What EMS Sees That No One Talks About | From Addiction to Recovery

Show: Warriors Heart Podcast
Episode: 6
Guest(s): RJ (NYC EMS)
Published: 2026-03-25
Duration: 1:58:12
YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CX6KjvDuZ_g
Apple Podcasts: https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/what-ems-sees-that-no-one-talks-about-from-addiction/id1852332254?i=1000757348806
Spotify: not found

Note: This transcript comes from YouTube's automatic captions and has not been edited. It may contain transcription errors, speaker names are not identified, and line breaks only approximate changes of speaker. "[__]" marks words YouTube filtered out. Timestamps are approximate.

Transcript

[00:05] So, welcome back to the Warriors Sire podcast. I don't know why I say welcome back. It's not like we cut to commercial or anything, but we're here with another episode and we got R.J. Downey. Man, I'm so glad that you're here. Uh you're one of my favorite guys here lately. Uh your joy for life, your countenance if you would, you know, the the light that has returned to your eyes, your happiness and everything, your laugh especially is contagious. Thank you. Uh I'm glad that you're here, man. Uh so we're going to have a little bit of a chat today about our respective backgrounds, yours specifically and your journey through sobriety. So, uh yeah, thanks for being with us, man. I appreciate it. It's an honor to be here. Yeah. So, what is Let me ask this. I got to know. What does R.J. stand for? Richard Jr. Richard Jr. I got a funny story about that one if you want.

Tell me. Hit it. I just um me and my because my dad's Rick Sr. So, um I got get through the uh EMS Academy for the New York City Fire Department and one of my dad's friends is a big chief or whatever and uh he goes to introduce me. He's like, "Yeah, Chief, I'm Big Dick and this is Little Dick." Nice. Richard Jr. Do you got it?

[01:17] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. I'm not that old. Oh, okay. All right, yeah. I may be slow to laugh at stuff. So, Richard Jr. So, every I'm like every time someone asks me I think of that story. Nice.

Yeah, it's kind of interesting. That's a good tie-in. One of my buddies on patrol arrested an L.B. Jr., right? L.B. whatever his last name was Jr. And back in the day if you did not put a name on the birth certificate it was L.B. for little boy or L.G. for little girl, right?

Really? And this guy's dad didn't have a name, so he just went by L.B. all of his life and named his son L.B. Jr. Oh, wow. L.B.J. Crazy, anyway. So, you're from New York, yeah?

Yes. Well, tell me a little bit about your background as far as like uh service and whatnot.

Okay. So, um I worked for the New York City Fire Department. I got on through the EMS uh side. So, there's two ways cuz it's a big department. You can get on the EMS way and then you can go to paramedic and then go to lieutenant on that side. You can stay an EMT or you can get on through the fire side and then you can go to rescue or whatnot. So, I was on the EMS side. I got you. How long were you on? Uh right around 5 years or so. No [__] 5 years. New York City EMS. New York City, yep. Bet that was a slow day, wasn't it? Oh, yeah. It was real slow. I No. Um it was busy cuz I got on during COVID. Um So, our academy got pushed out due to COVID.

[02:52] Mhm. And um it was hectic right off the bat. Um there was a lot going on at all times and eventually it started slowing down, but um it was, you know, if I did my first shift ever was supposed to be uh 12 hours and I was there for 20. Yeah. Um

Oh, wow. and it was like that in the beginning a lot. I did a lot of overtime, a lot of extended my shift cuz I was a new guy, I was the probie. Sure. So, um I was on the bottom pole. They were calling me in a lot. Um I did a lot of work, especially in the beginning. Um and then I end up getting hurt on the job and then that's kind of where things started really spiraling for me. Let me ask you this. Did you ride ambulance or did you ride with the fire department or Uh so, I rode ambulance. Yeah.

Um Yeah. Um but the fire side also responds to a lot of calls. Um been in a couple stations where they're both together. Mhm. Um it was um it was a journey. Um a lot of times they would get there first and then we would take it over or, you know, um from them. And or if it was a car accident, they'll be there, we'll be there, you know, uh we work like hand in hand. If there's a fire, we're there, you know, um Yeah.

[04:15] Some of our guys are rescue medics and they go and they go into um the fire, also. So you got a pretty good bit of medical training. Yeah. Yeah, I learned very quickly. Um you know, I I worked in uh station 54. Um it was in uh Springfield Gardens, Queens. Mhm. Uh I got relocated to the Rockaways a lot. Um they uh I got I learned pretty quick on the job, you know, especially with the whole COVID thing. Well, hopefully you'll still remember some of that. I mean, due to my advanced age and all, if I happen to have any medical issues over here, you got me, right?

got you.

Okay.

I got no problem. Yeah, thanks. You know, if you pull your back out, I got you. That That'll probably happen when I stand up in a minute, so. Happens to me, too, now. It's okay. Anyway, uh family history of uh service, right?

Yeah, so my um grandpa on my dad's side was a bomber pilot in the Korean War in the Air Force. Yeah, he was in a class with Buzz Aldrin, I think. Yeah. Yeah, um actually two-thirds of his class uh died. Um yeah, one of the three survived. Yeah, and then he became a captain for United uh Airlines. And then he flew He was a big to do. He flew around Richard Nixon during his campaign. Was friends with Muhammad Ali. Flew Pittsburgh Steelers, Patriots, Yankees. Um yeah, he was and then my dad uh followed those footsteps. He became a pilot in the Air Force after the Kings Point Merchant Marine Academy. Um and then he backed out of being a pilot. My grandpa talked him out of it. He said it was the biggest regret that he has, you know. Mhm.

Um and then he applied to like all the civil service jobs that he got me to apply to and he's a really smart dude, so he got in everywhere. And he kept turning things down and then the fire department called him and you know, he was getting a little bit older. He was He was like 20 29 when he got on the job. Oh. So old. Yeah. You know, it's elderly. At that point, yeah. Sign him up for AARP at the same time. But in that world, I mean, the older you get going through, you know, basic, you know, like Chris Kyle for example was 30 when he went to buds and he was the old man.

[06:43] It's just a bunch of kids in there, so. Even though that's not old in my book, that is, you know, going to an academy. And it's a little bit older than most of the cadets that are going to be there, right? Was he the oldest one? Uh no, actually. So with the fire department, it take it's really hard to get into, right? So Um a lot of guys have to go to the military first and then they get those bonus points and then they get on. Like a lot of guys that I know are late 20s that get on. Got you. Um there's a few that get on early. It all depends cuz then you get city points, too. Sure. If you live in the city and whatnot. Um uh my dad just he was adamant that I took the test. I'm grateful he did it, you know. Um He made me take everything. You can sign up at 17 and a half. So I was working a fuel dock at that time and there was a computer I'll never forget it. He He was not having me delay it like I was trying to cuz I'm I was 17. I didn't You know what I mean? I'm like I don't know what the what I'm doing. And he was like, "Yeah, no, you're signing up for everything right now." And I took all the tests and whatnot. I ended up getting called for NYPD. Um and FDNY. You could have been a real hero, but you chose fire department instead. Yeah. Okay. Yeah, I wanted to follow my father's footsteps, you know? Um and well, I don't have the heart to like, you know, cuz I I'm very much like my dad.

[08:15] My dad could have been a Suffolk County cop and

Yeah. They're the highest paid cops in the country. Are they really?

Yeah, by far. And um and I took it what he said, you know, he was right. He was like, "I don't have the heart to give somebody a ticket, you know?" Or like and I don't either, you know? I kind of I won't be able to do that, you know? There there are some hard aspects to being law enforcement and in retrospect me and Aaron joke about it all the time we should have went to the fire academy, you know? But he uh so he how long was he a uh a fireman? Uh he got on in 1989. He did 26 years.

26?

Yeah, he went through 9/11. Oh, wow. Jeez. Yep. Yeah. Yeah, um and he loved every bit of it. Um he loved the job. Um he loved it more than I did. Um you know, I wasn't really like into it, you know? Um I never like there's volunteer fire departments on Long Island. I I was never really interested in it. I just you know, got on cuz it was you know, I didn't really have much going for me, to be honest with you. Um kind of I think I I was still in college when I accepted it, but um you know, it was a route to get on and my dad really wanted me to do it and so I did it. Yeah. What was your game plan or did you have one? Did you have anything that you wanted to be? End goal was the Marine Division. Um I could really uh care I'm really big into boating. Um I grew up on on the bay, you know, so on Long Island. Um people everyone here thinks I live in New

York City and New York is just New York City, but it's not. It's um it's actually a really beautiful place to live. Um so I would have had the end to get into the Marine Division. Of the fire department?

[10:11] Of the fire department, yeah.

But that's still involved in the fire department. Yeah. So did you have like a a path that you wanted to go like you wanted to be a sailor or you wanted to work on a ship or anything like that before you diverted to the fire department? Yeah. Um I always I I wish I went to I kind of wish I applied myself in high school a little bit more. Um cuz school like came easy to me and I was so I was a big hockey player. Mhm. Major hockey. I loved hockey and I was really like really really good at it. I was a goalie. You know, I was a little bit skinnier back then. Yeah. Me too. Yeah. And um I actually had a coach tell my mom one time uh his name was Pete. Was like if uh if you get your kid into training, you know, we we'd probably watch him on TV. Oh, wow. Yeah. I I would play in tournaments um all around. Um did it I was on like four hockey teams at once, you know, every day it was just hockey. If it wasn't if I wasn't involved in hockey and I wasn't fishing, I just wasn't interested in anything. Got you. Um and I I do kind of wish I applied myself more in school. That's why I'm doing it now. Well, that's good. It is good that you're getting back on track, right? And I understand the family pressure. You know, family pressure it depends on the family. You know, you talk to somebody that's like fourth generation railroad, you know, four generations of their family have worked on the railroad. In my family, my dad and his dad were welders, you know? Oddly enough though, my dad he did not want us to follow in his footsteps cuz you know, he worked on high steel and stuff like that, you know, back in the '70s and '80s and he'd see guys die on the job all the time.

[11:50] And he didn't want that for us. So, he wanted us to go into something else, safer. So, my two brothers went in the military and I was a cop. That's a lot safer. Yeah, exactly, right? But, the family dynamic is still there. You know, we we want to share what we love with our children and want our children to love it. So, I get the idea that your dad wanted you to be in the fire department, but he also wanted you to have good career and a good job to have a good firm foundation in life as you move forward and maybe even retirement and whatnot. Yeah. You know? Yeah, uh that just wasn't where you wanted to go, right? Well, so it it's like hard to like wrestle with, right? Cuz like the only time I ever wanted to be on the fire department was when I was on the fire department, you know, like growing up like did I have little aspirations to do it? Yes, but I didn't like I wanted to be a phys ed teacher in the beginning, you know, like primarily when I went to school at first, right? Um it wasn't until I got on that I wanted to go to that side, the fire side, and um if I don't you know, I I had a lot of struggles when I got hurt Mhm. um on the job and it kind of spiraled from there for me, but um yeah, I don't really know to this day if I wasn't like thrilled about it, right? You know, like my dad was. Like that kind of job you need to like absolutely love. Oh, yeah. You know what I mean? And I wasn't like gung ho about it like he was, you know, um or some of the buddies were.

[13:27] Just wasn't really for me, to be honest with you. You know, there's there's different aspects of each job that people like and don't like, you know, when I heard on with the sheriff's

office, started off in the jail. Did not really want to work in the jail. Wanted to get into another division, but kind of like you're talking about, you got to work your way to that, right?

Yeah. But what matters most is you answered the call, right? Uh, and you did it for 5 years. And you could have, you know, you know, ditch the whole thing. You could have went a completely different direction, rebelled, whatever, but you still answered the call. And that's what matters most. And 5 years during COVID, that'd have been rough, yeah? Yeah, it was pretty rough. Um, and and especially in the beginning, you know, I was like 20 or 21. Mhm. And, you know, I didn't I didn't know anything. Uh, yeah, I lived in a great neighborhood, you know. Yeah.

Um, and then seeing all that stuff, you know, I actually lost my faith in God at that point. I remember I still don't remember the call, but I remember something pretty horrific. Obviously, for me to say this, I looked at my partner, I said, "There's no way there's a [__] God. If there is, I don't really want to be near him." Um, and then I started having like hatred for a lot of things. Uh, I was like more angry. I I would get more angry when I was home, like, and the first thing I would do is like crack a beer, you know. Um, it was uh, it was rough. There was a lot of dead bodies, you know. I saw There's a good amount of child abuse I saw in there. A lot of messed up car accidents, motorcycle accidents, yeah. Yeah. We won't don't worry, we won't delve too deep into that, but we will expand on that a little bit, right? EMS, uh, law enforcement officer, right? A lot of times we work hand-in-hand together, yeah. You know, you get called out, we get called out, vice versa, you know? Uh, so we show up on the same scene scenes and see the same stuff. And I can understand where you're coming from with that, with the the faith in God part of it. It challenges the faith. It really does. I mean, you see so much death and pain and corruption in the world and so many horrendous things, you know, that it just it shakes you to the core. Yeah. And it's it's hard to understand unless you're going through it, you know? Um and we can expound a little bit later on how maybe that mindset has changed a bit. But uh I watched a movie the other night.

[15:46] Have you seen a movie called Code 3? I've heard of it. Yeah. This guy Rainn Wilson in it, uh the guy from The Office, and it was billed as a comedy and there were some funny things in it. But, man, uh if for reference

EMS movie.

It's the EMS movie.

Yeah, I haven't seen that yet, but I heard it's spot on. I would say you should watch it, uh but at the same time you shouldn't watch it. You know what I mean? And I say that because there were several scenes in there that uh damn near triggered me, you know? Uh and there were he talks to the camera a lot about the in and out of an EMS worker on a daily basis, you know, just not really having time to process anything from call to call to call, seeing all this horrendous stuff, and then working overtime your first shift was supposed to be 12 hours, 20 hours, right?

Yeah. You know, just that constant daily grind uh it's it's hard to have faith in humanity when you see the darkest side of every day. And that movie really showcases it very well, but at the same time it's a real gut punch for anybody that's been there. So, I would say don't watch it yet. But, if anybody really wants to see a little bit of the taste of an EMS worker's daily grind, should.

They should watch that movie. There was another movie that I watched actually one time I was at Lakeside. Somebody told me to watch it. I wish I never did. Um it was about a FDNY paramedic trying to be a doctor. Mhm. And it was on Hulu. Mhm. And you're when I saw that, I mean, they were really spot on and it was it kind of messed with me a little bit, you know? Yeah, and you know, for guys like us, and I say guys like us having had to come to a place like Warrior's Heart, and we're going to get into that journey. But, for guys like us that have had have sunk so low and been affected by the job so much that we have to come to a place that really speaks to what we see, but most people maybe we talk about it and they don't really fathom it seeing it on a movie like that or maybe watching the new TV show The Pit or something like that kind of gives them an idea.

[17:45] Yeah, but the lived experience is just different. It's different. It really is different. Um However, it's a chapter in our life and it brings us to where we need to be in some ways or another. And it brought you here, right?

And let's let's talk a little bit about that journey. Now, you mentioned you'd, you know, get off and crack a beer. How bad did it get for you? So, it got um it it was really bad. My whole career was kind of a mess after that. Um I I got hurt and I had a really bad back. Um I was in a back brace for 9 months. Mhm. Um and also because one day I was coming home from physical therapy and someone T-boned me. Oof. Uh blue stop sign and broke a couple of floating ribs to two of the floating ribs on my right side. Um I was getting back injections every week. Um and I it got real bad when I So, FDNY they have a medical office for us in Brooklyn. It's called MetroTech. And I go there and he looks at my MRI and I'm not really getting that much better, you know, at all. I'm in a lot of pain. And he looks at me, he's like, you might have to we might have to retire you. And I'm like, what? You know, I was like two two years on the job and

[19:07] Two years on the job and they're talking retirement.

a Yeah, like you're maybe in a year and a half Yeah. It was real bad.

Was it like a lifting injury or something like that?

Yeah. And then but then from after that car accident, too. Oh, yeah. And I was already sinking mentally at that point. Cuz I was just sitting at home, you know.

Mhm. And then when he told me that, I like totally gave up on I didn't care about anything. Um Um you know, I was destroyed. I mean Yeah, 2 years into that career, not just the physical injury, but those 2 years you probably have seen more traumas than most people would see in a lifetime.

Yeah.

You know, maybe even more than some soldiers would see in a life, you know, in a career or a short career. Yeah. I mean, especially working EMS in New York City, man. Jeez. So, you have that that you're carrying as well as now you have this injury, right?

Yeah, so that was one thing I've never I didn't know how to talk about was when I got hurt and then I kind of had like time to process stuff and I didn't want to process it. You know what I mean? Yeah. Um it was kind of just like forced upon me in a way. I don't know how to describe

it. I would have these dreams and uh like night sweats from it, you know, waking up like screaming kind of, you know, and I had that problem my whole even till the last time I came here. Mhm. Um but yeah, I fell really hard mentally. I didn't want to think about any of that stuff. Um fell into the wrong crowd of guys. I started drinking and doing other things. Really like I would not stop drinking. Um It was I would drink all day from when I Let's say I woke up one morning, right? I would drink all day and do other things. Cocaine. I was doing cocaine at all. Um and then I would go out and party at the bars. Come back to my house. We would party all night. And then I would go on my buddy's boat all day drinking. And then go out and party and like virtually no sleep. Wow. You know, um and out of nowhere it went from fun to like severe depression. Oh, yeah. Um was isolating really bad.

[21:37] Um I didn't want to do anything. I was suicidal. I actually went to I went to a bridge. And I was about to jump out and I looked at the water and then I saw a car coming. And I'm like, "Okay, I'll get back in my car." And I had like no emotion about it. Like zero emotion. Did not care. Um It was really rough and that's where I I ended up going to treatment for the first time. After that. And And that's the thing about substance use, you know. Initially, yeah, it feels good. It's fun. We're partying. We're having a good time. Everybody wants to be around us, right? And yeah, I'm looking back on some of my days and there were some good times with it. But what started it? Suppression. Suppressing the memories, suppressing the thoughts, the nightmares. Initially, everybody thinks it makes it better. That's how they cope. But it comes roaring back with a vengeance, right? It just keeps building and building and building. And it's got to be dealt with at some point. All right? Yeah. Can't delay it forever. No. And I thought I could. You know, cuz I grew up in a firehouse, basically. And anytime my dad was off, you know, um he would drink. Yeah.

[22:51] You know what I mean? Um and all his buddies, too. Like every fire department event I went to, there was booze. So that's kind of it was like normal, you know? Um

That's the culture. It's culture. You drink. And I'm Irish, man. Yeah. You know, uh we drink and we drink hard. Yeah, firemen are tough, but you know, not as tough as cops, you know. I'm going to get my ass kicked at some point. Someone's going to kick my ass for that. Anyway, but you know, firemen are tough, right? We Yeah. But we're that type of personality anyway. We got this [__] We're the ones that people call cops, firemen, EMS, etc. when when [__] goes wrong. So, we got this, right? That's always the mentality. Yeah. Yeah. And bury it and bury it and bury it. Yeah. Um and I I couldn't anymore. Um not everything was about the fire department for you with drinking. All right, like I full out know I had a problem beforehand. Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I definitely had a problem beforehand. It just didn't get that bad yet. It escalated it. It like It's almost like a speedometer, right? Like I was very much on my way towards alcoholism, but then getting on the fire department it's like it's No, ramped Ramped it up. Yeah. Real quick. Uh like that. Cuz I remember being at work and I'm like, what the hell am I Like, what did I just sign myself up for? Mhm. Right? Cuz I I see the glory, you know, and I'm like this is bad. Yeah. You know? Um and I hated it. I hated seeing despair in kids. Um especially like that always messed me up. With children.

[24:32] Um and uh and immediately I didn't want to think about it. I don't like I it let's go drink, you know? Let's go handle this like a man, you know? So, um yeah. So, where'd you go to treatment the first time? So, I actually this is wild. I called one of um the drill instructors that I had and we were like friends, right? And he's like, "Downey, you you you [__] up right now?" And I'm like, "No, no, I'm just drunk." And I was coming back from a casino. Like, when I get drunk, I gamble for some like badly, like really bad. I don't know what I say. Half the time I don't remember it. Um and uh and he's like, "Are you on like pills or something?" And I'm like, "No, no, no." And uh but it was alcohol and coke, right? Um pretty bad. And um And then I ended up calling him later cuz I I swore to myself I would stop right then and there. I couldn't, man. I was having the shakes.

[25:33] How often does that work? We all do it, right?

Yep. Yeah. And then I called him and then I talked to some union rep that we have. And uh he listed off the names and he and somewhere like the fire department has they call it the farm, right? Um so, I guess regular people wouldn't know what people were talking about on the job. You know, keep it discreet. And uh he listed all these names and then I heard, "But we have a really nice one in California." I said, "Send me there so I don't change my mind." Smart. Yep. And uh my dad was in Boston with my brother cuz my brother went to school up there. He's real smart. He went to some fancy school up there. I don't remember the name.

They all happen to you, then. I I know. I got my mom's side of the genes, man. My brother got my dad's side. Uh my dad's side is like extremely smart. They all went to You ever hear of King's Point? King's Point? Merchant Marine Academy. It's like West Point. Okay.

[26:35] dad's side went there. And but yeah, I got my mom's genes. But uh so, my dad was up there and I convinced my mom not to tell my dad. I was so ashamed. Um like, I didn't want him to know until I was there. You know, and uh before I left, too, like I was like, "Look, I'm still drinking when I get back. You know, this is just for the other stuff, right?" Um Yeah. I'm laughing to myself cuz I know the drill, yeah.

Yeah, yeah, you know, and and I remember her looking at me sideways, and I'm like, "Okay, yeah." And I get on the plane, and I'm in Detroit now, right? And my dad calls me crying, and he's like, "I'm so proud of you." Cuz he knew I had a problem, you know, my mom did, too, at this point. I was you know, um how bad my drinking got if I I can elaborate on that a little bit. Um Right, I would have I bought a funnel. Um and I would shotgun Twisted Teas. I would put them I would chug like a 12-pack of those. I'd kill a bottle or two a day and probably a 12-pack of beer, and that was just alcohol, you know.

[27:47] Yeah. Um for like a drinking session. Sometimes I would double that through a day, you know. So, but I get to Detroit, and my dad was like, "I'm so proud of you, blah blah blah." And I almost turned around. Yeah. If he didn't call me, I was coming back. You know, I was like, "Screw this. Like, what am I getting myself into, you know?" I'm just going to throw a little tidbit right there.

Yeah. That was God showing up for you. Probably.

I'm going to leave that right there. We'll we'll circle back around to it.

Okay. But go ahead. Yeah, so I uh Oh, wow, thanks. Yeah. And and I get to California, and my detox was really bad. So bad

imagine, yeah.

Yeah, I was there for 10 days. Oof. I didn't think I was that bad off, but I was that bad off. Like, my they touched my liver one They touched my liver, and it was swollen. My blood and I had a like a seizure there, too. Um I my blood pressure was in 200 over like one a little over 200. Yeah, um I couldn't like function, dude, for like 10 days. That's what this stuff does. Yes, legal. Everybody does this. It's part of the does the same thing. It's part of the culture, right? Drinking one of the guys, but it's poison. Every bit of it is poison. Whether it's the Coke, the Adderall, the the the booze. You know, pouring it all in like that and your body was responding. It was tapping out saying, "Leave me the hell alone." Yeah. Like stop. Yeah.

[29:15] Yeah, stop it. Yeah. And it was scary. Mhm. You know, um I actually talked to my mom about that a while ago. I didn't I never knew cuz I got close to one of the detox people and I never knew she'd call my mom like out of concern for me. Oh, wow. Yeah, cuz I was I don't I don't remember how old I was. Young. I I started trying to get sober right after I saw that doctor. Uh it was like a few months after that. So, I was like 22 23 22 probably, right? And uh so I ended up going to um they had two houses. It was nothing like Warrior's Heart. It was um just a big fancy house and there was six guys in there. On the beach? Uh no, in the hills of LA. Oh, nice. But then we went on trips and stuff like Malibu Beach, Redondo Beach and

Oh, nice. Yeah, it was more luxury than anything. I But I also wasn't hearing anything. Right? I'm like still like out of my mind. I'm stressed out about like the fire department. Um cuz all this was like like I just wanted to keep my dad happy, too. All right? And we'll get into that a little bit more uh as we go on with this.

[30:30] Sure. But um so I left and I came back. Um went to work for a little bit again. How long Let me ask this real quick. How long was that program? Uh 30 days plus 10 days, so 40 days. So, 30-day program after the detox portion of it.

Yeah. Yeah. And then went right back to to New York. Right back to New York, right back into the [__]

Mhm. Um obviously did not work. Um, this is a continuous cycle for me, you know? Um for I put myself through and my family uh, through a lot of pain uh, through these past 4 years. Yeah, um, so then I would basically what I did for a while and the fire department treated me very, very well. That's good. Yeah.

A lot of departments don't.

Yeah, FDNY Mhm. like helped me like so much. Um like I'm blessed, you know? Um I would go back to work for a little bit. Um, relapse real hard, not the first time I didn't try AA. Um actually first few times, you know? This is a rough road for me. Um I wouldn't go to AA, I'd fall back, I would go back. Um so the second time I went back to that same facility um they knew that I was uh, first responder and uh, the therapist goes, "How come you don't talk about your job?" Or anything to do with it. And I said, "It Cuz in my head I'm like, "You're going to look at me

sideways. You have no idea cuz I like when I talk about it, like when I used to talk about it, I'm a lot better with it now, but I'd be real angry. That's the way I talked about it.

[32:24] Mhm. You know? Uh, that's the only way I knew how to process it. Um takes a lot to get it out of me. And uh, I'm like, "You want to hear it? Fine. Let's get into it." And uh, and then she looked at me and she goes, "Yeah, I can't. I can't help you. You need to go to a first responder facility." That's a That's a common thing, right?

Yeah. I want to expand on that a little bit in my in my journey, a little tidbit of my journey. I went to a counselor once and, you know, I told her the type of things that I, you know, I needed to go to counseling for. I said, "I'm a juvenile sex crimes detective working internet stuff." Um she's like, "Well, you can't talk to me about that kind of stuff." And I'm like, "Well, I'd never, you know, give you like pertinent information, you know, reveal anybody's identity." She's like, "No, you can't even describe the cases. I just can't do it." And okay, thank you. I went to another counselor. I respected her for having that boundary, but it it it illustrates that there there is a boundary for a reason because a lot of the stuff that we see and do as first responders is just is difficult, right? It's difficult for us to deal with. It's extremely impossible for us to deal with. It's difficult for others to hear. So, finding treatment for somebody it is difficult, you know, when they have that background. There's a lot of places that have first responder tracks, right? But are they culturally competent? Have they done the job? One of the first clinic I was here 5 and 1/2 years ago, one of my clinicians not only was she from Louisiana, but she also was a cop that worked juvenile sex crimes, right? Yeah. So, and I've seen her, you know, within the past year as a patient as well. Um and we have some other clinicians that are, you know, a a background that can handle it is what I'm getting at. But that was a a challenge for you. Mhm. Trying to find a place that cuz your experience in that place was Yeah.

[34:18] They they could They told you up front, I can't help you. Well, not up front, but they said I basically can't help you. Yeah, which was scary. Um cuz when I dove into it and then she told me she couldn't help me, at first cuz I was also young, I'm like, is this fixable? You think you're broken completely. Broken completely, and I'm like, I didn't even It wasn't like I did 20 years of this, you know, I'm you know, like my dad or anything. I'm like, man, so they sh- They sent me on a plane. Wow. Across back to the East Coast, and I'm at like I forget the name of it. Someplace in Maryland, like First Grace or something like that.

Mhm. Some kind of place, and um they had They lied to me on the phone. I'm going to just say it straight up. This is only a first responder facility and military. Not true at all. Um it was half and half, right? So, civilians and then first responder military. First responder. Oh, dude. Yeah, and it was like we were cooped up, like we had it up We had leftovers from like a restaurant, like and then they would pick us up in a bus from an complex, bring us to a facility. Um we get in groups, like first responder groups. We had our own groups, you know? But it was like And then you just like sit there when you're not There was no activities, you know? Um to get stuff off your mind You know what I mean? Like this place. Um And it was just not a great experience. I did like my counselor a lot um there. She She was very nice. Um but other than that, I didn't have a good experience there, either. Well, you have to be engaged. You have to be doing. You have to be working, you know, to fix something. It's like going to the range and just standing there. You

know, you're not going to get You're not going to be a better shot until you fire the weapon. And with this recovery business, getting all this stuff off our chest, you got to dig deep. It's painful, though. It's the hardest thing I've ever done, to be honest with you. Um but it's also the best thing in my life, you know?

[36:29] Um, like I can get into that a little bit later if you like, but Well, yeah, we got to He can't tell the bad without the good, brother. That's why you're here. And that's the main thing about it is there is a good part of it, right? But, you know, so you went to the place in California, you went to back to the East Coast, didn't work out? Didn't work out. Um, and then I was working at the academy for a while. I worked under the captain. Mhm. And uh which was a cool gig. That was cool. Paper [__] I literally answered his phones and stuff. Yeah, and then I would get everyone I was the breakfast dude, you know? And we had a It's just like at the station, you know, like total like normal firehouse like gig, you know? Yeah, we had the substation. We drive the same thing. You know, we'd talk [__] about them, too. You know what I mean? Yeah. It was great. I loved the captain. Um, I he was fantastic uh stand-up dude. Um, actually probably one of my favorites. And but I would get breakfast for everybody. Um, so I got in like a little groove there. It was an easier transition. Um, but then once again, here's a common theme, I don't go to meetings. Mhm. I I stopped going to meetings, actually. I did try that time. I stopped going to meetings. Um, you know, I lost my parents' trust with full understanding. Um, and I was getting really frustrated with that. Um, cuz I would lie all the time, you know, like I destroyed anything trust-wise.

[38:05] Um, and and then I fell down again, and I fell down real bad. That That was like the first time that was like astronomically worse, like morally-wise. Um, and uh and then I had to go to treatment again, which this time was Warriors Heart. Um and I watched the video and I'm like, "Wow." You know, the Amazon video?

Mhm. Mhm. And I'm like, "Okay, you know, um The documentary Warriors Healing Warriors.

Yeah. And I'm like, "This is different." A little bit. A little bit. And uh but it was a little rough, right? Cuz the uh fire department has a thing called CSU, counseling service unit. And uh I went through I told them I was leaving. And I told my lieutenant, I'm like, "I'm I'm going to be at CSU." Um cuz I was afraid for my job at this point, probably. And um but I still had to do the paperwork and CSU told me I didn't really have to cuz I'm under them, which ended up not being true. Um my captain was calling me and it became kind of a little bit of a mess and I got nervous. And then I took off, uh 2 and 1/2 weeks into here. Uh the first time. Came in 2 and 1/2 weeks and then you ACA went home? Um pretty much, yeah. Okay. Um then the fire department had their own IOP program. And uh I didn't even make it through that, man. Oof. Um yeah, I didn't really I like struggled pretty hard through that. Um they had my back and uh you know, let me through it, you know, but uh then I went back to work. Um right then again, then I came here again. Uh and then I came here again. And then uh I went to Virginia.

[40:08] Um and uh did good there. That was the first time that I felt solid. Yeah? Yeah. So, the other two times like I just once again, I'm a hard-headed person. I got this. I could go live in New York. And this whole time, right? Like I'm destroying my family. I'm I'm lying, cheating, stealing,

manipulating, like the whole nine. Now it's getting really to the bad part, right? Like I would be blackout drunk and I would gamble like a thousand dollars, too. And I would wake up, no idea what happened, right? I'm like, what the [__] you know? And um this whole time it's getting real bad. Like my whole life is just falling apart. And uh I would want to like change, right? But there was an immense pressure from my dad, to be honest with you. Stay on the farm department, you know, what else are you going to do with your life, you know? Um immense immense pressure. And I didn't want to do it at this point, man. I'm like my whole life is like in and out of rehab, you know, I like trying to stand up, like I don't know how to explain it, you know? Stick up for myself in a way. It was hard, dude, cuz I love my dad and he's like my role model and there was a lot of pressure to come back, you know? So, I would do it, but when I got to Virginia it was the first time I I really like tried to hone in on some stuff, right?

[41:40] I had a real good therapist over there and then Miss Paula over there is amazing. I don't know if you've ever met her. Mhm. No, I haven't. Oh, she is amazing. She brought some light to me and uh man, she made it interesting. Like uh like it made it cool kind of in a way to like figure this stuff out and she made it like fun in a way. Do you get what I'm trying to say? And um so, when I came back, it was the first time I think my mom kind of thought I got it, too. Cuz I was really going to meetings and then she was like, you know, I can't wait I'll never forget it. It's in my living room. She's like, I can't wait for you to get your one year. I'm like, yeah, me too. So this whole like time like I I want a year sober. I want a year sober, right? And uh go back to work um and I fall off again. Right? Real hard and I I went to this place in Austin. Uh right around Austin. I don't know something I saw it on TikTok and I was messed up and the guy got me into this place and this is where my life started really turning around. Yeah? Yeah, this is where like seeds were really starting to plant. Um the guy Paul um I'll probably send him this actually. And uh he really probably was a big part of the saving my life and he convinced me to go to sober living.

[43:11] Uh cuz he really got some truths out of me that I was holding on to. Uh he was the one of the first ones that got me to talk about a specific incident on the fire department. And uh and I did and then I puked my brains out. Yeah. Like I mean, we talk about the poisons that we put in our body with the substances. Yeah. But this [__] that goes into our head is just as poisonous to us. Yep. Yeah, I I believe you when you tell me man, it had to come out one way or another. That was deep seated. Oh, it was deep. Like nobody cuz I was not to I was not there was no way it was coming out.

Yeah. And he got it out of me. And uh it was funny cuz when I first got there, um I wanted nothing to do with him. Yeah, purple hair. Um you know, and I'm like, who is this guy? And uh I didn't want to talk to him.

Judging a book by its cover. Judging hard. This [__] Jabroni.

Yeah, just like Right? Yeah, I'm like this guy's a Jabroni, jerk off, right? And I'm like dude, you don't you don't know anything about my life, right? And um And he's like, "Look, I got nobody." Because it was a new place. He's like, "I got nobody to work with. The person that you want" Right off the bat I'm lying to her, right? Like I'm like lying through my teeth that I don't want anything to do with this person, right? Um And so I end up working with him. And he got a lot of

stuff out of me. He was really close with my mom, too. Um so like some truths came out, too, that I was holding on to, you know, of how bad it was, right? Cuz we're all afraid, right? Like at least for me, like And I heard Tom say it in his speeches, you know, like, "If you really know what I did, you wouldn't love me." Oh, yeah. You know, so like and and I believe that. I'm like, "Dude, he's going to kill me or like We tell it to ourselves, too, don't we? All the time.

[45:17] of [__] You're worthless. You're no good. That internal voice just tearing us down. And then we think other people are going to judge us the same way. Yeah. That wasn't the case, though. Scariest thing ever. Yeah.

You know, like That's the worst part was in between my head. Mhm. It it would take me a while to go back to treatment, too, because I'd tell myself I'm no good. I'm a loser. I'm a I'm

Never going to make it. What's the [__] point?

Yep. Yeah. I'm a [__] up. You know, I'm a disgrace to my family, you know? Like And I'm like, "I'm not fixable, you know?" Lies. The lies allowed us, man. But the truth was in there somewhere. Yeah. Yeah. And it got it started getting dig and then he convinced me to go to sober living. He's like, "You need to cool your jets. Exactly what he said. He's like, RJ, you need to like this has to stop. Let's before we jump into the sober living part of it, let's talk about something for a second. That one piece that you were holding on to now, don't worry, we're not going to go into that piece. We're going to talk about the hanging on to it part, right? You know, it's it's this PTSD, the stuff that we see on the job, these mental health wounds that we have, it's a wound. It gets infected, and you got to get all that infection out of there. You got to squeeze all that pus out. Cuz what happens if you hang on to some of you don't get it all out? Think about it. Yeah, you're going to think about it, and it's going to keep festering, and it's going to become that wound again, right?

[46:45] Yeah. And it's going to eventually kill you. So, you got to get it all out, you know? Medical You got that medical trainer, what happens if you leave a piece of something in somebody when they're doing surgery, right?

Yeah. They're going to die. They're going to get infection. Yeah, absolutely. And you know, it's funny that you bring that up, because when I was in Virginia, you know they're saying the lifeline put everything out on your lifeline? I didn't.

Didn't do it. Secrets keep us sick, right? Yeah, and every time I was drunk, I I I I would think about it. It's because it was an active memory, right? And the the substances that you have on board, they're just keeping it right there, active, keeping it suppressed, whatever, instead of going to where it needs to be, a stored memory, to where it's not [__] with you all the time, right?

Mhm. Um in this process, you were able to take it and put it back into a stored memory, but you didn't want to do that on the lifeline. No. And it kept you sick, right? Kept me real sick. Like, I would think about it all the time. Yeah.

Cuz other guys are putting out some serious stuff. I'm sitting here holding on to it. Like, you know, why? Shame. Shame. Cuz I was not the person who I am. Mhm. Um that's not the person

I strive to be. And addiction turned me into a monster. Shame, guilt, remorse, those things that just Big time.

[48:08] rip us apart, right?

Yep. But whatever it was that you were telling yourself, would you ever tell that to me for example?

No. No. Would you ever use the same kind of language that you use on yourself with me? No.

No, we wouldn't do that to each other, would we? But we do it to ourselves all the time. It's keeping you real sick. Yeah. And in that lifeline project that we do here, I mean it's I showed it to somebody showed mine to somebody the other day and it's I mean it's it's in-depth but it's rooted in something, right? It's rooted in lessons from the Hanoi Hilton, right? I'm going off on a tangent here for a second. But you know, those those guys that were in that Vietnam pit of hell being abused and tortured, you know, having to endure all that for like 8 years, they came out with no PTS. The reason for that is cuz they because of the situation were forced to have to open up about those things that cause shame that they don't want to talk about. These guys got shot down, they were tortured and they had to give information on troop movement. Well, all right, you're a traitor right there and there. And you tell yourself I'm a piece of [__] I divulged this information. And then the next guy comes in, they got to keep their story straight with their captors, so they have to talk about it. They didn't want to talk about it but they had to talk about it. Yeah, man, I went through the same thing that you did, it's okay. Let's get our story straight. The end result of that was didn't keep them sick. Didn't stay an active memory. They were able to move past it because they dealt with the shame, the guilt, the remorse associated with it, which is what that lifeline project is all about. But you held onto that piece because you were ashamed of yourself. But nobody in that room, you think anybody in that room would have judged you for any of the things that you had to say during that lifeline? No. No.

[49:45] And primarily because I've heard it from other people. And they're like

And they'd be able to say, man, man, [__] I went through that same damn thing, right?" And I didn't have the courage like I just part of me didn't want to accept that I did that, you know what I mean? And it was like wrestling hard, dude. And and it's so messed up cuz then I would start drinking over it again. Mhm. Pushing it back down. Pushing it back down. You know, like real deep. And then it would just Never-ending cycle. Yep. But this guy with the purple hair got you to break that cycle. Broke it. You opened up about it. Opened up about

You began to heal. Mhm. And then what? You went to sober living. Sober living. Here? Yeah. Yeah, I came here. I talked to Shane, my the missions lady. She is a godsend. She's good people. Uh she Yeah, she's amazing. Um she never gave up on me. Uh that was like I well, eternally appreciate her. Yeah. Um And so I get over here and um I never knew like what a fellowship was cuz I was that guy in the meeting holding up strings pissed off cuz my friends are out drinking and I'm in a AA hall. Mhm.

[50:59] Are you kidding me? You know? Um and and I was like self-pity, too, right? Like why me? Like all my friends do the same thing. Why did I have to get this? Right? Poor me. Poor me. Poor me. Poor me.

Pour me a drink.

Yeah. Mhm. And but then I get here and I was still fighting a lot, you know? Um after I left with Paul um went back to like I'm okay kind of, you know? But I was here for a while and I had fun sober for the first time ever. Like ever. Um went fishing with um No. With another warrior. See, I'm on it.

Better than I am at this. I would have dropped his name, man. I Yeah, see I'm I'm getting there. Yeah. Damn you, hippa. Well, another warrior and um and then with uh one of there's a guy here that comes in and sponsors guys big time on Mondays. And uh great dude, and then he brought me out shooting with a NYPD cop, actually. He owns some kind of gun store around here. Yeah, and then me and him we're talking. And and I had fun. Um I had I was a sponsor at first. And uh he got real busy, and I was a handful. I can imagine. No, right? I'm a saint. Of course, yeah.

[52:31] Yeah. And then I I went over to the grand sponsor. And uh Obi-Wan Kenobi, as it were. Yeah, and then he got more out of me than Paul did, too. Wow. Yeah, and I was not happy about it, man. I was not what uh I actually when I first met him, I thought he was drunk. I never thought anybody in sobriety actually stayed sober. I watched a show called "Loudermilk". You Yes. Great show, but not a good example for AA. No, because I'm like, there's got to be a like a something with this guy. And then one of the episodes, the guy asks him, "Do you guys actually stay sober?" He's like, "No, we just say that in meetings, you know?" And then he's like drinking. I'm like, I'm like, "I know it." Yeah, and uh but evidently he is sober, and he's one of the best guys I've honestly ever met. And um started work, and but then I I started finding it, and there's two different I don't know if you're going to want to edit this out or not, but this is my truth. There's two different types of people at the lodge. There's the winners that want to do this and work a program, and there's people that just sit there. That's a very real thing, not just in AA, but in treatment in general, right? And we do our best to kind of weed out the ones who are checking a box.

[53:52] Yeah. You know, we do our best, but everybody deserves a chance, an opportunity cuz maybe something will click.

Like that.

However, AA itself, when I first heard this phrase, align yourself with the winners, I'm like, what the hell is that? I mean, everybody here's in an AA meeting. We're not exactly We don't go to AA on a winning streak, right? We're all losers. And this That was the mindset that a lot of people have about AA. And when I went into AA, align yourself with the winners, what the hell does that? And that's that's that's [__] right? However, what it means simply is align yourself with somebody who has something that you want, somebody who is doing well. And that applies to every aspect of life. You see a fireman out there kicking ass, EMS out there kicking ass, cop out there kicking ass. Hey man, what do you do, right? How do you get as good as you do? Tell me your training method. Tell me uh how often you go to the range. Tell me how you study. How do you stay sharp? How do you stay fit? You want to learn from that person. You're going to align yourself with that winner. Same thing in AA, that's what it's about. If somebody is kicking ass in

AA, meaning they're happy, they're sober, important things are coming back into their life, the promises are coming true, that's the person you want to align with. And we can pick them out. And that shows progress in AA, in my opinion. That shows that you got your eyes wide open in AA, more so than you did in the past, right? Oh, yeah. Cuz in the right in in the past, you were one of those guys who weren't taking that [__] serious. No, at all. But that's part of the learning process. Yeah, and you're right, there are people everywhere in AA, sober living lodge, anywhere else, who aren't taking it serious. But hopefully, they will begin to, right?

[55:29] Yep. Never give up. Yeah, never give up. Nope. Uh that's like a big component of mine, because if somebody gave up on me, I'd probably be dead. Yeah, absolutely. I know I would be, too. Yeah, you know, um I I'm not a unicorn, as they say in AA. Yeah. First time, it took me many tries, you know, um who am I, you know, to say judge? Sure. I'll be there for anyone, you know, um as long as they're doing the right thing. Stay on our side of the street, as they say. Yep. Right? Yeah, cuz at a point you have to protect your sobriety, too, right? Yeah. You know, I got a family that's like depending not depending, but really hoping I stay sober, you know, so that comes first, and I want to stay sober. I want a beautiful life, you know? Oh, yeah. Yeah. Now, I kind of pulled you off your train of thought. You were saying there was people there. So so I I get over there, and then um you know, also like I kind of I had a tough time like reading that, cuz I want to I I've been there was really bad, like I I had a major bloody nose from substance abuse. The drinking was real bad, and it was for a longer than usual before I go to treatment again. And I was having trouble like reading the book, like remembering it. Mhm. And then uh they finally they approved me for Mert, what they called Mert at the time.

[56:50] Yeah. But then the day before I do it, um one of my best friends, Bryant, uh hit a telephone pole and died. Oh. Yeah, and uh I uh so uh back up on my story, I've hit a pole, too. And then I had another friend that uh hit a wall and a building and died. So, I had two friends, one before I hit the pole, he died, I hit the pole, I live, and I walked out of the car on live wires, stepping on live wires. I survived, yeah.

Mhm. It's a god thing, man. And uh but then my buddy Bryant died. Yeah. And uh I was a mess, and I was already my emotions were like crazy and they're like look you're not on any medication. Like you need to like be stabilized before you do this, right? Which is totally understandable. Appreciate them not zapping my brain, you know, without you know, me being more stable, right? So I didn't do the murk then and I was just like a hot mess. I wanted to come home. I wasn't I didn't want to move here yet. And then I ended up relapsing. Um one out with two people and uh They sent me back to uh They sent me back to 42 days at Lakeside. But what that sober living part did was it showed that a fellowship is real. Right? Like big I'm trying to I look at the glass half full and everything. Like there's a reason why my journey was this way, right? And I saw fellowship. I saw people that were generally happy and they all loved each other, right? And even in my lowest times when I was super angry and had nothing to offer people loved me. Yeah. I love that. I can almost cry about that, man, cuz my whole life I always had to have something to offer people. I had to have the boat to go on. I had to have the cocaine and drugs and alcohol. I had to have a place for people to come stay.

[58:55] I had to have hockey tickets or something, right? Like I always had to have something to offer for people to really like hang out around me. I had to be good at hockey, you know, to go on the you know, so it was always like I felt like I had to give something for someone to like me, right? And that that was like my whole life. And um They just loved me like when I didn't I when I hated myself. Yeah. So I I did the 42 days at Lakeside. And that was another thing it taught me, right? One night of drinking and drugging completely changed my mindset. I mean, 180 to like screw this. I don't want anything to do with this. Screw all you people, right? Like, you know, I I'm out of here in the beginning, right? Right after I relapse cuz once I start, I don't stop until I burn it down.

You know, and they stopped me and I was not happy, you know? Um cuz I'm an alcoholic. You know, and once you put that on it's analogy, right? You know, I I I want to go, dude. Like, let's get this ball on the road, you know? And uh so then I go back to uh New York. And um now they assign me to a house with um division chiefs, captains, and lieutenants, right? Cuz now they're keeping an eye on me at this point. And the captain brought me into his office, God bless him. Um and he was like, "Look, you you haven't been a so-called like productive employee." And he was totally right. I was a hot mess, you know?

[1:00:33] Mhm. And uh we're going to keep an eye on you. And I had to do some retraining, like uh CPR certification and stuff like that. So, in the beginning, I was just like light duty, I guess, right? Just sit there, wait till you go to training and whatnot, right? And I got a sponsor and he was on the fire department, too. Um he knew a friend of my dad's. Um so, we like hit it off for a little bit. I still talk to him to this day. And um you know, I was doing it for a little bit. Uh still not that long, you know? Um And then I went back out. I ghosted them. And I'm pretty sure I like told them off, you know? Cuz And then at this point, I'm not even trying to hide it from my family. Every other time I would like try to sneak it and hide it. I totally gave up on sobriety. I'm like, screw this. You know, I like I fully like gave in. I'm not Yeah, I came home stumbling drunk. Um, my mom would be crying. You know, my dad would be like, what the [__] You know. The relapse is always so bad.

[1:01:48] So bad. You got a head as they say a head full of AA and a belly full of beer, right? That's just a sickening place to be in and it creates so many damn problems. Yeah. You know? Yeah. So, the family was catching the brunt of it. They were They caught it the entire I Thank God they never gave up on me. Yeah. Um Parents are like the best people, you know. Yeah. They believed in you. You never gave up on yourself either. I want to point that out real quick, you know.

No.

Yeah. I I always had a little bit of fight left, right? And uh But this time I I just gave up on like sobriety and uh then I get back on the bus and uh You call it the bus. Yeah. You've heard that, right?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. The ambulance.

Yeah. The bus. The bus.

We didn't call it that, but yeah. Yeah. Um or the box or whatever, right? And uh I uh I man, I was struggling. I would I would work. Um I was on night tour, too. So, then like trying to I would

sleep. Get back up. You know, go to a call, try to go back to bed. You you know how it is, right? And and uh And then it got really bad to where because I would sleep during the day and then my mom would be like, how come you're screaming in your sleep. That's an eye-opener. Yeah. And you know, cuz I also like felt like guilt and shame, right? Like how can I have trauma when I haven't had 26 years on the job like my dad. I didn't go through 9/11. And you know, I would tell myself this stuff, right? Like just shut up. You know? Like suck it up.

[1:03:38] Suck it up, buttercup. Yeah, you haven't been through as much as this guy or that guy. We always want to compare it, right? And we feel like we hadn't been where they've been that we're then we're weaker than them. Which is such flawed thinking, you know? It cuz it affects everybody differently. Cuz what have you heard more often than not when you open up to those guys? Uh you start sharing a little bit of your story and they're like, "Oh damn, man. That's I never want to go through that. There's no way I could handle that. Bravo to you for for handling it." Time out, man. I'm supposed to be saying that to you and you're saying it to me. I heard that a lot when I was here cuz I had the same mindset of I was just a cop. I'm not a combat vet. I hadn't been through what those guys have been through, right? Yep. Every single time I would say that the feedback I would get when I started opening up and sharing my story was, especially when it dealt with kids and whatnot, "Man, you're a badass. There's no way I could do what you did." You know? Stop, you know? That's Yeah. I don't feel that way. You're telling me this. Now I have to accept it, I guess. But that's what I did. I accepted it. When I accepted it, it validated it and I was able to accept the diagnosis and begin to heal from it. I just wanted to point that out real quick, you know, that that mindset is common. I hadn't been through what that guy's been through. But I guarantee I'm telling you the stuff that you have been through, I don't want no part of it. No part of it. Probably nobody else that knows you does, either, you know? No, thank you. So, don't limit yourself, right? Like that or anybody else that's listening. Don't don't box yourself in with that kind of thinking. It's it's individual to all of us.

[1:05:10] Oh, that I've actually heard that a lot here. You know, cuz I like I was also when I first started coming here I was young. Like insecure about it, you know what I mean? Like dude, I'm just in the fire department. Yeah. Like I'm I'm a nobody.

Just EMS, just fire department, just a cop. Yeah, I'm nobody. Yeah, and I'm like hanging out green berets here, dude. Yeah. You know, I'm like I need to shut up. You know? Like who am I, you know? And and then I would talk about it, you know? Um And they're like, yep, can't do that. I'm like, what? You know? So I I appreciate Yeah, it's very true. Like I've heard a lot of people say I couldn't handle that. You know? Um cuz one thing about first responders, we're guaranteed every shift to see something. Exactly. And let me expand on that a little bit cuz it kind of ties in with some of the stuff that we've been talking about on social media lately when it comes to PTS, you know, first responders and military. What you just said right there, guaranteed. And it's in your neighborhood, in your community, where you live, people that you know, day in day out. Mhm. Right? There's no I mean, maybe you get a week vacation, a two-week vacation, something like that, or go to just some training, but it's all the time. As opposed

to a lot of the lot of the military careers, you deploy for a short amount of time, you come back, deploy, come back, you know, which is difficult. I'm not saying it's not.

[1:06:34] Yeah. But the amount of trauma experienced removed versus being in the pressure cooker all the time, right? How many times you run into somebody that you dealt with on an EMS call? How many times have I run into somebody that uh you know, I've arrested before? The worst time for that is in the in the drive-thru. I almost said the F-word again. The worst time for that is in the drive-thru when somebody recognize you. Oh, hey, Sarge. Oh, [__] you know? Yeah. I cannot trust the food I'm about to eat, you know?

it. Yeah, exactly. But the the the point being the what you just said there, that just about every shift, if not every single shift, you're going to see something that would be called a critical incident by most people's standards. Something that's life-changing, life-altering, that shakes you to the core, pretty much every shift. Yeah. And it's just another Tuesday. Yeah. You know what I mean? Um I cuz I've talked to a lot of cops that were prior military, and they all say a cop was like Oh, yeah. Yeah, they say that I've I've Likewise, a lot of friends, you know, that that were military and then became a cop. Same thing. Different world. Whole different world.

[1:07:41] Different world. Yeah. And uh Yeah, you know, uh it is it it really changed at at the end of the day, I'm like grateful for everything, right? Cuz uh I would have never had to look at myself like and like how what grateful I am, you know? Mhm. Um I would have never had to do any of those things if I never went through what I went through, you know? Especially on EMS and uh you know, how good I have it and be blessed, you know? Oh, yeah. Yeah, God knew what he was doing. Yeah.

That's why you're still here. That's why you ain't dead yet.

No. Most of us should have been. Our mission ain't over. We still got some work to do. And you're going to be doing that work. Yeah. Well, I'm sorry. I diverted for a little bit. Let's you jump back into where you were. But so you were still struggling. So did you How long were you back up there? And what happened to bring you back down here? Um I came back to New York um in November. Um like mid-November. And uh I remember like one day that I was at the I was at work, and I was in the back parking lot, and looking at these skyscrapers, right? Mhm. Or giant buildings, and I'm like why did I come back? Yeah. And uh I think that was the day that I realized again, actually, I'm like I can I hate this. Um I hate this job. Um I want anything to do with anyone in New York City, you know? Like I I developed that like I hate everyone attitude kind of a little bit, too. And um Yeah, and I fell hard, really hard. Um I would lie to people about drinking. Um it and uh it got real dark and pretty much towards the end I I couldn't get it together to um take a a test and um And I like I couldn't stop shaking. Um and then I I had to call out sick a lot.

[1:09:51] I called out sick uh cuz I generally was sick, you know? Um And I uh fell into a depression. I couldn't stop drinking. I actually told my dad I had this mini cooler and he's like, "What's that for?" I'm like, "Uh I'm bringing up waters to my room, so I don't have to come back down all the time." And uh that was a lie. They're for shooters and bottles, you know? And uh it got so dark. Um And And then this whole time my whole family doesn't want to talk to me cuz

my uncle Chip died at 26, my age, of drugs and overdose. And he had a bright future. He's uh super athletic, um like number one lacrosse player coming out of high school or number two. And they were all didn't know which road I was going to go. Am I going to finally get sober or am I going to just die, right? And uh I had one aunt, and she in Texas, that just wouldn't quit, even like when I was trying to like push her away um at a point. She wouldn't give up. Like thank god. You know, um and I was isolating myself in my parents' house. Um Now, this was after sober living. This is after sober living. Okay. I came back after sober living, after I relapsed, came to Lakeside, went back to New York again.

[1:11:25] Oh, and you tore it up again, huh? Tore it up again. Um and that but in the back of my head the whole time, Neil sends gratefuls every day. And then I would see how good everyone's doing. And then I would miss this place. You know, I actually had fun for once in so sobriety.

Mhm. You know, maybe if I just move there. Maybe if I just give up everything, try it, right? And uh had to get to a point where it was 7:00 in the morning. I was up for a couple days. Um or maybe a day, I don't know. And I never feel emotion when I'm drinking and drugging. Like I don't cry. I don't um I don't feel anything. And I had a great I I think this is a god moment for me personally. Um I think this is when the chains of alcoholism and addiction broke. Um I just started hysterically crying. At 7:00 in the morning, piss drunk and high on drugs. And uh I uh couldn't I was begging god. I said, "Look, like we had a whole conversation. I was the only one in the room, but we had a full-out conversation. I said, "Look, I'm going to go if they'll take me. Um I'm moving there. I'm quitting the fire department. I don't care anymore about it. I can't care what my dad thinks anymore about staying on this job. I'm moving here, and I'm either going to I'm going to really do this or I'm going to go kill myself right now. I knew where the gun was in my house. I knew I asked my dad where the bullets were. He didn't know that. And now he's going to know. Um and it was either that or I was going to like slit my wrist or something in the bathtub or like go to uh I was going to either take the gun and go to the beach parking lot and blow my head off and let the cops find me cuz I still had somewhat morals to not let my family find me like that, you know.

[1:13:22] Um and uh had my aunt convinced me to call again and took me like another day to call my lieutenant. And she would always check on me. Lieutenant um I'm not going to say her name, but um she knows who she is and uh she like saved like she helped save my life, too, right? These all these moving parts at the end. And um I called her and then she's like, "All right, I'll talk to the captain." And then I had a chief that loved me and like dearly and um she they got it done. They cut they they got me uh back here. Um they let me fully process and make a full decision. I resigned in like right before Christmas. Um I resigned freely. And um Yeah, and and I came down here and then I everything like worked out for me, right? When I came down here. I prayed that I wanted these two therapists, uh Briana and Kelly Wiley. Kelly W. And um cuz I talked to them more than any other therapist here anyway. Both badasses.

[1:14:38] Yeah. And came down here and uh I they handpicked me. You know, um They were like, "Yeah, we're we're we're tired of seeing this guy coming in and out, right? We're going to get down to this, right? And and they put me to work when I came here. I did a relapse autopsy. I did a body collage. I presented something else. I was in therapy three times a week, not two,

three times a week for both of them. Um There's some s I did a lot of ART. Um I had two great roommates. One was a big shot in LA fire department. So, I had a roommate that was in in a fire service, kind of like my dad, right? Um in a officer ranking aspect. So, I listened to him. I didn't listen to a lot of people, you know, but I listened to him cuz my sponsor even said, follow him for right now. I can't I can't do step work with you right now. I'm busy, but follow him. He's a good dude. I'm like, okay. And he would calm me down a lot. Had another guy that was a colonel. Um and that we lived in Live Oak. Mhm. And I had the two best roommates that I could possibly ex So, all these things that I'm asking for, once I really started to do this, right? Are coming true, right? And coincidence, I think not.

[1:16:09] Well, let me point something out to you, something you just said about that, right?

Yeah. That as AA would call the turning point. Right? Yeah, you got to surrender to win. You hadn't surrendered fully yet. It sounds like at that point you're ready to burn the ships, man. Yeah. Which is a good place to be in a lot of ways, you know? Burn the ships, that's the song by King and Country, which is a Christian band and it and it addresses that. You're turning so completely away from this and heading towards that that when you get there, you're burning the ships cuz your ass ain't going back. Nope.

Right? And that's the point that you need to be at to be successful in recovery. It's a milestone. Yeah. That's a huge part of it, right? And it takes a lot to be able to do that, to walk away from not just the career, the family career, the family, the state that you grew up in, friends, everything you ever knew. You're leaving that because you know what's going to happen if you continue to go back to it. And you ain't the only one that's done that. There's a lot of people around here that have done that. A lot of people in various you know, sobriety areas, I guess you could say, have done that. But it's it's a necessary point to be successful. Yeah. Just wanted to point that out to you real quick. But yeah, go ahead and jump back in.

[1:17:19] that. It's true. Yeah. Um the only way cuz the definition of like insanity is doing the same thing expecting a different outcome. Mhm. As we've talked about in this video, I've been in treatment many times. Yeah. It's time to try something new, right? And uh and I I did. I would I even when I was in treatment, I was kicking and screaming in therapy. But I showed up every time. I asked for more time with them. I did everything that was asked of me. And I never really did that before. No, you Most of us will do stuff for our career that we don't want to do, and we'll put everything that we possibly had into it. You could probably think of some examples in your career, you know, academy and everything else. Why do we stop short when it comes to try to save our own life? Always a mystery.

Right? Yeah. That is a big mystery, you know, cuz I there was I was willing to sacrifice my life to move up in the fire department.

Yeah. For like a few years. Like I really rolled the dice. Every time you put on that uniform, every time you go to work, you're rolling the dice. And we do it in further so that career, which you know, your your job will be posted before your obituary. You know, that uniform will be full as soon as you empty it, that patrol car, everything. So, why are we investing so much in this career that's not going to love us back? Even though that we think it's a family, it's not. All right?

[1:18:48] I had a reference number. A reference number? Mhm. Like you don't even when you go in it's true, we say that a lot. They don't even ask your name when you go up. What's your reference number and what's your last four? Social. They don't even ask your name. No. No. Yeah. That's how important you are. Yeah. Yeah. Don't get me wrong, they treat me very well. Good.

But at the end of the day the second that I resigned there was someone filling my seat. Absolutely. And and that goes into what aspect of like what my sponsor is like tried to teach me, right? He's like, you work to live, you don't live to work. And when he said that, like I started grasping, okay, I can move on. You know what I mean? Yes.

The thing on my left shoulder my patch on my left shoulder is not my life and it is not who I identify with. Mhm. You know, um So, back on track, right?

Yeah. Um so, and then I get to sober living. Um I ended up getting Vani as my one-on-one. Mhm. Man, I love Vani. I I you know, um So, I have Neil, Vani, and Marshall, and then the two of my counselors here that are always checking on me, right? And uh I need that like full accountability, you know? And then I started I did PHP. Uh to me, PHP bought me sober time from 8:00 in the morning to 3:00 in the afternoon. It's a point when you go to treatment so many times that And you've been through a lot. You've heard it before, right?

[1:20:27] Yeah, I've heard it before.

It's a lot of It's really beneficial to people that are um that haven't, you know what I mean? But I've been through this rodeo before, so it it some of it helped me a lot of one-on-ones with Gary helped me a lot, you know? I had him in PHP, but uh so I got through with that, but TMS I can't even explain to you how beneficial and Monica amazing. Um before I I did

You want to ask about that. I'm going to challenge you on one thing though, right? You've been through it so many times, you heard it. I'm I don't need this, right? Yeah. Something that I hear a lot when people leave, you know? They want to leave early, they've been in treatment before. There's always something new to be learned, even if you've been through it a thousand times. Always something new to be learned. Yeah. They try to learn one new thing each group. There you go. Something. Now, I'm I'm not pushing back on you. I'm just saying, you know, there's there's always an opportunity, even if we've done it a thousand times, there's always something. Well, there's the practice of like just sitting in your chair and staying. Right?

[1:21:38] Yeah. There you go. Beautiful. I like that.

like just sit in my chair and just try to learn one thing, you know? And I had to do that here, too, when I came back. But I also understood like when I came here that I really kind of knew absolutely nothing. Um I also had to abandon every idea I thought of AA. I had to abandon everything I kind of thought of life. Right? Like cuz I'm not living a life, right? Like my best intentions got me into rehab eight times. Yeah. You know what I'm saying?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And it's so I had to like abandon a lot of things that like mindsets and whatnot and let myself kind of like remold, you know? And so that's where we get to the TMS. TMS, let's hit it, yeah.

Yeah. So before that, my sleep was like pretty much horrendous. Anxiety through the roof. Right. Um and I didn't think it was going to work. I'm like, how does this thing like I cuz I I don't understand technology like that.

[1:22:48] Kind of black magic voodoo [__]

Literally, yeah. Yeah, like a thing that's on top of my head. I'm like, okay. And and then they tell me it's going to you know in the beginning, you know, it's a little rough, right? And I'm like, okay. And it did get a little rough. But no matter what, right? Like in RTC like I I stayed in my chair. I just got through it until, you know, and then PHP, I stayed in my chair. Mhm. I sit down and just get all the way through it cuz I never do, right? Cuz now I'm at a point where I betting my whole life on staying sober down here. Mhm. And then through TMS, right? I just even if it's getting hard, we're going to weather this storm, RJ. There you go. I like it. You know, and we're going to weather this storm and we're going to get through this and we're going to see, you know, it's going to work out, right? And that's really also like practicing step three for me. Comes into, right? Like there's a reason why I'm here and there's a reason why I'm sitting in this chair. Just trust and have faith. Mhm. Right? And um so I get through it. And now I sleep. I could sleep 12 to 14 hours if I want to. Wow. Yeah.

[1:23:52] Uninterrupted, not waking up. No nightmares?

light on now. Not much. I have dreams now. Yeah.

Like good dreams.

Good dreams.

Like literally I took a nap before I came here cuz I drove someone to the airport and I had a great dream about tuna fishing. Tuna fishing.

Yeah. Not like horror. Yeah. Nice. Nice. It It sounds like an ordinary thing for some people, but I there was for a long time before I did EMDR, I'd wake up that same recurring nightmare. Wake up covered in sweat, you know. And then there were other nightmares on top of it, but that one was consistent for a lot of years. So, having a good night's sleep is something that's huge. Because when you're tired, you're grumpy. And when we're grumpy, nobody likes us. All right? So, that's that's huge. Yeah. This is such a simple thing, but it's it's it's huge. When you lose everything in a way, like you realize how much the simple things are really like the major things. Oh, yeah.

You know, like big time.

to value things a little bit more.

Yep. You're more grateful. Hmm, wonder where we learned that from. There we go, right?

[1:24:57] Yeah. Yeah. And then I I I I was And then my anxiety Mhm. lowered like significantly.

Yeah. Um like my overall So, they told I Jennifer told me I have like a TBI. I had a TBI on my frontal lobe. Mhm. Um I've had a lot of concussions from hockey, uh fights, you know, um I'm a hockey player, dude. You know, so um and uh And then she showed me the brain waves before, brain waves after, and there's a significant Excuse me, significant change in it, you know, and uh

And then I saw the results. I'm like, "Okay. Well, look, you know, tap on the back. You got through it when it was hard, right? You can do this. You can handle one thing at a time. You can move it to the next steps, right? And uh then I I kind of had sort of have faith in myself, you know? And uh I would go to AA pretty much every day. Uh I still do. Like I'll probably be here tonight, you know? Um And no matter what, I would go to a meeting and I would sit all the way down in the chair. And unless there was some kind of significant emergency, I'm not getting out of that chair, right? And uh thank God Neil um and Bonnie are on my ass, you know? Uh like I need that, you know? Especially in the beginning, you know, Marshall, too. Like everyone checking on me, just caring about me, you know? Um I've never really like had that except my parents, you know?

[1:26:38] And um things started getting better, you know, like then I started college. My whole life I was told I was stupid, you know? Um pretty like by my friends like growing up a lot like I'm just an idiot. And uh and it's not true. Not at all.

See, my like my memory was like pretty bad, right? And with the help of with of Monica, my um memory's like this now. Like when I study, it's like this. Okay? Like I'm grasping information. I got straight A's in the fall. And that's something a lot of people don't really think about when it comes to PCS, substance abuse, TBIs, you know, the simple things become very difficult, you know, reading, for example, staring at the same page for an hour, Yep.

not recalling anything cuz the noise inside of our head is just too damn loud. We're not concentrating, retaining anything, right? Then the therapies will help, TMS will help, but sleeping, just being able to read, and then the memory issues. My kids talk about stuff all the time that I should well remember. I I there should be no reason why I can't bring up that memory, but it's just not there. Yeah. I've done a lot of work, but TMS is in my future as well. Hopefully that'll help, I don't know.

[1:27:56] But yeah, it's just something as simple as just memory. Yep. Yeah. Like and and to be how grateful am I to like be able to remember, you know what I mean? Cuz when I was here last year, like I said, I I even read the book that like Marshall had these assignments for me. Mhm. Like to read, to go over the step work and I'm like pissed. Yeah. And I'm like I and then it's like the negative core beliefs are coming back, right? Like I'm an idiot, I'm stupid, I can't do it, you know what I mean? And TMS like open up the gate Right.

to be able to do the action though. Mhm. So that's on me. Still requires work. Oh oh yeah, this isn't a magic wand where like thing and and people think that like they they want to like they think it's a magic wand. It's not. It just opens up the opportunity for to do the action. We talk about that all the time with various forms of treatment. You know, people talk about psychedelics in the same focus, you know, this is a quick and easy kind of thing. It's not, you're right. Nothing is. Nothing worth having in our lives is easily obtained. We have to work for it in some way or another. Yeah. Right? And if we want something bad enough, we're going to bust ass for it. We did it for the job. Yeah. Are we going to do it for ourselves? Right? So you're right about that, yeah. It does help tremendously, but you're still doing the work. And that's what I love about you. You're still doing the freaking work, man. Appreciate it. Of course, yeah. Yeah, I

no matter what, you know, um good one though cuz I don't know how to like describe this, but like if you told me when I came here on April 15th in 2025 that in 10 and a half months my parents would pretty much fully trust me and call me every day and our our talks are laughing joyous and instead of my mom crying all the time about me, she has tears of sorrow. Uh no, tears of joy instead of sorrow. Mhm. You know, um like they want to talk to me, they want me to come home. You know, I like myself. You know, I'm doing this. I know, right? With me.

[1:30:01] Yeah, with you, right? Like like they wanted me to speak Mhm. I would have I would have never believed you. I would have never believed that it could happen. The addiction gets on us. The allergy, that demon is on us, and it has a tight hold, and every time we slip, hold gets a little tighter. And it takes a lot of work to break free of that have a lot of work, right? You're doing that, and you're seeing the promises from that come true. Yep. Right? Yeah, big time. One of the biggest promises that I see come true is we used to handle sit situate. We handle situations which used to baffle us. Mhm. One of the biggest ones for me Mhm. Like a perfect example, when I went home for Christmas, my mom was like, "You know what? I realized something." And I'm like, "What?" She's like, "You didn't blow up one time." And usually I I I blow up all the time, you know. Yeah. I I didn't blow up one time. I like kept my composure. Some things I exercised my right to shut the [__] up. There you go. That's a huge one. Yeah, it's a huge one, you know.

[1:31:05] Very helpful in most situations.

Very helpful. Like it's saved me out of a good amount of [__] you know. But you know, and then I like see things as like the glass half full, not half empty. Changing your perspective. It's that psychic change in the in the doctor's opinion, man. Ooh. Now we're getting deep into the AA literature. Yeah.

Yeah, and and you want to know why I got deep into it? Cuz I started temporary sponsoring guys. Doing the work. Doing the work.

Mhm. Amazing how that works, huh?

Amazing how it works, right? Like everything that Neil told me to do Uh-huh. that I've done, and I I didn't believe in it, and but I did it anyway. That's the key, right? Like like a big thing is when it made no sense, am I going to do it anyway and see what happens, or am I going to run? And that's that's where everybody trips up. This [__] I've been doing all my life ain't working, and it's got me here, and they're saying to do this. That can't work. Let me go do this some more. How's that working out for you?

Yeah. And like you said earlier, it gets you all the way to the gates of AA, right? So, this thing that thing Oh, it's not going to work. All right, try it. Prove me wrong. All right? Everybody that does try to prove somebody wrong that way, they end up getting sober. To I challenged Tom. Mhm. Did you? Yeah. Oh, yeah. I I'm pretty sure I told him. I said, "I'm going to I'm going to I'm going to do it."

[1:32:24] You're going to prove this AA [__] wrong.

Yeah, like dude, cuz this this is a facade. Yeah. Jabronis and you know what I mean? Like this thing work and and then I took it to another level with the temporary sponsor. And I I tried I do it as much as I can. Um and it works. It works. The 10th step works. Yeah. I'll catch myself like giving into fear and anxiety throughout day and I'm like, "Hey RJ, we talked about this last night. Life on life's terms. It's in God's hands. Just do the work." And then I can move on with my day. Before that, I would obsess over it. I actually obsessed so much that I would be asking Chat GPT things and then Chat GPT would tell me I have anxiety. Really? Yeah. Yeah. You know what I'm saying? You just got to check and recheck. Prove and reprove, huh? Yeah. They were like, you you know, does this does this answer help your anxiety? Like, no. And here's some Oh, and then one time Chat GPT said, "Do you want me to uh show you breathing techniques for anxiety?" I was like, "Okay. I'm really giving into this too much." And that's a live and learn process, too, right? Like I'm not going to beat myself over it. Okay, this is a problem. How do I address it? Do I want to get better or do I want to run run from this, too? Like I I look at it like that way and the more I don't choose to run and the more I choose to like face that like not only the more confident I get in myself, the prouder I get in myself, like and then things just line up.

[1:34:00] Mhm. You know, um You got to prove it to yourself. You spend a lot of time tearing yourself down mentally, you got to prove that you can do it. But the proof is in the work itself. Right. The proof is also in the results that you're seeing. You know? Now, for the record, I want to point out I've seen it too, you know. You and I are both alumna, we both go to the same meeting. I've seen you around. We'll put it that way.

Yeah. Um and I've seen the difference. I have. I've You can always tell when somebody's kind of bought into that new life because before their eyes are just dead. There's no life in them, there's no happiness, there's no joy, there's nothing. Yeah. And then you see it in the eyes first, right? You see it in their face, you see it in their countenance, it's just brighter. And then you see it continue to go up, which is what I've noticed out of the time that I've known you. I've seen it constantly go up from that darkness to death in the eyes, you know, not really wanting to be a part of it to just coming back. And then I see you come on campus, I see you sponsoring guys, I see you putting in the work. I see you laughing and saying yes. You know, saying yes is what gets you sober. Now, saying put some context around that, saying yes is what got us drunk in the first damn place in some cases. But saying yes to the work, to the challenge, to the hard part of it is what you're doing right now. Right? And you keep saying yes and coming on the the the podcast and telling your story and everything else, I see it, man. I see it. I appreciate it. No, it's real. You can tell when it's real in somebody. I want you to just continue to hang on it own to it and go after it. Oh, I am. I I it like a big thing too with me, right? Like I didn't come down here for nothing. Yeah. Right? Like um I I am a very determined individual when I want to be. Um and I have dedication to my schoolwork right now, like big time, right? But there's one thing that Neil drilled into my head and I'm glad he did.

[1:35:53] There's three things that are in life, the have to's. I have to go to AA. I have to work the steps. I have to do this on a continual basis and stay sober. Then um I need to go to school to get an education to further my life, right? And then the want to, I want to go watch the New York Islanders play hockey. I want to go fishing. I want to go have fun. If the other two are in order, I

get to do that third. I don't get to do that third before the two. Like that I live like that, you know? Um and I actually have more fun that way. You know, it's like weird. Um like I would think I would have no time for anything else.

Mhm. And Neil said, "Just trust me, it's all going to work out. You'll actually have plenty of time." You're putting life in order. Yeah.

Putting the right things first, yeah.

Yeah. It's crazy how much my life is different. Yeah. Never would have thought it possible, huh? I thought the only way I was going to stop drinking is if I was 6 ft in the ground. Yeah. Like I I I genuinely thought that and uh I never thought I would like myself. Um I never thought people would see value in me, you know, like uh Yeah. And it's all come true. I can handle situations like a decent person. I can help somebody. I can be there for my dad and my mom. I can be there for my brother. Um I'm a good friend. Like all the things that I want to do um in life, right? Like and be able to handle life, right? Like I used to look to alcohol and drugs as the way to handle life. Mhm. But I didn't find it in that. I actually found it from the opposite. Being absent from it, right? Like everything that um I looked for in drugs and alcohol like I know it sounds corny but I generally found it in sobriety. You know. Mhm. Um I uh and it comes from like doing all the work like giving the the attention that my alcoholism deserved. Right? Like not half-assing it. Mhm. Not going to two meetings a week in the beginning, right?

[1:38:13] Like um like giving it full my full attention. Like you know, like I acknowledge it like hey I like in the morning my third step prayer the first thing is God please remove the urge to drink and use today. Yeah. So automatically off the bat I remind myself that I'm still an alcoholic and addict, you know. Yeah. It's it is work but it's the right kind of work and it's worth doing. Oh, it is.

Yeah. And if and the way I look at it too there's a purpose like I have purpose for the rest of my life now of helping others. And in and from the AA side of course

side, yeah.

but just because that's who Roger is you never would have got into the career field that you did otherwise.

No.

Right? Um and you're uh you mentioned college, radiology tech, right? That's what you're studying? You're still going to be helping folks from the medical side as well?

Yeah. Um I like that's just in my blood, you know, is to like help other people. Um cuz I don't that's just who I am, you know what I mean? Um and I love like being of service like it's in my family whether it's in the fire department or AA or somewhere else in my life.

[1:39:28] Mhm. I just want to be of service to people. Now let's talk real quick about your family. If I'm if I'm not mistaken your journey has impacted some of your family, correct?

Yes. Um tell me about that. Yeah.

So, my dad um my dad um has been a big he was he was like me and his story are kind of similar with alcoholism, right? Like when I got hurt on the job, I started drinking real real heavily. When he retired, he started drinking excessively. Common in our career field, yeah?

Yep. And uh and then he's what I every and then he got cirrhosis on the tip of his liver. Mhm. And uh and he would see me coming in out of rehab and then he would talk to me and he would be drunk sometimes. He's like, "Yeah, RJ, I'm going to join you one day. I got to join you. I got to join you." And I'm like, "Yeah, whatever, right?" Um and uh and then when I was at Lakeside this last time after relapse at sober living I was here on my birthday. And uh he looked at his friend that is a family friend of mine. Uh he actually just passed away from this disease uh 2 weeks ago. And he looked at him and said, "Yeah, this is my last drink and I'm done. You know, this is not good for my son to come home to." Oh, wow. Yeah. And uh and he quit and he never looked back. Just like that? Just like that.

[1:41:03] Is he going to meetings or No. No? No. But still So, that's the difference So, that's what me and him talk about, right? Like there it says in the big book there's a difference between a hard drinker and an alcoholic. 100%. You know, um and I come to believe he's just a very hard drinker. Right? Um not very He's just he he's a heavy drinker, you know what I mean? And Yeah. Um cuz I can't stop without AA. You know what I mean? I've known I've known lots of people that way. You know, that they were able to just do an about-face and walk away from it. And And you're right, there is a difference, right? I admire those folks. I really do. But for me, I got to do this. I got to do this program. I have to, too. Yeah. You know, um like my dad literally mentioned it to me one day on the I think it was on the phone or in person. He's like, "Yeah, I noticed something about you." And I'm like, "What?" He's like, "You start drinking when you stop going to meetings." Interesting viewpoint.

[1:42:03] Mhm. Yeah. And I'm like, "Yeah, dad, I know." You know, like uh it's a problem, you know, like I need I need my meetings and uh he's been the best supporter, him and my mom. Like they're the reason why I'm able to live down here. You know, um like seriously, uh they helped me with everything, you know, they've bent over backwards for me. Um but the biggest thing that helps is like when I like I'm getting a little squirrely, I'll call my dad. And uh we talk He doesn't even realize it, but we actually have meetings without him even noticing it cuz it only takes two people. And we talk about and then I don't And then especially in the beginning when I was here, uh and then out of nowhere I don't want to drink anymore after we talk. A coincidence? No. Imagine what the fellowship could do for him as well. Yeah. Well, see, he and he's going to watch this, so cuz he says some things that are room talk. Yeah. You know what I mean? Like, where did you pick that up from?

[1:43:12] Yeah, where did you pick this up from? Not common phraseology there.

Yeah. I'm like, "Okay, you might be going, you know, um cuz maybe he just doesn't want me to know, right? And uh that's okay. Um but I think he might be a little AA cuz there's things I just I'm like there's no way you don't like you have to be in a in the rooms of Alcoholics Anonymous. Um but he's been a big inspiration for me now. Uh when I hit 300 days sober, he had five. Wow.

Same day. Mhm. And uh it's truly like it's unbelievable. Um my mom never thought that and I never thought it. I never thought one of us would truly get sober. The fact that both of us are now and we're on this journey like together like is like the best thing I've ever had in my life. It's freaking beautiful.

Yeah. You know, you looked up to your dad, respected him, he was your hero, right? You wanted to be a uh in the fire department like him. Yep. It sounds like uh you get a lot of inspiration from you. You just said that, but it sounds like he's getting a lot of inspiration from you. Yeah.

[1:44:22] Sounds like he uh respects you. Yeah.

As much as you did him and maybe you're his hero. Maybe. He uh he tells me how proud he is of me all the time, you know, now. Yeah. Like and that's like a miracle in my eyes, you know? Um cuz he's very important to me. He's my He's my best friend. Yeah. Like we could get stuck on the phone for 2 hours straight and not even realize it. He's like the only person in my life that I I know I'd like to talk. You know I like to talk, you know? I picked up on it. But uh he's the only person that I could sit there, maybe my best friend Johnny, but um that I could sit there for like 4 hours, even like 4 and talk and just don't even realize it. Yeah. That's huge, man. I just want to you know, focus on that just a little bit, just how huge that is, you know? You come down here and you get to work on yourself and you never gave up and then your family did not give up on you and then how our how our disease affects our family, you You we touched on that, but how our sobriety begins to affect our family. When you heal, the entire family begins to heal. When I heal, my kids and my family begin to heal. You know? Yep. And you you did the work, you laid the groundwork, you showed your dad the way, "Hey, this is where I'm going." And you started to get yourself healed healed up, healthy again, back on the right track. And what's your dad do? He joins you on that road. Yeah. That's a beautiful freaking thing right there, man. It is. Like I I I've like no You know what I mean?

[1:45:55] It it's um everything that I never thought would come true, like the good things are coming true. You know, like You know what's crazy? And I've I think you've heard me say this in the meetings. Um I right now I am closer with my parents and have a better relationship a couple thousand miles away or however far it is to Long Island from here than when I was 20 yards away from them in the same house, drinking and drugging. Yeah. Like it doesn't matter how close you are to somebody, like physically, you know, um my relationship with them is the best it's ever been. Right? And and I want to spend as much time you know, when I I have more groundwork and like my mom might be coming down here for my 1 year in April. Um we'll see uh depending on what what's going on at home, but uh you know, I never thought that would happen. I never thought that I'd be welcomed home for uh like 3 4 weeks in June. Mhm. You know, and and to the 4th of July, it's my favorite holiday. So, I like spending it with my dad, you know, uh watch the fireworks go off in the backyard and like none of it would ever ever happen, right? And the cool thing about my dad getting sober, too, is this is the version of my dad that I remember when I was little. Oh, yeah. You know, like for a while like I was lost and he was lost.

[1:47:30] You know, um and now we're both like like my you know, my my mom's like like got her son back, you know. Maybe your husband back, too. Yeah, yeah, she says that all the time. I got my two boys back. Your sobriety journey that you thought would not work out, that you were going to prove everybody wrong, that you were headed in the wrong direction, and look how it's impacted your entire family, not just you, but your entire family.

Yep. Wow. If that's not proof, I don't know what is. You want to tell us more about that, right? Yeah. Yeah, it's proof, man. It works. I'm like living proof like and it took a lot of courage you know, I don't like I gave up everything, man. I was right there at my dream, dude. I was like the end goal was Marine Division. That would have been two, three more years. But what if I died, you know, like was I really going to get there? Was it an illusion my addiction telling me to keep me sick, you know? That's probably what it was like and uh but I gave up everything like I wiped everything clean, came down here in hopes for a better life and really like put my God thing to the test, right? Like if he's really real and I do the right thing and it it will all work out, right? Like that's like the analogy that Neil told me, right? With the third step prayer uh third and third step is you see a guy walking along the rope at a like a carnival, right? You know, with a wheelbarrow. And that thin line, you know, where you like walk like this. Yeah, tightrope. And uh you see him do it five times. And he's about to go for the sixth. And you he's done it five times. You you believe in it. But then he picks you out of the car and says, "Get in the wheelbarrow." Now, are you going to get in? It's a real test. That's a real test. Cuz I've seen it like good things happen all the people from all my treatment centers, right?

[1:49:31] Mhm. But I wasn't willing to get in that wheelbarrow until this time. And then I got in and I'm getting there, man. Like life is good. Yeah. Um God said, "Hold my beer and watch this, huh?" Yeah. Quite literally, yeah. Yeah, watch watch me let me work. Get off the steering wheel, dude. Like you are not doing it right. Yes.

Yeah. Yeah, you're screwing up. Let me take over for a bit, right?

Yeah, like let me Yeah, like just walk the path. One foot in front of the other, RJ. And don't get me wrong, I'm not perfect. You know, um we're not saints, right? Right. And but I can look at it as I'm I'm a mess up or this is a learning opportunity. Mhm. And okay, it's a learning opportunity. Okay, this is what I can get better at. Okay. Let me practice it. Yeah. Yeah. You know, you saw all that darkness and you you question if there was a God, how could there be God with all this darkness around, right? Yeah. But in an odd way it makes that light so much sweeter, so much better. You know, you can't appreciate one without the other. You can't have one without the other. Nope. Yeah. All along the way God knew what he was doing with you. Yeah, I could be preaching a sermon here, I don't know, but uh he he still has a purpose for you. Yeah, you may not know that full purpose. What's that 11 step? Pray to improve our conscious contact with our higher power, praying only for his will for our life and the power to carry that out. Right?

[1:50:59] Yep. Did I think I'd be leaving my kids behind and coming to work over here? No. I drove eight I'm like you, I had to relocate. Not that the situation was that bad there, but I had a purpose. God had a purpose for me. Yeah. Now, my kids are over here with me, right? You You made the same choice. You burned the ships. You took that leap of faith. God's sending you in

that right direction. Maybe don't know 100% what it is yet, but you had them in that right direction. That's the thing, right? Like that people ask me like what I want to do and I'm like at a point like I don't I know what I want to do, but is it what I'm going to do? I don't know. I'm on an adventure now. You know, I I you're like fully consider it like an adventure of life, you know. Yeah, you're living it. Yeah.

Yeah, like I I'm I'm single. Like I have no kids, you know, like this like if there's a perfect time for me to like do this and get this right. Like I'm 26 years old. Like I could like it says in the big book, I could save myself 15 years of hell. Right? Like literal hell. And get this right now. You know, and like a big thing that like keeps me going too is right like am I going to be happy with myself at 40 for sticking with the like when I'm 40 years old am I going to be full of regret that I didn't weather more storms that came my way? Or am I going to look back and be like thank God I did this. You know, like I think we both know the answer to that. Yep. Yeah. Yeah. I don't know that storm. Yeah, that that regret is way worse. Way worse. Like and then it's there's the guilt and shame of it, right? And then you drink again. Yeah. You know, cuz you feel guilt and shame. And then you drink again to numb that out and then you go well, I'm already really half in the bag. Just forget everything. Mhm. You know, and then really go out. I'm tired of that, man. It It shows a lot of intestinal fortitude, courage, uh intelligence to to to take that journey and to have that mindset at such a young age. So many of us are so damn stubborn. We already have that type A personality, right?

[1:53:10] Yeah. Uh and even though there was ample evidence in my life that I was doing the wrong thing, I was still doing the wrong damn thing. Stubborn and hard-headed. It shows a lot of maturity and intelligence that you have reached that at this point. 26 years old, no telling where you're going to go from here, you know? I have no idea, but it's it's going to be something it's going to be what it's supposed to be, right?

I know. I like I I I have a feeling it's going to be good, man, cuz I'm doing the right thing, right? Like that's all I can ask of myself. Mhm. Am I talking to another alcoholic? I check on guys at the lodging here all the time, right? Um am I going to my meetings? Uh yeah. I I you know, um I got accountability, right? Um am I going for furthering my education? Am I doing good? Am I putting in 100% effort into that? Absolutely, yes, right? Um I'm doing everything I can. Only good can come from that. But I know if I start drinking and drugging again, like my whole life is going to shatter again. Yeah, it will. Like um I've banged my head against the wall enough times. Yeah, that's where that TBI came from. Probably. So, and you know, um just keep moving forward. Um now me and my dad, like that's I want to take uh like when I get my career going and everything, like I have like goals now, like I I I would love to take my dad to Ireland. He's always wanted to go to Ireland, Mhm. and I want to do that with him, you know, when I come home in June for a little bit, we're going to go fishing, right? Like and those are all the things that I didn't care about when I was drinking and drugging. Like it didn't only numb the bad things, but it took away all the good in my life. It took away the tuna trips. It took away the hockey games, the and It took away I love my Islanders, like you got no idea, right?

[1:55:08] And I would not go to games so I can drink, right? Like and I wouldn't watch them like took all the good. And now with sobriety like I can deal with life on life's terms and I can go have

fun. It that old saying, you know, alcoholism, substance use is trading everything for one thing. And then sobriety is trading that one thing for everything. Cuz all these beautiful things that come back in your life. I love it. I love it. Don't ever turn from that path at all, man. Yeah. One day at a time, man. I know.

One day at a time, for sure. Yep. Man, it's been a great having you here. You know, we we do a lot of stuff on social media and we we listen to the voices when they speak, right? Um one of the things that I wanted to point out was something that Haley told us beforehand and one of our social media posts that had the most attention was about EMS. Yeah. Um it's almost a forgotten world in some ways, right? It's a thankless job. A lot of being a first responder is. But we hear the voices. We know that they're out there. We know that we we offer the type of health that help that they need when they need it the most. And you're a perfect example of that. So I appreciate you being on the podcast, talking with us about your journey. It's been a beautiful journey and I know it's not an easy story to tell, man. But it's it's been beautiful. You should be proud of yourself. Hold your head high. And when I see you you usually are. You usually got a smile on your face, laughing, talking [__] with somebody in that New York accent accent, rather. Yeah. How you doing? How you how you doing? All right, yeah. I can mimic it a little bit, but I'm from Louisiana. I got that Louisiana in my mouth, you know, so how you doing? Right? I don't know. If I ever go to New York, I'll probably get my ass kicked probably by a lot of firemen. Yeah. What? Yeah, you'll be all right. You know, it's just you know, what's a couple of gold, you know? Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, like you know, or you got to say coffee right though. Yeah, coffee. Coffee, c a w f e e. Oh, yeah, yeah.

[1:57:09] coffee right and you and you move a little fast, you know, you're a good bee guy. It's only like having you around, man. I love it. Appreciate it, Rob. But no, I really appreciate you being on the on the podcast talking about your journey, man. And we do offer the type of help that people really need when they need it the most. And if you're one of those folks that need the help, 855-610-1033, warrior heart.com/connect. Reach out. And I mean, you hear it firsthand, not just from me, but the other alumni that have been here from RJ. So, if you fall into that demographic, first responder, you know, cop, fireman, EMS, EMT, paramedic, dispatcher, corrections officer, etc. Yep. Give us a holler. We got the kind of help that you need when you need it the most. So, I appreciate it, RJ. No problem, Rob. Appreciate Look forward to seeing where your future's going to take you, man. Thank you. I appreciate it. Cuz the first thing that they said was welcome home.