

MVFD Firefighter Scott Palkoski

Interviewed by Rina Faletti

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Scott Palkoski

[Abrupt start of Scott Palkoski 1 by RF 130718]

Scott Palkoski: -- together. And at that dinner, Brandon Jorgensen was telling me about his aspirations of this design aesthetic for the way he wanted to design buildings, which was in a fire-resistant manner, and that he's planning to do an exhibit of some sort. He had done some teaching to students, and I guess part of the curriculum was maybe the discussions around fire zones.

So he's planning on doing something.

Originally, he was going to do it in maybe the April timeframe. But I think now, he's looking to do it on the one-year anniversary timeframe. Just like certain artists and yourself who are looking to document this, he's just looking at it from a different perspective. It's, "How can we learn from what happened? How can we work to avoid that in the future?"

His design stack is really nice. It's more modern-style construction with a lot of concrete glass. Those can be very fire resilient. With glass, you have to think more about radiant heat coming through. But, for sure, the concrete is going to do better than most other materials. So we'll look to work with him in the rebuild.

Interviewer: Where is he? In San Francisco?

Scott Palkoski: He's in Napa.

Interviewer: Oh, he's in Napa.

Scott Palkoski: Yeah, born-and-raised Napa guy.

Interviewer: Oh cool. Okay, hold on.

[Break in recorded material]

Interviewer: I started the tape again. It's actually working now.

From what I understand, you just started in the fire department just before the fire started. Can you tell me about that?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. I'll roll back even further to how I got involved and even being interested in it.

So our friends at 2149, Geoff Herrick and Sean Kelley -- I did my MBA at Berkeley alongside Geoff. We got to know each other at the time. We both were there from 2005 to 2007. We also had spent many winters getting ski shares together up in Lake Tahoe, getting out of the city during the weekend and getting up there.

They were looking to get a place outside of the city. They were looking at either up in Tahoe or here in Glen Ellen. Originally, I was like, "Oh, God. I really hope he would get that Tahoe place," because I'll have a place to stay when I roll up there. And I know their taste is good taste so it'll be a nice experience.

And then they bought here. We came to visit them here and then just fell in love with the area because it's accessible from San

Francisco. It's an hour and fifteen, an hour and a half away. Getting to Tahoe would be like four hours on a good day, and on bad days, it's even worse. I couldn't imagine doing that, commute back and forth.

Then we came up here, and we'd visit them quite a bit. The back of their property faces Doni Bird's property. She has horses in all of the corals that are within view of the house. When I'd come up and stay on the weekends, I went to introduce myself to Doni. I mentioned that I really love animals, horses, dogs, cats, and I'm happy to help her in any way with the horses.

So we would just coordinate a time to meet, to feed them at 7:30 a.m. in the morning on Saturday, sometimes Saturday and Sunday. I would just go down there and help her take care of the horses.

During a discussion, she told me her nephew was a Glen Ellen firefighter as well as an Oakland firefighter. She knows a lot about the volunteer and full-time firefighting community. She had mentioned that, over the years, the number of permanent residents in the area has dwindled over time, and that the number of volunteer firefighters has also dwindled alongside that.

The number of volunteers is so slow that there was a possibility of consolidation of fire departments or maybe just eliminating having a proper volunteer program.

I said, "Well, I'd love to help out. I'll raise my hand, maybe enough to be a resource." She told me to go down to the Glen Ellen fire department. I went down there and talked to them. They said, "Well, where do you live?" "I'm at 2050." They said, "Well, technically, you're in the Mayacamas fire district so you should go up to the top of Trinity Road and talk to Chief Will Horne.

I did that; this was at the end of the 2016 timeframe. The Chief said, "Yeah. We'd love to have you be involved. We do our drills on the first and third Thursdays of the month. Why don't you come by and see what you think? And if you want to continue doing it, then we can have you fill out the paperwork and proceed from there." So I said, "Great."

The first time I was here was the first Thursday of 2017. It was right after the new year. And then I was here for almost every drill, first and third Thursday of the month for most of the year. Maybe one of the ones I missed was when we got in the October timeframe.

I liked it because at first, I thought, "Well, I could be a helping hand if there's ever a fire. And then I live here so out of self-interest, I can actually maybe even help my own situation," which is the irony here is that fire is not that easily averted when it's coming through.

But then I realized that this is more than just about fire. It's public safety like people who have trouble breathing that fell off a ladder; a tree came down or a cyclist rolled off the road. There's just a wide diverse array of issues in which firefighters are prepared to handle.

We joke because, in the wintertimes, we're the Mayacama tree service. Even this Saturday, we were talking and getting organized to do weed whacking on Cavedale Road to take the tall grasses down. I mean, if people can trust you to give you CPR and then do the weed whacking, that's a pretty broad range of things that you have responsibility for.

And then, the third thing that I realized is that, as a volunteer organization, you don't have a lot of resources. Things break here and they need fixing. I'm good with fixing stuff. My garage before we lost it, it was a

great workshop. I could pretty much fabricate anything out of it. I had a 3D printer, CNC machine, ARC welder, TIG welder. I could work metal, woodworking, electronics, soldering things.

Even during drills, we do our normal drill and then maybe there's something I'll focus on. Like, right now, I have 3440 at my house to repair the reverse lights.

Interviewer: The 3440 is an engine?

Scott Palkoski: That's the squad car. It's one of the vehicles, but it doesn't have water-pumping capabilities.

And that one, the reverse light is not working; the strobe light is out; the back locking mechanism doesn't work. I'll finish doing those repairs, and then I'll bring it up here. Then I'll see what else might need fixing. For me, that makes me feel good to do this problem-solving.

So those three dynamics of being a firefighter -- well, two -- were very surprising. That's why I like it.

And then the other thing is you really get to know the community. I mean, before, if you saw new people, you bumped into them and got introduced to them. But when you're a firefighter, you really get to know who lives where and just more background of the mountain.

And then some of the guys that have been doing this for a long time, you hear about those stories of decades. They still call people's property probably the names of the people who lived there like three generations ago or three property sales ago. It's pretty funny.

So I started the beginning of 2017. Then I was doing my proper fire academy that fall.

Interviewer: Tell us what that entails?

Scott Palkoski: That's 66 hours of training with the county. That's where you're getting more proper textbook-style training that a fireman would get trained. The full-time firemen, in order to receive their certification, they do I think 400 or 500 hours of training. That's a lot to ask a volunteer to do.

So they crafted a more condensed program to be able to fit within 66 hours. There are actually two parts of it. One is more of the direct fire-related-type of training, which is vehicle fires, wildland fires, structure fire. And then the other part of it is some of the other elements of being a firefighter like first aid, hazmat -- so other aspects.

I haven't done that aspect of training. But I did the proper structure fire, car fire, wildland fire. Because after that training, you're then qualified to actually enter a structure while it's on fire. If you haven't had that training, you could do some things to help out. You can be at the apparatus and handle some of the engineer-type stuff of just making sure the pump is engaged or the water is flowing when the firefighters call for water.

I think I was in my sixth or seventh week of it. Ironically, that Wednesday of that week was to cover wildland firefighting.

Interviewer: You got the immediate practicum. [Laughs]

coming up just west of Trinity Road where then it was going to meet with the upper Trinity and pass this Cavedale Road.

I went down, walked down into the ravine. I saw it was pretty tall flames like maybe 30 or 40 feet within a very tight area. You just knew the heat was building up. It was going to draw more wind into it. It was basically going to be coming up, and it was going to be crossing over the upper Trinity pretty soon.

So Michael and I -- I forget what other department was here. I don't want to say the wrong one. But there was another agency that was up here. They took one part of the road. And then Michael and I were staging ourselves over at 3771 area by the roundhouse.

We tried to spread ourselves out to see which direction the fire would come and see what we could do to stop it from crossing over Trinity Road. We wanted to use Trinity Road as a fire break and see what we could do.

The winds were blowing in. The fire was coming up so fast. It was a little bit of a futile attempt to even think about stopping it. We rolled up on it. The fire was much more intense on the downhill slope, and it started catching on the uphill slope.

We had the front hose that's at the bumper. That probably had about 100 or 150 feet of hose there. We got that out, and we started trying to tamp the fire down with that. But the winds and the heat, you just knew that you were going to be wasting water. So we just said, "Let's get out of here. Let's pack it up."

As we're putting the hose on the bumper, cross-laying it over the front bumper -- you know how you look behind? -- now, the fire is coming across the road behind you. It crossed the road in front of you. We got the hose up onto the bumper. We got in the cab. The vehicle started moving forward, but then it started bucking. It seemed like it was stalling.

We were facing the direction of the firehouse. I was on the side of the cabin that was on the downhill side. So the fire was coming up, pretty much, right at the road's edge. It was getting pretty warm. It felt like you were in an oven as it was cooking, and you feel the radiation coming through the window. So the water tender is bucking. It's not moving. I was just like, "Michael, please, please get this thing moving."

I mean, looking back at it, certainly, it was adrenaline and a little fear. But when you think about the area, I don't want to say it wasn't too bad. But we have ways to prepare for it. We have our little canopy, which is the shake-and-bake-type thing which is a mylar reflective tent that you can jump into. But we're on the roadside. It wasn't completely overgrown with a huge canopy.

But that's the funny thing. The more you get exposed to the situation, the more you feel more comfortable with it. So at the time, that was really my first exposure.

Interviewer: So talk about the at-the-time feeling.

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. At the time, it was like, "Holy shit. I hope this doesn't get worse than it's already appearing."

Also, I'm not driving behind the wheel. I'm sitting in the passenger seat as an audience, and you feel a little bit more helpless

because you're just sitting there hoping the other person gets it going and rolling. And we did; we got through it. And then everything is good after that, and you just sort of wipe the brow. But, at the time, it was like, "Could this get worse?"

That's the thing that's hard. As a firefighter, at what point do you make the call that it's going to get worse and now you've got to take alternative measures? But we got through it.

And when we did get through it, when we got back to the firehouse, that's when we had to start protecting the firehouse because this area was getting hit by the fire as well. So we just spent time trying to protect everything around this station.

Interviewer: So can you tell the details for somebody who will never be in that situation like me? Can you go through it and describe exactly what that was like? So you get here, and where did you see the fire coming? What did it look like? What did it sound like? You did a little bit about what it feels like with heat. What did you see?

Scott Palkoski: The way I look at this, there are two fronts of a fire. The initial front, which is the one that I think just caught everybody by surprise, was the fire that was in the 40 to 50 miles per hour, sustained winds and maybe even gusts higher than that. That's where it's just getting thrown across the landscape.

So that front of the fire is hopping, and it's going quite quickly. It's creating areas where people didn't know where you go to defend it because it's popping up in so many different places.

Then there's that second wave that comes through. As that fire originated in all those spots, it just burns everything through

and next to it. That's also very much wind-driven. The more wind, the faster it's going to spread. That's where there's more of a constant line that you can see at distance. It's coming at you at a more even pace, and it's not getting thrown by the winds.

The high winds will throw these embers hundreds of yards. It could be over you, behind you, and you might not even see it. Whereas, the other one is just more of a constant full press forward of it. That's the one we're trying to fight and protect the structures.

To stop the front line of a fire, it's pretty hard unless you can be really prepared by cutting big fire breaks, by chainsawing trees down, by bulldozing trees down. Short of having that time and preparation, we're just going into more of a structured offense, which is get to the structure and try to protect it from the embers that might get into the soffits or the vents of the building; try to put out anything that's igniting, piles of leaves that are in the corner where an ember gets thrown into.

You're basically trying to protect just the exterior structure as the fire is passing by you. So during the initial part of it, you're more likely at the front side of the building, attacking it as it's coming around. But as it's really pressing forward, you're likely to go to the back side of the building to use the building as a barrier to protect you from the heat, the smoke and so on.

And then as the fire passes by you, you're coming back out and getting around the building and trying to put out anything that did ignite as the fire was passing through.

So when we got here to station 1, I just remember the fire being all on the downhill side, a little spotty in nature and coming

through. This has very heavily understory of dense leaves and easily burned material. So it was pretty much just having hoses out and getting everything around it as it was flaring up.

But as the fire started going up the hill, basically, anticipating its arrival at the next structure up the hill, Michael and I went up to Tish Ward's house. Tish didn't evacuate with the fires. She decided to stay. So that obviously was a higher priority to us. We knew somebody was there, and we had to think about their safety first.

So we went up there with the water tender. As we were arriving, the fire was probably 100 or 200 yards from that structure. So we got there, and we saw Tish. We started preparing the area, putting out some of the things that did catch fire. There were reels of PVC drip hose and that stuff.

I mean, I think about all the things that you can do to prepare yourself for a fire. I would say, "Do not put piles of PVC hose next to your structure. Don't put piles of your wood and siding and so on -- " We spend more time putting out things that are considered more of debris and wasting water on that when we could have been using it in other areas.

But, yeah. We had some issues. She had a shed and had a PVC hose next to that. She had a little pool pumphouse that had a lot of chlorine in it. We didn't want that to burn up and put a lot of chlorine gas into the air.

But then the fire front, coming to the house pretty strongly. So we got on the back side of the house, pretty much waited for it to pass through, and then came back out and hit all the hot spots that had ignited as the fire was coming through.

But after that first wave comes through, things are much more manageable because it burned up all the real high-quality fuels. And then it's more of the burning on some of the lingering stuff after.

Interviewer: I have a question about that. When the fire comes through, it's like a front or something, right?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you give an idea of how thick or how wide is that front? Is it just like a little line or does it take 10 minutes of thick flames to go through? What does that look like? Can give any idea about that?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. It's not absolutely defined. In a low-wind situation, it's a definite line of fire in which the material around the backside is blackened, already burned, and on the front side, it's unburned. That line just keeps progressing forward.

When it's windy, it's not a clear, delineated line because you have embers that just jump ahead 30, 40, 50, 100 feet. It could be hundreds of yards. In that case, you're always scanning and looking.

In the case of Tish Ward's house, it was going out and getting enough hose line to go around the back side of the shed. She had a lot of the corrugated metal roofing stacks. I think there were some jugs and barrels of flammable substance like an oil can or something like that -- so hose that down.

And then you're patrolling other parts of the house. You're coming back out and going around the other side; checking the downsloping side of the house; spraying anything that's threatening there. You're just

15 feet. That's protecting the tree being the bridge right on the roof of the house itself.

At the ground level, you should have a five- to eight-foot perimeter around your house of anything flammable. That keeps your grass or shrubs from catching the house. The next ring would be more evenly-spaced things where if the bush catches on fire, it doesn't catch the bush next to it. So you'd have less density there.

And then in the outer ring, you want to remove the laddering effect of the fire, which is the grass can get the shrub; the shrub can get the lowest branches of a tree, and then the lowest branches can get the canopy of the tree. If it gets to the canopy of the tree, there's not much you can do.

That's the most dangerous where the heat gets into the 1,200, 1,600 degrees. It's burning so much fuel and oxygen that oxygen levels in the air start getting depleted. A normal car won't start when the oxygen is below 16 percent. A diesel car won't start below say nine percent. Even a human will get dizzy in the 10 percent range. So that obviously is the worse part.

That's why flame height is a critical thing for fighting fire. But, certainly, for proximity, you want to get there while the flames are low because then you can have the best chance of fighting that.

And that's when we worried, even the days after. When the fire does pass through, you have a lot of standing, already-burned, now super-dry fuel. If the high winds pick up, there's a higher risk of it reigniting and then having a canopy fire. When it gets into the crowns of the trees, that's when things are going to be really, really, really bad.

Interviewer: A lot to think about when you're out there.

Scott Palkoski: Yeah.

Interviewer: So did you say all three things?

Scott Palkoski: Well, the second thing was how we were going to handle Tish's house. We're up there trying to protect that. What happens if things get much worse?

When the fire was getting towards the house, there was much more smoke in the air; visibility was getting more difficult. You knew you were there, to stay there, for the fire that's oncoming.

We would stay outside the house initially. If things got really bad, we'd enter the house and wait it out there. If things got really, really bad, Tish had the pool, and we could use the pool as our safety area to get into and hopefully ride it out that way. So at that point, that's where I was getting a little worried of like, "What is that next step?"

But, like I said, now looking back I don't think I would worry quite as much. Maybe it's just more experience. But at the time, I think that was the second time I was a little worried.

The third time, we had the new engine, 3482, which is the Type 1 truck. We had that down in the Dry Creek Lokoya firehouse. It's not the most practical truck for fighting a fire on the mountain because its turn radius is not that good. It weighs 42,000 pounds, and it's not great for tight, dirt driveways and so on. It was a pretty expensive vehicle, and it was sitting down in Dry Creek

Lakota. The Chief asked me to go get it because the fire was going down into the Napa side.

Interviewer: From where?

Scott Palkoski: From up here on Trinity Road. Basically, it got to the Napa line and started heading down Wall Road.

Interviewer: What day was this?

Scott Palkoski: I think it was still Tuesday.

Interviewer: Same day?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. Those initial days were definitely hard to differentiate. But I think it was still Tuesday. Yeah. It was Tuesday. I can definitely confirm that because I had taken pictures of things so I could look at the date stamp on the pictures.

Anthony Horne was going to drive me down. I was going to go get that truck and bring it over to Glen Ellen, now that Glen Ellen was not at higher risk as say Napa as the fire was going that way. So Anthony and I had to go drive through the fire down towards the Oakville Grade side of Trinity Road. Even on a good day, that's a pretty crazy road.

There was so much smoke in the air. There was fire pretty much all around. You just didn't know, as you were driving into an area, is it passable? Are you able to get through? Is it going to get worse? If it gets worse, are you going to have an issue with being able to turn around and go back?

So we had a lot of trouble seeing and driving into that area. Like I said, it definitely gave me some concern. We were lucky when a state trooper was coming up the other way and basically confirmed that we were able to get through, which definitely gave me a lot more comfort when you're driving through that.

So we finished driving down there, and that's where I got 3482; I drove it. I wasn't going to take it right back into the heart of the fire. So I drove it out and around Carneros and came back through Sonoma and up 12. We kept it in front of the Glen Ellen firehouse, I think, for the remainder of a couple days.

But I had to bring it up Trinity Road when all the power lines were down. That was pretty crazy. It was like trying to squeeze this huge truck through these tight areas with trees on the ground, power lines on the ground. I didn't have anybody helping me; used a pipe pole to lift the power line as I was --

Interviewer: So you were by yourself when you were driving that up Trinity?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah.

Interviewer: How did you handle those situations? You'd just drive right over them?

Scott Palkoski: No. I was able to use one of the pipe poles out the window. You were like a knight jousting. As I'm driving the truck forward, I was able to lift up the power line just enough to clear -- I forget -- if it was getting hung up at the ladder bed or whatever but the top of the fire truck is not smooth. When

you get a power line that's draped across the road, sometimes you would have to give it a little lift of a foot or two. But I got that thing through, which was definitely an interesting experience.

Interviewer: So the amount of debris on the road, you had to stop how often to go over something or a tree? You were saying there was a lot of stuff on the road.

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. There was debris on the road initially when you were first arriving here after the first fires were coming through. Some of the fires were burning the base of a telephone pole. A telephone pole was already detached from the ground at the base where the fire got to it. Basically, the head of it was hanging. It was hanging between the two other standing poles.

But then the fire was slowly burning the base of that telephone pole so it was getting shorter and shorter over time. So when we were driving the fire truck through it, we had like a foot of extra clearance. The next day, it was eight inches of extra clearance. And then the next day, it was three. And then the next day, you were using a pipe pole to raise it and get under.

In some places, roads were really bad like Manzanita Court. That transformer and telephone pole came down right in the middle of the road; it blocked the whole road. There was one structure at the end of that that was still there. So our concern was, we had to, a lot of times, clear the road because in case there was an issue at that structure, we can get our apparatus in.

So I think I probably chainsawed 30 trees, 35 trees during that week.

Interviewer: To clear roads and driveways?

Interviewer: First, we could only get up Trinity. We couldn't come up the Oakville Grade. We were staying in Napa. When we came up to see the house the first time, I just noticed all these new poles. So you're talking about the poles coming down and the trees coming down. But then during that two and a half weeks, what was that activity about? Other than clearing, there was also replacement evidently.

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. It was tough to operate. Like I said, it would have been really tough to operate in the area if residents were back in. And us getting around roads while cars are coming back and forth would have been impossible.

But at that time, there were a lot of PG&E and AT&T activity on the hill. Quite frankly, they were getting in our way as we were trying to go down to Cavedale to do a lot of mopping up, which is like cleaning up of hotspots and cutting down trees that were clearly risking the road.

I had a caravan of these huge PG&E trucks coming up the other direction. And you know how Cavedale Road is? This is not a wide area. So it became really difficult to manage it.

But the objective of PG&E and AT&T together was that there was a main trunk line of fiber that connects a lot of the Sonoma hospitals with the Napa hospitals. This is one of the main trunk lines. I think the other ones are up on the Calistoga, maybe not that far north. But there's another one that's just north of the Mount Hood area.

I think the fire was heading up there. The concern was to get this back online in case it took out that main artery of data, telephone, whatever.

Interviewer: It specifically connects hospitals?

Scott Palkoski: I think that was the concern.

Interviewer: How do you know that?

Scott Palkoski: I don't know. There were probably a lot of people with rumors and so on.

Interviewer: Still, it's interesting.

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. As I understand it, that was the reason why there were so many other telecommunications agencies on the hill, putting telephone poles up so quickly. It was for the data line of the hospitals. If that's true or not -- I don't know about that -- it should be confirmed.

And then too, I think it was to resume power for people on the hill, which I'm not sure if that was as much of a reason. Because 40 percent of the homes were gone --

Interviewer: A lot of people didn't have it.

Scott Palkoski: -- so what good does that do?

So they were putting poles up really fast. They had to do it together because it was shared, the power lines on the top and the AT&T fiber data line. AT&T can't do it without doing the whole power pole type of thing.

So they were up on the hill. I just remember it being very frustrating to be encumbered from trying to get down the road because they were doing that type of work.

Interviewer: You either had to wait or have everybody pull over in awkward ways or something to get through?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah -- in awkward ways.

The good thing is there was a little bit of an understanding that we have the higher priority. But it didn't make it easy. It's not easy moving. Because they went in caravans of four vehicles of the type with the big buckets on the top. They're not small. So it's not easy to get them to tuck to the side of the road so you could move by them.

Interviewer: Okay. Did you do all three of those moments you were feeling like --

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. I'd say those were the three.

Interviewer: How would you describe it? What characterizes those moments?

Scott Palkoski: It wasn't like shaking-in-the-boots fear. It was in the back of your head like, "Holy shit. Is this going to get any worse? Should I be worried." I mean, you don't even know. It's like you look at the other person. You

look at them, and you're like, "Are they scared shitless?" If they're not, then you're like, "Okay. I guess it's sort of okay."

So I would say, I wasn't like huge-fear intensity. But I would say that those were three notable times where I was like, "Is this going to get worse? How bad can this go?"

But I think, in general, I feel like most of it was manageable to the extent you could manage it or it was uncontrollable, but you gave it a respectable distance type of thing. But that was the one where I think that respectable distance was real close, a little close.

Interviewer: A little too close?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. Especially, when the car was stalling. That's like the worst nightmare. It's like the horror movie, "Friday the 13th." Jason's coming after you, and you're trying to start the car. It won't start. That was just sort of the feeling when the water tender was bucking, wasn't moving, and the fire was getting a little warm in the cabin there.

Interviewer: I can't imagine that.

We've started your stories in their middle. So I'm wondering. Because you're playing these three roles -- you're a firefighter; you're a resident in the place you're volunteering to be a firefighter, and then you also lost your own home -- what happened from the very beginning? How did you find out about the fire?

Scott Palkoski: I guess I'll roll back to the week before that fire started.

There was a clear red flag warning that it was going to be pretty dangerous, high-risk conditions for fires. I was with some colleagues who were in from New York in San Francisco. I guess it was either the Thursday or Friday before. We actually had a conversation where I think they learned that I was a firefighter. We talked about that it was going to be pretty challenging conditions that following week.

Sunday was the Glen Ellen parade. I forget what it was called. My mother was here visiting; so we had my mother up to the house. Michael and I were going to drive the apparatus 3461, which is the wild one, the brush truck.

Did we drive that one? I think we did.

We were going to do that at the Glen Ellen parade. So we did that on that Sunday during the day. There were other things that were signs like how little humidity there was. Xanthie was making a pasta dinner, and she was having trouble making the dough. She was doing it from scratch. It was drying before she could even work it. So those were clear signs that the dryness was going to be bad. But then Sunday night was when the winds were to pick up.

At work, I was organizing a big conference in New York at our New York headquarters. It was around Blockchain, Bitcoin and things like that. It was a conference that I was personally leading the organization of. It was everything from getting the keynote speakers, the panelist speakers, the people from the company who were going to speak, invitations going out to institutional investors, VC investors or anybody in the finance world who really wanted to go that were clients of our firm.

I think we had like 290 people attending that conference. The irony is that I had a large part in setting the date. I chose October 10th, a Tuesday. I chose that date because I knew I could get back in advance of Wednesday night's fire academy.

So I decided to fly out on Sunday, a day early, so I could make sure everything was organized on Monday in advance of that Tuesday conference. I was taking the red-eye.

Interviewer: This is on Sunday night?

Scott Palkoski: Sunday night, yeah.

My flight, I think it was a 10:22 flight in San Francisco. That was really close to when the fire started. I left my pager at home because I was going to New York. So I was like, "I'm not going to need my pager." Also, I knew the tone-outs, I would receive those on my phone as an SMS message.

I was boarding the plane. I was probably turning the phone off for the plane so I didn't get the SMS message. The plane took off. When I got up in the air, I turned on Wi-Fi. I started getting connected.

I got a text from a friend that said, "Is your house okay?" I was concerned. I was like, "Well, what do they mean by that?" So I went onto my laptop, and I looked at just fires in the region. I saw that the Atlas fire was clearly burning pretty well by that point. I saw it.

She's from Napa. Her family is there. She lives in San Francisco, a very good friend of ours.

I just thought, "Oh, it's the Atlas fire. It's far enough away. Hopefully, it will get under control. Maybe it could risk the area but probably not a huge concern at that point."

But when the plane landed in New York at about 7:00, maybe 8:00 in the morning, that's when I got the SMS message page tone out that said it was at 1210 on Nuns Canyon Road. I saw that address, and I said, "Well, that's not good." It was an active fire tone out, which means it's not in the structure. It's out in the wildland interface.

The first thing I did was I called the Chief. He told me that they were down in Glen Ellen trying to protect a bunch of structures there. I said, "Should I come back?" I remember him saying, "I don't know if there is anything you can do from there."

My first reaction was, "I have to try to get back." So I started trying to get a flight to come back. There were a lot of flights that were already booked. I got an early afternoon flight that then had a cancellation or a delay. I think I had a 6:00 p.m. flight that I was finally able to get confirmed on. And then that one got delayed.

And I just missed getting on one. I even ran to the gate and, of course, I said, "It's critical. It's an emergency that I get back." I'm sure the flight attendant or the agents that were at the gate were probably hearing this a million times. But I wasn't able to get on that flight. So I had to wait. It was late evening by the time I actually boarded a flight.

Interviewer: This would have been Monday?

Scott Palkoski: This was Monday night, yeah.

I was getting informed of what was going on by some friends that were staying in the area. One of them was cutting down some trees at 2149 to make that protectable. So he was just using the chainsaw to get the big trees.

Interviewer: Trinity 2149?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah, 2149.

And then he went over to our house and said, "Should I cut down your trees?" At first, I told him, "No. I don't know if there is anything you can do." Because I saw, in the morning, a news's helicopter shot of the fire coming up the hill. I just thought, "There is not much you can do."

Then I said, "You know what? Why not. Just give it a try. Get the trees down. If in some way, we can save it, we'll save it, and that will be great. But don't do it to the point where you're risking yourself. Just get the big trees down."

It's like the 80-20 rule. Get the big ones down; take the five minutes for each one of them; take them down and, hopefully, fingers crossed, that will help the situation.

He had sent me a video where the fire was just on the ridge coming up to the house. It was clear that he had to get out of there. One of the burned trees I saw, it had the two marks of chainsaw cuts where he was in the middle of it. And then it was like, "No. You got to get out."

My property, for sure, was a very challenging property to defend. Ironically, I got a woodchipper delivered on Friday. I spent Saturday putting it on the tractor so that I could start really making an effort to --

Interviewer: This was the 7th of October, the day before?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah.

It was never -- it didn't even spin, and it was burned up in the garage.

The number of things that are ironic about the whole situation, there were just too many to talk about.

So he had sent me that video. I was on the flight. I remember that I just couldn't do anything but watch "that little plane on that little image as it's going across the country." For six hours, I just watched the minutes tick down to "5:13, 5:12 left on your flight."

There was not much I could do, but I did prepare nutrient-wise; drink a lot of water; get a lot of calories into me. Because I knew, when I did get back, it was going to be needed. I've done a lot of endurance events, Half Ironman, triathlons, endurance trail runs. I just know the importance of proper nutrition when you're going as long as you are.

At the time, I was doing a ketogenic diet, which teaches your body how to use fat stores as energy rather than sugars that are easy for your body to consume. But when you don't get the sugar, you bonk, and that's when you come off your sugar high. So there are benefits of a ketogenic diet, which maybe it was helpful to me in fighting the fires because I could probably go longer without

eating and not feel dizzy and so on. So maybe that helped. I like to think it might have.

When I landed, I got back into SFO, it was 12:30, 1:00 in the morning. I lost all the wildland gear in the house because it was in the garage. But because I was in the fire academy, I had my structure fire gear outside of the garage. So I went to go pick that up in San Francisco.

Xanthie was there. She said she wanted to come up. I said, "No. I'm not taking you up. I'm getting up there to go fight a fire. I'm not dropping you off at other people's houses or bringing you into a dangerous evacuation zone."

Interviewer: She had evacuated from the house?

Scott Palkoski: She was staying in San Francisco.

Interviewer: She was already in San Francisco?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah.

Interviewer: So she didn't have to evacuate?

Scott Palkoski: No.

So I grabbed my gear, threw it in the car, and started racing up here. I knew the best way of probably getting up here would be to go up Oakville Grade if the fire hasn't crossed over yet. So I went up through Napa. The roads were empty except for emergency vehicles. The smoke was clearly in the air. The haze was everywhere.

As I was going up Oakville Grade, I was just shocked that there were not that many cars on the road. It seemed pretty dead. When I got up over the ridge and I started passing station 1 and going down towards the house, that's when there were pockets of fire just everywhere.

Interviewer: But not going up to upper Dry Creek to the county line?

Scott Palkoski: Not to the county line.

Interviewer: It was smoky, but there was no fire there yet?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. It was still more on the lower Trinity side.

Interviewer: This is after midnight? It's Tuesday, early morning?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. Gotcha. So passing station 1, you mean right here?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. And then there was fire --

[Abrupt end of Scott Palkoski 1 by RF 130718]

[Start of Scott Palkoski 2 by RF 130718]

Interviewer: All right -- continuing Scott's interview. I don't know when it stopped. It wasn't too long ago though so just go ahead.

Scott Palkoski: Okay. So I called dispatch and said I needed some assistance. I remember dispatch saying, "Where are you?" I told them my general area. They said, "Well, that's in the evacuation zone. How come you didn't evacuate?" I said, "Well, I'm a firefighter so I didn't evacuate. I need assistance."

I remember her saying -- that was the first realization of just how resources-constraint we were. She goes, "We have nothing. We have no extra resources. We cannot help you. You are on your own." That's when I'm like, "Okay. I've got to grin and bear it and just deal with it."

So I was able to successfully get that line of fire under control; waited a little bit and made sure there were no remaining issues with it where it could flare up and continue on again.

Then I went back to station 1. That's when I was able to connect up with Michael J. and I think Jerry and Jesse, who both got here. I connected up with Michael J. to be in the tender with him. We started attacking things using that. We just started using the water tender as an attack vehicle.

Every vehicle was pretty critical. We don't have a lot of vehicles. If you have four vehicles, you can only be at four structures at any one time to protect them. I think 3482 wasn't a very good vehicle for it.

So it's more like three vehicles. Ted Meyer was in one. Jerry and Jesse Apgar were in the other, and Michael J. and I manned the water tender. Jerry and Jesse tended to patrol more of the Cavedale side. Michael J. and I were more of the upper Trinity and the lower Trinity side and some of the

more immediate area on Cavedale. Ted took the middle parts. We just tried to do what we could.

I think communications was definitely a challenge for us. The radios weren't always the best way. Cell phone service was certainly not dependable. But we pretty much did what we could to try to handle things.

I remember -- I guess it was that Tuesday -- the Chief was in 3482. He was driving the new apparatus that day.

Interviewer: What day are we at now?

Scott Palkoski: Tuesday still.

Interviewer: This is Tuesday morning? Wait. When you had that fire -- that whole thing you were doing by yourself when you got back up here after you got back from your back and forth flight -- that was in the middle of the night going into Monday?

Scott Palkoski: So my flight --

Interviewer: No. That was in the middle of the night going into Tuesday.

Scott Palkoski: Yeah -- going into Tuesday.

Interviewer: When you got back here, you encountered all the firefighters. Do you have any idea what day and time that was?

Scott Palkoski: No. Tuesday and Wednesday, it's really hard to remember the linear progression of time.

Interviewer: Because?

Scott Palkoski: Because I was pretty sure the Chief's house burned on Tuesday. I can't remember -- I'm pretty sure, Tuesday, we were also trying to defend Tish Ward's and the firehouse and upper Trinity. I can't remember which happened first, which happened later.

I do remember us patrolling a lot of Cavedale, connecting up with the Chief who went down to Cavedale for a bit. I remember the Chief going down to Wall Road because the fire was getting down there. I'm pretty sure that was still Tuesday.

I forget where we were, but I remember getting a text saying, "We now have to go down to Cavedale because the Chief was actually trapped in on Wall Road with 3482." I think his house had burned at that point. But we had to get down there with chainsaws to basically get them out of the Wall Road area.

I remember us going down -- I think there was another agency that was there at that time -- basically, clearing the road and got it cleared. And then we pulled up with the water tender and went to fill up 3482 with more water. I forget if we filled up another apparatus from another agency.

That was the point where the Chief had already lost his house. We were just trying to put out some of the larger trees that were still on fire and smoldering on the insides so those didn't come down in the area.

It's hard to remember exactly the timing of events on that day because it all just blurs from hopping from one to another. That's pretty challenging.

Interviewer: You said that after you saved or defended the firehouse, then you and Michael realized, "Okay. Now, it's going to go to Tish's." Then you went up there. What else was happening? Did you know now or did you know then or everybody just went where they thought they needed to go?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. There was a lot of coordination of others saying, "Look, the fire is making its way into this area." It was probably more of just general plans to patrol. Because we knew Tish was there, that clearly was a primary concern for us. So Michael and I just said, "Whoa, let's get up there. We will stage ourselves there and prepare for it to come up."

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. And you stayed there?

Scott Palkoski: Mm-hmm.

Interviewer: When you were defending the firehouse, who was all here? Do you remember that?

Scott Palkoski: It was quite a few people. I remember Ted being here. Jerry and Jesse probably were here, and then there were a bunch of other agencies that were out here as well. So there was a larger group here, which was good. It was much more capable of saving the firehouse with that group of people.

Interviewer: You weren't involved in any evacuations? I mean, Tish did not evacuate. So you were clearly involved in an anti-evacuation or a refusal to evacuate?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. As I understand it, the sheriff did a lot of notifications on the hill for the evacuations.

Interviewer: Oh, up here?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. I know that it wasn't 100 percent. There was a lot of talk about how the notification system could be better for any resident in the whole county. But I know that the sheriff knocked on some people's doors but probably didn't know that that driveway kept going to another house and another house and another house.

So houses along the immediate adjacency of the Trinity Road proper, they were notified. But if you were the third and fourth house back, like Jensen Road or some of the other smaller driveway-looking things, they didn't get notified. I know 2149 didn't get notified by the sheriff, but I'm pretty sure Rolf Lamar did. I know Dennis Roberts did. So it was spotty.

But that's the first primary concern is evacuate it. You're not thinking about defending structures at that time. You've got to make sure everybody is out. It was helpful to have the sheriff actively involved in doing that because that then just gives you more manpower to get people out and make sure they're gone. And then you can focus on fighting fires.

Since I was on a flight to New York at the time, I wasn't part of that aspect of it. I got back and, clearly, people knew; everybody knew.

Interviewer: Everybody was gone pretty much by that time on who was going to leave?

There were certainly times where we did overlap. There was -- I would say -- Thursday night or maybe even Friday night, I know Jesse and Michael J. were sleeping at Station 1. And that night was a high-wind night. We were going to stay at 2149. I was going to stay there with Geoff. I don't think Sean was up here that night. And there were a couple of other friends that were staying as well.

We said, "If we're going to stay up here during the night with high winds, we've got to have organized watches. We've got to have somebody wake up at specific times, check the horizon, check the winds, and look for any dangers that might be risking the situation."

We chose every 90 minutes throughout the night for somebody to get up. And I remember, it was probably about 3:30 in the morning, I didn't sleep well anyway. So even though, we had people organized to get up, I was still up. And at that time, I walked to the back window of the house. I remember seeing Geoff with a five-gallon bucket. He was walking out to put out this little flare-up of a trunk that was on fire at the edge of the property.

I looked out the window to the northwest. It was 1879. It was the house that's past Doni Bird's property that I didn't know. I just saw this glow up on the ridge. It was like you looked across the hillside where you'd see everything glowing in little pockets.

And then I remember Geoff saying, "That's the neighbor's house that's catching fire right now." So I made the call into station 1, and I was able to get ahold of Jesse. They were going to get into 3461, the brush truck, and come down.

In the meantime, I put on my gear. We got Doni's little UTV. We threw a pump in the back and a garden hose. We rolled over to the other property; cut a hole through the pool cover; dropped the garden hose in; ran this portable pump, and just started pumping water.

The fire got in the corner of the house where the utilities were, electric, circuit breaker, distribution box, water treatment. That was one of those nights where it was high winds. An ember must have just blown into this little pocket and set that on fire.

The garden hose was clearly not enough water. So we were also doing a bucket brigade and throwing five-gallon buckets. The five-gallon buckets were probably more effective than the garden hose. I was just telling them to throw really high, "Throw as high as you can get on top of the fire, as much as you can." Because we couldn't let it get above our reach until 3461 got here.

We were basically trying not to put it out but at least stop it from getting worse until 3461 got there, which they did, and we got water. Luckily, that truck also was equipped with foam, which has twice the effectiveness of water. So we got that out.

I forgot about the original or origin of the point I was trying to make as I went into that story. But that was just another case of four or five days later and you're still putting houses out. That's the reason why people can't come back to the area until almost everything is mopped up and put out. Every little burning ember could be a flare up if the winds come.

And then the same thing happened the next night. It was 4:00 in the morning when we did the same thing. We had these watches; we were getting up. There was another glow. This time it was between

Rolf, Martin Lee, and Dave Gaziani's house in the field. It was pretty much risking all three houses because it literally started in an unburned spot in the middle, and it started making its way out.

There was one agency -- I wish I wrote down all the names of the agencies. But there was another agency that had a Type 1 vehicle. They were on Doni Bird's area in that neck of the woods. They were staged there overnight. They had also seen the glow.

Again, we called for 3461, which was staged here. Jesse came down. He was staying here that night. So he came down with that, and we did the same thing.

As the other agency was coming over with the bigger truck, they had a hard time figuring out how to get there. They had people on foot trying to walk through. I had to direct them. I said, "No. Take the apparatus; go out the gate; get on Trinity Road; make a left, and come down the driveway of 2149," which is not a small distance. That's still 300 or 400 yards. But if you don't know the mountain, you just don't know which driveway is the right one.

Interviewer: This is in the middle of the night, right?

Scott Palkoski: The middle of the night, yeah.

So even after telling them exactly what to do, we were still able to get 3461 dispatched from station 1 onto the scene and have water flowing faster than those guys could even turn around where they were. They just came around later.

Interviewer: Type 1, what kind of truck is that?

Scott Palkoski: That's the larger one. That's the typical one that kids would have as a toy truck. That's the same as 3482; the new one that we had got. That's a Type 1 apparatus. The 3461 is the wildland brush truck. That's the one that Jerry usually drives.

Hello?

[Break in recorded material]

Male Voice: I just found out an ingenious thing. He would take a picture of the address as we went in, and then he took a picture of the address on the way out. So he knew exactly which houses we were looking at to make it helpful to the people and make it helpful for us too to know, as soon as we did the loop, if it was a house he had to go back to because there were hotspots over it.

So it was a lot of fun.

Interviewer: Once.

Male Voice: Yeah. This is the second time for me.

Scott Palkoski: Oh, was it? Oh, that's right?

Male Voice: I was 14, and it was fascinating back then. Now that I'm 68, not so much.

Take it easy.

Scott Palkoski: See ya.

Yeah. It still gets hard to remember all the homes and all the addresses. That was the only way to do it, to take a photo as you were rolling up.

Interviewer: Plus, it sounds like, when you say, "I can't remember," or, "The events all go together and you don't have a grasp on chronological time," do you think that that would have been the same? Like now, we're however many months away from that time, we tend to forget details. Do you think it would have still been the same way of that fusion of time?

Scott Palkoski: To a degree, yeah. Probably, documenting it sooner after it happened, I'd have a little bit better grasp of timing like that whole thing of 1875 or 1879 burning. Now I'm like, "Was that a Thursday night or a Friday night?" Whereas, at the time, it was easier to say, "Oh, that was Thursday."

I can go back through all my photos, and I have date stamps on everything. I did take a bunch of photos. Some of it was like lessons learned. Like people who -- I don't want to out too many people. But ten inches deep bed of woodchips around the propane tanks. Like that was wasting so much time trying to put out that stuff.

There was a lot of time wasted on things that if people had a little bit more discipline in -- I get it. People probably didn't know. They're like, "What am I going to do with all these woodchips? We'll just chip it up, and it's not going to be an issue."

But when a fire comes through, 10 inches deep, the fire actually burrows like a gopher in veins. With the McLeod tool, normally, we just come up and you can just scrape back to dirt and give yourself a wide path.

That's another of the rules like four times the flame height. If the flame is eight inches tall, you've got to do it 32 inches wide. It'll probably burn out. That's if there's no wind. If there's wind, all rules are out the window.

It was like we couldn't make any effort through woodchips. You'd put that McLeod tool in it, and you'd just pull back and a couple chips would just flutter. You made no progress.

And then you're just putting water down on it. Now, you're wasting a ton of water. You can't even see it because it's burrowing underneath. So the only thing you can do is put a little water on it. Hopefully, it works out. We'll come back and check in three or four hours. But that's a pain in the ass. You could be checking other properties.

Or some people had a nest of pine needles in that little cap on their propane tank. That's not that bad because that stuff will probably burn before you can actually -- it wouldn't generate enough heat to put the propane tank at risk. But that was another one.

So if you think about best practices, just a lot of piles of wood, three, four feet from the house.

Another story that was pretty interesting in this was while I was up here fighting the fires, Xanthie wanted to contribute and be helpful. Her friend Kassie Borreson was the one that sent me the text while I was in the air. Cassie is from Napa county off of Dry Creek Road.

So the two of them organized a GoFundMe account, which is where people could give money to some cause. This was specifically to help the people who were displaced by the fires in Sonoma and Napa Counties. Their objective was to raise money, and then with the money, go to Costco and buy socks, underwear, just supplies that people are going to need that are in the shelters. So they would raise the money, and they would go to Costco and just fill the cart with a ton of stuff.

While they were online, there was another person who said, "Wow, you guys look like you're stocking up for the shelters." And Xanthie said, "Yeah. We raised money, and we're going to take this and drop it off in the shelters."

I'm trying to think of the name of the person. Because now I'm blank on her name. She's the last house before you get to --.

You know the four houses on Trinity and then you get to the Napa county line?

Interviewer: By the vineyards?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. Across from the Petroni Vineyard.

Interviewer: No. I don't know them.

Scott Palkoski: I'm blanking on a name.

But anyway, she was online, and she said, "Well, I have a house up there. We're not sure if it's there." Xanthie asked her where it was. She said, "My house is on Trinity Road." She goes, "Ours is too. My

husband's a firefighter, and he's up there. He could tell you if your house is still there or not."

So I'm going to say this is on probably the Wednesday timeframe, maybe Thursday. But Michael and I, we got back to station 1. We were filling up the water tender from the tanks here. I just told Michael, "I'm going to get in my personal car, and I'm going to go check out this house." It was 4575 Trinity.

As I was driving out, I got to the first of the four houses on that strip. This line of fire was just coming right up. It was about six feet away from the first of the four. So I just turned around quickly, and I raced back to the firehouse and told Michael, "We've got to get out there quickly. Let's gear up and get out."

We drove out. By the time we got there, the fire was within two feet of that first house. We quickly got the most at-risk side of that exposure; we took care of that. We were able to put in a little bit of a buffer.

This was an area where the pine needle thatch was so thick that that stuff was like kindling. It seemed like it was eight inches thick of just pine needles over many years just building up. It was in an area where there was a lot of ivy too. So the fire was just burrowing through.

That house had a ton of wood on that side, stacks of 2x6's, dry, old and then galvanized sheets of roofing material on top of that. So underneath the galvanized roofing material was eight inches of pine needles. It was like an oven, like a furnace with a galvanized thing.

You try and spray water, but you're just spraying water on a sheet of metal. And underneath it, it's burning. So I had to, with one foot, try to kick back the metal as you're spraying it to put out the fire and then doing the same thing with all that wood. It's like you're spraying the wood, and then you're having to kick it with your boots to flip it over to try to get to the underside of it because, literally, it's a ton of hot red embers and wood. This is all within 10 feet of the house.

That's the other thing that I'll ask someone. "If you're going to pile a ton of wood, put it outside your defensible perimeter and just let it burn. Don't put it right up against the house."

So then after getting that immediate fire out, we cut a fire break around that house and then continued the fire break around the house next to it and then the third house, which is set back from the road. It looks almost like a French chateau thing.

With that one, we had to pull back a bunch of wood that was stacked up against the house. We pulled yard furniture away and stuff like that. Also, we cut a fire break around -- they have like a shed, some structure where you just had to cut back. They also had a propane tank in the woods, but that one wasn't terribly on a lot of bed of fuel.

And then 4574 was the fourth one, the ultimate one that I was going to check on. I started cutting the fire break there. That was just a long stretch; that was a tougher stretch. But that's when Jerry and Jesse came to help out. We were able to put a nice perimeter around that. We came back to check on it, and would the fire get across it?

That's when, like I said before, there were so few resources in the county. I know a lot of homes were lost, and it was unfortunate. But every individual probably contributed to saving like four or five homes, per person. Anything remaining was really because there was somebody there to attend to the fire that was immediately threatening it.

There may be some that we don't know whether the fire was just sheer luck or if there was another agency there that was on the scene. Because there were just so many people operating in this area, it's hard to tell.

But for sure, it was luck, timing, resources, wind direction, time of the day. It was just all that together. So hopefully, the ones that were still standing, it's just a matter of all of those put together of being able to attend to it.

Interviewer: Well, that's why we're grateful because of that combination of unknown factors. Well, some of them are known, like you said. There were people there.

So there are a couple questions here. Describe the fighting fire that you'll always remember. Have you covered those ones? Do you have anything else that comes to mind?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. Certainly, the three that I described before. All of it, they were all like little vignettes though. That's why I just said, it's hard to remember the chronological aspect of it.

But those three instances where I was a little bit nervous; the two middle-of-the-night things that happened almost a week later, for

sure; another four houses at the end of the road in that situation, for sure. I was going to say, "Trying to fight the fires that went up across the road of upper Trinity."

There was another thing which was to help make people feel better about whether their house was there; seeing it on Nextdoor. There was also a Facebook newsgroup where people were like, "Yeah. Can somebody go check on my house?" I remember doing some extra patrols just to give people the comfort that their house was there.

We did a lot of "taking care of people's pets." Doni wasn't able to get her horses loaded up to evacuate so her horses were up here at the time. We offered to load them up and get them out of here, but Trinity Road wasn't exactly the best road to take a horse-laden trailer down with the power lines on the road. Also, the fire already went through this area so we were like, "Well, we're here. We're next door, and we'll look after the horses." So that was more of Geoff and those guys because I was out patrolling and doing the fire.

There were a couple times when I would go and feed Roberto's birds at 1861 Trinity or there was a neighbor on Maple Glen whose cat was up here still. So that was like the end-of-the-day routine.

It would wrap up by -- I don't want to say "wrap up" because there was never really any wrapping up. But there was a point where you were like, "Okay. I've got to go get something to eat and get some sleep." That was generally like 10:00, 10:30, 11:00 at night. That's when it was time to take care of the pets and animals and try to get sleep from like midnight to 2:00 or 3:00. And then the next day started.

I remember when I talked to my employer, my boss, and I said, "Look, I'm going to be a little out of pocket for a while." He's like,

"Just take as much time as you need. You're doing something way more important than us." I was grateful for that.

But I just remember saying, "At what point do you say, I got to go back to work?" I figured the good point was if I woke up one day and I didn't have to wake up at 3:00 in the morning and put out a fire or take some tree off the road because it was something that was at risk, things would feel calmer. Then I was like, "Yeah. Then I'll go home."

So that for me was, I think, 10 days into it. I probably went to the office maybe on the Thursday or Friday the following week.

Interviewer: Oh, you did?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. Until this day, I'm super-grateful for the people I work with to allow me that time. My bosses are in New York. Do they live and see the same effect of the wildfires that we do being residents here? Absolutely not. But they have their own emergencies. They had Hurricane Sandy and other things that they've had to deal with. So I was pretty happy to be able to take that time off and for people to be so understanding to allow it.

Actually, that was one of the points that I was going to make. When I was returning from New York, I remember one of my colleagues in San Francisco saying -- because I would wear my pager and stuff in San Francisco. They'd be like, "You're here in San Francisco. Why do you have to wear a pager for Sonoma? What are you going to do? You're going to actually go up there when there's a fire?" I was like, "Yeah. The fires we worry about are not the ones that get put out in three hours. I will be able to get there."

Now, this was an extreme case where I wasn't able to get there in time to save my own house. But from New York, I flew here to fight the fire.

There's no distance that is not relevant as a firefighter for me. The first fire I actually went to, it was the Monday before the fires. It was on Doni Bird's property. I get up at 4:30 in the morning on Mondays because I have a standing call at 5:00 Pacific, 8:00 a.m. New York time.

My pager went off at 4:15 a.m. I thought it was my normal 4:30 a.m. alarm because I was still a little groggy. Then I looked at it, and that's when I saw the address. It was 1861. I was like, "Damn, that's Doni's address."

So I grabbed my gear, and I got in the car. I did my call while I drove up. I got here, and it was pretty much under control. We were just doing some mop-up of it. But it was basically almost a similar situation -- some winds. The power line to the cabin that's on her property, that's where the fire started.

Luckily, CalFire was I think on their way to Yolo County. So they were already in route, about to go over Trinity Road into Napa when the call happened. So it was quickly contained. But it was still very dry then, and that could have been the origin of a lot of the fires.

Then I sat with Doni, and we chatted for a bit. Then I was like, "Okay. I guess I'll go to work now." I think I was at my office by 9:00 a.m. I just remember telling people, "I woke up. I had a work call; put out a fire, and was at my desk by 9:00 a.m." Talk about a "productive week." It started off with that on a Monday morning. [Laughs]

So Doni is known as my first fire.

Interviewer: Yeah. So you seem like a big-picture thinker. You said you were thinking about the people in New York who have had to deal with other disasters. Have you done any thinking about connecting the way that this feels either personally or regionally or with the community and thought about any picture issues? How it might connect?

Scott Palkoski: No, not specifically about different disasters. I always think about the notification aspect of it and the communication challenges in rural areas. Like I said, not everybody knew there was an evacuation. How can we not really be that unaware of it?

So I'm actually looking to create a system to accommodate that, I guess. I've already prototyped a technology-type thing to do a long-range radio frequency alert and response system. I might even look at patenting it. I don't want to talk too much about it.

I'm not patenting it for a business proposition. It's just that somebody said, "Well, that sounds like a novel idea. This is something that you should patent." So I was like, "Yeah. Okay. I'll give it a try."

The thought is to create a mesh network where every house is interconnected, and an alert can be triggered at one central place, either by a central authority like the county, the sheriff or some ops center. Alarms will be able to go off in each home. Each one will be able to actually respond with, "I'm evacuating," "I need assistance," or some other thing.

That would allow first responders to prioritize, to know that people received it, and they don't have to go knock on the door. Like I said, the first 36 hours of this, we were trying to make sure people were evacuated. Structure protection was completely secondary at that point.

If you could shorten that time, you can save more property. So that's the concept there. I mean, technology exists. It's just wrapping it up into a solution that people could use and have. And then that solution could be utilized for other things -- Amber alerts or what not.

Interviewer: But you were thinking about it in terms of the bigger picture of the fire. It sounds like that invention is about finding ways to communicate better for the people in this type of a disaster where you have to get out fast.

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. That's one of the biggest concerns that I hear following the fires is people were frustrated with the lack of notification, poor notification, whatever. There are alert systems through SMS on your phone. But a lot of people weren't signed up for Nixle. I think that's the most popular one.

But then some people don't have cell phones. Tish Ward doesn't have a cell phone. So having Nixle means nothing to her. But could you put something in the house that would be low-power, and when it went off, you knew it went off? I mean, I get 300 alerts on my phone a day. How did I know that that one I should have done something with? If I didn't look at my phone for like half an hour, it sounds like any other text message.

So there's definitely an opportunity to make a better system that could be bidirectional. It's not just notifying, but it's also the ability for somebody to respond and allow you to prioritize.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm. So that goes to the questions about the future, post-fire, which we are now I guess. What are we, nine months out?

Scott Palkoski: Yeah.

Interviewer: When you think about what recovery now means, what are your thoughts and what do you hear other people talking about? Communications is one of them and notification and stuff. As we move forward, what do people talk about for the future?

Scott Palkoski: The one thing, the immediate concern right now is what that fire has done to contribute to the situation we have now. There are a lot of dead trees on the mountain still standing and need to be cleared. How can you get that fuel off the mountain?

Also, the trees, when the density was taken away, now you have a lot of grasses growing on the mountain. So it's contributing to what could even be more dangerous right now in terms of our fire concern.

So even though we're post-fire, I feel like we still have lingering effects to that fire. We're going to have a lot of dead trees on this mountain for a long time because I know people can't clear 6,000 acres. Our fire district is 6,000 acres of rugged terrain. That's going to be a tough thing post-fire to deal with.

Other things, as a fire agency, that we have to do to be better prepared for, "Is 3482, the Type 1 engine, the right apparatus for this mountain?" Any of us would say, "No. Why did we get it?" We had to get it for the

ISO-8b classification to have an apparatus that met those specifications for insurance standards.

We are investigating other alternatives to still meet those criteria but to do it with a different apparatus that's better suited for the mountain. That's likely to be in the form of a Type 6, which is a smaller footprint vehicle but has the pump capacity both in throughput as well as water capacity in the tank, and with the 24-foot ladder, another 12-foot ladder, and a certain amount of hose in order to meet those requirements.

There are other things that could help improve it. There's what's called a Type 7, which is more like a UTV-style thing. I mean, it was clear when we put out the fire at 1875 or 79 -- whatever that number exactly was -- it was helpful to have that little piece of equipment to get up, get closer to the pool, and drop the hose in.

A lot of these properties are getting bigger. Their pools are set back. They have these nice little pathways that we're not getting a big apparatus over there. Even getting into these little jeep trails or fire access roads, some of the big apparatuses are not getting there. So a small little thing like that would be well-suited.

And then, it's like I said, we were as effective as we could be with the number of equipment that we had available to us. I don't think we need a \$250,000-apparatus for each person to be effective. Because even the small things could do these quick little field brush fires and stuff with that small UTV-style thing.

I'm a proponent of getting at least one. And then somebody even said, "We should probably get two." Do we need to have two?

For you, it's about that experience, but it's also about your losses I'm assuming too maybe. How do you sum up your feelings of how the fires changed you both personally and professionally? What change or loss or whatever might mean for you in this situation?

Scott Palkoski: I have a lot of complex feelings around all of it. I get it. A lot of this is just junk you collect over time. I did lose a bunch of that stuff. I'd say the majority of it was a financial loss. Some of it was sentimental. That was tough to deal with.

The one thing I had recalled after seeing my house gone and losing all that stuff was that it was good to actually have the responsibility of being a firefighter, giving me something to do. I just said, "It sucks I lost everything." But now, "Is there something I can do to help somebody else from having to have that same feeling?"

It gave me something to preoccupy my mind because I would have been completely miserable if I just had to be a victim and sit there and say, "Yeah. This fire overran the house and destroyed everything. Now, I'm stuck feeling sorry for myself." I think having the responsibility of being a firefighter really helped take my mind off of that for at least enough time to get over the worst part of it.

I don't know how long it'll take to get over it completely. My stress has certainly changed. We weren't insured for what it's going to be to rebuild for sure. We'll probably do some improvements to rebuild because if you're going to rebuild, you might as well invest. You're not going to put up exactly the same thing before. We're going to do some concrete. We're going to do fire-resilience. There's probably going to be a big investment in that.

Also, this is something where you have to be happy with going forward. If you're going to take two years to rebuild, you might as well do it in something you know you're going to be happy with for a long time.

But I wasn't ready to do that now. I mean, when you do your dream house, you do it when you're retired or, "I've got nothing else to do, and this is going to be a fun project."

Now, it's like, I still have a full-time job. I work until 9:00 almost every night. My hours are better than they used to be. I mean, in finance, in my career, it's 90 hours a week in the early stages of my company I work at. It's a lot better, but it's now travel.

It's like I have so many decisions to make right now. I have to deal with my septic situation, the leach field. It was considered experimental. "Am I going to have to redo that? Can I reuse what was there?"

I know if I was building new for now, the county would certainly say, before this, "No way can you do it with that system. You'd have to improve it." But now, I'm hoping like, "Can I still keep it? Is there going to be some leniency afforded to people who lost their home?"

I don't have a lot of records of the soil, the geotechnical report, what could take a foundation, what the county is going to require for that. So your architect says, "Well, now you've got to get a geotech engineer to come in." And then you're like, "Well, how much of that stuff is in what your insurance was?" Because I don't know if those soft [clauses] are all there.

We still have to do a personal belongings list, which my list is 2,000 items at least, and even that's aggregating a lot of stuff. I have

a lot of hobbies, and I have a lot of eclectic weird stuff. Not like completely weird but just my electronics components, microcontrollers, diodes, packs of resistors, just a ton of components.

I had mini solar panels fabricated in China and shipped to me for projects that I was working on, things for the property but other things I would just use solar panels for. That's stuff that is hard to remember, everything that you had in every drawer. I'm probably not going to recover to the extent that I had with all that stuff. So that's a lot of stress right there.

I have no idea how much it's going to be to rebuild the house. I know people can give you broad brushstrokes. An architect is going to be like 10 percent of the cost. The good news today is that I found out that the geotechnical engineers that did the soil test said that we have bedrock four or five feet down. We don't have to do pilings. I was like, "Phew. That's a \$100,000-savings right there, that piece of news." So more of a tidbit.

Also, I'll probably be house-poor for a while. But the thing is, I also know that I'm probably in a different situation than a lot of other people on the hill. I always think about Chief Horne's situation. He's 79 years old, 57 years of fire service. He had a lot of investment in antiques that were on the property and were burned in the fire.

I still have years of career ahead of me to recover from this stuff. But the Chief is in a different stage in his life. He just lost his wealth that was in antiques. His insurance policy didn't cover all that stuff. How is he going to recover?

So I mean, my situation sucks. But I think other people have worse hardships to deal with right now. I still consider myself fortunate.

It doesn't mean my stress goes away though. I have plenty of years to recover. For right now, I feel like, I need to keep a hold of my job to get through this window. And financial services, job stability is sometimes hard to come by. But hopefully, my firm is happy with my contributions and will keep me around right now.

So the stress in the back of the head is like, "What happens if I were to get fired right now? Everything would change." The level of stress would go through the roof. So I'll make it through hopefully, fingers crossed. If I can get through the next two years for the majority of the reconstruction, then I'll be in a place where maybe I'll look back and say, "It didn't turn out to be too bad." But hopefully, it is there; we'll see.

Personally, I handle stress really well. It's probably why I'm fine with being a firefighter and why I work in a job where I have no structure. I like critical projects at work. I always tell people, "I fight fires in the office and fires on the hillside." I like that. So I'll be fine from the stress situation. But it's there; I know it's there.

Interviewer: From what you told me before, it sounds like you love this place. So you're going to rebuild here because you're established here. You're going to stay here.

Scott Palkoski: Yeah. The whole place, everything about it, the community, the neighbors, the people -- just rolling down to the Jack London Lodge -- it's like walking into a living room where you know everybody. That intimacy of the Glen Ellen area, so close to San Francisco, it's an unusual thing to have that level of a small town so close to a large metropolis, which I think is awesome.

I tend to like to work on projects. I like having the space of a garage. I like waking up in the morning, having fresh air, peace and

quiet and stuff like that. So I absolutely love being up here. That's why I wanted to contribute to the community by being a firefighter, like be a positive aspect to the community and not somebody who just takes it for granted.

People talk about weekenders and stuff. Yeah, technically, I'm a weekender. But I would say, "I'm more of a weekday in San Francisco." This was our home. I would absolutely not feel the same way about our place in San Francisco ever. Maybe Xanthie would have a different opinion.

Over there, it's a shell. I leave the office at 9:00, and I go home. I probably wouldn't even have eaten at home, and I go to sleep. I wake up, and I shower. I go to the office. I mean, that's pretty much the extent of there.

Here, I try to get back up here by Thursday. I try to work from here on Fridays. On Saturday and Sunday, for sure, try to work, but it's mostly doing projects and doing things up here. And then I get up early on Monday mornings; go to the office; stay in San Francisco Monday night, Tuesday night, maybe Wednesday night, and just be a couple days there.

Even as a firefighter, I know people probably prefer to have the full-timers here, all the time. I'm in the office. But, like I said, I can get here, and I can contribute. I know I have the physical ability. Like I said, I love endurance sports.

I thought about even helping out with some of the fires that were happening just recently, a county fire. I'm blanking on the name.

Interviewer:

The Yolo fire? The one that just happened?

Scott Palkoski: No. That's the county fire, the Yolo fire. The other one is the Pawnee fire I think, the one in Lake County. I'm going to say maybe 30,000 acres, 40,000. The Yolo one is the county fire. That was 90,000 acres but a different urgency. I think over there it was 10 structures that were lost in 90,000 acres. Ours was like an aggregate of over a quarter million acres, but 5,000 in Sonoma and 3,000 in Napa structures -- I mean, a completely different situation.

So I figured, if I can have some time on the weekend, maybe I can take the water tender, go out there, and just do some trips with water for people.

My permanent address is listed here. I care more about voting here than I could care about voting in San Francisco. So this is home for us.

Interviewer: Well, as a member of the community, I certainly appreciate you being here. Thank you.

Scott Palkoski: Thank you. Yeah.

Interviewer: Can you think of anything else that you want to share or have left out?

Scott Palkoski: I think the gratitude of people for firefighters was a really nice thing to see afterward. I know we've received a number of checks from people, from the board, Mayacamas, whatever that entity technically is named as a disaster relief. I know there have been firefighter unions that have given checks. We got cards and drawings from school kids thanking people.

I would walk in to get a burrito at Juanita Juanita, and somebody at the counter would be like, "I'll buy your dinner." So I think a lot of that was really nice to see.

You see all the signs on the roads on how thankful people were for saving the homes. So it's nice to see, and I hope that continues for a while. I know that, over time, it might be forgotten but hopefully not from projects like what you're working on.

When I had 3482, I had to fill up gas. I was down in Napa. People were coming up to the window, handing me bottles of water and saying, "Thank you." It's really great to see that stuff. It makes it feel really worthwhile.

But, yeah. I guess that was it.

Interviewer:
appreciate it.

Good. Well, thanks so much for all this time. I

[End of Scott Palkoski 2 by RF 130718]