

Brandon Foster: You estimated that you had dealt with 30 or 40 fire deaths in your experience. Do you happen to remember the first fire you worked on where there was a death?

Glenn Gaines: I do. I was a firefighter, and we were the second unit on the scene. This was a daytime fire, I think, during the week. The mother had been burned. She was outside the house. In fact, a lot of her clothing was still on fire. It was smoldering, and she was screaming that her two baby boys were inside. They were twins. I think they turned out, they were 4 years old. Basically, what... I don't know. That was the first fire. It was in a single-family detached. Do you want me to get into the nature of the fire, is that what you're looking for? What happened?

BF: I guess more of... do you remember how it affected you?

GG: Well I was a part of the rescue team that went in to get them, and this was a fire in the basement. What had happened is, one of the twins, the husband had... It was in the fall, and the husband had put away the lawn mower for the winter, and in doing so he was told not to leave the gasoline in the gas tank. So he drained it into a coffee, a metal coffee can with no top on it. It was on his workbench in the basement. You can imagine, this is not a good idea. It's not something that's... You don't want an open container of gasoline in your house, especially in the basement because that's where the furnace and he had a gas hot water heater. One of the little boys apparently pulled it over on top of them, and it ignited, probably as a result of the furnace or the pilot light on the hot water heater. The mother was able to escape out a window. We ascended the stairs. There were three of us looking for these kids, and we couldn't find them. We had a heck of a time. I won't get into the specifics, but the door was actually made a part of the paneling and we thought we were in the only room, and it turns out there was another room. Well, ultimately, we did find them. I got one of the boys out. I took him outside, and it was clear to me that this was an incident that just was not a survivable incident. Yeah, how did I feel? Well, I felt a lot of guilt to some extent, because I had worked really hard treating and I went to schools all over the states — in fact, I went out of state to ensure that I was best prepared for something like this. I had been in the department for, well I had been a volunteer for four years, two years as a career firefighter. I'd been on a number of fires. I had been to a lot of training. And yet, we couldn't find these kids. So I felt a lot of guilt. I just wondered... As it turned out, I don't think it would've made any difference. I think they were dead when we arrived. They were probably dead before we got there. A gas leak burns so hot. It's a small room. They didn't have a chance. They were probably dead within a minute inhaling superheated air and all the toxic smoke. But, I felt guilty about that because we didn't get there... it took us... as it turned out it was only 14 minutes. We found them in 14 minutes. Well, we should have found them in... It's a small house. We should have found them in three or four minutes. I can still see that kid's face. That was... jeez, that was '68. What is that, 50 years? I don't know. Yeah, it was 1968, and I can still see that baby's face. Well, he wasn't a baby, he was four years old. Burns are ugly. They do ugly things to humans. I've often said that those that die in fires in many cases are the fortunate

ones. If, for those that are burned seriously, they leaves scars that last a lifetime, and they're both physical and they're also mental scars. And for me, that was the mental part of it. I mean, I didn't get burned. I had protective equipment, a breathing apparatus and a coat, you know, I was gloved up and everything. Wrapped up really good, so, but they do ugly things to humans and that and some of the others that I worked on. I can still visualize... I mean I know that, the address was 444 Plum Street, no Birch Road. Birch Street. I'm sorry, 444 Birch Street. Southwest Vienna, Virginia. You know. Now, I've run hundreds of calls, but those... 7608 Windsor Road, we had a double fatality. 2242, I think it's called, Jenny (?) Road, a single fatality, but we actually got that person out. I thought we had a save. She died three days later. That had to do with lung damage. You inhale this superheated air, and you've got no chance. It does so much damage to the trachea and to the, well, the lungs.

BF: After the first fatality that you dealt with, did they continue to affect you the same way, or did you ever become desensitized at all?

GG: Well, you know, it's awfully hard not to have empathy. A lot of it is, I think, the psychological makeup of the individual. I don't think we could generalize how humans, firefighters or anyone that's involved. You know, the police are involved, the coroner, the fire marshal, investigators, those kinds. I don't know that you can... I think everybody's a little different. Me, no, I still... I got used to it. Do ask me what that means. I don't know what that means. I just know I got used to it. But it still bothered me. I got burned in a fire, and another two or three minutes and you wouldn't be interviewing me. You'd be interviewing somebody else. So I got burned pretty bad, so I could empathize with the person, with the body that I was looking at. I know what it went through. Now, hopefully, mercifully, you would hope that they died of smoke inhalation and not burned to death. In many cases, in fact in most cases that's what kills occupants of buildings, is the smoke. Because it's so toxic. Of course it is also superheated, but, no I never got used to... I, like I said, I got used to it, but, man, I can relive that pain. I don't know if you've ever been burned. I hope you haven't. Anyone that's ever been burned, it's not a pain that comes, you know, and then it drifts away. You live with it for a long time. I know you're focused on fatalities, but I'm just saying that, maybe, if you burn seriously, maybe it's best if... that you didn't survive, in some cases.

BF: If a death or a particular incident really weighed heavy on a firefighter, do departments have any sort of recommendations? Do they provide counseling options? Or, if not, do you think that's something that should be available.

GG: Behavioral services for... mental behavior services for firefighters actually first surfaced in the late '70s, early '80s, and most sophisticated fire departments will offer employee- or member-assistance programs that is headed by a mental health official and in many cases supported by peer counselors who are trained by that mental health care official. Firefighters are in some cases, well in most cases, these are tough people. They're very unique animals. They have a tough skin, but they have a tender heart, so it's not easy for them to admit, 'Hey, this fire really... (?) I

don't know that I can do this again. Maybe this is the wrong job for me.' Well, so the short answer is, that's the advantage of having the peer counseling, because they are much more likely to call a peer than they would go to the chief or to a mental health care official that they don't know. There's also these mental employee- or member-assistance programs, the most successful are those that have anonymity. They guarantee anonymity for the person seeking help, which breaks down a barrier for them. 'Well, you know what, nobody's really gonna know that I asked for help, so I think I will.' So the short answer is... you know, I never... Well, I did to a certain extent at one point in my career to deal with two or three... I was dealing with a lot at one point when I was fire chief. My daughter was diagnosed with cancer, my boss had died of a heart attack. I was No. 2. I was appointed No. 1. We went to sell our house and buy a new one. The people backed out of the house that we were selling, and, you know, now I own two houses. So, I was under a lot of... my brother died unexpectedly of a heart attack, and so I said, 'Man, I gotta go talk to somebody to see if I can get this all figured out.' So, yes. But never for the fire fatalities. I think what has to happen, and this would go for the families, too, that... I tell you, there are some really awful stories. I mean, kids that were playing with fireworks or something or matches and they set the house on fire then their brother, their sister or their parents are killed. Really awful circumstances. Mental health support is critical to help them to get through that. And I don't know that you ever can, but at least, you know, we don't wanna lose another one. We don't want someone hurting himself or worse. And so, I don't know how families deal with that, but I know it happened on a few of the fires I responded to where a young man or a young girl caused the incident. Or it could be an adult, left something on the stove and then ultimately burns the house and kills one of the members of the family or worse.

BF: I imagine that you've had to deal with the media in your line of work. What has been your experience with the way that they've interacted with you? Do you feel like they have made efforts to be sensitive to the situation or do you feel like there are still some lessons to be learned?

GG: Well it's always hard to speak in generalities, but I would say, in general terms, that media is very sensitive to that. They know that you don't wanna put the names out there. You'd like to keep the address... You'd like to keep that somewhat circumspect until the other family members all are notified. The big questions typically that the press is looking for: What caused the fire? What did you do to try and save these individuals? How long did it take you to... When did you get the call? When did you arrive? What'd you do when you did arrive? What's the background here? Is there some uniqueness to this incident? But I would say in general terms, you know, I don't think I ever... Now remember, my frame of reference is Fairfax County, Va., which is right by the nation's capital, so these are very sophisticated news corporations, news affiliates. They're used to covering the White House and senators and congressman, so they're used to dealing with public information professionals. So many, I think, if you were to get into other areas of the country, it may not be this way, but my experience has always been that they were respectful. But they want the scoop. They wanna be the first to get... You know, we have

breaking news. We've got a major fire here, they wanna know how many firefighters are there? What are they doing? Are there any suspected fatalities? When will you know the cause? And you know, the difficulty is, in most cases, especially in fatal fires, it obviously was, in most cases a very bad fire, unless someone wouldn't have died, but what occurs is much of the evidence in terms of how this fire started, is consumed by the fire. So it takes time to begin, and what investigators do to begin to eliminate causes. Like, well there was no electrical storm, so there's no lightning. So we mark that off. The fire started in the living room, so we know it wasn't started from cooking. It was not a kitchen hazard. So that's the way, and eventually we get down to the point that there's only two things left: let's focus on that. Maybe it was electrical, and so we'll get electricity in here to look at the circuitry and see if the burn pattern is such that it was caused by an electrical source. Or an electrical system was overburnt by too many electrical devices. Those kind of things.

BF: And what has your experience been with what you've seen in terms of the final product? In some of the studies we've read about in our course, we've found that the media often is not super critical of rescue forces. They basically assume that they always have done what needed to be done. Is that what you've found, or have you had experiences in which the media has been critical of your side of things?

GG: I would say, 90 percent of the time, again remember that where I came from, that arena, the greater Washington metropolitan area, we're dealing with very sophisticated news organizations, as I said previously. So, when we were criticized, we earned it? If we did something that we would rather not have out there, but what are you going to do? Occasionally, you know, the news media would put someone on, some observer, that really didn't know, didn't have all of the data before them before they were interviewed and they made some assumptions. Gee, it took the fire department 20 minutes to get here. Well, you know it only took six, and we have proof of that, you know. How you respond to that criticism, you don't wanna call the citizen out, but you just give the fact. Well, our records indicate that we received a call at 7:06 and we arrived at 7:14, so that's contrary to what you've been reporting. You don't call the person out, because it's really the news media, it's their responsibility to get the story right, not the citizen. Hey, I've dialed 911. I've been on incidents where I was the first to make the call, and geez, I think, when in the world are they going to get here? Later on, I find out that they got there in six minutes. But there's all this apprehension, and you're out there on your own and everything slows down. And when you're doing... I was on CPR on a guy, and the fellow had a heart attack on the ball field, playing baseball. This man goes down, and what am I going to do? I'm trained, so they ask if anybody knew CPR. Well, that's me. So I get out there, and do it and I'm waiting seems like forever before they got there. Six-minute response. So. It's understandable.

BF: Another thing that we've talked about in our course is, like you said, it's on the journalist to get the facts right. And a lot of times in these traumatic events, the journalists will basically take whatever the public information officer says as gospel, because it might be a lot more difficult to speak with the victim or the victim's

family. Even though, it is on the journalist, obviously to make sure he fact-checks and gets everything correct, is there an awareness on your guys' part that we better have this right, because it's going to be passed around as fact?

GG: I'm thinking through my response before I give it. Again, it's awfully hard to generalize. The more sophisticated fire departments, they're going to be out there. They have a PIO that's paid to do just that. And they do a very good job. Other fire departments, less sophisticated, they're going to turn it over to the police or someone else. They don't wanna get in front of the camera. But your question led to... It is the fire department's... And by the way, when we train up here, we train them, look, when something bad happens in your community, the public should expect the fire chief to be there. I don't care whether you're volunteer or paid or part-time paid, whatever. You should be out there speaking as a person of authority and responsibility. Here's some dos and don'ts. We train them in terms of what the public wants to here through the media, how to deal with the media, how to create trust and those kinds of things. But is that always done? No. But I don't think, I have never in my history and I've been in this business a long time. I don't think I've... With very rare exception, have I learned of a fire department that knowingly gave out false information. They may not be as open as they should've been or they should be, but remember there are laws that protect privacy and there's also the sensitivity issue. The investigations, as I say, are so complicated and elongated that by the time we figure out what started the fire, the news media, they're not interested. It happened two weeks ago, and they're telling me, 'I don't care.' The public doesn't care. Unless it's a fatality, and then there might be some interest. One of the things that we have to know right ahead, and you should know this, is that, when there's a fire fatality, we deal with it as though it's a crime scene until we're convinced it isn't. I mean, we lost a human life, and it wasn't natural. Or it may not have been. Sometimes the patient had a heart attack, they were smoking, they fall, they set the fire, yeah, but come on. That's an anomaly. That's an outlier situation. So in many cases it is an unnatural death. And so it's best for us to protect the scene until we know exactly what transpired. And there has been, there is, every year in this country, there's a percentage of fires that are vengeance or hatred or whatever. It could be to cover up some crime. Theft, something like that, rape, whatever. That's why it's so important to go in with that mindset, so that we're protecting the scene. So keep in mind that that also plays into the mind of the person in front of the camera. 'You know, I've gotta be careful here, because we don't all really know...' Even if we found out, yeah, the fire was started, we think, by someone playing with matches. Well it turns out, they weren't playing with matches. This was intentionally set to cover up the fact that this person was shot. Now, when someone dies in a fire, if they're burned severely, it takes a while for, not for us, but for the coroner to figure out whether they were actually... what was the cause of death. Fire, like I say, does ugly things to the human body. So for all those reasons, I'm just saying that a wise person will give you as much as they know, typically, when I was doing that kind of thing, I would be willing to tell them, where this is where it started. Which, that is pretty easy to determine. Not always, but in many cases, it's relatively easy looking at burn patterns and all... Figure out, 'OK this fire, we know it started in the

kitchen. We don't know how it started, but we know it did start there and it spread to other parts of the house, trapping victims, two of which succumbed on the second floor. Right now, we don't know the cause for certain, and as soon as we do get that, as soon as we notify the families, we will release the names of the information that deceased.' And that's the typical way of handling it. The PIO should know, when did you get the call, and when did the first unit arrive, what did they do when they got there, what did they see, what did they find. All that should be done by interviews before they get in front of the white lights. And that's some of the things we teach up here.

BF: Like you mentioned, when you find the cause of a fire a few weeks later, and the media isn't particularly interested... Another thing we've talked about is how the media does a pretty thorough job of covering the first part of the traumatic event, when the event is actually happening, but fails to do much in terms of going back and checking up on the lasting effect that it's had on a family or even just what the event means on a long-term basis. Do you think that the media should do a better job of keeping in touch with these sorts of events or the people affected by them to see what the lasting effects are?

GG: Well I think it's a shared responsibility. Part of the responsibility, I think, of the fire department is to make it a teachable moment. One of the things the department I was with was, anytime we had a fatality or a serious fire, we would send firefighters into that neighborhood and say, 'Look, your neighbor had a serious fire,' or 'Just down the street here we had a fatal fire,' after everything, all parties were notified, 'We have smoke alarms out here in the rigs. Have you checked your smoke alarms lately? Do you mind checking while we're here?' And we found that people were much — it was a teachable moment. So, that's also a good story for the press to use, that the firefighters were out here and are attempting to avert a reoccurrence of what happened, a tragedy. So I think it's up to the fire department to also think about, rather than giving them, 'Hey, this thing started with a pot on the stove.' Well, how interesting is that? Well it is interesting, because it starts about 70 percent of the fires in homes, kitchen fires. But can we package this in a way that it would be attractive to the media? So I think it's a shared interest. I don't wanna blame the media. I think the fire departments have equal responsibility here to... Listen, let's create an opportunity here, something of interest. Let's tell the story. Maybe we could get someone to come on, maybe not the family involved but another family, to come on and do an interview and say, 'Hey look, I was frying a steak the other night and my team was getting ready to score. Man, I had to get in there and watch it, and, sure enough, I came back and the kitchen was on fire. Well, the fire department came in, put it out and everybody was OK, but it's kind of the same thing that happened down the street.' And then couple that with, well, the firefighters are out there providing smoke alarms and information about kitchen fires.

BF: On the media's part, do you think there ever needs to be a concern when using these as teachable moments about maybe entering the realm of victim blaming?

GG: Well, now we're dealing with respect for others. Public flogging. Yeah, I think that would be a really bad idea. I think most press agencies are smarter than that. They're not going to embarrass their constituents. Occasionally, though you get the rogue reporter who will, you know, 'Let me show you what stupid thing this family did. I'm gonna demonstrate it,' and they set up a... Well, that might sell really well. My goodness. Now we're getting into morality and ethics and all those things, and I don't think it would be a very moral or ethical way of going about your business. And I would guard against that. Does it happen? Yeah, I think occasionally, it might. But I think the fire department could probably set something up for you to illustrate what happens in homes across the country without calling any individual out, but does it happen occasionally? Yeah, I've seen, especially with, everyone has a cell phone, has a camera today. A lot of this... So a lot of this, well, you have to be careful too, because if you're taking a picture, you know. Having the public (?) is good, but if you're shooting even a zoom lens into a home, I don't know that that's necessarily protected, so there's always that piece of it, too, that we have to work within the framework of the law.

BF: I know you said 30 or 40 is the number of deaths that you've dealt with in your experience. Have there been many in terms of firefighters themselves? And when that does happen, what sort of effect at the people still working at the department.

GG: Well, I was so fortunate during my tenure as fire chief, we did not experience any line-of-duty deaths from fires. We had, I actually gave away 26 American flags to the widows of male firefighters, but they were all cancer or heart attacks, natural. I've attended a number of funerals of firefighters. I attended funerals after 9/11 with the 343 firefighters who were killed. I had read when the... You know, the fire department was getting worn out going to these funerals, you know, every day. There was a period of time there wasn't any funerals, and then after a period of time, people just kind of gave up, and they held a memorial service. So, I went up and attended some of them anyway. One of the great things about the American fire service, I can't speak for others, but I can tell you that we learn, we study closely what occurred. We're very open to criticism, review, critique. In fact, if you go to our website, you'll see the causes of firefighter fatalities. NIOSH, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, if you go to their website, they are charged with actually investigating every firefighter fatality. And what you'll see is, well it's not in-depth, but it's a very readable, friendly report on what occurred, what type of incident, what type of mechanisms of the fatality, whether it was a building fire, whatever, vehicle, wild land (?), what operations were taken, what mistakes were made and what are the lessons learned. So there's also near-miss. The American Fire Service, actually the International Association of Fire Chiefs created a separate website called near-miss reporting, and any firefighter who has experienced a near fatality can go in and report it. 'Hey look, we were out on an incident scene, we forgot to put cones up, and a tractor-trailer nearly killed all of us, because we didn't have enough warning out there while we're on the scene of a vehicle crash with injury.' So, but your question was more about well how did it affect? You know, there's a lot of sadness, because, there by the grace of god, there goes me. So I,

having that experience, I got trapped in that house like I told you, I got burned once. Anyway I could go to the funerals, I went. I still go today. Mostly for the families, for the survivors, but also I wanna learn as much as I can in terms of what happened. But there is a certain amount of sadness, but there's also this desire to find out what happened so it doesn't happen to me or my family. So I think there's two things going on there: First, pay respect to those who were killed. They were just trying to help someone else. It's a noble thing to do and in an attempt to perform this noble deed, an associate, a cohort was killed. As I said, there's special... My dad told me, what are you doing, going to work for the government? Because I'm kind of a type A, well I might be a double-A, I'm not sure, but he said, you know, you're self-motivated, what are you going into government? I said, well, this is different, and there's nothing quite like it and I like it. It's unique, it's a unique and it's a noble thing, and I like it. And so I've been pretty successful at it, and I think that's, I don't think firefighters walk away because one of the other firefighters, another firefighter is killed, but I will tell you, and you could talk to the New York City Fire Department, members up there... There were quite a few that the families encouraged their loved ones to get out after 9/11, you know. New York, actually many fire departments, my fire department, sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, great-great-grandsons go to work for the same organization. It becomes a family tradition. Well much of that was lost. A lot of these families got out of it. The next generation, the family convinced them, 'Hey look, do something else.' I knew that happened up there, that kind of thing with New York, but mostly no. Firefighters wanna know what happened, how did my brother or sister, how were they killed? And that's how they're referred to by other firefighters. What happened? What can I learn from it so that it doesn't happen again?

BF: Great. Well is there anything I might have touched on that media members should know about covering fires?

GG: Well in my biased opinion, fire is the worst thing that can happen to a man or a woman's home. Just, all of the petrochemicals that are used in plastics, synthetics today, carpet, drapery, furnishings. Smoke permeates everything. I didn't die in a fire, but I've been burned in a fire, and so it's a horrific way to die. I don't wish it on anyone. It's such a sad event, and in most fires, we in the fire service have a saying: the top three causes of fire are men, women and children, and that's usually the case. We're our own worst enemy. We'll leave food on the stove going or we won't have the furnace serviced or the fireplace flue cleaned, overload a circuit in a house, an electrical circuit. But I think the ultimate impact of a fire fatality, it's a gruesome way to die. Like I say, one can only hope that they took a few breaths of the super-heated smoke and were rendered unconscious and they didn't suffer. So, I think it's, just know how sad an event it is, and the suffering that goes through. Everything is ruined. Let's forget those who were killed and think about the families. Now they go back into this home, and all these treasures that the family has held close are now ruined. Flood's bad, don't get me wrong, but this fire thing is wow. It's really a different animal, and it's very ugly. So, I think, be sensitive to the trauma and how



gruesome all of this is. It's a very sad event. The key is, use it as a teachable moment with respect for those who suffer.