



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 7

LAFD BC Greg Gibson

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.

Cameron: Hi everybody, this is [Cameron Barret 00:14] and you are tuned to another My Safe: LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. We're continuing with our January special podcasts which are remembrances of the North Ridge earthquake. Hard to imagine but that happened 20 years ago. Today we are joined by Battalion Chief [Gregg Gibson 00:33] of the Los Angeles Fire Department, a good friend of mine and a wonderful fire officer. Hi Gregg.

Greg: Hello, how you doing Cameron?

Cameron: I'm doing great, thanks. The reason we asked you on to talk about North Ridge is because you were a member of the Los Angeles Fire Department back in January 17, 1994, and you have probably some very interesting stories to tell about what that day was like. What was your rank and your assignment back then?

Greg: I was a captain, a station commander and I was assigned to fire station 64. To give you an idea where that's at, it's 108th and Main Street way down in South LA.

Cameron: Lot of folks think that the North Ridge earthquake hit North Ridge, but it was felt all over, wasn't it?

Greg: Absolutely. Of course it happened very early in the morning and the interesting aspect of earthquakes are not like the Santa Anna winds that blow in this area. They could be quiet mild where you're at but very violent in other parts in the city. Earthquakes, you'll feel them everywhere. You just don't know if you're at the epicenter or if it's somewhere else.

Cameron: Just after what, 4:30 in the morning is when the quake actually hit. What were you doing? Were you on duty at that time or were you getting ready to come into work your shift?

- Greg: Actually I was on duty. Of course working 24 hours I was asleep in bed. When it hit my first concern was all of the book shelves that were around me thinking, boy I should have thought of this a little earlier. Wondering if these things would be falling on me. Fortunately, that didn't take place, but immediately got up and got all my resources, all my personnel out of the station so that we could respond to anything and wouldn't be trapped by our own structure that we were in.
- Cameron: You know that's kind of an interesting point that you make because a lot of different things can happen to some of these fire stations that are around the city. Some of them are not the newest structures. The fire station that you were in, was it earthquake ready?
- Greg: Actually, it didn't sustain any damage but it was an older station. They've rebuilt it since that date. Again, you'd mentioned North Ridge, the station that was near the epicenter, they couldn't get out of the station because there was so much damage to that fire station.
- Cameron: We've spoken to a lot of fire officers that were on duty that day and there's really varying reports about how doors couldn't be opened because they'd been shaken off their tracks, and a lot of stuff. It sounds like you could go right into earthquake mode and get your people out of the fire station that early morning?
- Greg: Exactly the case, but no power, like all the other people in the area that we served. There was no power on so we opened the apparatus doors manually, got our apparatus out, shut them, and then went to survey our district as all our fire companies are directed to do.
- Cameron: Now, what was the reaction? You were in charge of a fire station. You were station commander at the time. That's like being a lieutenant on the ground as a marine, you're in charge of a small group of people. You're their leader, you're the boss. How did your crew react? Were they pretty controlled and calm about the situation or were there some pretty wide eyes?
- Greg: Well, I think everybody took it in stride. Obviously it was a pretty good shake even in south LA. We knew we'd had a pretty significant earthquake and like I mentioned previously, you never know how big it is because you don't know where the epicenter. We always are looking for information and eventually we found out where the epicenter was and how significant the damage was. In our area it wasn't as bad, however, we don't live in our area, and our immediate concerns are not only for our own safety and the people we serve, but our homes, and if they were in the target area.

Cameron: Tell me about that. Were you worried? Did you at the time live near the epicenter, were you trying to call your wonderful wife? Were you worried about your sons?

Greg: I think everybody felt the same as I did. Yes, we were concerned because trying to get information, you listened to radio. You turn on the radio that you may have. Now a days we have all kinds of communication; 20 years ago not quite the same. We were able to find out where the epicenter was and then we tried to call. Now think about that. How do you call?

Cameron: Yeah, that's something we should talk about. Tell me a little bit about that. What do you mean how do you call? You're telling me, the phones weren't working, were they?

Greg: No, they weren't. You couldn't use any phone in the fire station, we weren't getting anywhere with that. We were getting some information through our own fire department communications and getting a clear picture where some of the damage was, and seeing how wide spread it was. Of course, we all have cell phones now and everything else, but that wasn't the case 20 years ago. Fortunately some people did have some things and I was able to call home and find out that there was some damage, and everybody was OK, and that was all I needed.

Cameron: Then you could start concentrating on the people that you're in charge of taking care of in your first-end district. Tell us about your first-end back then. Was it a crowded, residential area?

Greg: Well, it's a bedroom community if you will. It's south Los Angeles. Older part of LA, bedroom community as I stated. Lot of chimneys so we had a lot of chimneys crack, or fall, or some damage in that respect. A lot of the calls going on were gas leaks as would be common during an earthquake.

Cameron: Now, what do you do for people? You're at this point trying to assess your district, you're trying to make sure there aren't really big problems happening, and if you check the district and there aren't any really big problems, what does a fire station crew do after an earthquake?

Greg: First is survey and see what damage. Now, we talked about a disaster, if you slam your finger with a hammer that's a disaster on a minor scale, if you will. If you have people crushed inside a structure, you have hospitals down, freeways down, the smashed finger takes a lower priority so you have to assess it from the standpoint of how much damage do I have, and do I have the biggest problem in the city? Because it has to be looked a little more globally than just what you're

looking at and you can't jump in and try to address things in your district knowing that you may be needed somewhere else.

Cameron: Yeah, and tell us about that because there are iconic disasters that happened that day. Everybody knows about North Ridge and their departments, and all that. You were pretty far away from there, you were down in south LA.

Greg: Yes, I was in south LA for probably an hour and by 6 a.m. I was already in the San Fernando Valley with most of my crew because obviously we assessed the city, we knew that there was damage throughout the city, but the biggest hazards were more in the San Fernando Valley, and like you mentioned, North Ridge. We had hill side homes collapse, we had structures down, obviously at Cal State North Ridge a lot of issues there, freeways had collapsed. We were pulled into the San Fernando Valley. Fire station 88 which is in Sherman Oaks and then we were dispatched out of there.

Cameron: Tell me some of the things that you guys did on that, no doubt, very long day. You were supposed to go off duty at about 6:30 in the morning. You obviously didn't.

Greg: That's exactly right. As most of the people were working that morning, we'd have been getting off but there's not going off when we have disasters like that. Matter of fact, people would come in from home just to see if they could, to augment our resources to help out. Yes, we were assigned structures in areas. They said could you assess this area, if you will, and see what kind of issues we have. You'd find apartment buildings crushed, you'd find houses collapsed on hill sides, there were rescues being done, and we were asked to not only assess the damage, but also to try to minimize it. As I mentioned prior, we'd have gas leaks. Well you can't just walk by those because if you leave those and some of these larger commercial occupancies, you have a much bigger hazard a little later on if the source ignites.

Cameron: True, a lot more fires than you originally have to deal with. Talk about fire after earthquake. It's a big deal. Was it a big deal 20 years ago?

Greg: It was and to something that I recall vividly. As the day progresses, as your assessing all the damage, as you're going from structure to structure, rescuing people, turning off gas when you can, seeing what you can do to eliminate some of the hazards, the city tries to come back to normalcy if you will. They're trying to get the power back on so certain neighborhoods where the power would be turned off because of this quake, were starting to come back on. Which was good and bad. It's nice to have your power, however, when you have a gas leak and it's 3 o'clock in the afternoon, almost 12 hours after the original quake, now

you have these fires starting to erupt because no one addressed the gas leaks in those houses.

Cameron: How can people be prepared for that kind of eventuality today? Because we know it's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when. Does everybody need to know how to turn off their gas and their water in their home?

Greg: You know what would be funny is if you ask them could they even find where the gas shut off is for their home, their water, and electrical. Show me on your house where it's at. Most people would say I have no idea. So going back to your original question, absolutely. You need to one, find out where it's at. Where is your main water shut off? Where is your electrical panel? Where is your gas shut off? Then, how do you turn it off? How can you systematically turn it off? How can you make sure that you're doing it correctly? It's a very simple task but most people don't take the time to just learn the basics.

Cameron: They have to do that before the earthquake strikes.

Greg: Obviously, yes.

Cameron: Obviously.

Greg: Yeah, going to Costco to get all that water is great but not having any when the quake hits is always an issue.

Cameron: What about a majority of people in Los Angeles, especially in the city, don't live in homes, they live in apartment buildings. How can an apartment dweller help with the issue of gas leaks, and water hazards, and that kind of thing after earthquakes?

Greg: At some point you really have to evaluate your own personal situation. Are you in a high rise building? Are you in a mobile home? Two very different structures and how would you address those things? One, how could you get out? One of them you can walk out your front door. The other one you either walk down the stairs, and if there's no power you can't use the elevators. One, do you have shoes, do you have clothes, do you have stuff that you can do? Do you have equipment to assist with that? Yes, there's gas shut offs at apartment buildings.

Obviously in the major commercial occupancies, there's professionals on usually 24 hours a day that can assess those things, and we can assist with that. But if you're living in an apartment building, let's say three or four stories, they're usually on one side or at the back of the building.

Cameron: Los Angeles Fire Department tells folks that they need to be able to survive and take care of themselves for at least 72 hours after a major

disaster. Can you give us some details? Why 72 hours? What does it mean, you need to be able to take care of yourself?

Greg: Well, the city of Los Angeles, what is it in round figures 500 square miles, 4 to 5 million people, which depending on whenever the earthquake hits that just like New York City it's going to swell during business hours. We just had one this morning, an earthquake that was in Fontana, didn't impact LA, but we all felt it and we did go into earthquake mode. Trying to get fire stations, 106 of them, and X amount of people on duty at one time trying to assist 4 million people. It can't be done.

Cameron: Yeah, plus during work hours. North Ridge, it struck at 4:30 in the morning. You were at work but not the majority of folks that work in LA. It can swell by 2 million people during the work day, can't it?

Greg: Exactly.

Cameron: Yeah, so how do you do that? 106 fire stations, a little over 3,000 fire fighters, 1,000 on duty at any given time. How do you manage to take care of that many people in that many square miles?

Greg: Well, we can't do it alone, obviously. We need the assistance of the civilians themselves. Day in and day out, you call 9-1-1 we're there within five minutes or less, and usually that's what we shoot for. Obviously in a disaster everything changes. We need everybody to work with each other. Neighborhoods have to work with neighborhoods, people have to work with people. Let's be honest, not everybody is in need of an emergency. Not everybody needs our assistance, but the ones that do, you need to evaluate going through programs like the fire department's officer's cert program so you can learn these basic skills and maybe even more advance skills to help do things that we can't even get to you.

Think about this, what if the roads are blocked and I can't even physically get my apparatus to your house? What then?

Cameron: These are the kinds of things that people need to think about now? They need to have escape plans, they need to have gear, and food, and survival items on hand so they can be without professional help for a certain amount of time. We live in earthquake country and that's just the reality that we need to prepare for that.

Let's go back 20 years. Let's go back to the North Ridge earthquake. Tell me what would you as a firefighter, as a captain, what would you have done differently if you could? Is there anything that stands out that says, wow, if I had done this it would have been better? Or if I hadn't done

something there would have been a disaster. Is there anything that stands out to you?

Greg: Well, going back to my original statement, there I was asleep like all of us were at 4:30 in the morning. I have these books, volumes, all around me. I gave the example of hitting your finger with a hammer. Well a book falling on you and hurting you, is really not that big of a deal, but it does nag at you all day long. What if I'd just taken the normal precautions of securing that shelf and making sure if it did shake, nothing does fall down. Fortunately I wasn't injured, but all of us have stuff around us. I'm sure if you look at your own bedroom, or your own office, whatever, we have cabinets, glass, chandeliers, there's all kinds of stuff around us, and if something does shake, you could be injured. But if you have to go on for 72 hours, if you could have avoided that one minor injury right off the bat, then you wouldn't be limited in doing what you needed to do. The first thing is, take care of the basics, take care of your immediate surrounding and where you live. Where you sleep, then move on from there.

Cameron: This is a big question.

Greg: Yes?

Cameron: Are we ready for the next earthquake? We meaning the community. The very large community of Los Angeles and the fire department. Are we ready?

Greg: That's a tricky question. I think a lot of people respond tremendously, heroically even to what we need to do. A lot of people have already taken precautions. They have water, they have taken training, they know what they're going to do. Many others haven't. So when you say it in such a broad term, are we ready? We as a city are a lot better off than others but we still have issues so we all have to take care of each other on that one.

Cameron: How about the fire department? You guys train 24/7 for this kind of thing. You guys are ready, yeah?

Greg: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Cameron: Well that's comforting. We should end on a comforting note since we're spending this whole month doing North Ridge earthquake remembrances and there are some dark stories. So for Battalion Chief Gregg Gibson and myself I'm saying goodbye on a very positive note. Thanks so much for joining us for this My Safe: LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. Stay tuned, we're going to be interviewing a lot more first responders about the North Ridge earthquake.

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