here?

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Well, for me, I'll,

Joe Minogue:

From around the country? Because this building serves everybody and not just the firefighters, also EMS and people are from around the country.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

All over. Yeah. Well, for me personally, honestly, and it might sound cliché-ish, but it's, I'm very humbled to be honest. I really am humbled. Number one, too, I've gotten to know the family the way I've done, I have over the last year and a half or two years now, humbled to work for the bosses that I work with, between Chief Leeb and Chief Downey and their dedication to training and allowing us to, you know, do certain things that, you know, things outside the box a little bit and maybe, "Hey, we like this idea." They give us a lot of rope where we can kind of tweak with certain things and not, and they're very open-minded to certain things and what of our thinking. So, I'm very humble to be working for them, humbled to work with the guys that I work with or the, actually firefighters. We actually have Lieutenant Joann

Diaz as a part of our search subway instructors team. And I'm just humbled what they have done. Like, it was a, this whole building, I can't do anything. I'm not a plumber, I'm not a carpenter, you know? I'm not. But everybody else here is. And they got to work really hard. The electric, who's the electrician? They were, everybody, and they made it happen. I had the vision, they made it all happen. So, it just, I really, it sounds pretty silly, but I'm absolutely humbled to have been leading this and then to have gotten to know the family, to, and now got to know Ed. And it's just really a humbling experience. I don't know what else to say. The building speaks for itself. In terms of, you said it's nationwide now, I would even go a step further and say, it's now worldwide, right Brian? I mean, from Australia, the United Arab Emirates was in here the other day. France, I mean, just worldwide fire departments are coming through this building on a daily basis and they get to know Carmine's story. And part of the whole humility thing, I was brought up, I, again, I was brought up by and Brian in 38 truck and 88 engine, with great leaders, and they always said, "Wherever you go in your career, just try to leave it a little bit better than it was left to you." And I believe my team has done that. I believe Chief Leeb and Chief Downey and the way that they're approaching their dedication to training, they're doing it and they're setting the bar really high. And that's where I really believe that it's just a extremely humbling experience for me.

Joe Minogue:

Well, thank you.

Captain Brendan Connolly:

Thank you.

Joe Minogue:

Thank you, and I think that's a perfect way for me to shift over to my boss. John?

John Tippett:

Oh, well, thanks very much, Joe. I appreciate it. We certainly could not have done any of this without a lot of people's involvement. So, I get the honor of being able to recognize as many of the folks as we can.

So, first and foremost, we'd like to certainly thank retired Captain Ed Ireland for coming down and taking us back to that day. That can't be easy. But the message that you give about remembering Carmine helps us do our jobs better with remembering all firefighters.

Lieutenant Brian McNamara, you're the future. You're, and you're the today and also the future. So, it's an honor to sit in your presence.

Captain Brendan Connolly, if there's a man, yeah, you may have had the vision and can't swing a hammer, but the results here are, (Brendan laughing) are really, really phenomenal.

We certainly owe a debt of gratitude to a Deputy Assistant Chief Frank Leeb. Chief Leeb took the Executive Director of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation for a tour here almost two years ago.

And our boss was so impressed by it he said, "We need to come back and tell this story." As I said in the opening, our mission here is to recognize and honor the fallen. And this is a, not only a fitting, but a phenomenal example of what that is.

Chief of the Academy, Chuck Downey, second to none. I've known Chief Downey for a number of years from a while ago.

Lieutenant Tom Bendick and the Rocks Video Unit, gentlemen behind the camera here that never get the thanks that they get, the sound folks in the back, we certainly appreciate that as well.

Firefighter John Paulson, from Engine 75, detailed to the Mand Library, resources provided were second to none. We can't do any of this without a group effort. So, we thank you guys for that.

It's been our honor to be guests at Randalls Island for the second time to do a podcast. I hope we get an opportunity to come back. But I think the deeper honor is being able to remember Firefighter Carmine Puccia and the sacrifice that he made. And even though it took 50 years to recall or make sense of his tragedy, I think, there's a pretty decent job being done by a lot of dedicated people to remember his sacrifice. What's been created here is an outstanding example of what you should do to remember your fallen. And for my colleague, Joe Minogue, I'm John Tippett and I'm asking you to share the lessons you learned from here, the lessons you learn in your job, and make sure that we don't forget our fallen.

(inspirational music)

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