



MySafe:LA Podcast

Fire and Life Safety Education

Our mission: providing children, families, and seniors in Los Angeles with life-saving education, resources, and benefits.

Episode 10

LAFD AC, Donald Frazeur

(music)

Announcer: You're listening to a special edition of my safe LA's fire and life safety podcast. Remembering the North Ridge Earthquake 20 years later.

David: Hello and welcome to another podcast from MySafe:LA. Part of our fire and life safety education series. This is part of our special series on the North Ridge Earthquake from 1994. We're talking with Los Angeles city fire fighters who were part of the earthquake response and after math. Today I'm joined by assistant chief Donald Fraser who was a captain two at fire station 98 in the San Fernando valley. Which is where the earthquake was centered. Pleased to have you with us chief. How are you today?

Donald: Fine Dave. Thanks for coming out and talking.

David: So, you were at 98th. How long have you been a TFC? A task force commander?

Donald: I've been a captain two for two years at that point.

David: So you had some experience, the valley's busy. You're in a busy house. And then, January 17th 1994 comes along and..where were you that morning and what happened.

Donald: Well I was at home. We had a good shake. I live outside the city and I knew from the duration of the shake that some place we'd had a big earthquake. So, I checked my house and made sure that my family was good to go without me and headed into work. It was striking as I crested the 118 freeway coming into the valley it was almost surreal because there was a brush fire off to the north with no resources attending to it. The valley itself was dark. The entire valley was dark almost. Then there were fires that I can see. So, I knew that we were going to have, obviously a full day.

David: So, once you got to work..

Donald: Before I get to work I need to tell you that the one thing that I found striking as I drove the freeway is that every overpass I came to there was a bump and it's because the overpass and the freeway-it shifted. Finally as I came across the valley, every time I'd get to an overpass I'd slow down. The bumps were getting bigger. So, at Balboa I got off and it's a good thing because past there the freeway had come down.

David: Right.

Donald: And when I got off at Balboa of course we had a river of water because of the fire hydrant mains that were broken and then we had a natural gas transition line that had broken there. So we had a huge fed fire that exposed and burned I think it was about five homes in that neighborhood there. That's just what I saw coming into work.

David: Wow. So once you were you're relief obviously has been held over.

Donald: Right. I gathered my crew up at the station because 98th's isn't at the station their out of Worth and eventually we took what we call..it's a pick up truck and took the crew out and made relief at the scene of an incident 98th at that time was at a fire that involved about three houses in the city of San Fernando.

David: Wow.

Donald: But that was just one of many fires that they had been to since the incident. We took over at that point and finished extinguishment there and then proceeded with the balance of our shift.

David: So, as the skipper of a truck company. Where you stop [inaudible 00:03:58] there's a task force or light force. Now we're in degraded mode, or earthquake mode. So, what were your runs like, what were your calls like?

Donald: Well, we just started running to all kinds of calls. There were calls for fires, there were calls for medical assistance, calls for electrical shorts. But really one of the first things that I had to accomplish was to get fuel. Without electricity non of our fuel pumps worked. So, we actually fired up our generator and then energized a circuit at the station so that we could draw fuel from the tanks. The underground fuel tank.

David: Wow.

Donald: So.

David: Does anything from that particular day stand out? As being like I'm going tot remember that forever? Or is it the whole day?

Donald: Well, the whole day, but I guess there's some little things that really stick in my mind. We had initial fires at the earthquake. Then, given time we were able to deal with those fires. But, then as the electric circuits cycled back on we'd start getting fires also because there were shorts because of the... and you didn't know until they actually energized the circuit to see that. It was remarkable that day, but even more remarkable as time went on and we dealt with the aftermath. So, we ended up pumping into other grids so that we had water pressure and water to fight the fires.

David: My understanding is that about 1400 water mains became inoperable and companies were drawing from swimming pools and from tank [WA-GOTS 00:05:55].

Donald: Exactly. [crosstalk 00:05:58]

David: But you're still really concerned about your water supply because there's only so many gallons in a pool and only so many gallons in a tank.

Donald: Right, and fire truck carries 500 gallons. Which is about good for an auto fire. Not for a single family dwelling.

David: In some cases you'd have a triple. A single engine show up for a structure fire and they'd be it.

Donald: In the derated mode that means that you're not going to get a lot of help like we do normal day-to-day operations.

When you think about it we've got about one fire fighter for every four thousand occupants in the city on a day-to-day basis that's great. But, when you have a calamity where everybody needs help at once we're woefully understaffed at that time. That's where the preparation worked, the community emergency response teams come in to where they organize block by block to help people help themselves.

David: In a city like this it's really essential I would think to be able to make sure that the community knows that they're part of the solution.

Donald: Exactly. Community has to be self-reliant. So, that little bit of preparation that you can do ahead of time really pays off when there's nobody else left to help you.

David: Now, in your role currently as fire marshal, preparation and readiness and prevention are all hallmarks of what your bureau does. How ready is the city and what can we do, what can the community do to become better prepared?

Donald: Well, we've made great strides since the North Ridge Earthquake. We've improved our urban search and rescue response capability with specialized equipment and [TAPE 00:07:56] training teams. We have a FEMA response team that goes to emergencies around the country and is prepared for something here as well. Then of course, we can bring in resources from outside. But, there is a time delay before those resources can be mustered and it's that gap there that the community has to be self-reliant. So, the community emergency response teams, has done a lot of training with the civilians within the Los Angeles area and helping them get ready. But, it's that little bit of preparation that you can do, having water and supplies. Flashlight, having your shoes next to your bed. Things like that, that will make all the difference for you when the actual earthquake comes.

David: And it's going to come. I mean I don't know if it's tomorrow or in thirty years, but we're definitely-I mean we live in earthquake country right? So, this is part of where we live and what we do.

Donald: Yeah, I've been through two major earthquakes in my lifetime here in LA and the lots of smaller ones. Of course we watch around the world earthquakes happen all the time, everyday. So, it's just a matter of time here.

David: Before we wrap up. One interesting thing that we haven't really delved into with anyone else, but I'd be interested to get your feedback particularly since you are a deuce, a captain too. Firefighters love to talk around the table and firefighters all have families, for the most part and they're away from their families when something terrible happens like an earthquake or a flood. What was the table conversation like in the weeks following the earthquake? What were the impressions and reactions and emotions of your crew?

Donald: Well, it's interesting because everybody was affected different. I was fortunate because I lived away from the city. So, I felt at ease leaving my family. But, there were other firefighters that lived in the city that suffered devastating losses to their houses. They were rightfully concerned about the welfare of their family at the same time.

David: And this was a time when there were no cell phones really to speak of. No texting, no real internet connectivity. So, the ability to get in touch is much more difficult.

Donald: Exactly. Exactly. You know that's one of the things of being a firefighter. When you're gone from your family an extended period of time. 24 hours for a shift. You have to teach them to be self-reliant. Because you're not always going to be there. That's part of the preparation, as a fire fighter

that I did at the time and I did with my crew so that we were able to perform when the time came.

David: Well thank you for spending time with us. As we talk here at the shops for the LAFD in down town Los Angeles, we have a bit of traffic in the background, but great stories. I think what we're trying to accomplish is if you listen to all of the stories of all of the different firefighters they are all different and they are all.. they form a fabric. They form an educational kind of foundation about what we need to think about prior to having the next big earthquake. Chief, I greatly appreciate the time you've spent. If you want to learn more about what we're doing and fire life safety go to our website mysafela.org and you should always visit lafd.org to get the latest information from the Los Angeles city fire department. We look forward to having you join us on our next podcast here at my safe LA.

(music)

Announcer: You've been listening to a my safe LA fire and life safety podcast. My safe LA is a public education partner of the Los Angeles fire department. Visit us at mysafela.org and lafd.org.