Rafael Sa'adah I

00:00:04**Amy Mauro**

Good afternoon. I am Amy Mauro. I'm Executive Director of the DC Fire and EMS Foundation. It's about 4:20, and this is our first oral history interview via Zoom. So I am on Capitol Hill at what I call the Foundation's Headquarters, and I'm here with Rafael Sa'adah. Rafael, if you could spell your name and tell us where you are right now.

00:00:30**Rafael Sa'adah**

Sure. It's Wednesday, September 18th at 10:23 a.m. my time. I am in Hawaii on the island of Oahu, where I am stationed with my wife, who's an active duty military officer.

00:00:59**Amy Mauro**

Well, thanks for joining today. I'm very excited to talk to you about your career with the fire department and life in general. And we'll have a focus, obviously, on EMS, which you and I worked closely together on. So I think it'll be a really unique opportunity. But let's just start from the beginning. If you could tell me where you were born and where you grew up.

00:01:23**Rafael Sa'adah**

Sure. I was born in Montreal, Canada. My father was a career [United States Army] officer. So we moved a lot, growing up, and generally only lived in any one place for two years. We were overseas a lot. We spent a lot of time in Europe when I was growing up. But there were four years where we were in D.C., living right behind Walter Reed Army Hospital at the time in the Shepherd Park neighborhood of D.C. And those were my elementary school years. And so that was the first really stable place that I'd ever lived. It created enough continuity that I could think of myself as belonging to any particular place, as opposed to just being somebody that was parachuting in and exfiltrating. So I really bonded with D.C. because of that, both the duration of the time that we spent there and, and the age that I was at when we lived there.And I bonded with Shepherd Park, the neighborhood in particular, because it's a really unique place in DC, in the history of civil rights in DC and it's probably outside the scope of this interview to get too into the details. But let's just say that as the city was being redlined, as white flight was taking place, Shepherd Park was a neighborhood that consciously, collectively said, no, we're not going to be a part of that and was one of the few truly integrated neighborhoods in Washington, DC. And the elders who were on the block, who all lived within a few houses of me, were really central to [my upbringing.] [My dad] was an active-duty military officer. He was at work [much of the time]. But there were other people in the neighborhood that stood in as parents because back then, this is the late 60s, neighborhoods still functioned as collective parenting units. And so I had Joseph Hairston next door, an African American helicopter pilot in the Korean War who went through extraordinary discrimination, prevailed, became a lawyer, taught law, and was the person who integrated the D.C. Federation of Citizens Associations, which until that point had been segregated. And so people like Joe [Hairston] and Julius Becton, who became the [first African American officer to command a Corps in the U.S. Army], was two houses down.

00:04:24**Amy Mauro**

And then became chancellor of DCPS [DC Public Schools].

00:04:30**Rafael Sa'adah**

So it was a really amazing place to grow up. And being part of the [D.C.] public school system, attending Shepherd Elementary, those were all deeply formative experiences. So then we went back to Europe. Et cetera, et cetera. Traveled around a lot, lived all over the US, around ‘84 I drifted back into the D.C. area and I've been back ever since. So most of my life has been spent living in Washington, D.C.

00:05:02**Amy Mauro**

And do your parents still own the house in Shepherd Park?

00:05:05**Rafael Sa'adah**

Yeah, my mom lives there now, and I'm still deeply rooted to that neighborhood. I lived in that house myself for many years. I was active in the Shepherd Park Citizens Association, following in Joe Hairston's footsteps. So, yeah, I mean, my heart, even though I don't live in the neighborhood right now, my heart will always belong to Shepherd Park. And it really centers how I think about what D.C. can be and should be, and how it should work, and how people should interact with each other. It's very much rooted in my experience in that particular neighborhood.

00:05:42**Amy Mauro**

That's great. So you come back in 1984 and how old were you then?

00:05:48**Rafael Sa'adah**

Approximately 22, 23 ish.

00:05:53**Amy Mauro**

And why did you decide to come back to DC?

00:05:57**Rafael Sa'adah**

So I had tried to make a go of it in New York City. I moved there when I was still a minor and was very active in the arts there, the music scene and the avant-garde jazz scene specifically, and also the No Wave scene. And New York's a really rough place for a young person without a lot of resources or experience, and it pretty much chewed me up and spit me out. And so, you know, I sort of retreated to D.C. because I still had family around the area and it seemed a safe refuge.

I started trying to rebuild my life in D.C. and things turned around for me there. I started working in retail. Within a few years, [I] realized that just having a job, even if it was a job that I enjoyed, wasn't enough for me. Because of some of the stuff that I'd lived through and losing a lot of friends, I knew a few things about myself. I knew that I was called to a life of service and that whatever I chose as a job, as a career had to be about serving others. I also knew that I was attracted to things that were physical, that required action, that required decision making, that put you under stress. And I naturally gravitated to those types of scenarios and seemed to be able to function well in those types of environments.

So I had an old friend from the neighborhood who was working as a volunteer EMT at the Red Cross, and he said, "You should come ride on my ambulance sometime, it's really fun." And the Red Cross at the time was staffing special events. So I think the first ride along I did with him was Georgetown, late ‘80s Halloween, back when Halloween in Georgetown was still a thing. And it was a thing. And I just immediately got it, and I was just like, "Oh, this is so cool, I love this." And I started doing ride-alongs with the Emergency Ambulance Bureau and ... the universe just sort of opened up a path for me. People laugh when I say this, but I've never been particularly ambitious. Everyone assumes that I must have had some kind of master plan, you know? Oh, you know, I need to become the fire chief, and I have to do this, that, and the other to get there. And that's so far from how I approached my career. My career, I felt, at least was a very accidental one, where all I was doing was just trying to pursue the next right thing, make myself better at my job, pursue education, and in the process of that pursuit of trying to be as good as I could be at the job, things opened up. But a lot of it was other people pulling me up or pushing me into positions, as opposed to me consciously trying to make those things happen for myself.

Rafael Sa'adah II

00:00:02**Amy Mauro**

Before we move on, tell me what you liked that night on Halloween and in the successive ride-alongs. What about it did you see that attracted you? Is it the things you described earlier?

00:00:20**Rafael Sa'adah**
Well, I think part of it…being a first responder allows you to go places you wouldn't otherwise be able to access. And I'm just really interested in people, and I'm really interested in people in extremis or people under stress or just how people behave generally. And so I think it was the access of being on the inside, but also being there with a sense of purpose, like I'm here to actually do something that would hopefully be useful. And I'm really glad that the universe pushed me into a career of fire and EMS as opposed to law enforcement. I mean, at the time that I began pursuing public safety jobs and a life of service, I was open to whatever happened. I applied to all kinds of agencies - police, federal police, fire/EMS, you name it. And law enforcement's an incredibly noble mission. But the way your work is perceived by the public and the way you are perceived by the public when you show up to do your job is radically different. And I think it changes people on the inside, in ways that aren't always healthy. And for whatever reason, the universe pushed me into fire and EMS. And not that that didn't come with its own set of challenges and costs, but I'm glad that's the direction I went.

00:01:56**Amy Mauro**

Yeah. A friend of mine has done both policing and fire, and he encouraged his sons to be firefighters. He said, "Firefighting is better for the soul." No offense to our partners in blue. Plenty of challenges on the fire side, too, So you're going to get closer to making your decision.

00:02:24**Rafael Sa'adah**

So I thought, okay, I want to be an EMT. I want to ride an ambulance. I'd like to work in my city. So let me look for a job with the DC Emergency Ambulance Bureau, and the old EAB, which just for historical understanding, at the time was a division within the fire department staffed by civilians, so-called non-sworn employees ... even though of course, they wore a uniform. And so I went and tried to find out what was involved in that, and they said, "Well, you have to become an EMT first before we'll hire you." So then I started looking for an EMT class. Just by accident, I actually found out that Georgetown University had its own EMT training program for their student ambulance service. It was called GERMS. Georgetown Emergency Response Medical Service.

00:03:23**Amy Mauro**

Still exists.

00:03:25**Rafael Sa'adah**

And they kept a few seats for anybody from the outside that wanted to attend that was willing to pay whatever the tuition cost. And that was a few hundred dollars. So I actually took my EMT class at GERMS. It was good quality training. I graduated [at] the end of 1988, if I remember correctly. Immediately went to apply for a job with the Emergency Ambulance Bureau. And like a week before I graduated, they had instituted a hiring freeze, so there were no jobs available. I was driving a delivery van at the time for a lamented company named Olsson's Books and Records. It was one of the best independent book and music stores in the region.

00:04:07**Amy Mauro**

Yeah. Great place.

00:04:09**Rafael Sa'adah**

Wonderful place. And I was very happy there. But I needed more. And so I used to drive by on my delivery route, this station that had a sign outside that said "Volunteer: the experience of a lifetime." So that was the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Squad in Montgomery County, Maryland. So I walked in and said, "I am interested in volunteering. I have an EMT card." And they snatched me up and I had no idea at the time what a big thing the volunteer-paid dichotomy was, and the presence of volunteer firehouses in the immediate suburbs of D.C., and how that was actually fairly unusual, as opposed to what was going on nationally and all the drama involved. I didn't know, and to be frank, I didn't care. I just wanted to get experience as an EMT. I wanted to do something with this training that I had because I really, really enjoyed it and I really, really liked taking care of people.

So I started volunteering at B-CC and that was another one of these happy accidents. Because they had a really high standard of care. I mean, my probation at B-CC Rescue Squad, to be frank, was much harder than my

probation at the DC Fire Department down the road. And they had a really high standard of care. The people that worked there were super interesting, super accomplished in a variety of disciplines. So it created its own network. And there were a bunch of young people there, some men, some women. Another thing that was great about B-CC is I actually had female officers, which was important to me, and my earliest mentors were mostly women in the fire service, which I think was unusual then. It's probably still fairly unusual now. And there were a bunch of people-- I called them "ronin." Essentially masterless samurai roaming the landscape in search of employment. So there were a lot of ronin at B-CC Rescue Squad wandering the landscape, taking entrance exams, trying to become police officers and firefighters. And they knew way more about the process than I did. So I just started following what they were doing.

And one day they said, "are you going to take the DC Fire entrance exam?" And I knew nothing about it, but they said, "yeah, it's happening on such and such a date, you need to sign up." I did. I had no idea - this is another one of these accidents of history. That was the only entrance exam that was going to take place for approximately seven years. And if you were not in a seat at the D.C. Armory, on that specific day taking that test, and essentially they had an age cutoff at the time, I would not have even been able to apply for a job as a firefighter. So once again, just an accident of history.

00:07:06**Amy Mauro**

What year was that?

00:07:08**Rafael Sa'adah**

That was in 1989. And the backstory on why they were giving this large assembled examination, the super quick version is there was a lawsuit, the Hammon class, Hammon v. Barry, that essentially froze all hiring and promotions and resulted in the creation of a special master to oversee a bias-free entrance examination [for the D.C. Fire Department]. It resulted in the creation of a fourth platoon, which created additional vacancies in addition to all the vacancies that existed because no hiring was taking place. And it was a big inflection point in the department's modern history, to create this new [hiring] register.

So I took the test. I wanted to go further in my training, because this hiring process takes a really long time. Takes years. So I went and started paramedic class at the George Washington University. They had an outside paramedic class for non-GW students. It was located in Northern Virginia at the old Commonwealth Pre-Hospital Education Center. And at the time, it was absolutely the best training in the region by far. It was a class that was taught by really gifted educators, and they had really high standards. And if you didn't cut the mustard, they had no problem kicking people out of the class the day before the last exam, if you weren't making the cut in terms of performance. So a really good program at the time. So I took that class and then had become - I was working in Maryland as what they called a cardiac rescue technician, which is the first level of ALS provider, and finishing the National Registry Paramedic process.

And all of a sudden, I got two letters from the D.C. government in the same week and one said, "There's a spot for you at the D.C. Fire Training Academy as a firefighter recruit." And the other one was from my old friends at the Emergency Ambulance Bureau saying, "Hey, we started hiring again. Do you want to be an EMT?" So I went down to the EAB headquarters, which many years in the future would be my office on the third floor of Engine 16 downtown. And I met with the operations supervisor of the paramedics, who was a captain named Melvin Neil. And I said to him - and I remembered him because I'd done my oral interview with him for the EAB position. And so I said, "Captain Neil, I've got two job offers here, one from the fire department and one from the EAB. I don't know which one I should accept because I really only ever planned to be a paramedic, ride an ambulance." And I'll paraphrase because there was some profanity involved in what he told me, but essentially he said, "You stupid x x x x x. If you don't take that fire department job, you're an idiot." And this was the guy who was the chief paramedic operations supervisor for the EAB.

00:10:20**Amy Mauro**

And was he single role?

00:10:22**Rafael Sa'adah**

Yeah, it's a single role. So I think he probably knew what he was talking about. So I followed his advice and I took the fire department job. I was not one of these kids that grew up wanting to ride a fire truck. I didn't have

any family in the fire service. I was not coming in the traditional pathways, but he gave me really good advice.

00:10:44 **Amy Mauro**

Did he say, "oh, the pay and benefits are better?" Like, what was his rationale?

00:10:50 **Rafael Sa'adah**

He may have gone into a more detailed explanation, but the gist of it was there's no future in the Emergency Ambulance Bureau, and you'll have a much better life on what was called then “the fire side.” And, of course, he was absolutely correct. So that's the sort of the long and short. I entered the Training Academy in early 1991, and while I was going to recruit school, I would be in recruit school during the day, immediately drive out to Northern Virginia for paramedic class at night. And then on the weekends, be sleeping in at my volunteer station, riding the medic unit for clinical hours and doing hospital rotations as part of my paramedic training, and I really basically didn't sleep during that time period.

00:11:44 **Amy Mauro**

Yeah breathed and maybe didn't sleep. EMS and fire.

00:11:51 **Rafael Sa'adah**

So I graduated from the Training Academy. I took my National Registry Paramedic exam the same week that I graduated from the Training Academy. And then I was appointed to Engine Company 30, which at the time was the busiest fire station in the United States.

00:12:09 **Amy Mauro**

It's quite an assignment. So tell us about your early days at Engine 30.

00:12:16 **Rafael Sa'adah**

Well, I was very grateful to be assigned there. Again, I didn't know what I didn't know, so I didn't know that there's all these politics around station assignment, and I'm not sure I even really want to get into it in this forum, I mean, it's a longer interview. But at the time, let me put it this way. I didn't know anything about the firehouses in DC. And the captain of the training school, who at the time was a leader in the Progressive Firefighters Association, came to me and said, "Look, you're going Engine 30. I know a lot of times you young firefighters like to go out and ride around your district and get familiar with it, and I don't recommend you do that. I don't even drive around that neighborhood myself. I don't feel safe there. So just be really careful." Weird things like that. And then I would talk to people from B-CC Rescue Squad, who were now DC firefighters who'd been there for five, ten years, whatever. And they were all like, "Oh, I can't believe you're going there. That's the worst place in the world. You should put in for a transfer as soon as you can." I mean, they really made it seem like it was going to be this hellhole. And my experience there was so different from what people were telling me that it just reinforced an approach I tried to take for the rest of my career, which was to not spend a lot of time worrying about what other people were saying about a situation, and try to go into it with an open mind and an open heart and learn for myself what was going on there. I mean, I was so comfortable there. I was so happy.

The fact that I stayed after I completed my probation really completely alienated me from a bunch of members of the department. I mean, they really looked at me like, "What is wrong with you? Why are you staying at that firehouse? You're out of your probation. Now you can put in a transfer request." I was like, "Why would I? It's so active. I'm learning so much, and I like and trust the people that I'm working with." But a lot of it was racial politics. I mean, I'm just going to call it like it was. It was an African American firehouse. And the department, even though it was not segregated, there was a great amount of de facto segregation in terms of what you would actually experience in the stations by choice or people just choosing to cluster in different groups or communities of interest. And I felt much more comfortable there. It was much closer to the environment that I grew up in, that I went to school in. Culturally, I was much more grounded there than I would have been at a so-called white firehouse. And the main thing was it was a firehouse that's on the outskirts of the city. So you had a huge response area, and not a lot of people breathing down your neck. So you could really concentrate on

trying to do the job right, rather than worrying about fighting somebody in the hallway to gain three inches of ground so you can get your hose on the fire ten seconds ahead of them and have bragging rights for the next month, which seemed to be a lot of the dynamic at the downtown firehouses.

And then the thing that made it super interesting, coming back to my point about what I'm interested in, is people. Don't get me wrong, I love going to fires I always have. I loved the science of firefighting. I loved the challenge, the physical challenges. It's not like I had no passion for that work. I always had a passion for that work. But what really makes it interesting is when you're working one-on-one with people that have really complex needs and trying to figure out what those needs are and give them some kind of help in these compressed time frames under really strenuous circumstances.

00:16:22 **Amy Mauro**

So can we pause there just for a minute? I think it's interesting what you've said about Engine 30, because today in 2024, I think that's a sought after house because it's so busy. The southeast units, my impression is that most people, black and white, actually want to go there. So is that maybe something that evolved over 30 years and in '91 it was different?

00:16:51 **Rafael Sa'adah**

I think there's a lot less structural racism and, pardon the phrase, shitty attitudes in the fire department now than there were then. Keep in mind, we have to look at what's going on globally. So ... there are these inflection points in department history where morale is really, really low for structural reasons. And I entered the department at one of those moments because of the effect of the Hammon class lawsuit and freezing promotions meant that there was an entire cadre of officer and officer candidates that - and I'm not excusing the behavior or condoning it, I'm just describing it. They were really, really bitter. And they were all men. All those men were being sent to firehouses like Engine 30, because the only way the department could integrate houses on paper was they only had control over two groups of people - the movement of two groups of people - officers who had to go where they were sent, and recruits out of the training school who had to go where they were sent. So they would send young white firefighters, to, quote "a black firehouse," they would send disgruntled white officers to a black firehouse, and then people would eventually transfer or whatever. And I just sort of bucked that trend because I went to this firehouse. I was really happy there. I was learning a lot, and I stayed there. But my officers, while all technically very proficient in firefighting, did not provide…they were not positive role models for me as a young firefighter. By and large, one or two exceptions. But really, and it was across the board. I mean, there were a lot of really bitter, unhappy people.

And also, this was the tail end of a period in the '80s where it wasn't just the fire departments, every arm of DC government - the drug epidemic had really taken its toll on the DC workforce, and the fire department wasn't spared that. So, I mean, there were a bunch of people that were sort of in the process of being separated or separating themselves or just showing up to work borderline under the influence. And it was also, I mean, there was a lot of historical stuff at that firehouse, it had active gambling going on. No drinking, thank God. But, you know, there was a fair amount of drug use and gambling and other stuff and that maybe created this reputation of it being "Dirty 30." But I loved it. I thought it was a wonderful place. I didn't participate in the gambling. I participated in the ping pong, and I ran a ton of calls. I mean, we were ridiculously busy... Also, keep in mind, we just created a fourth shift, so there were vacancies on every platoon. So if you wanted to, which I certainly did, you could work four shifts in a row. It wasn't a lot, but there was so much overtime available. So the benefit for a young firefighter like me is you could get years and years and years of experience in a very short period of time between the call volume and the fact that so much overtime was available. So pretty much all I did was work and volunteer [in between my work shifts].

And then after I got out of my probation, I started going to the college classes at night at the University of the District of Columbia, which had a fire science program for the firefighters, [with] classes staggered to fit our shift schedule. And that really just opened up all kinds of avenues for me, because I found that I had a passion for learning, and I really started going after trying to earn a college degree.

00:20:41 **Amy Mauro**

That's pretty neat. So, like, did they have platoons for classes? I mean, would you have three days off of class and then fire science class?

00:20:52**Rafael Sa'adah**

Every class was taught twice. Every session was taught twice during the week. Say on a Tuesday or Thursday or a Monday or a Wednesday. And that meant that if your shift was working Monday, you would always have Wednesday off. You were working Tuesday, you would always have Thursday off. So on and so forth. And it was an absolutely wonderful program. And some of the things I'm proudest of, in terms of career accomplishments, came down the road when I was actually the coordinator for that program and tried to increase participation. But it was a really wonderful program and for a huge chunk of the department, it was access to education that we wouldn't otherwise have had. And people took it really seriously. And if you look at who was getting promoted during that time, very often, you would see a correlation between the people that were pursuing degrees through UDC and the people that were being put in leadership positions. And I don't think that correlation was an accident.

The other thing that I was doing at the time was almost immediately upon graduating from GW's [paramedic education program], they hired me back as an adjunct instructor, and I was spending a lot of time teaching paramedic classes at GW. And specifically at the time, GW had the contract to train DC's EMTs into paramedics. So these were all single role EMTs that were going to the department-sponsored paramedic class, and I was heavily involved in teaching those classes, and that's how I got to know an entire generation of people at the Emergency Ambulance Bureau who later would become paramedic supervisors or whatever. I got to know them when I was involved as an instructor in their ALS program.

00:22:37**Amy Mauro**

So it's interesting. You thought you would be in EMS. You end up going to the fire department, firefighter training academy. Were you pleasantly surprised that you developed this passion for fire science? Was that another example of your keeping an open mind and it working out?

00:22:58**Rafael Sa'adah**

Yeah, that's a good way to put it. I don't know that I ever really even thought about it. I just was really happy that I found something that was really physically satisfying and physically challenging. I like a challenge, and so I don't really differentiate much between the challenge of learning your craft and the challenge of operating in a building where you can't see. And it's really hot and there's danger, or the challenge of trying to pass a college class and get an A, they're all just challenges. And I just took them all. And if I wasn't being challenged enough, I'd try to find something harder to do. And that that approach isn't easy. But, you know, it seemed to work out for me.

00:23:49**Amy Mauro**

That explains how you ended up at law school. But let's not skip ahead.

00:23:55**Rafael Sa'adah**

Let's not skip ahead. So I did, but I do think something very important happened to me at Engine 30 that I do want to talk about. So most of the ideas that I've been involved in, promulgating, promoting, supporting, creating whatever around EMS, really formed during my first two years on the job at Engine 30, because it was all of DC's EMS challenges in a microcosm. So the main thing being that when you're - especially if you're working all four shifts, but even if you're just working one shift - you start seeing the same people over and over again. And I was paying a lot of attention to what their underlying issues were. And there's a book called Robbins Pathologic Basis of Disease. And every time I saw a patient, I wrote down their meds and got their history, I would go back after the call and look up what the root issues underlying their medical history were to try to get a better holistic understanding of not just that emergency, but what other emergencies we might see with this person. Did this presentation match what we expected to see or was it something new? And so you really, if you were paying attention and if you cared, you started to learn all this really granular information about overall health trends in the community. And what I saw and experienced was essentially: we were the front line of public health in the District of Columbia, and that a huge chunk of the community relied on us for

basic medical services to include primary and preventive care. And they were accessing it through the 911 system, through the responding firefighters, EMTs and paramedics, and through the emergency department. And we were spending so much money and throwing so many resources at this patient population. And none of it was really addressing their underlying needs. So the first research paper that I wrote for UDC was called "Medical Locals in Ward 7." And what I did was, [I] created a data set. That was every patient that I touched for - I think it was approximately a four month period, all located in this confined geographic area. And what I found was that 20% of them had used an ambulance within the past week. 23% within the past month. 46% had used an ambulance within the last year. And so these were people that were really using EMS very frequently, but without any good results. I mean, and to add in the operational challenges we faced at the time in the early 90s.

So first, of course, you know, there was still this peak era of violence. So we had to deal with the stress of constantly responding to shootings, multiple shootings, mass shootings of young people.

00:27:05**Amy Mauro**

Highest rate was 1991, I believe. Yeah, It was 90 or 91.

00:27:11**Rafael Sa'adah**

Yeah. And ground zero [in D.C.] was the Sixth Police District, where we were responding..

00:27:15**Amy Mauro**

Right.

00:27:15**Rafael Sa'adah**

And I mean, it just wears you down. It's just so sad to see so many young lives snuffed out needlessly. But then also the ambulance service was just falling apart. ... We had the most reactive EMS operational policies in the United States, I believe. A fire truck had to roll on every single EMS response to make sure somebody got there. You had to respond lights and sirens. There was no such thing as just responding following normal traffic, regardless of what the reported emergency was. And then we would wait 45 minutes, an hour, for a transport unit to become available. And ... it was polarized. So you'd either have the most banal situation in the world where somebody that wants to get their kid to the emergency department to renew a prescription or something like that, but the kid's not sick ... And you're just sitting there in their living room for an hour trying to make conversation, waiting for an ambulance to come. And of course, the fire truck's not available to respond to any life threatening emergency during that time period. Or alternatively, the other extreme would be we would respond and let's say it was a heroin overdose. And at the time, Narcan was considered an advanced life support medication. And you would have to sit there watching somebody die, knowing that you had the skill set and in another county, in my case, I had the certification to push a drug that would immediately reverse what was going on, and I was not legally or formally allowed to do so in the District of Columbia. None of us were.

00:29:21**Amy Mauro**

Just to clarify, then, you were assigned to Engine 30 as a firefighter EMT, not as a firefighter paramedic.

00:29:28**Rafael Sa'adah**

Exactly. And that's important because we didn't even have a position description for firefighter paramedic at the time. So a lot of what shaped my belief in the power and utility of the paramedic engine company system was being in a situation where I was constantly arriving first. [I] could constantly make a huge difference in a patient outcome, and was legally prevented from doing so. Because the fire trucks had no problem. We were very well distributed. It was still a robust infrastructure. And we could get pretty much everywhere really quickly and really easily. And so that those are horrible, horrible memories.

00:30:07**Amy Mauro**

I just - I can't imagine sitting on a life threatening scene for an hour waiting for an ambulance.

00:30:13 **Rafael Sa'adah**

So and then there were funny moments, too, because everybody knew I was a paramedic. The battalion chiefs all knew, and all the EAB folks knew. So it was also because I'd been teaching their classes. So it was also pretty common for me to be on a scene, and everybody's turning to me and saying, "What should we do?" Including the paramedics and so it was almost comical at times. The interesting thing is, people talk about negative attitudes of firefighters towards EMS. I experienced the opposite of that. The members of my company and even my worst officers all really appreciated the fact that I brought that skill and passion to the EMS calls, and they saw it as an asset, not a liability. And there would be bizarre moments. And I had one officer who sort of falls into the bitter category where we arrived [on the scene] and had somebody who had an arterial bleed. And I'm putting direct pressure on the arterial bleed to keep the person from bleeding out. And the ambulance pulled up out front and he goes, "Okay, the ambulance is here, let's go." And I'm like looking at him like he has two heads. I said, "No, I'm holding pressure on an arterial bleed right now. I'm not moving until somebody takes over pressure. And even then this person's, like, really sick. They need extra bodies in the back of the ambulance." So I mean, it's funny but it's not funny, you know? But at the end of the day, he deferred to what I was telling him. He didn't make an issue out of it, but it just showed the mindset.

00:31:53 **Amy Mauro**

Yes.

00:31:54 **Rafael Sa'adah**

Every now and then you'd really have to reinforce the mindset. So I gained a lot of experience. I started doing this research, and most of the ideas that I had. So basically my idea at the time was we need to have a mobile outreach program for high volume system users so that we can address their underlying issues. So I'm certainly not the only person that ever had that idea. I don't claim that the Street Calls program was my idea. It was a lot of peoples' idea. But the point is, the idea occurred to me while I was still a back step firefighter and I was like, "If I can ever do something about it, this is something I'd like to create." I thought we should put the clinics in the public housing projects because the locus of all of these responses was the public housing projects, most of which have been torn down since in Ward 7. But at the time were just these pockets of chronic medical issues and misery. And I thought, "Let's put the clinic and a nurse practitioner in one of the empty housing units and then train the community members to be nursing assistants and bring the care to the community, as opposed to sending fire trucks and ambulances running all over the city." Anyway. A lot of ideas like that.

I took all my recommendations and my research paper to [Dr.] Bob Bass. Robert Bass was the medical director at the time. He'd come from North Carolina, and he also was quite bitter and burned out at that point. He liked what I was coming to him with. And I said, "We need paramedic engine companies," all of that. And he actually offered me something very similar to the job I wound up doing many years later. I mean, it would have been equivalent to an EMS chief role. And I had to turn him down. I said, "Look, I'm a rookie firefighter. I'm still trying to learn my trade. I want to have a normal career. I want to go up through the ranks. I want to earn my rank. The only way people are going to respect me is if I earn my rank the old fashioned way. And that's how you make long lasting change. I appreciate the offer to be jumped up, but it's not for me." And then he left in frustration. I mean, he was pretty…we were close. He was pretty open with me about his frustrations. I'll just give you one example at one time, I just found him completely spinning, and I said, "What's going on?" And the department had just had an award ceremony, including for members from the EAB, and they hadn't even bothered to invite him or let him know that it was taking place. And that was pretty symbolic of the frustrations that he was having. He was a very progressive guy. He went on to become the director at MIEMSS [Maryland Institute for Emergency Medical Services Systems] and had a good career, but he was yet another medical director that we chewed up and spit out.

00:34:53 **Amy Mauro**

How could we possibly - So what's management doing at this point where you're waiting an hour for an ambulance? How does that even happen? I know that's a hard question to answer because you grew up with it.

00:35:10 **Rafael Sa'adah**

You have to understand how for a line firefighter, what's going on in management is like The Wizard of Oz. ... It's in some shining building up on a hill that you're not invited to, and it's behind a lot of curtains. I mean, we had no idea how management was making decisions.

00:35:32**Amy Mauro**

Why did residents put up with it? Do you think people in Ward 3 were getting ambulances faster?

00:35:38**Rafael Sa'adah**

No, there were people in Ward 3 that were dying as well. I remember one particular high profile incident with somebody - and there were just fewer calls coming from Ward 3. But when somebody who had the right connections died, it would become the issue du jour. So [Mayor] Sharon Pratt Kelly had a friend who died from a possibly preventable asthma attack or possibly treatable asthma attack. And, you know, there's the usual flurry of information. I think that very much the fact that the communities that were being most impacted by this were marginalized communities of color, notwithstanding Marion Barry's ascent to the mayor's office, were still largely without political power or influence. Certainly the media didn't care what was going on with them. And I think all of those factors. And then also the fact that - and we're now entering the mid ‘90s - and then we have the fiscal crisis and the Control Board coming in.

00:36:43**Amy Mauro**

Right.

00:36:44**Rafael Sa'adah**

So I mean, when I talk about these inflection points with really low morale, that [mid-‘90s] has to be one of them. It's really difficult to overstate how decrepit our fleet was at the time, and there'd be days where there'd be 1 or 2 ladder trucks serving the entire city when you're supposed to be 17. And we brought in our own supplies just to keep the fire trucks running, just to keep the station running. It was really, really bad.

So everything that happened to me later on in my career stemmed from a decision I made pretty much the day I stepped into the firehouse, which is, you know the saying, "What's the difference between puppies and firefighters? Puppies stop whining when they grow up.” So I came into an environment where everybody was whining all the time, but people weren't really stepping up to be part of the solution. So I was like, "Look, I can either be part of the problem or part of the solution. If I'm not part of the solution, I'm part of the problem. So let me stop blaming other people or blaming whoever, and just do what I can to start fixing this system." And I very much made a decision to always try to be working from inside the system to fix it, not to go the heroic whistleblower route, which you can do once, and then nobody ever trusts you again. But rather to really try to become a systemic change [agent] and then also to fix these processes so that the change wasn't dependent on me as an individual, but would become institutionalized. So other young, idealistic care providers would not have to step into the environment that I stepped into as a new member of the department and in fact, could step into an environment where they would be properly mentored, properly nurtured, properly supported, properly educated, so that they could do their job properly equipped, and so that the citizens wouldn't have to experience these absurd operational and customer service scenarios and could actually get their underlying needs met. Because nobody likes waiting an hour for an ambulance, nobody likes going to an emergency department and waiting another four hours to be seen. It's not like people were doing this to quote, "abuse the system." That's why you never hear me use the term "911 abuse." I don't look at it that way. They're using it because they had no other options, or this was the only option that really made sense for them. But their needs were real. So I decided to become part of the solution rather than become part of the problem. And everything that I did from that point on was really focused about trying to participate in being a change agent, which is really a very uncomfortable thing to do in our agency. I mean, the only thing we hate more than the status quo is the possibility that we might change. So it was not necessarily a happy or a smooth ride, but that's the decision I made and I'm comfortable with my choice.

00:40:13**Amy Mauro**

So when did you decide to compete for sergeant?

00:40:18**Rafael Sa'adah**

Pretty much it was expected that you would take the promotional exams as they came. And that's certainly one of the virtues and the vices of our work culture is that it's inherently extremely competitive. So you compete with your peers and we were talking earlier about the best way to get somebody to participate in one of these interviews is to let them know that you've already interviewed their arch rival. Well, it's kind of like that. When you find out one of your friendly rivals is studying really hard for the promotional exam, it's like, gosh darn it, I don't want to be supervised by that person. I better get off my butt and start studying myself. But also, I was just really drawn to learning and new challenges. So really the stuff that I was studying in the fire science program at UDC, actually, even though none of that material was technically on the promotional exam.

We had some progressive chiefs at the time, Chief [Robert C.] Bingham had was in the process of leaving or had already left, but then his work at implementing the updating of the standard operating procedures was taken up by Joseph Herr and Bill Mould, and they did the first ICS (Incident Command System) implementation and training for the Department.. and I was taking a class with them where essentially they were doing a dry run of what would become the department's ICS training. So I was in at the ground floor, and it really made me start thinking about fire grounds holistically, rather than my little piece of the fire ground as somebody with a hose line. And that really opened up my mind and helped me start thinking like a manager of resources. And the officers, by and large, were really happy to let you learn how to do all the paperwork in the firehouse, so they would let you do the timekeeping, which we did all manually at the time. And we were still typing reports on a typewriter with onion skin paper and all that stuff. There was a lot of paperwork and a lot of make-work, and they were really happy if you showed an interest and wanted to learn how to do all that stuff, they would certainly be happy because it was taking work off their plate, but also because they understood the only way to learn is by doing it. So yeah.

So I took the promotional exam and scored well, and started acting as a supervisor right after - the exam was ‘96. So ‘96, ‘97, ‘98. I was acting all over. And the thing about being a sergeant in our department, it was a tremendous education because you have no permanent home. And essentially every day you're doing something different - in charge of a truck company one minute, in charge of an engine company. The next, you might be on the rescue squad. You never knew where you were going to be. So it was a chance to get out and experience the rest of the department. I always like to think of our department as a collection of micro-cultures. There are some macro cultures, but it's often dozens of little fire departments, each with their own particular folkways. And getting out and getting exposed to that was really, really important.

I finished my bachelor's degree in 1998. And was promoted... Let me rewind that. I don't want to get into, like, all the complicated, this list I was acting and this that. The bottom line is you're out there functioning as a supervisor. The rest of it is just inside baseball. Not particularly interesting to the general public. I had one formative experience, which was as an acting sergeant, going to a double house, which is a firehouse with an engine company and a truck company, and the slowest firehouse in the District on MacArthur Boulevard overlooking the reservoir. Engine 29, Truck 5. They had not had regular officers for a number of reasons for the better part of a year, and all their paperwork was backed up, and so even though it was the slowest firehouse, I spent 20 hours a day getting all their paperwork caught up. And administratively, I've never been sharper. I mean, it was, you know, the training you go through is not just about responding on fires. It's about all the other stuff, too. So by the end of that summer, I was pretty comfortable. I was doing the job of a company commander as an acting sergeant. It was pretty absurd.

And then the other thing that was a real eye opener for me from that experience was I had to learn to supervise people that had been allowed to become not self-motivated. And so back at that period in time, the department, if it had somebody who was not aggressive or not happy or whatever, had personnel issues, very often they would deal with it not through leadership or mentorship. They would just transfer them to the fifth battalion. And so the fifth battalion, which had historically been a place where very active firefighters who'd earned the right to go to a slow firehouse went, but they came with tons of experience. Now was tons of young firefighters that were just being warehoused there. And that's a whole different leadership challenge to being in a firehouse where everybody's already pre-motivated to work. So I had to learn strategies to deal with things like people not being able to do basic skills that I thought were part of a basic firefighter skill set. And I also had to learn [that] techniques like scorn or shame or whatever are not going to be effective motivational tools, and you've got to have a whole different set of tools in your tool bag. Peer pressure ain't going to get it. So that was really formative for me as an officer.

And then they sent me to the training school. So I wound up being heavily involved in recruit training for the next three years. I created a marketing program for the fire science program at UDC, and we essentially deputized everybody that was a student in the program to go out and do presentations on every shift at every firehouse, talking about how accessible the program was, how it had benefited them, how easy it was to sign up for. And we did that. We touched everybody, and we dramatically increased enrollment. And that's one of my happiest memories of something that I did that I felt like would really benefit everybody that we did with no resources. We had no budget. It was all volunteer labor. And we figured out who were like the most effective spokespeople, and they really stepped up and made lots of firehouse visits. Guys like Pete Pearson, who was very active in the program back then and was really happy to go out and talk about it. So on and so forth. So that was a happy memory.

Fixing recruit training was really helpful because the curriculum was completely ossified. And the people that were teaching it didn't really understand it. And most of it didn't make sense anyway. And we had a little break in classes [that] allowed me to rewrite the test banks and start making things educationally more modern, and get the equipment fixed down at the training school.

And then the other big program I came up with while I was there was the Accelerated Recruit Program. So when we were looking at the new list, we finally gave a new entrance exam after this long period. I should say the last classes I taught at the training school off the old list were all people who sat at the Armory on the same day that I did to take the entrance exam. And now it's seven years later and they've waited so long to be hired that I'm a sergeant teaching their recruit class. That's how absurd that process was back then. So now we had a new [hiring] register, and I started looking at the demographics on the new register. And a lot of the applicants were fully certified from accredited fire and EMS departments. So they were firefighter EMTs, firefighter paramedics. They had the same national credentials that we aligned with in terms of their firefighter I firefighter II, hazmat certifications. And I thought it was absurd to take these entrants and put them through our entire entry-level curriculum from scratch, rather than leveraging the fact that they were already certified. We could essentially create a shortened, condensed challenge curriculum that would take where they were starting from and build on that and teach them DC-specific operations policies and procedures as opposed to reteaching them what the fire triangle is, which they've already demonstrated that they know what that is. And some of that was driven by my own experience. Entering the department as a paramedic, they made me repeat EMT class. You know, even though I had a DC EMT card that was active in my pocket. Because they didn't know what else to do with it. It's one size fits all. So that was a really hard sell. Because it created the perception or the fear that somehow we were trying to create a preferential pathway for applicants that were white males, which of course was not the intent, but we had to realistically address those concerns. So the amount of engineering that took place in the program to make sure nobody was being hired out of order on the register, etc. It was quite Byzantine, but we did it. We pulled it off. It saved the department millions of dollars and we got better outcomes. And, you know, the graduates of that first accelerated recruit class, many of them are actually in the senior agency command structure now as assistant chiefs or deputy chiefs. So that was exciting. And that was because I had bosses that were willing to let me come up with ideas and didn't look down on the ideas, even though I was a very low ranking member without a lot of time on the job.

And that's another takeaway for me that I tried to empower people at all levels of the organization and listen to their ideas, because very often the best ideas come from people that are closest to the ground. And very often those people have the intelligence to develop and flesh out those ideas if properly guided. And so I was lucky to have people like Joe Herr and Bea Rudder, my bosses down at the training school, and they had my back while I was trying to sell that program, and we actually pulled it off and implemented it. And it's very rare that you can design and implement a program that was primarily your idea and live to tell the tale and actually, you know, see the results. So that was another happy memory.

00:51:39**Amy Mauro**

From that time. Can you tell me a little more about supervisors, mentors you admired? And I'd like to hear about Bea Rudder specifically.

00:51:49**Rafael Sa'adah**

So I always like to call what I experienced more like anti-mentorship for the most part. I think one of the things that really disappointed me about entering the fire service, and it wasn't just me. I mean, I checked notes with my peers that came in at the same time. We all had the same experience because you hear all these stories, you see these movies or whatever and they talk about all this camaraderie, this brotherhood, sisterhood, and the

environment could not have been further from that when I came on the job. Some of that was structural. The creation of the fourth platoon essentially created a situation where people could live so far away from the District and commute in for their jobs on this 24/72 schedule that you had many people that just had zero ties to the community. They were driving back to Pennsylvania or Southern Maryland or wherever, and they were volunteering out there and not to take anything away from them or their commitment to the job. But there's a big difference between spending all your energy volunteering in some place that's hundreds of miles from where you work, versus spending all your energy on your days off volunteering in your own community. And certainly you're more likely to be invested, I think, if you live in the neighborhoods that you're serving and you're treating the people that you respond to as neighbors as opposed to treating them as the other. And so the fourth platoon had created that dynamic and people weren't supportive of each other. It was tons of micro cliques, neighborhood-based cliques, age and neighborhood-based cliques. I mean, some of the silly stuff, there was no such thing as the monolithic white firefighter group, for instance. I mean, those guys were so balkanized, it was ridiculous. The guys from New York were convinced everybody hated them. The guys from Southern Maryland were convinced everybody hated them. The guys from Virginia, you know, all these geographic levels of distinction. And yeah, it was pretty absurd. It was pretty negative. And as I said, my officers were all very bitter people for the most part.

00:54:07**Amy Mauro**

But so, to be devil's advocate, you also just talked about how you were able to accomplish something because of some good chiefs at the Training Academy...

00:54:21**Rafael Sa'adah**

And the Training Academy was actually the first place where I felt like I had leaders that one were being good role models, and two, were interested in what I had to say and were supportive if they thought it was a good idea. And that was specifically Joseph Herr, and then he was succeeded by Beatrice Rudder. And I was certainly much closer with Bea than I was with Joe. But both of them, that's probably the first time I can say. "Oh, yeah. Okay, that looks like mentorship." And with Bea, her mentorship was really, really informal. I mean, Bea had a gift, and it's not one that I've largely encountered outside of her, but this was somebody who, first of all, she's cool as shit, all right? She's just a cool person, right? And she's got a sense of humor, and she's cool. But more importantly, this is somebody who had every excuse in the world to not trust anybody and to be really bitter about the things that she'd experienced. And because of her character and who she is, she was open to everybody. She didn't carry a grudge. She didn't walk around with a chip on her shoulder, and you could have a relationship with her. And it didn't matter if you were white, black, old or young or what part of the region you came from. She was just going to respond to you as a human being and see you as a human being. That shouldn't be exceptional, but I'm sorry, in our agency, that *was* exceptional and it made her really fun to work with. And I could always count for her to bust my bubble if my head got too big. And also to explain if I was too stupid to understand the politics behind. Sometimes, because I did have blind spots, she could explain it in a way that was educational. And when she was explaining to me why some of my ideas might be perceived through a racial prism and through these historical prisms that I wasn't privy to because I wasn't part of them, and because I didn't think that way, I didn't see them. She could sort of outline those shapes and then help me understand the historical context of all these things that we were engaged in, and that was really important.

00:56:42**Amy Mauro**

Thank you for sharing that.

00:56:48**Rafael Sa'adah**

So and then, the union [Local 36 IAFF]. I was very active in the union as an entry-level firefighter. I became a shop steward. And I would go up to the union hall. I would go to all the meetings. Tom Tippett and Kenny Cox basically had the union on lockdown and then eventually Ray Snead. You know, Kenny [Cox] forgot more about DC politics than most people will ever know. So you could certainly learn a lot from being around those guys, but they were fairly opaque to me. They appreciated my energy. They sent me to the first IAFF [International Association of Firefighters] EMS conference. They sent me and Brian Lee. And I met Jim Page in person, and that was like a really big deal to this young guy who grew up, I mean, who was coming of age reading JEMS magazine [the Journal of Emergency Medical Services] and so on and so forth. So I'm really glad I got to have that experience. But they only would trust you as far as you were useful to them. And then if you weren't useful, they would kick you to the curb in a heartbeat. And I certainly experienced that. So yeah, I have a very love/hate

relationship with union leadership, because there were many times I felt like we were doing things that were in the best interest of the city, but also in the best interest of their membership. And they would often take a posture of just trying to nitpick you to death or demand that everything be collectively bargained, etc., rather than actually trying to help you get it done. And that's - they're doing their job. I was doing mine.

00:58:23 **Amy Mauro**

Understood.

00:58:25 **Rafael Sa'adah**

So then as far as later mentors, I was often close with medical directors. Not all of them, but many of them and certainly another thing I'm proud of is trying to protect and support our medical directors who were doing incredibly difficult work. And we are famous for just destroying their lives, destroying their health, and so, you know, certainly folks like some of the ones that come to mind that I had very positive relationships with were Amit Wadhwa, Jim Augustine, and Dave Miramontes. But even the ones that I disagreed with at times, or that maybe had different long-term policy goals than me, like Mike Williams or Fernando Daniels. I still would work really hard. I mean, there were a bunch of things that Fernando Daniels did that I thought were incredibly good ideas and beneficial to the department, and one of them was creating the Advanced EMT category and getting Narcan classified at the BLS level so we could start giving it as first responders. So even though we really disagreed in terms of our long term vision for the department, because he very much wanted to see it go third service, and I didn't. That never stopped me from acknowledging when he had a good idea or supporting it to try to get it done. And similarly with Mike Williams, we had our ups and downs, but I tried very hard to support and help him.

But a lot of my mentors really, Amy, to be honest with you, came from outside the department. And so a couple of folks in particular spring to mind. Burt Clark was a former DC firefighter who had left fairly early into his career and gone up to the National Fire Academy and became heavily involved in redesigning their management science curriculum and their education programs, and coming up with firefighter safety campaigns and so on and so forth. So a really brilliant man who made a difficult choice to leave a job he loved to go up to be someplace where he could impact the fire service nationally. And he really, really did. And Burt was an early mentor. And so he really believed in me. And he brought me up to the National Fire Academy as a consultant to work on their management science curriculum. And I was involved at the creation of the Fire and Emergency Services Higher Education conference, with Ed Kaplan and Burt and other people. So the National Fire Academy became a really important resource to me, because it got me out of a parochial mindset, and I was able to access the database of research papers up there, go to classes with people from different agencies, and that was really important in my professional development...

01:01:13 **Amy Mauro**

I want you to know - I don't know if you're still in touch with Burt, but he encouraged the foundation to co-sponsor the Fire Service Psychology Association's conference, which is coming up in a couple of weeks. So I've been working with him on that this summer. So I'll say hello.

01:01:29 **Rafael Sa'adah**

He would be a really good interview as well. Jerry Overton was an important early mentor. So Jerry was the director of the Richmond Ambulance [Authority], which was a public utility model ambulance service. And so he's very closely associated with so-called high performance EMS, which is its own beast.

01:01:48 **Amy Mauro**

Can you explain what a public utility model is?

01:01:51 **Rafael Sa'adah**

A public utility model is essentially [when] the jurisdiction puts out an RFP for a contract to run the ambulance service and then vendors from the private sector bid on that contract and run it as an independent agency, but with oversight capacity from the jurisdiction, whether it's a board or what have you. And so then you could have a company like AMR or whoever, whoever the private ambulance company is - the landscape is always shifting

- come in and essentially bid to run this ambulance service for 6 or 7 years, and they have performance parameters that they have to meet. And then very often the model is set up so that they keep whatever revenue is derived.

01:02:39**Amy Mauro**

Thank you. I always thought it was a funny phrase to call it a public utility. It's a private sector [operation].

01:02:45**Amy Mauro**

They did their own little bit of semantic branding by calling it high performance EMS.

01:02:51**Amy Mauro**

Yes, of course. But anyway, I cut you off. So. Overton.

01:02:56**Rafael Sa'adah**

So, but the idea is that you can achieve the efficiencies possible in the private sector while still having some level of public oversight and treating it as a public utility and serving the public. So one of the things that was nice about Jerry was he did not have a negative attitude to me, even though I was coming from the fire service, because I was asking him relevant questions. Like the first time I interviewed him, I was trying to find the historical basis for the eight minute response time performance standard, which was another one of my research projects, and we really hit it off and stayed in touch over the years. And I began attending Pinnacle and these other conferences that are almost exclusively for public utility model systems. And another thing that I do feel good about in my career is I was out there both building bridges to other system delivery models and learning about best practices, because there's things that those systems do really, really well that any system can learn from. And that informed my own thinking about system delivery models.

And obviously in DC, you know, I'm seen as somebody who's completely wedded to the fire service-based EMS model, etc. But in reality, I don't believe there's any one perfect model. And if I meet somebody and the first idea out of their mouth is the best EMS system delivery model is X, whether it's third service, hospital based, fire-based, whatever. Essentially, they have very little credibility with me, because I don't believe there's one perfect system delivery model. I do believe specific jurisdictions have service delivery models that work better for those jurisdictions than others, based upon the unique economic, political, and operational factors in that jurisdiction. But I'm not a zealot that says fire-based EMS is the only way to go. And so Jerry helped introduce me to that world. That was helpful. Paul Pepe, the famous medical director and EMS researcher, was certainly an early mentor. And he ultimately wound up bringing me to the Eagles conference to present to the Eagles pre-conference, to present to the medical directors of the major metropolitan jurisdictions. So those are some of the folks that come to mind.

And then I do want to say there was some quiet - I think mentorship is probably too strong a word, but there were people, whether it was [Tom] Tippett or some of the operations chiefs that were extremely old fashioned, that you wouldn't think would be really trying to support unification of the agency necessarily. A lot of those folks would really surprise you because they were smart enough to get it and understand why it was in the agency's best interest to go this way. And I think about Jimmy Martin and Doug Smith were both assistant fire chief of operations at various times, and I remember moments where they did non-obvious things to support me. And I'll give you an example. We were having an inauguration. I can't even remember which one it was. And I was a captain at the time, and Jimmy Martin asked me. He was the assistant fire chief of operations. He asked me to be his aide for the inauguration, which was usually done by one of the deputy's aides. And they were really pissed off that he picked me. I was kind of curious, like, why? And we spent the entire day driving around the city, visiting specific firehouses, just checking in, taking the temperature of the troops, as it were. And I sort of figured out in about the middle of the visit that he was very specifically taking me to these power centers, for lack of a better word, the Engine 6 the Big House, Engine 11, Engine 4, places where sort of the old guard, Engine 10, places where the old guard, sort of like you weren't anybody unless you came from those specific firehouses. And they were sort of bastions of a certain critical mass of opinion about the department. And he was physically demonstrating, this guy's okay, this guy is with me. You need to pay attention and pay respect. And it was super subtle. Never once did he come out and say, "Hey, I'm going to go take you over to Engine 6 so they can see that you don't have green skin and two heads and a tail, like they probably believe that you do."

You know, he just did it.

So it was really interesting sometimes where your support would come from. But, you know, I'll be frank, a lot of it I had to figure out on my own. And there wasn't a lot of hand-holding. And even down at the training school, Bea Rudder never held my hand. She would kick me in the butt and challenge me to do something, and then I would live with the consequences, you know? And so when I was finally in a position to mentor people, I did everything I could to try to get them young, try to get them, try to find the bright ones and empower them to start making a difference. And when I did become the Assistant Fire Chief of EMS, I had no assigned staff. It was all detailed people. So I just tried to pick people that I thought needed to be close to the wheelhouse and had something to offer, but didn't have rank. And Queen Anunay would be an example of somebody who came on as staff with me. I did everything I could to expose her to what we were doing and create learning opportunities for her. And she ran with it, and she wound up retiring in that same position that I had - the Assistant Fire Chief of EMS - and became our first [uniformed] female member promoted to the rank of Assistant Fire Chief. So that was very gratifying for me personally.

01:08:48**Amy Mauro**

So can we move towards ... When did we do paramedic engine companies? Can you talk about the lead up to that? ...

01:09:04**Rafael Sa'adah**

One other person did occur to me when we were talking about mentors, and it's not that he was in a supervisory role to me. We were actually peers in terms of rank. But I think Claude Ford played a really important role for many years in our department. Just really quietly, because he was a firefighter who had gone to the training school, had a passion for EMS, was one of the early firefighter EMTs, but also just had an incredible gift as an educator and really did his best to imbue, not just train people to pass the certification exam, but also imbue positive attitudes towards EMS for generations of students. And then we became colleagues and we were working together to try to revise the curriculums. It was just like a kindred spirit. But I think Claude often gets written out of the history books and really shouldn't, because it was a really lonely road for him being the quote "EMS guy." When it wasn't popular to do so and he was that.

And the other thing I'll say is we start talking about some of these programs. It's very difficult to avoid centering yourself in these narratives because I'm the one being interviewed. I'm talking about stuff I was involved in, but I'm not always the center of the narrative. And many of the best ideas were proposed multiple times by multiple people and implemented… I mean, the whole history of EMS in the District is two steps forward, one step back. And it's not like this arc. It's very convoluted, and we make a lot of progress, and then somebody else comes in and undoes the progress and so on and so forth. So there's a lot of that. Paramedic engine companies are a perfect example. The early stages. I don't think I was involved at all. I was way down the food chain. My recollection is a lot of that energy came about when Otis Latin was fire chief. If I remember correctly, was our first outside fire chief ever, he came from Houston. Came from a system where there were paramedic engine companies. And I don't know who was coming to him with the proposal. It was certainly something that made eminent sense, that I deeply believed in. Because the fire truck still always got there first. Why not front load the most qualified member on the fire truck to assess the patient. And then if they actually didn't need ALS, which very often they didn't, because our dispatching protocol at the time really over triaged everything. I mean *really* over triaged everything.

01:11:58**Amy Mauro**

More than ProQA?

01:12:08**Rafael Sa'adah**

The first iterations involved things like taking single role paramedics and putting them on the fire truck as like the fifth person and so on and so forth. So that proceeded in fits and starts. By the time I became involved in the program, I was trying to implement a different vision, which was people who were actually fully certified as firefighters and paramedics.

01:12:33**Amy Mauro**

Why do you think there was a shift? Did the single roles on the engines not work out? Were there not enough of them? Why, do you remember?

01:12:41 **Rafael Sa'adah**

Well, certainly, their union [leadership] (Local 3721 AFGE) hated that we were trying to do it. And the union that represented single role personnel did everything they could to find administrative ways to stop it. And then ultimately, I mean, it was really about having a vision of a unified all-hazards agency where everybody had the same baseline certifications. But also changing - there's a lot of different ways to change outcomes. But I really believe one of the most effective ways is also one of the slowest, which is to hire people at the entry level who have empathy, compassion, a passion for EMS, or just a passion for serving others who are going to ... deliver good patient care because that's just how they're wired. And you're more likely, I think, to encounter that sort of person - you know that it's very hard to screen people for various personality traits in the hiring process. I mean, we've had vendors that have tried to do it, and they tell me - these are industrial organizational psychologists. And they even tell me it's really, really hard. Doesn't mean you shouldn't try, but it's hard. If you take somebody who's already demonstrated they have a passion for EMS by becoming certified as a paramedic and then hire that person and then fill in whatever gaps, very often they're already a firefighter, but if they're not, you can get them certified as a firefighter. You start to change the way the agency operates from the inside. And when all those people get into management positions and then leadership positions, then really the change really accelerates. I mean, that takes a generation. But that's what we were trying to do. We were trying to go out for the first time, one of the things I was involved with was purchasing the National Registry mailing list and actually doing a recruitment mailing directly to every certified paramedic in the country. And there were wins and losses with that approach. And we brought in a lot of people….

01:14:51 **Amy Mauro**

That was during Rubin. Right?

01:14:54 **Rafael Sa'adah**

I think that I started that during Chief [Adrian] Thompson, but it certainly was active during Rubin and I can't remember all the time.

01:15:02 **Amy Mauro**

Maybe you returned to the same strategy.

01:15:04 **Rafael Sa'adah**

Yeah. And we didn't retain all of them, you know. So, like I said, two steps forward, one step back. But there's certainly a far higher proportion of ALS providers in the workforce now than there were when we started.

01:15:21 **Amy Mauro**

There are. And I think we've realized what you've described. We have, you know, a ton of company officers who are paramedics, and definitely chief officers as well. So it does make a difference.

01:15:39 **Rafael Sa'adah**

And it's not just D.C. I mean, what you find in many - I look at the suburban agencies immediately around D.C. I mean D.C., we shouldn't think of ourselves in a vacuum. And I look at agencies around the country. I mean, very often you see the promotional ranks in the suburban agencies are dominated by firefighter paramedics. And you know that's not hard to figure out. I mean, paramedic programs are really difficult. So if you finish that, you have really good study skills and you've already demonstrated you're the type of person who's going to get after whatever your learning objective is. And if your next learning objective is studying for the promotional exam, you're probably going to do really well on it. Because you've been forged in a furnace to be able to, like, grind, absorb this vast amount of information and then demonstrate it, whether it's for an assessment center or on a multiple choice test or whatever the case may be. So I can't say all the ins and outs. I mean, I probably could remember them if I spent enough time going back through old stuff, but we wound up ultimately through fits

and starts with the Paramedic Engine Company program that was being staffed by firefighters who were actually certified as paramedics. And the operational impact was extraordinary.

This was a point that there's some stuff that happened in my career that's sort of relevant to this. So I'll just try to hit it with the highlights and then we can dip back into it if it's necessary. But I had two really unusual things happen to me that don't happen to most firefighters, which is I got pulled out of the agency and sent to work in the Office of the City Administrator. So the first detail happened in, like, around 2000 ... 2001ish. I was in a certified public manager program at George Washington University. One of my classmates, it was sort of like I already had my master's in public administration at this point, but this was sort of like an MPA-lite, but focused on getting people from different parts of DC government to be in a cohort together and exchange information and learn from each other. It was a wonderful program, and one of my classmates happened to be the Mayor's Chief of Staff, and she saw my passion for all the wonky public management stuff, you know, performance measures and strategic planning. And I was like, I was a geek. I was really into that stuff. So she said, "Look, I have a critical need. We're implementing performance based budgeting across the entire District government. It's an office with one person in it. He desperately needs help." I don't remember it being presented to me as an offer. I was just told "You're going to be working with him."

01:18:44**Amy Mauro**

Who was she?

01:18:46**Rafael Sa'adah**

Alfreda Davis.

And so, they called the fire department and said, "We're taking this guy. He works for us now. We'll pay his salary, and he's going to be working [at OCA]." At the time, we were at 441 4th Street [NW] right before we moved back into the Wilson building. So I went down there. John Koskinen was the City Administrator at the time, and I wound up working with this really smart guy named Doug Smith. Not the Assistant Fire Chief. Completely different Doug Smith. And it was doing exactly what they promised. We were implementing a system called performance based budgeting with outside consultants coming in to help. And it was forcing every agency in the District for the first time one, to have a strategic plan, and two, to have performance measures that were tied to that strategic plan that were outcome-based as opposed to output and output or input-based. And so I worked on that for a year and learned so much because it allowed me to learn what all the other agencies in the District government did. And it was pretty interesting. And then I took that skill set and Chief Thompson again, they didn't make me an offer. They just told me, "You're coming back to [Fire Department] headquarters and you're going to do the same work for us, and now you're just going to write the fire department strategic plan and the fire department's performance measures and write all our testimony and write all this and write all that. And so there I was, finally in headquarters for the first time in my life, and I really had no clue. Like what happened at headquarters. It was the first time I was ever in the wheelhouse. So that was pretty interesting. And then I eventually went back to the firehouse as we're implementing paramedic engine companies. I finally had the time - we finally created a position description for firefighter-paramedic; sergeant, lieutenant and captain paramedic. And that was the first time I was actually able to go claim my ALS status in the District. I'd been doing it informally for years at that point, but it was the first time I had actually had a position description that said, "You're allowed to be a paramedic for us."

01:21:07**Amy Mauro**

I had no idea it took so long. It was 2001.

01:21:12**Rafael Sa'adah**

Let's see, when I went back to - later than that. It was 2005.

01:21:21**Amy Mauro**

Oh my goodness.

01:21:22**Rafael Sa'adah**

Yeah. So it took a really, really long time ... So I wound up back at the firehouse where I started from, [now] as the company commander, at Engine 30. I was now a Captain Paramedic. [Then] Chief Thompson promoted me to Battalion Chief and sent me to the old Emergency Ambulance Bureau to preside over the unification of this division and folding it back into a unified department. So that's from 2005 to 2007. I did that and then also functioned as the de facto and sometimes formal Chief of Staff to the Medical Director, did everything I could to try to help the Medical Director. And then the Rosenbaum Task Force happened in 2007.

01:22:14 **Amy Mauro**

Okay. Before we get there, you were also detailed to be chief of staff for Margret Kellems, right?

01:22:25 **Rafael Sa'adah**

Yeah. How can I forget that?

01:22:26 **Amy Mauro**

So Mark Jordan had left. Is that when that happened?

01:22:31 **Rafael Sa'adah**

That's exactly when that happened. So yeah, there was some stuff happening at the time. I think it's easy to forget now. But as somebody that was in the trenches at the time, I have to state what a sea change the Williams administration was in terms of a revolution in how the DC government functioned at every level. And it starts with the really basic stuff of: you will pick up the phone.

01:23:03 **Amy Mauro**

Answering the phone. Yes.

01:23:05 **Rafael Sa'adah**

And you will read the script and you will take a message and you will have 24 hours to respond back or resolve the issue, you know, I mean, it seems laughable now, but that was like a really big deal at the time.

01:23:22 **Amy Mauro**

Well, it's not laughable because I can tell you that agencies are back to not answering the phone, but I don't want to be unobjective here, so go ahead. I had to get that off my chest because what you're saying I lived as well, right? I was at the Council and it was like a win if you could get through. So yeah.

01:23:43 **Rafael Sa'adah**

And we lived it multiple ways because unlike a lot of our colleagues, we actually stayed in the District of Columbia. I mean, we were citizens, we were residents, we were community members, we were active participants in the community. And so, I mean, these are the services that we depended on, that our family depended on. And we were not insulated by retreating to some suburban sanctum. So it was a really big deal at all levels as a customer and as somebody who was part of the government.

So Margret Kellems was the Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice. An incredibly smart, interesting person. Somebody I learned a lot from, from working with and watching. And she was in a situation where she knew that she would be leaving District government within six months. I mean, the other thing people don't really know or understand is how hard those bureaucrats work. It's the level, certainly what I saw in the Williams Administration, if you were working in government, it didn't really even matter at what level. But if you were part of that administration, you were working ungodly hours, ungodly seven days a week around the clock. I mean, those folks were working really, really hard. You had to be completely committed, and none of it was reflected in your paycheck. It was just like, this was the mission and this is what you were part of. And for many of them, it was really only sustainable for a few years. I mean, you just physically, you couldn't do it much longer than that. Certainly Margret's level of performance, I think was something that you can only do physically for a certain number of years. The stress was incredible. And keep in mind that 9/11 had happened.

And there's all sorts of stuff going on outside of us. It's not just what's going on inside the city...

So, I'd come to Margret's attention, I suppose, from my previous work in the Office of the City Administrator. It was the same thing. Just called me up and said. "My Chief of Staff is leaving. You're coming down here next week to take over the position." At least that's how I remember it. And I didn't know that she was going to be leaving within six months. So I came in, and then by the time she left, we were at the final part of the mayor's budget cycle, where essentially you take the budget up into the mayor's office and there's seven people left. So for people who don't know this process, it's like a pyramid. It starts off with hundreds of people involved at the agency level and tons of meetings and hearings and all this stuff. And then you finally, everybody's list makes it up to the very top, and you go in and basically create the final budget. There's a lot of horse trading going on at the last minute, and I found myself in a room with like seven people: the CFO, Nat Gandhi; the Mayor, Tony Williams; Ed Reiskin. It was essentially a pretty rarefied environment.

01:26:57**Amy Mauro**

And Ed Reiskin was the Deputy Mayor who followed Margret Kellems.

01:27:07**Rafael Sa'adah**

I think he was - I can't even remember if he was Deputy Mayor at the time or just Assistant City Administrator. But at any rate, it…

01:27:13**Amy Mauro**

That's right because he started with Robert Bobb. I'm sorry.

01:27:16**Rafael Sa'adah**

That was the issue. So Margret left. For the next six months, they didn't fill the position. So I was stuck trying to hold this office together as the chief of staff. Because they didn't want to name another Deputy Mayor, and they essentially just said, "Well, just report everything up to the City Administrator, Robert Bobb and Ed Reiskin at the time. So that was like one of the most challenging things I've ever had to deal with professionally, was trying to hold that office together and make sure all the reporting and the grants management and the congressional testimony and the budget and all that stuff. And at that point, I'm going from I think it's actually worthwhile me trying to reconstruct this statistic. If you'll just bear with me for a second. Let me just find it.

01:28:02**Amy Mauro**

Okay. While you're doing that, I can tell the story of the day I met you.

01:28:06**Rafael Sa'adah**

Oh, please.

01:28:09**Amy Mauro**

I was working for Kathy Patterson in the Judiciary Committee, and one day you just strode, and strode is the right word - into the office. Without much introduction, I think, to tell us that we were doing something wrong, I don't know, I don't remember the exact subject, but it was like, "Oh, hi. Nice to meet you." I assumed that you had some kind of military background. But that's a funny memory that I have. And then, of course, we became colleagues.

01:28:44**Rafael Sa'adah**

Well, you know, the wonderful thing that served me well stepping into Margret's world and being up at the Wilson Building for the first time, was that I didn't know enough, I wasn't smart enough to be intimidated by anything that was going on around me. I was just too stupid. So I just assumed, "I belong here and I'm going to function as if I do, and I'm gonna do the best job I can." And, you know, for the most part, I think I pulled it off. But there was ... The learning curve was pretty steep. So I'm just sharing this because I think it's really funny. So I went from being a captain in the fire department, worried about our toilet paper requisition for one firehouse,

to overseeing the budgets for the police department, the fire department, Department of Corrections, Emergency Management Agency, Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, seven boards and commissions - $646 million, 7,627 FTEs, plus managing all the federal Homeland Security grants and Justice grants, and standing up the first Office of Homeland Security in the District Government and ending our dependence on contractors. So all of that, you know, dealing with. And so now I'm in this room with like seven people, and at that level, it really was not about trying to do something for the fire department. You're really thinking much more globally. You're thinking about the needs of the entire District. And there was a specific area where MPD had a budget enhancement that really needed to be protected. And, you know, the Mayor made some comment about, "Well, why do we need to do that?" And I jumped in because that's what I'm supposed to do at this point, is be an advocate for my cluster. It's called a cluster, the Public Safety and Justice cluster. And I said, "We need to do that for the following reasons. And it's critical. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera." Said my piece. And the Mayor looked at me with a funny expression and said, "And who are you?"

01:30:48**Amy Mauro**

Classic Tony Williams!

01:30:49**Rafael Sa'adah**

Really pretty much Anthony Williams in a nutshell. And I'm thinking to myself, "Uh, dude, I'm like the guy who's been your de facto Deputy Mayor of Public Safety and Justice for the last six months, holding this ..."

01:31:02**Amy Mauro**

Finger in the dyke.

01:31:05**Rafael Sa'adah**

Holding this organization together with my finger in the dyke. And so it was pretty funny. And Ed was nice. He goes, "that's Margret's Chief of Staff. You know, he's functioning as Margret now." But it just goes to show, there's always levels above levels above levels. But you know, that year we got an 18.8% increase in the mayor's budget for public safety and got 110 FTEs [full time employees] for fire and EMS.

01:31:32**Amy Mauro**

And so you did a good job.

01:31:36**Amy Mauro**

But I was so burned out - it wasn't even funny. I was really, really happy to go back to the firehouse.

01:31:43**Amy Mauro**

All right. So I'm going to ask you to focus on.

01:31:47**Rafael Sa'adah**

Get me back on track.

01:31:48**Amy Mauro**

... January 6th, 2006. The Rosenbaum case.

01:31:58**Rafael Sa'adah**

So I was not in town. I was [assigned] up at the old EAB headquarters, working with then-Deputy Chief Greg Blalock and then-Battalion Chief Jerome Stack, who were from the old EAB leadership structure. And we were three very lonely men. I can assure you, because there was no - first of all, it was a ghost town up there. Most of the FTEs had been repurposed. The people that were left were not particularly happy about the direction the agency was going, so they were not very friendly. And the rank and file, for the most part, was just sitting on the

fence or just laying up in the cut. Nobody was interested in supporting us while we tried to do this thing that I think most people could recognize would move the agency forward. Nobody wanted to take any chances by getting involved. So I guess that's one thing that is probably not evident if you look at the historical record, is how lonely it was. The people that actually implemented the Task Force recommendations, that actually made that stuff happen, were operating without internal support, or without really even the ability to get peer support.

01:33:21**Amy Mauro**

Okay. But you are jumping ahead. So I'm talking about the actual incident.

01:33:26**Amy Mauro**

The actual incident. What little I remember about it was I was down at Fort Bragg, [N.C.], dropping off my wife for a year-long deployment in Iraq and getting a phone call from the Medical Director about other stuff. This was Amit Wadhwa, him mentioning in passing there had been some incident at Howard University Hospital. He didn't really get into it. I had no idea that parenthetical reference would be an event that was going to transform all of our lives. So, my key takeaways from the immediate aftermath of the incident was it exposed really significant structural problems. And I'm not talking about the response to Mr. Rosenbaum. I'm talking about the response to the response. Because I had been saying for years, and this was a big issue between me and Dr. Fernando Daniels, that it was an inherent conflict of interest to have a Medical Director that was simultaneously an employee of one of our largest emergency departments and receiving patients from our ambulances and so on. And to be fair, in many cities that's the norm that in fact, if you go to the Eagles, a lot of those folks work for a hospital and are on contract to the [departments].

01:34:50**Amy Mauro**

It's in the statute, in the DC statute, it's required.

01:34:55**Rafael Sa'adah**

And I just felt that that was an accident waiting to happen. And I think that this incident illustrated why. Because Dr. Wadhwa was involved in the care of Mr. Rosenbaum [at Howard University Hospital], and then had to recuse himself from the investigation into the care that was delivered [by DC Fire & EMS]. He was conflicted out. We didn't have anybody to take his place. And certainly nobody with a medical background. The second piece was it exposed the weakness in our investigation protocol because - and I was not driving the train on this one. So in many cases, I'm experiencing this as sort of a participant myself. We still didn't know,nd this has been an issue throughout my career, how do you look at allegations of deviations from standard of care? Is this a disciplinary proceeding or is this a medical quality improvement proceeding? And it's two radically different approaches with really different rules. And at the time we were clueless about how to deal with something that was potentially both at the same time. So a lot of the things that didn't go well during the quote, "investigation and interview process," really could be anticipated as a result of the fact that we didn't have a clear idea of how one looked at incidents where there's a question about the standard of care, and how do you interview people and what protections apply, and how quickly do you need to do it? Because that was the other issue. By the time we interviewed the members involved, they were locked into a story. And I still don't know to this day whether that story is accurate or not. I have no idea. I just know that they stuck to it. So it became an issue.

And then the other thing, and I don't want to spend too much time on this, but Alice Rivlin had a famous saying, "In government you should never waste a good crisis." And, and I don't want that to sound callous or cold or what have you. Because the Rosenbaum family experienced a tremendous tragedy. But the reality is that tragedy and their decision to participate with the city in terms of affecting policy change created an opportunity to do a bunch of things which we had wanted to do and needed to do for a really long time. And when you get this confluence of mayoral attention, council attention, media attention, and a willingness to actually put resources into achieving solutions, you cannot waste your shot. So many of the things that we accomplished as part of the task force recommendations and all the rest of that were things that we wanted and needed to do for a really long time. And that this incident gave us the catalyst and the funding, to be blunt, to actually accomplish.

01:38:17**Amy Mauro**

I call it leveraging crisis. And we did the same thing in 2015 because as we've learned, progress is cyclical.

01:38:26**Rafael Sa'adah**

And the Control Board period was similarly, I mean, there were a lot of tough decisions that Marion Barry, for political reasons or because he was blocked or impeded by Congress, was never going to be able to make that the Control Board allowed us to do and then reset and then move back…

01:38:45**Amy Mauro**

And Tony Williams benefited from that. And you were there for that experience as well. So we've got a new fire chief at this point, if you're ready to get to that part. In April of 2007, Dennis Rubin starts as Fire Chief, his first meeting is with the Rosenbaum family. And Mayor Fenty has decided to settle the litigation that the family has filed against the city in exchange for creating a task force to improve EMS. And I was working in the city administrator's office. I was delivered this assignment, unhappily, I might add. And then it ended up sparking the most rewarding work of my career. So that's another one of those lessons in life. But I remember the family, they were really intent on stopping the cycle. There was so much ink poured on the record, about the decades prior about EMS in DC. And so when I was asking the questions earlier about your experience in 1990. Here we are. And it's what? It's 27 years later. Um, no. It's 17. Sorry, math. And it's not fixed yet. So you're right, so that this was the opportunity to fix it and to try to make a lasting change. And so I was honored to do that work. And also enjoyed getting to do it with you. So what are your recollections of those task force negotiations and breaking in a new chief and getting to that place where we issued the report and then started working on the recommendations?

01:40:49**Rafael Sa'adah**

Well, as far as breaking in with the new chief. I mean, you know, Dennis Rubin is a force of nature. So, he just brought a tremendous amount of energy with him, and it could sometimes be chaotic energy. I mean, working for him was simultaneously one of the best and worst experiences of my life. So the best was: I've never had a chief exhibit that level of trust [in me]. And because DC Fire and EMS is not a trusting organization. I mean, it's like, you know, it's like the Medicis in Florence or something like that. I mean, it's just a lot of backstabbing, a lot of politics. Nobody's your friend. It's very transactional. So on and so forth. And I remember one time, he always asked me to call him the Rube, and I just. That's too weird for me. So Chief Rubin needed me to punch out some document for him. And he sat me down at his computer in his office and said, "Can you bang this out in an hour? I got to go do something." And I was like, "You're leaving me on your computer in your office to write this document for [you], just so I'll make sure I'm tracking." So, absolutely. He said, "Chief, this is your office, too." You know, he's like "You are an assistant fire chief now." I was the Acting Assistant Fire Chief at the time. "And you don't even have to knock. You know, if you need me, you just come in and." And, you know, that might seem like not a big deal. That was a huge deal. I can't imagine any fire chief before or since they'd be like, "Oh, yeah. Here, sit down at my computer. It's got my network drive. Everything I've ever written, all my emails are all up, and I'm trusting you to just, you know, get some work done on this while I do something else." I mean, it was just like, that was really powerful to me.

And if you came to him with a good idea, he loved it, and he would run with it. But there were a lot of good ideas floating around? So it was it really- that the hard part was there was just so much work that was constantly being created. You really had to figure out how to triage it. And I've always created a triage system for my work, which is, "Here's all the projects, here's their impact, here's the amount of resources they demand." And then you try to do the low resource, high impact stuff first and then the high, high impact, medium resource, so on and so forth. And the only way to survive was just to constantly triage this stuff because it was far more work than any one person could do. And so, you know, I didn't know him. I didn't have a relationship before he came. I always appreciated what he was trying to do. I don't feel that he was treated well by history or by the union. That being said, I think a lot of that blame actually devolves on Mayor Fenty as much as it does on Chief Rubin because - I've known Adrian Fenty since he was a kid. He grew up in my neighborhood. He put a lot of energy into becoming mayor, and he had the opportunity, the ability to be a multi-term mayor without trying too hard and almost immediately into the job. I don't know if he decided he was no longer interested in it, or he got bored really quickly, but he decided to start picking fights with the Council, which if you're going to come at the King, you best not miss, right?

So he came at the King and he missed, and they never let him forget it. So we had this completely contentious relationship with the Council and specifically with Phil Mendelson, who was the chair on the Committee on the Judiciary at the time. And [if] the Chair of the Committee on Judiciary has you in your sights, you're just not going to win. You're not going to win that fight. They have too much power. And so between Mayor Fenty

checking out and not aggressively pursuing winning a second term and the fights with the Council, we were stuck in the middle. So we would go to oversight hearings and just get lambasted. And half the time they weren't even mad at us. They were speaking through us to the Mayor, and they were mad at the Mayor. So that was like some of the downside of that time period.

Now as far as working with the people actually staffing the task force, that was an absolute joy. It was like I said, it was pretty lonely. So it was a small group of people doing the heavy lifting. And I think about people like you and I think about people like Phil Heinrich, whose name also doesn't get told in these stories, but we could not have done the vast majority of this work without him. Phil Heinrich being basically a data genius working in the Office of the City Administrator, working in programs like Tableau to help visualize both to analyze and visualize what it was we were trying to fix. And Erik Johnson doing the same work in the Office of the Fire Chief with ArcGIS and so on. And so their names don't often get told in the story, and maybe they like it that way. And I'm like busting them out here. But their work was really important. And sometimes it's easier to staff these things than to be the principal up front, because we're not driven by ego. Our name is never going to appear on this document, even if we wrote half of it or wrote all of it. And so, for me, that's actually, that's fun. I like any situation where my ego is out of the equation, and it's just, quite clearly, about trying to do a good job for the city. And this was one of those opportunities.

And then the big fight. I mean, let's be frank, I always felt like the biggest issue the task force needed to opine on was what was the system delivery model going to be? And Mayor Fenty had campaigned on creating a third service EMS, and that had been the political fight the entire duration of my time in the department. And I had enough experience and education at this point to really believe the optimum system delivery model for the District was a fire-based EMS system. I'd done everything possible to model what a good fire-based EMS provider should be in my career. And we were going to march in whatever direction the Mayor directed us to, but the task force, I'll put it bluntly, I feel like they gave him an out from his campaign promise because everybody knew the math wouldn't work for a third service EMS system. It would be horrendously expensive to accomplish. It would be a tremendous duplication of resources. But nobody wanted to come out and say it. And the task force, I mean they had severe disagreements. Predictably, people inside the task force like Rich Serino, coming from a third service EMS model, and the Rosenbaum family themselves, I think, really wanted to see a third service model, represented on the task force by Toby Halliday.

01:48:07**Amy Mauro**

Yeah, I would disagree with that point. I do remember the economic conversation. I do remember Rich Serino was disappointed that we did not propose a third service, but the Rosenbaums - and I've talked to them about this since then - I think they were swayed by - because money wasn't going to be important to them. Right? They had lost their loved one, and they don't care how much it would cost to build the best type of system to them. I think what was persuasive was the research that we did that showed you could deliver, you could improve patient outcomes in any type of system. So it was what you were saying earlier. That's the research and the findings from the task force. They wanted there to be that process and that analysis. And I think that made them comfortable at the end of the day with the recommendation. So I'm just offering that hindsight, because we have had those conversations and frankly, it could have gone either way. You know, I think it worked out for the best, but there was a lot of hard work between that decision and where we are now.

01:49:20**Rafael Sa'adah**

And unfortunately for me, I was not in the room for many of these discussions. So I have to impute what I think certain players were thinking or acting based on what I observed from my piece of it. And that's the beauty of interviewing multiple people that were involved in this, because we all see different things and remember different things, have our own perspective. But be that as it may, I was always willing to work with the Rosenbaum family.

At the end of the day, though, the biggest decision in terms of giving me my marching orders was yes, we are going to commit to making a fire-based EMS system work with the unification of the workforce and most of the work that I had to do, I mean, I was involved in every aspect of implementing the recommendations and many of which called for actions not just from the fire and EMS department, but from other agencies as well. Because the EMS system is an EMS system, it's not just the fire and EMS department. [It’s] the Department of Health, it's the hospitals, et cetera.

That being said, probably the most work was involved in analyzing the law, analyzing the regulations, and analyzing what would need to be changed to unify the workforce, to try to get everybody in the same pay and salary structure. Unified position descriptions, create a pathway so that the legacy single role providers could both take advantage of the benefits to the greatest extent possible of being part of the fire department. And also have some protection for their jobs. So that they could continue to work and do meaningful work, and have some opportunities while this larger transformation of the agency accomplished itself. So that we're not just kicking them to the curb, and because, I mean, let's be frank, the single role providers labored under very difficult conditions, other than the ones that were hired under the old federal system. A terrible retirement system compared to what the firefighters were getting, and were treated like second class citizens, by and large. So there needed to be attention paid to their transition within this larger plan, not just - oh, we got to hire more paramedics and make them firefighters or whatever the case might be. So it was a lot of moving parts, and a lot of the work we did was with the Office of Labor Relations and Collective Bargaining and the Office of Personnel, and I wrote and got classified more position descriptions than I can even possibly remember. And, you know, we really got down into the arcana of like, how do you transform a workforce.

And unfortunately, a lot of the things we tried to do, that we thought we had a mandate to do from the task force recommendations, were blocked by the council. And, once again, I blame some of that on the deteriorating relationship with the mayor. While the Council did participate in the task force, specifically, the thing I'm thinking about is, we wrote legislation to allow us to bring the entire workforce, all the single providers, into the fire salary structure, get them into the police and fire retirement system. And that legislation was introduced on our behalf. And you may remember the specific beats of this even better than I do, but from my recollection, Councilmember Mendelson rewrote the legislation to block us from doing what we were trying to do and make it read the exact opposite. The fiscal impact would have been tremendous.

01:53:31 **Amy Mauro**

There was a negative fiscal impact.

01:53:32 **Rafael Sa'adah**

Yeah. So it became a “may” instead of “must.” And the mayor returned it unsigned and it just basically died there. And what we were able to do, salvage some aspect of that, was to take the single role members that were not part of the union, not part of Local 3721, they were all supervisors and they were in the Management Supervisory Service. So they were at that point not union employees anymore. And we were able to bring them over and there were a lot of moving parts to that. One of the most complex things I've ever been involved with from a policy perspective. But we did it and we actually created a promotional exam for them, got everybody sworn in and for the first time got them into the retirement system. So that was huge. I still deeply regret that we weren't able to do it for the entire workforce. But like I said, with all of this, it's two steps forward, one step back, and it's rarely a smooth process. I mean, what are some of your memories of what the heaviest lifts were during that time period?

01:54:38 **Amy Mauro**

I think you covered it pretty well. I was thinking of asking you what was different this time compared to prior efforts, but I think you answered that already at the beginning of the conversation with the confluence of forces. But yes, there were a couple of lessons that I took from that experience and that I took into being chief of staff. And one of them was to not antagonize your committee chair. So we were fortunate from 2015 on to have good relationships with our committee chairs. And that made a huge difference because again, we went through another phase of doing pretty radical, making pretty radical changes...

01:55:36 **Rafael Sa'adah**

In FY 2008, we got an enhancement request for $3.7 million from FY 2008 operational reserve funding and created 31 new FTEs to support implementation of the recommendations of the Mayor's Task Force on EMS. And most of those were supervisory positions.

01:55:53 **Amy Mauro**

Which I'll always remember that number 3.7. It makes me happy because, you know, something that is important to note is that we did that in 2008, which was the Great Recession, and I was in the City

Administrator's office, and we were cutting every agency's budget except the fire department and except the schools, because schools were Mayor Fenty's top priority. And that's significant.

01:56:26**Rafael Sa'adah**

So you know, the other thing that is as an example, I mean, I could go through all the task force recommendations and we don't have enough time.

01:56:35**Amy Mauro**

Please don't!

01:56:35**Rafael Sa'adah**

I'll just say something ... One that I was really, really happy to see implemented was we finally created the Street Calls program. So this idea that I'd been promulgating for 20 years, and certainly others as well. And San Francisco was already doing it and doing it really well with not a lot of resources. I'd gone out and done ride-alongs with Niels Tangherlini out there to see what he was doing. Street Calls was huge. It's essentially demand reduction for high volume system users, a dedicated unit going out, finding folks before they dial 911 based upon historical usage patterns, and getting them diverted into the appropriate alternative pathway to address their underlying issue. And this really, to me, comes back to like the very beginning of my career, this idea of having a prevention model for EMS as opposed to a response model.

And let me just go back to the protocols. When I first came on the job, we had to respond lights and sirens to everything. Everybody had to be transported lights and sirens. Everybody went to the hospital, regardless of ... whatever was going on with them, whether there was any medical benefit. Everybody went to the hospital. And we were doing no analysis of who was calling when, why? And even in the fire service, we'd started to adopt a prevention model of: the best fire is the one that never happens, right? Because you implemented mechanisms to keep it from happening, you know, and a public health model looking at the social determinants of health and looking at actual EMS usage. The fire department has all kinds of resources that are embedded in the community that have an intimate knowledge of what people's health issues are, both at the individual level and at the systemic level, and is optimally positioned to be an agent of providing better outcomes for those folks. And this was the first time we really just had a commitment across the board to start thinking that way.

The other thing I want to say about the task force and one of the challenges for me was they created this position of Assistant Fire Chief for Emergency Medical Services. And Rubin wanted to hit the ground running. So he put me into the position in an acting capacity. Probably the only person in the department that had the interest, certainly, that had the minimum qualifications to serve in that position. But there was a lot of community energy around doing a national recruitment process. And certainly people were suspicious of me and said, "Well, he's part of the problem. You know, you can't put *him* in that position. Surely there must be somebody more qualified." So they actually took a whole year process of them actually advertising the position, bringing in applicants from around the country. And that's, to my knowledge, [I'm] the only assistant fire chief that ever had to compete for his job as opposed to being appointed to it. And I competed against people around the US, and I felt like I won the job fair and square. I didn't make the decision. But, you know, I was certainly committed to it. So I was in the job both in an acting capacity, then finally appointed. But I had no FTEs, I had no direct reports, I had no formal resources. And for the vast majority of the time I was in the position, occasionally I would get some detailed personnel to help me out with projects, but I had to oversee implementation and I had to use tools other than ordering people to do stuff in order to do it. And that's a lesson in soft power, in all kinds of stuff. Because I had to use influence to persuade other divisions to work with me. And it was really, really challenging. And it was really, really lonely because as I said, the vast majority of people were just sitting on the fence.

The relations between Rubin and Local 36, the larger union, had deteriorated at that point, which was really unfortunate. And I think once again, a lot of that was about the Mayor as much as anything else. But be that as it may, the union wasn't falling all over themselves to help us accomplish something, even if it matched some of their strategic goals. [Local] 3721 just refused to participate. I would have weekly meetings about what we're trying to do, what we're trying to implement. They had an open seat at the table. I had one of their board members show up for a few weeks, and then he stopped coming and I was like, "Why did you stop coming? I want to be transparent about this process. I want you guys to see everything that's going on. There's no secrets. Everything we're doing, we're putting on the web in real time and reporting out. There's no secret plan.

Everything is up front and transparent and public." And the answer from Local 3721 was, "Well, if we're sitting at the table and you discuss something and then you decide to do that, it appears that we've endorsed it. So we can't be at the table because, you know, we don't necessarily endorse what you're doing." So that's where that fell out. But let's just say the unions were very passive. And when we would try to do things like survey the members to find out what they wanted, the union would do things like, "You're not allowed to even talk to our members without our permission. So you send the survey questions to us and we'll decide if we want to distribute them or not," stuff like that. So it was a real challenge. It was really lonely. The physical costs, and the mental costs of doing what I felt were the right thing were really, really high.

I hope that future leaders in the department don't have to pay as high a price for being change agents. At one point in this process, I received this award. It was a national award, the James O. Page/JEMS [Journal of Emergency Medical Services] EMS Leadership Award, very prestigious. When I started researching everybody who's won this award, it's like the EMS Martyrs Award. Like, everybody that wins it loses their job. And, you know, it's like I'm exaggerating slightly, but only a little bit. I mean, essentially, they're highlighting people who are change agents, and a lot of times good things don't happen to those folks because people don't like change, and change is really threatening, and they'll come after you personally and they'll figure out what's important to you, and that's where they're going to attack you. And I wish it wasn't like that, but it is what it is.

And [this year, 2024] I went back to fire department headquarters for the first time since I retired, a few weeks ago when I was visiting DC, which is still my home of record. I was so proud of where the agency is right now, I couldn't stand it. I mean, I walked into the Office of the Medical Director, and it was huge, and it was well resourced, and it was staffed by really smart people doing useful things. And they all had positive attitudes. And everybody at headquarters was smiling and seemed to be in a good mood, and I guarantee you. I've worked at headquarters, the old Grimke school or the Reeves building, under lots of administrations for lots of fire chiefs, and it was never, ever a happy place to work. And it's like the first time I ever felt like, wow, we really pulled it off. You know, I really saw how the work that we did during the task force years laid a foundation for that. But slowly. But then, and thanks to leaders like Dr. Robert Holman, I don't think you can understate. Chief Dean, even though Chief Dean and I didn't work effectively together. A lot of stuff happened on his watch that was incredibly positive for the agency. So you cannot argue that he was an ineffective leader. We didn't have a particularly good relationship. And now under Chief Donnelly, I mean, I just see the narrative now is not about "DC is the worst EMS system in the world. If you dial 911, it's like playing Russian roulette." And for the vast majority of my career, that was the prevailing narrative, whether it was accurate or not. And now the narrative is something really, really different. And I remember the first time we ever got an article in JEMS that said, "Wow, DC is turning into a really progressive EMS system." And this was in the still in the fairly early days of task force implementation. But we had a narrative that countervailed the prevailing narrative, which the prevailing narrative just frustrated the hell out of me because of my pride as a member of the agency...

02:07:40 **Rafael Sa'adah**

I'm going to highlight three or four things that we did that I'm really proud of.

02:07:43 **Amy Mauro**

Okay.

02:07:44 **Rafael Sa'adah**

And some of them, I was the main driver and some of them I was just able to get the right people working together on a project. But ... When I finally got some access to the protocols, making it possible to respond to certain emergencies without lights and sirens, and, more importantly, making it possible to transport without lights and sirens for certain emergencies. This was huge. Obviously increasing opportunities for ALS-certified members, which is a fight that we're still fighting to make sure that their opportunities are not limited because of their certification, but in fact enhanced. Setting up the monthly meetings with the hospitals and building a dialogue-based system to solve problems together. It was huge. And it's not just me. I mean, that was me working with multiple medical directors, but that forum was really, really important. When I came on the job, there was this quasi-governmental body that reported to nobody, appointed by the Department of Health, called the Medical Control Subcommittee, and they had a stranglehold on DC's protocols and on the evaluation of DC's EMS providers. And while I'm sure everybody in that body was well intentioned, to be trying to be involved in EMS reform, when you had a group that reported to no one still stuck, in my opinion, in the dark ages of how our agency could be empowered to actually solve problems through medical quality assurance. So, yeah,

migrating out of that was really huge - into a more trust-based but peer-based relationship with the hospitals, eliminating ED [emergency department] diversion and putting the EMS liaison officers in place to do system status management. If I could point to anything that feels like a lasting legacy that I'm really, really proud of, that would be right up there. Creating a checklist for refusals so that we had some checks and balances rather than providers not transporting people to the hospital that really should have been transported. Those are things I'm really happy to have participated in. Street Calls, obviously.

And then one of the last projects I was involved in before I retired was I was participating in the Heroin Working Group[s], there were several of them, one with the criminal justice system and then one with the medical community. And I had already noticed that a lot of people were overdosing and not being resuscitated. That seemed unusual to me based on historical patterns. And we were increasing our administration of Narcan. And I knew something was going on in our community, because one of the things that - because I spent so much time in the electronic patient care reporting system, I just see a lot of things that I can intuit are indicative of a trend that needs some further study. And when I started looking into it and then looking at what was going on nationally, I had a really high index of suspicion that the heroin supply in the District was being adulterated by fentanyl, and that we were seeing a significant increase, both in overdoses and in fatal overdoses, and that furthermore, as I looked at the EMS usage patterns of the people that were overdosing, these were all people that previously had been able to overdose successfully for years and years, and we would run them several times a year. They were decades-long heroin users, but they would use with other people, and if they overdosed, somebody could call 911 for them and we'd come and resuscitate them. And now we were coming and we couldn't resuscitate them. So I put all of that together, took it to the heroin working group, got OCME [Office of the Chief Medical Examiner] to agree to start analyzing all these fatalities and what compounds were being found.

And we came up with an idea for a pilot program - myself and my co-investigator, [Jessica Bress] at the Department of Behavioral Health [DBH]. We sold it to the DBH leadership and I sold it to the fire chief. It was essentially to set up a system where I would monitor the overdoses in real time and send a hit list - a target list - to the Department of Behavioral Health, and the goal was to send a qualified recovery social worker to somebody's house within seven days of their near fatal overdose event and offer them treatment on demand. And we had a team of really good clinical outreach workers from DBH, most of whom were in recovery themselves. They were not showing up in a military uniform or a police uniform. They're showing up in polo shirts. They were clearly identifiable as from the recovery community as opposed to from the law enforcement community. I would tell them, "Here's the people that overdosed. Here's where you're likely to find them if they don't have permanent housing." They would go out. It was completely voluntary. We offered treatment on demand and the yield was so effective, so much more effective than any previous outreach strategy they'd ever used. We had a really large percentage of people accept the offer of treatment on demand or create a plan to access treatment within the next few days. It was a really, really successful pilot. And it wound up not being developed past the pilot phase for political reasons, which I'm not even going to get into now. There's a good article about it in the City Paper by Joshua Kaplan. But that SBIRT pilot laid the foundation for stuff that they are now trying to do.

02:13:39 **Amy Mauro**

Yeah. I wanted to give you an update on that.

02:13:43 **Rafael Sa'adah**

But also, there's other people around the United States using that model now, too, whether they were influenced by us. I presented it at regional conferences. And it was really kind of surreal going to a regional conference and hearing the mayor, Mayor Bowser, highlight this program because her people had to give her talking points of, what's the District doing with this fentanyl crisis? And so that was the program she highlighted as our response. And at the same time, the program was actively being killed while that presentation was being made. So that was one of many surreal moments...

02:14:20 **Amy Mauro**

So I want you to know, with the Nurse Triage Line actually giving the entire department kind of a menu of options when they respond to a non-emergency EMS call, which could be putting them in a Lyft vehicle to a clinic, having the nurse talk to them and just give them self-care instructions, setting up a telehealth appointment. You know, all of those things - the Street Calls team has kind of reoriented themselves to

substance abuse and partnering with DBH, responding, going back to that type of model that you described, and the relationship is much improved. And I don't know if you've met Sergeant Gerber. He's in charge of Street Calls now, he is doing excellent work. And he told me when I last saw him that DBH is going to pay for two physician assistants to join his team. So I just want you to know that things are definitely in a better place on that topic.

02:15:28 **Rafael Sa'adah**

Yeah. And Steve [Gerber] and I have talked about this and as well as with the current medical director [Dr. David Vitberg], and I think they know that I'm really, really happy that they're rebooting this because it was the right idea then, and it's the right idea now.

02:15:43 **Amy Mauro**

We're doing bupe. I forgot to say that. Buprenorphine in the field.

02:15:49 **Rafael Sa'adah**

Which is a new twist on it. And I'm really excited to see what kind of results they get. Because you don't know unless you try. But I think that's a perfect example of when you have a fire department that embraces its role in the healthcare system and leans into it. This is where you can really start adding value, because nobody knows community health conditions better than the firefighters. The cops don't know it because they're in an adversarial posture through no fault of their own. We're welcomed into people's homes and we actually see what's going on inside the home. And if it's a person who's unhoused, we're intimately familiar with their movements and where they put down their head at night and where they're eating and all the rest of this. And so I think we're uniquely positioned both in terms of as a data source, but also as agents to actually improve health outcomes in our community. And that was always my vision from my days appointed at Engine 30, which is: “Why am I reacting to these events instead of proactively doing something to keep them from happening in the first place?” And there's no reason that the fire and EMS department shouldn't be playing a role in that, and often that role is a lead role.

So just to close the loop, I was talking about the James Page Award, so I went to a conference to receive the award. And it was once again one of these surreal experiences, because there had been a new mayor and a new fire chief since all the stuff I did that helped me get the award... And I was up there by myself. Nobody from the agency came. It was in Baltimore. The [new] fire chief [Kenneth Ellerbe] was invited. Of course, he wasn't going to show up, and he was in the process of trying to figure out how to get rid of me at the time. He could only demote me. He couldn't fire me. But all the work that we'd done to create these additional supervisory positions was being undone at the exact moment that I'm standing on stage, being recognized for, really, our accomplishments. And I made it very clear "These are not my accomplishments. These are collective accomplishments by a group of people that's trying to improve the EMS system. So I'm accepting it on behalf of all of them. Even if you're recognizing me individually." And that comes back to that, one, you can't be ego driven. And two, it's you have to be steadfast because there's this two step forward, one step back. Progress is incremental. And then occasionally we get these moments where we have accelerated progress like we saw with the task force. But a few years later, all those FTEs we created, 22 of them were taken away, and those were all EMS supervisory positions. And sadly, there wasn't any hue and outcry at the time about "you're undoing all the task force recommendations." But that's exactly what was taking place.

And at a certain point thereafter, [Chief Ellerbe eliminated the position of Assistant Fire Chief of EMS and] I got demoted. I was just sent out in the field as a regular old battalion fire chief to be back in a firehouse. And while it was really sad seeing what was being done to the EMS system during that time, and overall it was a time under Chief Ellerbe of possibly the worst morale I've ever seen in the department. There was at the same time, I'm not going to lie, I really enjoyed just being back in the field, having a very defined set of responsibilities. It was the first time I was able to breathe in like ten years. And so I went out there and tried to be the best battalion chief I could be. And a lot of folks had forgotten that I was actually a firefighter at first. You know, so there was a lot of funny moments where people would look at me on the fireground like, "Oh, you actually know what you're doing? And, you know, like how to run an incident." And I'd be like, "Uh, yeah. You know, because I mean I'm not just an EMS guy. You know, I'm really committed to every aspect of the mission statement." So it was a respite, if you will. And then, right back into more pressure cooker environments. Once Eugene Jones took over as interim fire chief, and then we went through Chief Mills and then Chief Dean and so

on.

So it was very symbolic for me to end my career at the Training Academy where I started. And I've always had a passion for education. And we have a saying in the fire department, which is "You'll know when it's time to retire." And I reached that point, all of a sudden I knew, and I hadn't before. It was the right time for me to retire. For physical reasons, for mental health reasons, for personal reasons, for policy reasons. I was involved in some elder care issues at the time, taking care of other people, and I was going to law school. So there was just - it was a really good time for me to transition out... The whole point of mentoring people is to make yourself replaceable. I always operated under the assumption of - I need to train my replacement. So I really felt my entire career was an accident of history. You just happen to have this guy show up with the right attitude, the right commitment to the city and the education and the passion for EMS to be involved in all these big changes. But I didn't plan any of that. And I always wanted to try to create a system that wasn't dependent on me. For many years. I was the only person that could do my job. And that's not a healthy place for an agency to be. And so I feel proud that through mentorship and also through people just rising up through the ranks, there's a lot of people that can do that job now. And it's not all on my shoulders, and I feel I was part of something much bigger than myself and I'm proud of it. And what more can you ask for, really, in life?

02:22:05**Amy Mauro**

Well, thank you very much.

02:22:08**Rafael Sa'adah**

You're welcome. Thank you for doing this project.

02:22:10**Amy Mauro**

Well, a couple of things. So first, I'm sorry no one came to see you get the James O. Page Award, and I wish I had known, I would have been there. And if that had happened today, the whole executive team would have been there cheering you on. So, second, I have two questions I need to ask that I ask everybody, but I've run out of time because I'm going to the Friendship Fire Association meeting to give them a preview of the website.

02:22:40**Rafael Sa'adah**

But try to do it quick. Or do you want to? How do you want to do this?

02:22:44**Amy Mauro**

I was thinking of reconvening. ... But I have ten minutes.

02:22:49**Rafael Sa'adah**

So we'll preview the questions and let's see, maybe I can just bang it out.

02:22:53**Amy Mauro**

Alright.

It's - how does your career with the department continue to impact you? And what - for people coming to this website, what do you want them to know about our department?

02:23:06**Rafael Sa'adah**

Okay, I'll take a stab at that.

02:23:07**Amy Mauro**

Okay. And I'm going to eat while you're talking.

02:23:11**Rafael Sa'adah**

So some of the impact, how does my career impact me? All right, some of the impact, I'll be blunt, is negative. And I think we in the fire service, fire and EMS service have to talk about this, which is this job, you know, partly through external conditions, partly through some of the choices we make about shift structures and deployment, will absolutely destroy your body and will destroy your brain, mostly through sleep deprivation. I mean, my dominant memory of the vast majority of my career is constantly being in a state of sleep deprivation and not being able to sleep. It felt like for years at a time. And I look at about a third of my recruit class that I came in with is either dead or permanently disabled, which is absurd because we were all young, young men, in this particular case, in peak physical condition. And, you know, our mortality rate should not be so high. So there are those impacts. And then there's the impacts that linger. Whether it's post-traumatic stress, or what have you. So it's taken me a really long time to try to rebuild my body and my mind and learn how to sleep again and try to actually have a healthy lifestyle in the next phase of my life. And partly I deal with that by not spending a lot of time looking backwards and trying to be very forward looking. Like I said, I haven't looked at a lot of this fire department stuff in five years since I retired. It's not that I don't care about it. I care deeply about it. But you can't spend your whole life just thinking about what you did when you were on the job. And there's a lot more to life than just one agency.

So in terms of moving forward, I feel like my practice of law is directly informed by the exact same forces that made me want to be a firefighter and EMT and a paramedic, which is a desire to serve others. So I find myself in a niche in my law practice where I only do pro bono work. And I'm trying to concentrate on a population that's underserved, in my case, asylum seekers who desperately need legal services but don't often have access or resources to pay for them. And it's just all an extension of this. The same drive, if you will, which is we're only on this earth for a very limited period of time. And the only thing people are going to remember is how we made others feel. It's not going to be about what rank you achieved or what award you got. So try to make it a better place, whether it's a person at a time or with the fire department. What I loved about it was you could train 20 students to be really compassionate paramedics and multiply any good you could do in the world 20 times, and then they'll go out and do the same. And I really feel like my career is a lot about that, which is trying to create conditions where young men and women can go out and really serve their community effectively and not have to worry about deployment models or their equipment or any of the negative stuff that, you know, just really be focused on serving people. So that's the answer to question one. Remind me again what question two was.

02:26:36**Amy Mauro**

For visitors to this new website. What do you want them to know most of all about our department?

02:26:43**Rafael Sa'adah**

I want them to know that our department is - each department is individual and unique. You know, we have a saying, "You've seen one department. You've seen one department." But there are meta issues throughout the fire and EMS service. And notwithstanding the negative narratives that were often created about our agency, sometimes fairly, some very often unfairly. Our department is so progressive in terms of the things that it's accomplished, not just operationally, in terms of incident command system, but in how we manage [First] Amendment events, how we manage mass gatherings. I didn't mention, but I was the EMS branch director for President Obama's first inauguration, the largest planned special events in US history. And we had no adverse outcomes and a lot of transports, over 150 if memory serves. It was a very busy 24 hour period. And we're good at that stuff. And we've gotten good at it through hard work and application and studying what works.

And then I think about it in terms of having a department that represents the community in all respects and is very often drawn from the community. Where we may not be where we want to be. And we have a diversity plan to help get us there. We're still light years ahead of the fire service generally, and we've already fought battles internally. And I mentioned the Hammon class lawsuit, a lot of other things that were very traumatic for the agency at the time, but that moved us forward in important ways. And we're on the other side of that. So I'm confident that we're going to continue to have a workforce that's compassionate and culturally competent, and really cares about the community. And hopefully we'll keep them actually embedded in the community and living here. Because that's still an issue. You have to create conditions that make it possible for somebody to want to raise their family and be able to afford to live in the city that they serve. And that's something that every big city needs to work on right now.

So it's a department. If you study its history, it's important generally in terms of the civil rights struggle, in terms of the struggle for the fire service to redefine itself and in terms of the EMS mission and figuring out how do we accomplish the EMS mission, and particularly if it's going to be based in a public safety agency that's got centuries of tradition. And how does the mission change and how do we help it change both. Even when it doesn't want to. But then also organically. So it can become something much healthier for the 21st century, and there's so many lessons to be learned from our hard battles and our collective battles, and I'm really proud to have been a very small part of it.

02:29:39**Amy Mauro**

One more question I remembered. Can you talk about that case we [discussed] before the interview. We were talking about why a fire-based system works in DC and you talked about a motor vehicle accident when you were on the rescue squad. So can you describe that? And then we can close.

02:30:02**Rafael Sa'adah**

Sure. Yeah. I mean, I often make my arguments at a macro level about the infrastructure and pre-deployment and all these other things about why it makes sense to base ALS responders. But sometimes you can take a micro incident and it tells a story also.

So I was assigned to Rescue Squad 2, fairly early in my career, I've got five, six years on the job. And rescue squad, for those who don't know, is a technical rescue unit that does things like complicated extrications for somebody who's pinned in a motor vehicle, rescues on the fireground, etc. So we responded to a motor vehicle accident on Sherman Avenue. A car traveling at a high rate of speed crashed into a light pole, and one of the occupants of the car was pinned in the back of the car. And they're severely injured and they're severely pinned. So they need to be cut out. It's a small car, small back seat. And this person is essentially upside down and pinned between the passenger seat and the rear seat. And they have only agonal respirations, which means they're not…their brainstem is telling them to keep breathing, but it's not respirations that are sufficient to oxygenate the brain, and it's often a precursor to death. But we're going to do everything we can to save this person. Give them a shot, get them to a trauma center. They still have a pulse. They're still breathing, and maybe we'll save them. Maybe we won't. There's no room, so we have to cut this person out. There's still a risk of fire, so a hose line needs to be deployed just in case fuel catches on fire. Like, while we're trying to cut this person out. And somebody needs to breathe for this person, okay? This patient. So the problem is there's only room for one person in the back seat. And if this had been New York [City], three different agencies would have been fighting over that patient. The extrication is reserved for the police department and the emergency services unit. So you would have ESU saying "Everybody's got to back out. We're here to extricate the person," so they extricate him, but they're not going to attend to his medical needs and they're not there for the fire. You've got the fire department that's there for the fire, but not for the medicine or the extrication. And then you have EMS that's there for the medicine, but not for the extrication or the fire. Three different organizations, three different set of work rules, three different protocols, and very often a history of fighting with each other on the scene of complex incidents about who's in charge and who gets to do what. What I do know is if it had happened in New York, it would have taken a really long time to get that person out, and they'd probably be severely deoxygenated by the time they got him out. In our case, everybody just turned to me and they knew that I was the EMS guy on the rescue squad that knew how to work the tools and was also qualified as a firefighter. And I got in the back seat with a hose line with my gear on with a cutting tool, hydraulically powered cutting tool, and a bag valve mask and a small tank of oxygen. I established an airway. I ventilated the patient and in between ventilations extricated them. Cut the seat posts that were pinning them, and used the hydraulic cutting tool to accomplish the extrication while protecting them from fire, while simultaneously ventilating them while they're upside down and in agonal respirations. And we got them out and they were taken to the trauma center. And to me, that's an illustration of an all-hazards provider in practice, where we didn't have three agencies, we had one agency and a person who's properly trained to do whatever's necessary and can do it all at the same time. And I would much rather have been that patient in D.C. than in New York.

02:34:15**Amy Mauro**

Well. Thank you. Thank you for your time today. Thank you for your service to the department and the District of Columbia. The sacrifices you made, the contributions you made, particularly in the area of EMS. You're right. Change is incremental. We had our fair share of progress and then regression, and that's natural. But I would hope that this website is part of community education so that we can learn from the lessons of the past. So you're

sharing that as part of that. So thank you.

02:34:56**Rafael Sa'adah**

It's been my pleasure. And I'm really happy to participate in this oral history project. I think it's really important. And I think the more stories you get, the better it's going to be. And I know that you're casting a pretty wide net. I think that's important. History shouldn't be told [just] by the fire chief or by the principals, but very often the people in the trenches have really important stories to tell. And you've been behind the scenes for some of the most significant positive changes this department's ever experienced. And I thank you for your service as well. People don't give enough love to the civilian workforce, but I think you've demonstrated that somebody can bring a tremendous amount of wisdom and experience and really enhance the mission of the fire department by coming in not necessarily through a traditional pathway, but whose leadership has been really impactful nevertheless. So thank you for that.

02:35:59**Amy Mauro**

Thank you. I enjoyed our conversation and I will be in touch.

02:36:04**Rafael Sa'adah**

All right. You bet. See you later, Ames.