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Jonathan Baxter

Jonathan Baxter: Longtime Paramedic and Current Public Information Officer, San Francisco Fire Department

California Fire Departments Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Shanna Farrell
in 2016

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Jonathan Baxter is the Public Information Officer for the San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD). He is a California native and worked as a paramedic for the Sonoma County and Hayward Fire Departments before joining the SFFD. In this interview, Baxter discusses his childhood and education, paramedic training, transitioning to the SFFD, public versus private ambulances, issues facing paramedics in the SFFD, the impact of 9/11, the evolving role of paramedics within the SFFD, and moving into his current role as Public Information Officer.

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Interview 1: June 21, 2016

01-00:00:00

Farrell: This is Shanna Farrell with Jonathan Baxter on Tuesday, June 21, 2016 and this is our first interview for the San Francisco Fire Department, California Firefighter Oral History Project. Jonathan, can you tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:37

Baxter: Yeah, I was born in Salinas, California in 1971. My parents moved us out to the city of Paso Robles when I was about seven years old, where I did most of my public education, elementary school, private Catholic school, and then graduating through the public school system there. While I was in Paso Robles I was an Explorer Scout for the Paso Robles Explorer Program, which encompassed paramedic services and police services. It was with that that I got the passion to go into public service. One of my first experiences, at about the age of fourteen years old, was a car accident, where a car crashed into a tree and you had bodies, three bodies, all critical. My first impression at fourteen was these guys are just dead—there's no hope for them. And observing the paramedics come in and being able to resuscitate and save one of those three people was an amazing sight and that started my real drive to get into emergency medicine, as well as public safety in general.

01-00:01:57

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about your parents, what their names were and what they did for a living?

01-00:02:03

Baxter: Yeah, my father died early in my childhood. He was a Vietnam veteran and he had a car business in my early childhood before he passed away in the early '90s. My father's name was Thomas Baxter. My mother's name is {Izzy Vaughan?} Baxter, and she worked to raise three children on her own in Paso Robles. She worked at a number of facilities as a secretary aide, and then around 1997 she was hired on as the administrative officer for the Glen Ellen Fire District, where she recently retired from.

01-00:02:48

Farrell: Do you have any memories of her working for the Glen Ellen Fire District?

01-00:02:53

Baxter: Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

01-00:02:53

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about what she was doing and maybe how that interested you when you were growing up?

01-00:03:01

Baxter: Well, when she was there I was already grown up, so I was already in my twenties working for the fire service while she was there, but she was able to do an amazing job with that fire district, funding numerous grants for new

apparatus and basically being the workhorse behind all the dynamics that go around a partial paid and partial volunteer fire department.

01-00:03:26
Farrell: You mentioned that you have two siblings. Can you tell me a little bit about them?

01-00:03:31
Baxter: Yeah, I have my older brother Charles Baxter, and he's a supervisor/agent for Homeland Security investigation[s] in Dubai currently, and my younger brother, Michael Baxter, works for a generator company in Reno, California.

01-00:03:48
Farrell: Were you close to them growing up?

01-00:03:52
Baxter: I think with every—brothers and siblings, when you were growing up there was the tension, and so forth. We would always cover each other's backs, but we had the normal spats that siblings have. We are definitely, I think, closer now as adults than we were as children, but I think overall we were always close and made sure we were all taken care of.

01-00:04:13
Farrell: Do you have any memories of Salinas before you moved to Paso Robles?

01-00:04:20
Baxter: In Salinas I remembered gunfire. I remember people breaking into our house while we were there and stealing stuff. I remembered a lack of a sense of a community while I was there, so I think I was glad to move out of Salinas. We did have many memories there. My great-grandmother was there, lived next door to us. She owned both of the houses that we lived in when we were there, and she was one of the last descendants of the Boronda family, which is a Spanish family which—in the city of Salinas we have a family memorial, the Boronda adobe, which is our family's surname. So those things I kind of miss, having that. However, being out of that atmosphere—it definitely was a little bit better when we went to Paso Robles.

01-00:05:12
Farrell: Can you tell me about some of your early memories of living in Paso Robles?

01-00:05:19
Baxter: Yeah, it was a little bit of a culture shock moving from there to Salinas. It was a lot quieter. It was a migrant and military community, very close-knit. My mother, being extremely involved in the Catholic Church, made sure we went to church three times a week, if not more, putting us into the Catholic school and then into the public school system later on in our public education. Had a good time growing up there. There was a lot to do, lots of fun items. Kind of isolated from a lot of the dynamics that were outside the world at the time.

One of my biggest memories, when I first got into my career at eighteen years old with public safety and moving out of Paso Robles, was the notion of the racism and different cultures and stuff. I just wasn't used to that and didn't understand why that conception was out there. So keeping the traits that I got from a small community and bringing them out to where I'm at now I think has been a benefit.

01-00:06:31
Farrell: Was there a difference in the feeling of community in Paso Robles versus Salinas? Did you feel more of a sense of community?

01-00:06:40
Baxter: Yeah, absolutely. I felt more of a sense of community, and it might be attributed to the age difference too, you know, being only seven years old and then going there. But the community was very involved. My family was low-income growing up, so my mom worked two jobs. I worked three to four jobs from the age of about twelve years old to eighteen years old, moving out, and the community always stepped up, especially the church with making sure that there was food and clothes and options for private school and stuff like that that was afforded to us.

01-00:07:13
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about your experiences in Catholic school?

01-00:07:18
Baxter: To put it short, going to public school was like being set free. [laughter] Catholic school, in my opinion, really would isolate you, at the time, to their beliefs and what they wanted you to learn besides the regular scholastic curriculum. There was a lot of favoritism in the Catholic school. If you voiced an opinion and the opinion wasn't directly in line with your instructor at the time, there were penalties, such as having to go sit in a pew and pray, and stuff like that. So yeah, my time in Catholic school was definitely interesting. I learned a lot, but I also learned that allowing people to express their own opinions is very important and I've carried that on throughout my career.

01-00:08:15
Farrell: And I'm sorry, just to clarify—did you finish high school in public school?

01-00:08:19
Baxter: Yes.

01-00:08:20
Farrell: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about some of the interests that you had when you were in school, maybe some subjects that you really liked a lot?

01-00:08:31
Baxter: In high school—I really didn't like too much of anything in high school, and I think that was because there wasn't really a direct relationship into why we

needed to learn this. With my mindset I'm always [asking] why am I learning this? Why do I need to know this? I think, track, field, and swimming was good because that was fun and you can see the positive outcomes of it. I always enjoyed history, but I think that's because I had a great history teacher who was a very participating member of everybody that he had. He was always interested in what everybody was learning. He'd always try to make a direct relation into what we were doing as a project to what we liked to do. Other than that, I really can't think of any other topics in high school that I liked.

In high school, I was a C-average student and when I graduated at the age of seventeen and went into college to learn emergency management and EMT-paramedicine, I've always been between a 3.7 and 4.0 student. I saw the relationship of being able to see what you want to learn and understand what you want to learn, pushing your drive as opposed to not really understanding why we need to. Which is why now, when we go and do public education and I see kids in high school or junior high or elementary school and I say, "You want to be a firefighter?" and they say yes, I say, "Well, math is important." Because you take these fire hoses—you have to know these dynamics and how much water is flowing through, and if you don't know math you're not going to know how to do this. You have to know your languages. Pick a language besides English, because that's who you're communicating with in your community and this is why it's important. And then your history obviously—you want to know where you came from and you can relay your culture and your beliefs within your job when you're doing community services." So maybe that makes an impact and it changes someone's life or not, but I don't know how to really figure that out. But we'll see. [laughter]

01-00:10:37

Farrell: Actually, speaking of cultural dynamics and communities, was Paso Robles a diverse place when you were growing up? Did you learn what you were just discussing, that you have to listen to people and everybody has a voice and understanding different dynamics? Was that something you experienced growing up?

01-00:10:59

Baxter: In Paso Robles, the community in general was mostly Hispanic and Caucasian. I remember, you can count on your hand in our high school the diversity—we had maybe five Asian-Pacific Islander members and we had about maybe ten African-American kids in our entire school, in our entire—not just my grade but the entire high school. With that said, no, it wasn't very diversified. I was recently back there giving prevention, our recruitment information to our high school and it was extremely diverse, but at the time I was there it was very isolated to Hispanic and Caucasian.

01-00:11:45
Farrell: And then in high school—I guess particular to your high school, were there any mentors that you had growing up or teachers that played a big role?

01-00:12:00
Baxter: Yeah, I said my history teacher was Mr. {Kelso?}, was a huge influence on educating yourself and being self-proactive. The community, the police department, which ran the Explorer Program, was a key. On the paramedic side, there was {Deborah Gassett?} and her husband—and I can't remember his name right now, but he was a sheriff's deputy and he would always say, "Kid, don't become a cop. If you can become a firefighter or paramedic, do that. Trust me." And {Deborah?} was in charge of the paramedic station out of Paso Robles, so she always allowed me to do ride-alongs there as an Explorer Scout, which was very beneficial. I think I maybe overcame my welcome a number of times, pushing it weekly, but they never turned me around and I was always there to help and learn, so it definitely paid off.

01-00:12:57
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about the Explorer Scouts—how old were you when you joined and how you got involved?

01-00:13:05
Baxter: I was fourteen years old when I joined as a freshman in high school and had an interest in law enforcement, fire service, paramedicine—not sure. At our high school the kids that were in the Explorer Program at the time were always being active and present, so I just asked, "Hey, what's this program about?" and went to a meeting and never looked back, just moved forward. [laughing]

01-00:13:32
Farrell: Was that before or after you had seen the car accident?

01-00:13:34
Baxter: That was before, so I was an explorer with the police department when I saw that. It was riding in a police car.

01-00:13:43
Farrell: What were some of the early things that you learned as an Explorer Scout, or what were some of the activities that you did?

01-00:13:49
Baxter: Community service, fairness, equality. Being extremely non-partisan when you're looking at a crime. So if you see—if you use domestic violence, for an example, and you see a male and a female, don't always make the assumption that the male is the aggressor. You look at both sides, listen to both sides. Take your beliefs away from it. If you have political, religious, lifestyle beliefs and you have an issue that involves that, you take your own beliefs completely out of the picture and you listen to the facts and you listen to the

individuals and you be completely fair with that and deliver those fair facts up the chain if it's a criminal matter.

If it's not a criminal matter you look on a civil side. You don't just say okay, well, there's nothing we can do. We're out of here. One thing that I know at the Paso Robles Police Department in their Explorer Program is the officers were very engaged with their community. They would take the extra step to make sure that everybody was cared for. I know on a number of occasions officers off duty would go back to families to make sure that their needs were being addressed, to make sure that the kids were taken care of, to make sure that there wasn't any other issues. That's something that I've carried through, personally, through my career. I've seen a lack of that in the public safety profession, in general. When you see people that are doing it—especially when you see agencies that are doing it, it makes a huge difference with community involvement/community engagement/community perception, and I think that all leads to an overall safety feeling between the community as well as who their safety providers are.

01-00:15:39
Farrell: Oh, and what were some of the community service activities that you were doing?

01-00:15:43
Baxter: Oh God, if there were storms we were out cleaning storm gutters. That's back when it would rain a lot. [laughter] There was—any type of a fair, any type of a public event, we were out engaged with just having a presence, a second set of eyes, to make sure there were safety features, traffic control things, education, crime-prevention education, crime-prevention booths. They were really big on child identification cards back then, making sure parents would fingerprint their kids and get a picture of their kids and pass out ID cards, something that we don't see too much anymore. So a lot of that stuff, a lot of community engagement and involvement. Really puts the emphasis on being engaged in a community and keeping your community informed and being transparent with your community, to facilitate a easier route for your public safety organization. And that's my opinion, because if you have the trust of the community and the community sees you all the time, they get to know—not you personally, but the uniform, and it represents something that's involved in the community. That's one thing I definitely learned with their community service projects.

01-00:17:01
Farrell: How many days a week were you doing Explorer Scout activities?

01-00:17:06
Baxter: Oh, I would say probably at least four days a week through high school.

01-00:17:13
Farrell: What was the community perception of the Explorer Scouts?

01-00:17:20
Baxter: That's hard to quantify. I think if you take the whole organization, being the paramedic service, the police department, and the fire department, they're very well liked, I think, back then. Very receptive. You had your typical people that didn't like the authoritative figure, but overall I think that the organization was well perceived.

01-00:17:47
Farrell: What kind of an influence did being an Explorer Scout have on you for later in life?

01-00:17:53
Baxter: It had a huge influence. I think one thing I look at is I had the opportunity to get recruited in the military service by graduating when I was seventeen, so I couldn't go into the military until I was eighteen. The police department wouldn't hire you until you're nineteen. I went directly in EMT school and quickly got hired on with the San Luis Obispo County Fire Department on my eighteenth birthday as a paid call firefighter and EMT and then quickly was able to get into a paramedic program, which a neighbor of ours funded for me, which I had to pay back, and that allowed me to become one of the youngest paramedics in the state of California for a few months. [laughing] And that's about it.

01-00:18:41
Farrell: So you had also mentioned that you started working at twelve?

01-00:18:44
Baxter: Yes.

01-00:18:44
Farrell: Well, actually I forgot to ask you—do you remember your first ride-along when you were an Explorer Scout?

01-00:18:52
Baxter: Yeah, and that's the one where we had the fatalities.

01-00:18:53
Farrell: Oh, that's—?

01-00:18:54
Baxter: So that was the very first one.

01-00:18:57
Farrell: Okay. Do you remember any subsequent ones, what kind of things that you would experience?

01-00:19:02
Baxter: Oh yeah, there's everything from just regular traffic stops to domestic violence to fights to burglaries, robberies, stolen cars, shooting, stabbings, car accidents, house fires—you name it.

01-00:19:22
Farrell: Was there ever a point, because you did become a paramedic, was there ever a point when you were younger that that ever was overwhelming or you questioned your involvement?

01-00:19:38
Baxter: No, I don't think I ever questioned it. It was just a driven path.

01-00:19:45
Farrell: As a fourteen-year-old I don't know that I would have been able to handle that, but have you always been pretty steadfast in your doing public safety?

01-00:19:56
Baxter: Yeah, I've always been very proactive, feet on the ground and just moving forward.

01-00:20:05
Farrell: Okay, so you started working at twelve. Can you tell me what your first job was?

01-00:20:10
Baxter: Yeah, so I started working at twelve at a convenience store. It was a gas station—like a 7-Eleven is now, just stocking things and then also working in the school cafeteria during school time, and then was able to find a job at a animal shelter that started at five in the morning, cleaning up horse and dog kennels, making sure everything was fed. And then seven o'clock I would go to school and I'd work in the school cafeteria until class started at eight o'clock, and then I would work in the school cafeteria at lunchtime and get some money. Then I would get off of school and I would go work in the store, and then I would go home and do my homework and revolve that back around.

01-00:21:01
Farrell: Was that your pattern until you graduated from high school?

01-00:21:03
Baxter: Yeah, pretty much.

01-00:21:06
Farrell: Did you end up going to college? Or it was right to EMT school?

01-00:21:09
Baxter: No, I went to Cuesta College when I graduated high school at seventeen and obtained my EMT when I was eighteen years old, so I timed it perfectly,

because you have to be eighteen. From that period of time I was just working as an EMT with the San Luis [Obispo] County Fire and then part time with San Luis Ambulance and with Monterey County Peninsula Paramedics. It's with the peninsula paramedics that Community Hospital of Monterey Peninsula sponsored a consortium where they had some doctors coming in and they were going to be guest speakers at a paramedic program. They were only going to allow ten people in and it was going to cost $10,000, and I was asked by some of the employees to join that and I didn't have the money. So my neighbors found out, conveniently, and they offered to pay for it upfront and I would just have to pay them back, which I ended up doing and was able to continue to work all those part-time jobs—the fire department, the ambulance services, and go to school, which was in Carmel, and graduated that program and had numerous job offers going up and down the state. There were lots of jobs for paramedics back in 1989-1990.

01-00:22:34
Farrell: What were you studying at Cuesta?

01-00:22:38
Baxter: Cuesta was just EMT, emergency medical technician.

01-00:22:40
Farrell: Okay, okay. And at that point what were some of the things that they were teaching you?

01-00:22:48
Baxter: It's almost the same curriculum now; just wound care, basic life support, CPR, almost exactly the same curriculum, I think, that the EMT standards have now.

01-00:22:58
Farrell: Was there an overlap with what you were learning as an Explorer Scout and in college?

01-00:23:03
Baxter: I knew most of it already from what we had learned. A lot of it was refresher. It made it easy to take the class. There was anatomy, physiology components to it that were new, that were not implemented in the Explorer Program, but other than that I think everything else was pretty in line with what I had learned before.

01-00:23:24
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about some of the people that you were working with when you first started those jobs? I have a feeling—was it intergenerational? There were people of all ages?

01-00:23:32
Baxter: Yeah. There were people of all ages. As an EMT I'd be working with paramedics that were in their twenties all the way up to in their fifties, and you'd be driving them, driving the ambulance, lights and sirens, to medical emergencies and cohabitating with them for the twenty-four shifts and so forth. The same thing with the fire department side.

01-00:23:57
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about what the dynamics were when you were just starting out?

01-00:24:04
Baxter: Yeah, when I was just starting out the dynamics were easier as an EMT, because you were just the EMT, just driving the ambulance. You were just the firefighter, you just took direction and stuff like that. I think when I became a paramedic—again, I was an eighteen years old licensed paramedic. Well, when I was eighteen years old it was a certificate, so you were a certified paramedic and I was the paramedic, having EMTs that were in their thirties or forties driving you, so there was some animosity and there were some cultural differences that I had to overcome with people, whether within their own selves were upset that someone so young was essentially in charge of them, which I never saw. I thought it was always—in my mind it was always you learn from somebody who has got experience, but other people didn't always see it that way. When I got hired on as a firefighter, there was a lot of older—at the time older—late twenties, thirties, individuals who pretty much stopped talking to me because I got hired on and they had been trying to get hired on for possibly years and didn't get hired on full time, so there was that type of—a little bit of indifference as well.

01-00:25:23
Farrell: How did you overcome that or deal with it?

01-00:25:27
Baxter: My whole demeanor is just move forward. You understand people, understand dynamics, understand frustration, and just be yourself. There's no reason to push it on anybody, there's no reason to gloat, and you be proactive. I always, especially as a young firefighter, but as a paramedic—there weren't too many paramedics, especially in the ambulance services when I worked there before I got hired on the fire service full time. You had to learn from people who had the life experience, because I had the knowledge, but I didn't have the life experience, and I learned a lot from some EMTs when I was a young paramedic.

01-00:26:11
Farrell: What were some of the things that you were learning from them?

01-00:26:14
Baxter: Dynamics. How to deal with situations. I was extremely proactive—or hyperactive, proactive combination. I didn't believe in second-guessing stuff. If I saw something that needed to be done, it was being done, and I can be very direct, because you get into this mode of this is what needs to be done. We're going to do it here. Dealing with people that didn't want to follow that route, such as fire personnel when you were the paramedic, police department personnel when you were the paramedic, other EMTs who were on the scene first before you, and learning how to bring them in as a team player rather than pushing—this is how we're going to do it. That would be the biggest thing I learned from my partners.

01-00:27:09
Farrell: Was your mother supportive of you deciding to take this career path?

01-00:27:13
Baxter: Oh yeah, yeah. I was basically the child that she didn't have to 100 percent worry about when I grew up. I kind of had a free will, if you will, when I was growing up, so that was always good. [cell phone ringing in background]

01-00:27:35
Farrell: So you had joined the Sonoma city department in 1990—is that correct?

01-00:27:44
Baxter: Yeah.

01-00:27:44
Farrell: Okay, so can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to transition to Sonoma?

01-00:27:49
Baxter: Yeah, so I was working as a paramedic full-time in Bakersfield and I was still working part time as a paid call firefighter in San Luis Obispo County. We went to an EMS agency to do something, and I saw a flyer for the fire department there, and at that point I hadn't really looked at going full time at a fire department. I was still just trying to hone my paramedic skills. However, the city of Bakersfield was an extremely busy and dynamic ambulance service back in 1989-1990, and I saw the flyer, so I put my application in and tested very well.

The chief at the time decided—he came by the neighborhood and did his background investigations and I was one of about six people they hired. The city fire department had just purchased the local ambulance company, so they were hiring firefighters—training firefighters and training paramedics to be in their department. So going into their department was great, especially at such a young age. I wasn't the youngest—there wasn't a very large age discrepancy in that department because they were bringing in a lot of paramedics, but I think we had twelve that they hired over a one-year period, and we all ranged

from twenty-one to maybe twenty-six at the time. The officers of that department were in their thirties at the time, so again, it wasn't a huge age gap that I was used to at my prior positions.

Very proactive in training, community engagement, being involved in the community. It was a split department of volunteers and paid professionals. We were a very diverse department within our geographical dynamics. Lots and lots of trauma, lots of car accidents at the time, lots of medicals, long transport times, sometimes up to an hour with lights and sirens to get to your hospital. Lots of helicopter flights with trauma patients, and that was daily and it was a busy system. You were on the medic unit there as a firefighter/paramedic and you would be running calls from the minute you started to the minute you got off some days.

It also afforded me the opportunity to go to college. They allowed me to go, on duty. They had an education fund that nobody was using, and at the time they would reimburse you based on sharing those costs. If you had ten people going to college or taking education, at the end of the year they would divide that fund up. Well, nobody went, so I basically was able to get my college paid for out of that fund while I was going to school and on duty. While I was there I was able to get my fire officer certifications, my fire prevention investigator—all my level one fire certificates at the time as well as my AS degree in fire science from Santa Rosa Junior College. And then around 1997 I got hired on with the City of Hayward Fire Department as a firefighter/paramedic.

01-00:31:25
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about Sonoma city department being a split department, how the paid members and the volunteers—how that worked?

01-00:31:37
Baxter: Yeah, so you had—the volunteers would respond to the large incidents. They would co-staff apparatus. They had paid call firefighters, like I was, in San Luis Obispo. At nighttime the volunteer firefighter would be paid to be there from, I believe it was five o'clock at night to eight o'clock in the morning, to supplement the staffing on the engine. Lots of drills, lots of community involvement. So to me it was the normality—it doesn't matter if your title was volunteer firefighter or a paid firefighter, we both had the same training. It was just a matter of—it was your full-time job and for somebody else it was their part time.

01-00:32:21
Farrell: Do you have a sense of what some of the other types of jobs the volunteers were doing?

01-00:32:25
Baxter: Everything. You name it—working at the grocery store, working in a law firm, doctors, lawyers—community members wanting to be engaged in their community.

01-00:32:41
Farrell: Were there any volunteers who were trying to become paid members?

01-00:32:46
Baxter: Absolutely, yeah.

01-00:32:49
Farrell: Was there a long—so I guess I'm asking because I know in San Francisco right now the waiting list is really long to become both a paramedic and a firefighter. Did that exist in Sonoma city?

01-00:33:01
Baxter: It has always been that way, and it's not really a waiting list, it's just a hiring list. You take the classes, you meet the requirements, you test well, and then you hope to get picked based on your qualifications and your ranking on an individual test. I think the fire service has always been, and continues to be, one of the most desirable jobs for all age groups and all genders, for the perception, I think, of the job and the dynamics of the job. With that we're always having a large pool, so a department looks at the fact that you have ten thousand people for a few jobs that are applying, so we really had to filter that down to people that we want to be in our department. I'm not saying that you don't want certain types of people. You want people who are engaged, you want people who understand community involvement, you want people who are professionals, you want people who are proactive, so that's why you have recruitment efforts within departments, even though you have so many people that want to get hired. If you didn't have the recruitment efforts, then you're just getting a person off the street who may have just woken up and said I want to be a firefighter, and they test very well and they get hired, and they end up not having that community engagement and that pro-activeness, which is really a key component of being a professional in any public safety position.

01-00:34:30
Farrell: Were you involved in recruitment efforts early on?

01-00:34:36
Baxter: I think—not officially, but always pushing it, telling people this is a job that you should consider, especially kids, underprivileged individuals, low-income individuals. There are so many times where you hear people say, "Oh, I couldn't do that job." And so, "Why?" "Well, because I'm not educated." Or, "I can't do this job because I'm a female." Or, "I can't do this job because I'm only 5'5 and a hundred pounds," and you just educate them. "You want to do it? It's something you're interested in?" And they say, yes—"Well, take a couple of classes, learn about it." Some of those people have been hired on

and love the job and do very well at the job. It's just a matter of being, again, proactive and being an ambassador to the community that you work in.

01-00:35:23
Farrell: You had mentioned that there were long transport times and it was a really busy system. Was that ever an issue for Sonoma city?

01-00:35:35
Baxter: No. You had the staffing and you had the ambulances. One thing that they had when I was there is they had two backup ambulances. We all had pagers on and we all lived in the community—and we were all community involved. If the ambulances were all out on calls and another emergency came in, they would send a county ambulance from somewhere far away. It would be like maybe a half-hour time to get there on scene, but they would page us out and say, "We need someone to staff this ambulance." We were almost always able to get an ambulance staffed by off-duty personnel within the—as little as fifteen minutes responding to the incident. Sometimes we would respond directly to the incident in our own car. Somebody would bring the ambulance to drive you, and that was the benefit, I think, of having the volunteers in the department, because you would be able to have that.

Now, is that something that we'd be able to do now or we could do here in San Francisco? Probably not, because we have such a large call volume which is why certain communities really need to have the full-time staff that's dedicated to make sure that doesn't happen. Because now there's the—I think, the expectation to call 911 and [snaps fingers] have your paramedics there with a snap of the finger, and that's something that's been pushed just, I think, by the media and our communities for so many decades now that it has to be addressed.

01-00:37:09
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about what Sonoma was like in the '90s when you were living and working there?

01-00:37:22
Baxter: Yeah, it was great. It was hot. [laughter] Lots of allergy problems, but yeah, lots of grass fires, lots of structure fires, lots of—the call volume was really good as a young paramedic and firefighter to learn, the community involvement was really good. A small community. Lots of community events put on by the city and the community organization. So yeah, real close-knit feeling there the whole time I was there.

01-00:37:52
Farrell: What were some of the events that they were putting on or that you were involved in?

01-00:37:56
Baxter: Wine festivals, pioneer day parades, community events—cooking for people, pancake and waffle breakfasts, 5K runs, 10K runs, stuff with the high schools and the kids and prevention efforts within the fire department, so a whole spectrum of items.

01-00:38:20
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about the prevention efforts, what some of the things that you were conveying to the community that were important about fire prevention?

01-00:38:27
Baxter: Yeah, it would go seasonally, so fireworks; medical items—hydration issues; see something, say something. Not necessarily that phrase back then, but something along those lines. Really big on driving, because we had so many fatal accidents during my tenure there. Just promoting that type of safety and measurement, and then we had programs for the elderly if they lived alone. They'd call into a phone system, and it was an automated system, and if you didn't pick up your phone, the fire department or the police department would drive to your house and knock on your door to make sure you were okay. So things like that.

01-00:39:11
Farrell: So would you say that there was a pretty positive relationship between the fire department and the community?

01-00:39:17
Baxter: Absolutely.

01-00:39:20
Farrell: And did you feel like those prevention efforts were successful?

01-00:39:25
Baxter: Absolutely, yes.

01-00:39:30
Farrell: Culturally, what was Sonoma city like in the nineties?

01-00:39:36
Baxter: A farming community, lots of cows, some wine—lots of wineries. A country cow boy-ish type of a community. So very close-knit and proactive.

01-00:39:53
Farrell: Was it hard for you—was there one aspect of the job that you preferred over the other? What would be your role when there were fires that you would have to respond to?

01-00:40:05
Baxter: Just a firefighter, so you just put the fire out.

01-00:40:09
Farrell: Okay. Was there one aspect of the firefighting versus being a paramedic that you liked over the other?

01-00:40:14
Baxter: No, they were both equal, being in the fire service, in my opinion, with paramedicine is that's the route. You're there to prevent injury to life, life safety and the property safety and salvation. So being a paramedic allows you that tool. If you have a fire, you have to put the fire out to eliminate life danger, so that's part of it and then you would roll into the paramedic side. To me it has always been an equal connection.

01-00:40:53
Farrell: Were you involved in salvage activities? Were you responsible for that as well?

01-00:40:57
Baxter: Yes, that's always been—the activities of salvage and overhaul, of property—which we're now finding out is a huge cause of firefighter cancer-related incidents and stuff, and I think the fire service is taking a shift now from firefighters doing salvage and overhaul.

01-00:41:18
Farrell: We'll probably come back to that a little bit, but was there ever a point, especially in your early years, where you were concerned for your personal wellbeing?

01-00:41:29
Baxter: There—I think when you do an emergency, when—I've performed a lot of what people would call stupid, and I would even look back and say that was stupid to do things—you know, water rescues, swift water rescues, cliff rescues, going into fires, surf rescues and stuff like that. [cell phone ringing] When you're doing it, you don't necessarily think this is dangerous, this is crazy, but afterwards you look at the parameters and you're like oh, that was kind of stupid. [laughing] I'm not saying that it wasn't safe, it was just why were we put in that position?

01-00:42:10
Farrell: Yeah. What was the reason for you moving to the Hayward Department?

01-00:42:16
Baxter: Pay was a huge factor. Going from $30,000 something in Sonoma to $80,000 in Hayward was just the ability of a larger city to pay. They didn't have ambulances, so you were more engine-based. It was a larger department, going from a three-station department to a nine-station department at the time. I don't want it to sound like pay was the only issue, but I was able to do the same job at a busier department with more stations and more opportunity for growth and expansion, so that was a big factor.

01-00:42:59
Farrell: What was the transition like from Sonoma to Hayward?

01-00:43:05
Baxter: For me, again, my personality has always been moving forward, so there wasn't a big gap. Their academy was great. It was very hard and aggressive, but I like that. I enjoy it. Their department was very structured, very military for the probationary period there, and then after that it's the same with the fire services. You hear it's a community and a family and it is. So it just went from moving from one family house to another family house with more advantages. [laughing]

01-00:43:44
Farrell: And Hayward was denser than Sonoma?

01-00:43:47
Baxter: Yes, yes, Hayward was a lot denser. More population, but denser.

01-00:43:51
Farrell: Did that affect the types of calls that you were getting?

01-00:43:54
Baxter: You know, they were the same. There was car accidents, shootings, stabbings, a lot more fires in that community. But no, it's—you're able to adapt to your situation at hand, not necessarily the number of situations you're given.

01-00:44:14
Farrell: With the denser, more dense population and more people, did that change any of the techniques or the ways in which you were fighting fires?

01-00:44:26
Baxter: No—well, you had more resources. In Sonoma you would show up with one engine, so you would do a lot of the work before you would get more help. Starting with Hayward, you would get three engines, a ladder company, a battalion chief almost immediately when you were there, so there was more a sense of security when you were there and more structured job tasks when you were there.

01-00:44:52
Farrell: Did you like that more structured atmosphere?

01-00:44:54
Baxter: Yeah, yeah.

01-00:44:56
Farrell: Okay. What was the probation period like?

01-00:44:58
Baxter: A one-year probationary period with Hayward. It was very structured. You had monthly tests that you had to do, which were based on your fire academy

that they put you through. You had to show up an hour early, be the last person to leave at the end of your shift. You were never allowed to step on the carpets. So their carpeted areas were usually the TV rooms and stuff like that. You had to always be studying, if you weren't doing anything, up until ten o'clock at night. So they said, "You can study or you can work out," after five o'clock at night. It was one of the two. So it was very educational, the structure was good, they really push team involvement and community involvement, so it was a great, great experience.

01-00:45:46
Farrell: What were the shifts like?

01-00:45:49
Baxter: Twenty-four-hour shifts, same as here.

01-00:45:52
Farrell: Okay. How did you—I guess could you walk me through a typical day, if such a thing exists? [laughing]

01-00:45:58
Baxter: Yeah, a typical day there you'd show up in the morning, the shift would change. Check out your equipment, check out the paramedical equipment, check out the apparatus. There was an engineer—everybody had a role: fire engineer, fire officer, and a paramedic firefighter. There was only three people to an engine company and three people to a truck company. So you would check out all your gear and your apparatus. You would have a game plan of what you were going to do for the day. It always involved a company drill, going out and doing a company drill, area inspections, driving around and seeing your community, and then responding to emergency calls.

01-00:46:35
Farrell: What were some of the station dynamics like, or how did those differ from Sonoma city?

01-00:46:39
Baxter: Different personalities, different—just different dynamics. It was smaller, so you would have three people in the fire station, whereas in Sonoma you would always have volunteers coming in. You'd have just multiple people hanging out at the stations there. You had an age gap—you had people in their late forties being your company officers and mid-thirties being around your driver's age, and then the firefighters and the firefighter paramedics were in their late twenties/early thirties mostly.

01-00:47:17
Farrell: What was it like to not have ambulances and just work strictly on the trucks?

01-00:47:24
Baxter: For me it was great. I had gotten tired of the misuse of ambulance services that we were seeing. So you would be stuck with someone who would call because they had a headache or because they had a splinter in their toe and they wanted a doctor to see it, because it was their right to take an ambulance to see their doctor. While you were doing that a CPR call would come in, and you knew it was going to take a half hour for the next ambulance from somewhere else to get there and you can't leave this person now that you've got the contact with them. So that became frustrating, and that was not just Sonoma—that was systemwide throughout California. Being able to really address the emergency medicine directly off of the fire engine and not have to deal with a lot of the nonsense, that was breathtaking. But obviously, when I came to San Francisco, the majority of our job, for the first couple of years was based on an ambulance [laughing].

01-00:48:22
Farrell: Did having no ambulances and just having trucks, did that ever impact response time?

01-00:48:28
Baxter: No, because you're getting your paramedics on the engine to patients a lot faster than you would if you had them on an ambulance. The same thing was with Sonoma, is we would rotate on the ambulance and onto the engine, so you always had a paramedic on the engine also, so if you didn't have any ambulances available, you would still have the paramedic engine that's addressing the needs of the patient just waiting for the ambulance to get there for the transport portion.

01-00:48:54
Farrell: Did Hayward always have paramedics working on trucks? Or was that something that had changed or was implemented?

01-00:49:03
Baxter: I believe they went to paramedics on their engines and their truck companies in around '96-'97.

01-00:49:08
Farrell: Okay, so just shortly before you got there?

01-00:49:08
Baxter: Yes, so it was a new program for them.

01-00:49:12
Farrell: Was there a transition period for the department? Was there any pushback from the firefighters?

01-00:49:17
Baxter: No, no. That department did it, what I say, is the right way. They had union buy-in, they had department buy-in. They paid everybody who wanted to go

to paramedic school for their shift coverage. They covered their shifts. They paid for their internships. They gave them food vouchers for while they were on-shift doing that. They had great results. Everybody in that department, with the exception of a small few, wanted to become paramedics and they were given the opportunity to do it. So you would have days where you would have everybody on your apparatus was a paramedic, which to the community stance was very beneficial.

01-00:49:57
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about that, why that was beneficial from a community standpoint?

01-00:49:59
Baxter: Yeah, if you have one paramedic on the scene of a multi-injury accident, you're really delegating to the most severe injured. You have three paramedics on the scene, you're able to deliver advanced life support to now three critically injured patients, if necessary. If you have a patient who's critical and you're the only {patient}, you're always doing a—what do I need to do that's most important and what can my EMT-firefighter do, which is basically just monitor the airway and control bleeding? Now, if I have two paramedics, my person doing the airway could do an advanced airway while I'm doing an IO or an IV or pushing medications or doing a chest decompression, and/or vice versa. So those are where the benefits I saw come into it.

01-00:50:46
Farrell: Were there any procedures or skills that you were actively acquiring during this period of time?

01-00:50:53
Baxter: Yeah, life experience. The more calls you go on, the more fires you go on, the more interactions you have, you learn what you did wrong, you learn what you did right, and you carry that on to the next incident.

01-00:51:06
Farrell: As far as lifesaving procedures go, what you were learning—was that becoming a little bit more advanced, or were you just practicing the same sorts of procedures?

01-00:51:17
Baxter: It's always advancing. The more experience you get, you do things more, you understand why they're working, how they're working. You understand when it's needed and not to delay that. That's something that always progresses, to benefit you and the community or their patients as you move forward. And that goes with medical calls, with fire calls, with car accidents, with hazmats—everything. You always learn your mistakes, you learn what worked, you learn what didn't work and you carry that to the next incident,

and then you relay it back to your coworkers and your younger generation or your probationary firefighters also.

01-00:51:57
Farrell: What station—what engine or truck were you stationed at?

01-00:52:02
Baxter: When I first started, when I first got off probation—or out of the academy—I was at Station 7 on Engine 7. I moved to Engine 2. Those were both the two busiest stations, so I was fortunate to get that. And then after that I was off probation I was sent to their Station 9, which was way up in the hills and very slow.

01-00:52:26
Farrell: Did you have a preference between busy and slower stations?

01-00:52:29
Baxter: Always busy. I like being busy.

01-00:52:31
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about that, what you enjoy about being in a busy station?

01-00:52:35
Baxter: I just don't like downtime. I'd rather—I want to learn, I want to be aggressive, I want to help people, I want to learn from experience and gain more experience—especially at that time in my career. Being busy was always proactive. That's why I chose this profession, was to be of service. I've worked in slow places and it drives me crazy, because you're trying to find busywork and stuff like that, which is always needed, but I would rather be out on the ground, boots on the ground and working.

01-00:53:10
Farrell: Was there ever a time where you experienced any burnout or feeling overwhelmed?

01-00:53:15
Baxter: I think I experienced it in San Francisco, burnout, probably around 2004-ish, 2005-ish, and that's when I put myself through the police academy and was kind of thinking about maybe doing a career change.

01-00:53:29
Farrell: We'll get there in a little bit, but can you tell me a little bit about the chiefs who were running those stations? Tell me a little bit about your chiefs.

01-00:53:41
Baxter: In Hayward?

01-00:53:41
Farrell: Yeah.

01-00:53:42
Baxter: Yeah, they were all experienced, proactive battalion chiefs. We had two battalion chiefs—I'm sorry, when I was there we had one battalion chief for the entire city, but everybody was proactive and very engaged in both the department and the personnel.

01-00:53:57
Farrell: What were some of the things that you learned from them?

01-00:54:00
Baxter: Life safety measures, again—community involvement, pro-activeness, just being respectful to your coworkers as well as the community. There's this whole transition that you take from one department to the next department, but in the fire service it seems to be this flow of just community engagement, prevention, and education leads to a safer community. I think where I've worked at I've been fortunate enough to have leaders who really pushed that.

01-00:54:36
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about when you took the civil service test?

01-00:54:47
Baxter: I never took a civil service test. With the city of Sonoma it was a hiring process, with the city of Hayward it was a hiring process, and with the city of San Francisco it was a lateral transfer hiring process, so there was never an actual sit-down civil service test I took.

01-00:55:06
Farrell: Okay. You transferred or moved to the San Francisco Fire Department as a firefighter-paramedic in 2000. Can you tell me why you transitioned from Hayward to San Francisco?

01-00:55:21
Baxter: Yeah. It was a hard decision. I actually turned down the San Francisco position twice and then the third time they told me that they would not offer it again, because it's a civil service rule. They can only offer it to you three times and then, apparently, that was it, which was relayed to me. [laughing] I looked at the size of the department. The San Francisco Fire Department has a lot of tradition, they have a lot of departments. You can work in one portion of the city and get bored and move to another portion of the city—and it would be like being in a completely different department, and lots of opportunities for growth and change. So putting all those factors together, I wavered on the line and gave it a shot and I've really enjoyed it, so I've been here sixteen years. [laughter]

01-00:56:13
Farrell: It's interesting that you had experience working in different departments and then were able to look at the department before you joined, more objectively, I think. Can you tell me a little bit about the types of tradition that you saw before you joined?

01-00:56:32
Baxter: Well, there is the nonsense type of tradition. The shenanigans, I guess you would call it, that the department was known for, this department. But then the other positive things that I was looking at were the deep-rooted history, the exposure. One thing that I've heard people say is, "People come up to me and I tell them that I work at Department X, and they're like 'Oh.' And then my friend says, 'Well, I work at San Francisco Fire,' and they're automatically interested and they're automatically asking questions about past incidents and stuff like that." That was a tradition that I was interested in.

The new tradition of integrating the paramedics into the fire department—I was key in—in Sonoma they had just started their paramedic thing. I was kind of used to the small animosity between firefighters and paramedics, and so forth, there. With the city of Hayward it was a new system, but there it was very integrated. It was very well received, but again, it was a new system. When I came over to San Francisco the system with their paramedics was only about three years new into the fire department, and there was a lot of headaches and a lot of tension and issues with that thing.

But with the tradition stance, it was just the deep-rooted history of this department, where the department has been—the amount of fires this department gets, the amount of call volumes, the diversity of this department—those are a lot of things you can't get out of a smaller department in such a magnitude as you have here in San Francisco.

01-00:58:12
Farrell: I've heard and I haven't really been able to figure out what it means, but I've heard that the San Francisco Fire Department is a lot more conservative—I don't know if that's something that you've experienced. I can't really seem to get a sense of what that means or how it's conservative.

01-00:58:34
Baxter: Conservative as in—put it in some sort of context.

01-00:58:39
Farrell: That's what I don't know. I've heard from people who are actually—I have a friend who's a reserve right now and he's trying to get a full-time position, but he's talked about how the department, compared to New York or Chicago or Boston, is more conservative. I've asked a few people, but they seem unable to articulate what that means. So I don't know if you—?

01-00:59:03
Baxter: Yeah. I would disagree when you—well, it depends on what context the person's putting it in, but this department is extremely aggressive. It's extremely diversified, which to me does not meet the guidelines of being conservative. When you look at our department, we fight fires because we have to fight fires. You have buildings in this city, throughout the city, that are old; they're next to each other. You have wind, you have hills, and you have now, a growing number of people being put into buildings, whether it's apartment buildings with more people in there, or whatnot. If we allow a fire—we can take an example. A neighboring area fire department—their first fire engine comes on scene and their SOP says they're not going into that fire until their chief officer arrives to be their IC. Their chief officer arrives on scene to be their IC and he says that that first engine's not going into that fire until they have another engine company to stand outside to be their rescue intervention team for the firefighters themselves. So at this point this fire has grown from this to this. Now, you have a person in that house—you do the math.

So this fire department, we're structured that every single apparatus that comes in line has a job task. The first engine in: size up and they're going into the fire. The second engine comes in; they're supplying that first engine and they're getting out and now they're there as the RIC team initially, but they also have the task to back up that first engine company. Chief officer arrives on scene, starts commanding the incident. Third engine company comes in and they're going to stage their apparatus to the hydrant if they have to supply the second engine in and they're now going to staff the individuals who are onsite, so if they need to be a RIC team, they can be a RIC team. If they need to go to work to do a task, they're going to go to work to do a task. The first truck company comes in and they're lateralling their aerial portion, they're putting wooden ladders up to fire escapes. If needed, they're splitting their crew to do a search of the building and to ventilate the top of the building if it needs to be done. The first rescue squad comes in, they're going in to search for people. That's their job. That's their sole responsibility.

That's aggressive and we save buildings. You look at the fifth-alarm fire that we just had with six buildings involved and we had no injuries. We had smoke inhalation from people who were not in the fire, not involved in the fire. That's almost unheard of. We saved that and we contained that fire to just six buildings, where it could have been a conflagration. That's what an aggressive/non-conservative fire department does for your community.

Now, on the personnel side, we have 264 female firefighters, which is the most in the nation. We have an extremely diverse workforce. We're so diverse that the US Department of Labor, this year, honored us as being one of the most diverse public safety agencies in the nation. To me, that's not being conservative. [laughing] And then you look at our EMS system. We have an

extremely aggressive EMS system. When I say aggressive, you have counties that require your paramedics to call and ask a nurse or a doctor to do a procedure. That takes time. While you're asking that person and you're waiting for that time, the patient gets worse and now that procedure might not work. This county allows our paramedics to be an adjunctive or emergency room and treat patients, complete procedures based on guidelines, based on strict training standards, and deliver that patient to a hospital. We have paramedics on our engines and we have paramedics on our ambulances that deliver that information.

Just recently, our fire academy became accredited with the State Fire Marshal's Office as an accredited training center, which allows us and facilitates our department to receive additional funds for additional training for our members, so that we can have training that we don't have to take money out of the budget for. We can get reimbursed by what they call C[al]-JAC [joint apprenticeship committee] or a state fund for training standards. It also holds our training staff to a larger code of ethics. They have to take an ethics class, they have to sign an ethics agreement, and if there's a complaint against them, in the past it would be dealt with by the department as well as the state. The state's going to look at that instructor and be a secondary source.

When you're saying conservative, conservative to me would mean that we would not be aggressive in firefighting. It means we would not be engaged in our community. We would not be actively trying to recruit members of the community into our department. We would not be delivering such high-quality EMS standards. I would have to disagree with the statement of being a conservative fire department.

01-01:04:15
Farrell: I think you did an absolutely wonderful job dispelling that. [laughter] Just to clarify, can you explain what a RIC team is and what their function is?

01-01:04:26
Baxter: Yeah, so a RIC team—RIC is what most departments—we call it RIC. Rapid Intervention Crew or Rapid Intervention Team. It's a dedicated fire staff crew to conduct a rescue of fire personnel. So if we have ten people on scene, we should have—theoretically, ten people standing outside ready to go in, but we call it—two in, two out is a phrase that they use for it. We use a crew. We usually have enough people on scene to facilitate a rescue if we need to, but their whole job is to be the rescuers of a firefighter who goes down. It's not for civilian use; it's not for anything else. The sole purpose is to rescue their own. And there's special equipment that we carry for that team that's given to whoever has designated that team for a given fire or an emergency.

01-01:05:22
Farrell: This structure that you had just explained, was that something that you knew about when you were transitioning? Did you know that that's how the department worked?

01-01:05:35
Baxter: Yeah.

01-01:05:36
Farrell: Okay. Was that something that you found was attractive and why you wanted to join the department?

01-01:05:43
Baxter: That was one of the reasons. The big reason is I'm extremely proactive and hyperactive and I like being busy, and there's just a number of options. You can do car accidents, car fires, surf rescues, water rescues, Bay rescue, cliff rescues, low-angle rescues, wildland firefighting, hazmats, confined-space rescues—all that stuff happens almost on a weekly basis here whereas given, say, Hayward, I would have to wait maybe five years to get a number of those things, you know. The opportunities, the experience, and so forth were more prevalent here. But again, why I said it was a hard decision is the cohesiveness, the department—it was a great, very aggressive, proactive, non-conservative fire department, very like San Francisco, but not as large with not as much opportunities to offer.

01-01:06:40
Farrell: What was the reason that you had turned down San Francisco a couple times?

01-01:06:44
Baxter: The same reasons that I just cited. It was because I was holding that as a comfort zone I guess you would say. I liked being there, I wanted to be there. But finally, on the third attempt, when I was told this was the last attempt, I was like—okay, I'm going to take it and do it.

01-01:07:03
Farrell: Did you move—were you living in Hayward when you were working there?

01-01:07:06
Baxter: Yes.

01-01:07:06
Farrell: Did you move to San Francisco?

01-01:07:07
Baxter: Yes.

01-01:07:09
Farrell: What were some of the differences between living in Hayward and then San Francisco, especially during that period of time, where the dot-com bubble had just—it was bursting?

01-01:07:20
Baxter: You know, not much. I was living in an apartment in Hayward and I was living in an apartment here, so there wasn't much. About a year into my career here in San Francisco I did buy outside of the city, because that's the only place you afford to, pretty much, buy, unfortunately.

01-01:07:35
Farrell: What neighborhood were you living in in San Francisco when you lived here?

01-01:07:37
Baxter: The Richmond.

01-01:07:39
Farrell: Okay, okay. Before totally transitioning to San Francisco, did you—when you were living in Hayward during those few years, did you see the neighborhood change at all?

01-01:07:56
Baxter: No, no. Down there in Hayward, not at all. It was just the same community. It's a large Samoan, Tongan, Hispanic community where we were at.

01-01:08:11
Farrell: For you personally, did you enjoy living in San Francisco versus Hayward?

01-01:08:18
Baxter: Yeah, I did. When I moved out of San Francisco to Livermore when I bought, it was like I was amazed to see how much money I was saving by actually making food and stuff that was so easy in San Francisco, every single day just to go somewhere. [laughing]

01-01:08:40
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about, I guess, your understanding of how and why you were recruited for San Francisco?

01-01:08:54
Baxter: When I was with Hayward we had no ambulances, so I started working part time for—AMR is a private ambulance company here in San Francisco and again, my nature was, being extremely aggressive in making sure that—my biggest thing was I wanted my skills to be kept up on an ambulance as a paramedic. It's something that I spent a lot of time and a lot of effort to get the license and didn't want to lose that. I'm not saying that I wasn't getting that in Hayward. I wanted to keep that skill set with me as well.

I had a number of people telling me when I was here that I should apply for the position and I should put my name in it, and it was as simple as just saying, “Yeah, tell them I’m interested.” I didn’t fill out any paperwork—which is different now. I didn’t do anything, and I literally got a phone call that said, “Hey, come take our physical agility test,” which I did and I passed. With that it was like—“Fill out some paperwork so we can keep you as a consideration,” which I did. I literally got a phone call that said, “Hey, we want to hire you.” I was like, “Oh, let me think about it.” They took that as a refusal and then a few months later I got another phone call and then shortly after that phone call they called me again and they said, “We need paramedic/firefighters. Yes or no. This is your third shot.” They explained the third shot to me and I was like, “Okay, I think I’m going to put my foot in.” [laughing]

01-01:10:25
Farrell: You had just mentioned that you were working for AMR, which was a private company. What were some of the differences between working in the public sector versus private?

01-01:10:34
Baxter: To me, AMR was a professional company that was a structured company. Their sole responsibility was to provide emergency services and non-emergency transportation to patients. The delivery is the same. The responsibilities to your patients are the same, it’s just the uniform, same, and who you’re working for is a for-profit rather than a nonprofit public safety agency. So to me there was no real difference. I know some people have issues. They want to be firefighters. They work on an ambulance—they don’t really want to work on an ambulance. Whatever the issues are. My whole career, my whole lifespan, has been about the actual service, not the delivery {point?}—the private ambulance or the public safety ambulance or the fire engine. It has all been about the end result.

01-01:11:28
Farrell: Were there different, I guess, resources that you were working with or different equipment?

01-01:11:38
Baxter: No. The ambulance, you were just on an ambulance. The fire engine, you had the same resources pretty much—not depending on where you’re at—there was all, pretty much equally the same.

01-01:11:48
Farrell: Were your shifts different?

01-01:11:50
Baxter: Yeah, it was just part-time shifts. It was eight-hour shifts I think, eight hour, twelve-hour shifts.

01-01:11:54
Farrell: Okay, on AMR?

01-01:11:55
Baxter: On the AMR, yeah.

01-01:11:57
Farrell: Were you working at both?

01-01:11:59
Baxter: Yes.

01-01:11:59
Farrell: So with Sonoma and Hayward and San Francisco, can you talk about the differences between the shifts, whether it would two on/one off for every—?

01-01:12:13
Baxter: Yeah, it has always been one day on, one day off, one day on/one day off with Sonoma and Hayward, and then you would have six days off. So when you had six days off, then you'd be able to, obviously, go do something like that. Now, in San Francisco you have one day on, two days off, one day on, two days off, one day on, three days off, one day on, two, one day on, two, one day on, two, one day on, three, one day on, two, one day on, two, one day on, four. So with that, my whole career span with San Francisco, they've always been low-staffed, up until recently. For a small period, around 2005 and '06, I think—and with that there's always been mandatories, there's always been overtime opportunities, so there has really not been a need to venture out and work. Working here there's been times that I've worked fourteen days straight here, twenty-four-hour shifts, so basically lived here for two weeks. That would be a difference.

01-01:13:16
Farrell: The training that you received when you joined the San Francisco Fire Department—can you tell me a little bit about that or maybe how it differed from your past training?

01-01:13:25
Baxter: It was not as structured and militant for the lateral paramedic/firefighters coming in. Everybody who got hired—that was new for this department, a lateral position that was new for this department. It was a learning phase and a learning curve, and we were essentially the guinea pigs, because we were the second class that they brought in of paramedic-firefighters for this organization. The training standards were the same as a regular academy, but the delivery method was not the same. There was members of the union that would come in and address us and tell us that we would never be on a fire engine, we would never be considered firefighters, we would never be members of this department—as seen as the normal people that had to take a test and had to go through the regular academy. So there were these

differences that we got when we came in; however, the training standards were the same that you would have to get from anybody else.

Now, going into probationary phase, again—a learning curve, a lot of animosity. People looked at the lateral firefighter-paramedics in this department, early on, as, in my opinion, not worthy to be here. You're not a San Franciscan. You come up with all these things. We actually ended up, me personally—I actually ended up doing three probationary books. My first probationary book the union came back and says, "Well, you guys, that wasn't real, because you guys had to work on the ambulance while you were doing your engine time." So then, "Okay, well, put me back on an engine." So my second tour was on a truck company, and did that. And then that book was changed and they said, "Well, you were—you had to do time on an ambulance, so that one really didn't count." So then I went to an engine company again, and that one magically accounted and then I went to a truck company again and that one magically accounted, so actually, it was four books that I had to put up. [laughing]

A lot of that was personal issues, I think. There was conflict between the union, there was a conflict between the current line staff personnel in the department. There wasn't a great delivery method of introducing lateral firefighters and the EMS system, because it's at the same time, into this department. Personalities played a key role in dispelling that. Me personally, coming from where I came from, I understood personal issues. I understood culture, I understood moving forward. Somebody would yell at you and say derogatory remarks and—you know, just let it go. You'll have your day to jab him with something if you needed to, at a later time. It really paid off with just sitting down, being quiet, doing your job, understanding the issues that were there, but also addressing the issues, because we had to move forward and it took this department a long time to move forward with its paramedic division into the suppression division, but now we're at a really, really good point in this department. Today, 2016, it is such a proud event to be in this department with the many, many changes we have moving forward.

01-01:16:48
Farrell: Did that tension that was there, did that ever deter you from wanting to join the department?

01-01:16:54
Baxter: It didn't deter me from joining the department. It frustrated me a little bit, with just what I would equate to adolescent/immature behavior. You can—even borderline uneducated comments and actions. But that, along with the amount of mandatories and overtime and the conception that we might not be going on engine companies around 2004, pushed me to think about other careers, and that's when I went and put myself through the police academy.

01-01:17:30
Farrell: With your probationary periods, how long were all four of those?

01-01:17:35
Baxter: Oh God, maybe three months? I can't even remember.

01-01:17:43
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about your decision to want to go through the police—a little bit more about the police academy?

01-01:17:51
Baxter: Yeah, I was getting—and this, so you're just seeing the amount of person-on-person crimes, assaults, murders, stabbings—robberies where they push old ladies down, and stuff like that. I was just like—I really want to be able to be proactive than reactive. In my mind, paramedic is part of the reaction. You're going and you're tending to the consequences of somebody else's actions. I looked into it and I was able to get into an extended police academy on weekends for a year and ended up graduating second in my class and had a lot of job offers. Just coincidentally, at that time, I got assigned to an engine full time, without an ambulance, in the fire department, so I was just like okay. [laughing] Well, back to enjoying it and not being too much of a burnout.

01-01:18:47
Farrell: So actually, just to back up in a clarifying question—when you had joined the fire department you were a firefighter/paramedic, so you weren't on a truck you were in an ambulance?

01-01:18:59
Baxter: In San Francisco, yeah. We were on an ambulance for about two years and then around 2002 started doing our probationary periods on an engine and a truck, and ever since 2002 it was always a split—one day on an ambulance, sometimes two to three days on an ambulance, then you would be on an engine company, and then one day on an ambulance, then an engine company. It started being this transition period. Right around 2005-2006, pretty much we were starting the transition to be almost solely on an engine company.

01-01:19:36
Farrell: Were the ambulances housed at the stations?

01-01:19:38
Baxter: Yeah. When we were there they were all housed with twenty-four shifts at the fire stations and you are a dual role firefighter-paramedic, which is different now from our public safety paramedic and EMT, which is—their sole responsibility is only on the ambulance, and a firefighter-paramedic is on an engine, a twenty-four hour shift as a firefighter-paramedic.

01-01:19:59
Farrell: Okay, and so during that transition there was discussion of paramedics never joining engines?

01-01:20:06
Baxter: Yeah. That was around 2000, so it was at the inception of the whole program, and stuff like that. As people retired and as people started to understand the roles of the paramedic-firefighters, as people started to learn the personalities and the people behind the uniform and the position, all that stuff started to transition into what we're seeing now.

01-01:20:34
Farrell: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your training at the police academy and maybe how that differed from what you had experienced in the past?

01-01:20:45
Baxter: Yeah, it was proactive, it was fun, it was energetic. It was learning the laws—I was able to, coincidentally, get my AS degree in criminal justice and then later on got my bachelor's in criminal justice—learning how to be proactive with preventative measures within the community for crimes and how to determine crimes and how to prevent crimes and how to be an advocate for the victims of crimes, including making sure the criminals go to jail was all refreshing and enjoyable. I enjoy it to this day. It's a fine line of which profession I think is better. I think they're both equal. [laughing]

01-01:21:29
Farrell: And culturally, did you see a difference? Were you doing your training in San Francisco?

01-01:21:35
Baxter: No, it was in the Monterey Peninsula, Monterey Peninsula College was the only full-time academy that was on a part-time basis, so it was the full-time post curriculum, but only on the weekends. You did twelve hours Saturdays and Sundays every weekend, for an entire year.

01-01:21:52
Farrell: Oh wow!

01-01:21:53
Baxter: Yeah.

01-01:21:55
Farrell: Did you see a big difference in culture between the police and the fire academies?

01-01:22:00
Baxter: No. The camaraderie was there, the willingness to help each other was there. They are very equal, just different things you were being trained on.

01-01:22:11
Farrell: Were you a reserve police officer for a little while?

01-01:22:14
Baxter: Yes.

01-01:22:14
Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about what that means and maybe what your roles were?

01-01:22:18
Baxter: Yeah, just simply—adhering to the laws of the state of California and the nation and protecting life and property, the same as being a firefighter, but you had the opportunity to be proactive rather than reactive, and then while you're reacting you continue to be proactive by engaging crimes while they're being committed or before they're being committed. Pretty much the roles.

01-01:22:47
Farrell: But as far as the function of being a reserve police officer, did that mean that you were on call?

01-01:22:54
Baxter: No, you would work a shift.

01-01:22:54
Farrell: Oh, you—okay.

01-01:22:55
Baxter: Yeah, so you work a shift.

01-01:22:57
Farrell: Was that something you were doing on the weekends or on your off days?

01-01:23:01
Baxter: One of your days off.

01-01:23:03
Farrell: Were they pretty flexible with your schedule?

01-01:23:05
Baxter: Yeah, they had to be, because this is a civil service position, so you have to make sure that the agency was okay with foregoing the civil service obligation to be available for disasters and stuff—this was my primary responsibility here.

01-01:23:23
Farrell: Was there communication between you and the fire department that you were doing this on the weekends?

01-01:23:29
Baxter: Well, it's not just weekends. This is whenever you had your days off and stuff, so the requirement for the city is it has to be sent into the Human

Resources Division so they know you have outside employment, and that's for any job.

01-01:23:43
Farrell: Oh, even with AMR when you were doing that?

01-01:23:43
Baxter: Yeah, yeah.

01-01:23:46
Farrell: What was the reaction when they learned that you were also doing?

01-01:23:50
Baxter: There was no reaction. Having such a large department, you just submit your paperwork.

01-01:23:52
Farrell: Oh, okay.

01-01:23:53
Baxter: There's a lot of people who do reserve police officers that are firefighters.

01-01:23:59
Farrell: What was the—was there a difference in camaraderie between the police department and the fire department?

01-01:24:05
Baxter: I don't think so. I think they're both equal. It's both—a family, it's just a different set of what your responsibilities are.

01-01:24:16
Farrell: Is being a police officer or police safety something that still interests you?

01-01:24:21
Baxter: Oh yeah, yeah.

01-01:24:25
Farrell: Moving from being a [cell phone ringing] police officer to ending your time as a reserve police officer and moving to an engine, were you—when you had made that transition, which engine were you on originally?

01-01:24:48
Baxter: Oh God, I started off on Engine 18 out in the Sunset, then the 32 in Bernal Heights, then the 41 in Nob Hill, and then to Engine 1 in downtown.

01-01:25:02
Farrell: The period between 2000 and 2004 you were on 18, 32, and 41?

01-01:25:08
Baxter: Yeah.

01-01:25:09
Farrell: Okay, and then you permanently moved to Station 1?

01-01:25:11
Baxter: Yeah.

01-01:25:12
Farrell: Okay. So we'll talk more about Station 1 next time, but can you tell me a little bit about the types of calls that were differing between 18, 32, and 41?

01-01:25:24
Baxter: Yeah, 18 we had surf rescue responsibilities. I got a class A valor award for a surf rescue there. While I was at 18—you had a lot of medical emergencies with the elderly, cardiac arrests, cerebral vascular accidents, a lot of transport times, a little bit longer than the normal from downtown. Thirty-two—a lot more fires than we had on 18 in the Bernal Heights/Mission area. Medicals were about the same, a little bit more violent crime-type medicals, you know stabbings and shootings at 32. Forty-one, a large increase in call volume, more calls for homeless, inebriated subjects, and stuff, but then again, a lot more fires, and so forth. And then moving onto Engine 1, obviously, extremely busy.

01-01:26:20
Farrell: What were some of your lieutenants or chiefs like? What were some of the things that you picked up from them?

01-01:26:28
Baxter: You pick up a lot of things from some of them. The department, in my opinion, has some inexperienced officers throughout this transitional period where we didn't have a test for—in officers, until 2008, so you had a lot of individuals that you would really work on the team rather than the individual, to make sure that we were all getting the same issue addressed. So the officers that were really key—Station 41 had amazing officers, learned so much from them on fire tactics, and stuff like that. Station 1, same thing, really proactive, energetic, educated officers. Station 32, my officer was very, very proactive and he was very good. And Station 18—a couple really good officers and a couple questionable officers. But again, you don't take that against the individual, you take that as a team aspect and you make sure that everybody works as a team and everybody learns from that.

01-01:27:33
Farrell: How are you seeing the city change at that point as far as population growing or traffic getting more dense or demographics changing?

01-01:27:48
Baxter: I think all of it. The traffic getting worse, the dot-commers, if you want to call it, moving in. The growth of the city is just crazy and it's just exploding throughout the city. The department growing, getting more funds now that

we're out of the economic crisis that we were in, so we're getting more staffing levels, we're getting more equipment, we're getting more training opportunities, we're being more proactive in a number of projects in the department, which reflect back to the community, which increases community involvement and increases community safety.

01-01:28:29
Farrell: The way that the city had been growing at that point, did you see that affect response times or the department's ability to operate?

01-01:28:43
Baxter: I think—response times have always been—up until the last decade were up and down with the issues on staffing levels. But those staffing levels also corresponded to population levels and call volume levels and the calls themselves, and what were the actual calls coming in for? It's kind of hard to say exactly, a pinpoint answer to that. But I think we responded as a department, as a community, together, to make sure that those were addressed when they were occurring, and there's measures that were put in place by this department to react to those incidents. There was efforts within the community to decrease that type of incident, if that makes sense.

01-01:29:36
Farrell: Yeah. How were your early impressions of the fire department either reinforced or challenged when you joined?

01-01:29:48
Baxter: Oh, I've always liked this department. Again, I'm looking at the end result, which is the care to the people, being able to extinguish a fire, being able to limit a fire, and moving forward. I've never been, personally, one to dwell on the past or in the present get brought down. I always saw that as, not an obstacle, but a challenge to overcome and to move forward and to progress, and it has been beneficial for me to be that way. I've seen people that don't believe that and I've seen the negative impact it has on them, the frustration, the stress, the desire to not want to do their job anymore—all those factors come in, and I think that's on an individual basis. I think a lot of it has to do with personality.

01-01:30:41
Farrell: I think that's probably a good place to leave it today, and then we'll get into more of the Station 1 stuff next time.

01-01:30:45
Baxter: Sounds good.

01-01:30:45
Farrell: Thank you.

Interview 2: July 20, 2016

Farrell: Okay. This is Shanna Farrell with Jonathan Baxter, on Wednesday, July 20, 2016. This is our second interview for the California Firefighters Project-San Francisco Fire Department Oral History Project. Jonathan, when we left off we were talking about your training and the probation period. You had moved to Engine 1. Can you tell me a little bit about transitioning into Engine 1 in SoMa, which is one of the busiest stations in the country?

02-00:00:47

Baxter: Yeah. So just prior to being at Engine 1, I was at Engine 41, which is up in the Nob Hill area. I owned a spot there, which means I bid for a spot on that company, and that was a spot that was granted to me. That, at the time, was a busy engine company, with being a paramedic assessment company up there. We would come into the Tenderloin and into the Market area on a daily basis. It was a good working group, with some good officers to work under. Shortly after getting my spot there, the city reorganized its ALS [advanced life support] engine structure and took away the spot that I had on that, making it a basic life support, or a nonessential ALS engine company. This was around 2007, 2008, right around that period, maybe a little bit earlier. At that time, I started what was called being detailed out. As a paramedic firefighter, you would go to vacant spots on engines that were higher on the priority list. They were in high-call-volume areas or they were in areas that they would be able to respond faster to a given emergency, to get your paramedic on scene faster. I started being detailed to Station 1, and my nature being proactive and enjoying to work, made a good connection with the individuals at that station. I don't mind—didn't mind, still do not mind—running a call every fifteen minutes, per se, in a twenty-four hour period, to come out to forty calls. I think the highest amount of calls they ran at Station 1 was seventy-six calls in a twenty-four hour period.

That was on New Year's Eve in 2008. That included a three hour down time, because we blew something in the engine. I can't remember what it was. We had to have it fixed from like nine o'clock at night to midnight, and then we went back and started running more calls. We would've had a lot more calls, had that not occurred. Shortly after being detailed there for a few times, our bidding process comes around January. There's certain stations in our department that still have the traditional nuance of being asked to become a member or not saying, I'm going to put in for this spot here. It's not looked at as being culturally correct. In our department, [it was] something that we deviated from with the new hires and the new cultures of these individuals that we're hiring now. Station 1 is one of the stations that you still need to either be asked or definitely ask before going over to that station, just because it's a high-call-volume area.

You need to be able to work very closely with all the individuals on and off duty, due to the high stress to the amount of calls that you get and what you see, basically, within that area. I was asked by the station captains collectively, prior to that bid, if I would put in for that spot, which I did. I was the only paramedic firefighter owning a spot at Station 1 for, I believe, a three year period. Might've been four years. Because we have always had such a lack of firefighter paramedics, I would be working, on a yearly basis, at least double my actual workload. So would normally do I believe it's 109 twenty-four hour shifts per year, and I was doing over 218, 220-plus shifts. Those were all at Station 1 during those parameters, because there was nobody for me to not have to be able to stay there. That call volume then was very large. I believe on average, we calculated that I ran I believe it was an average of 600 patient contacts a month, just by myself. That was just me on the engine, calculated through a yearly period, which {revolved?} you into the clientele, if we're going to stay isolated to the downtown corridor, where you have a number of issues.

02-00:05:24

You have nonprofit organizations, which are paid based on the individuals that require their services. Now, the services that these individuals get, they understand they get these services, but they're not obligated to stay with those services, so it becomes a cycle. Or you can even call it a game if you want, where they know that if they go here in the morning, they'll be able to get this amount of food or this amount of money or this amount of resources. Then they can go over here and either trade, sell, or bid off these resources for cash, drugs, or alcohol. Then they can come over here and get high or drunk, to a point where they need to call for services. Then they'll go to a hospital, where again, they're not obligated to stay. So they'll walk out when they're at a point where they're able to walk out, and they'll get a ride back to their original location, which will be our area, and the whole cycle continues. We would see, on average, a certain amount of [the] same individuals in excess of—I think six times a day was an average, with some of our individuals. And they would openly state, with slang words and profanities, that oh, you have to take me here. Some of them even said, "Oh, it's four o'clock, which means I normally get a sandwich and orange juice at this hospital, so you have to take me there." It became a little bit of a stressor on you. Especially if you're waiting for an ambulance with this individual and you hear a call for a pediatric CPR resuscitation four blocks away in your district, and you know that that paramedic engine is coming from two districts away because the other engine in the other district is on somebody just like the person that you're on.

So not saying that individuals should be discounted for their emergencies or for their medical issues, but there's a number of issues that revolve around the individuals stating they have these issues, as well. A lot of times you'll hear the term that they have no choice, that you can't blame them. But being in my

position, I have to realize that they do have choices. Especially when you know that you personally have offered them housing, food, transportation, a trip back to their hometown to be reunited with their families, rehabilitation, detoxification, you name it. We had one individual who the city paid to go back to his home state in the East Coast, as far as I know, six times, seven times, usually all on the holidays. That individual always makes it back here, on another ticket paid for by that community, because he's doing the same thing over there with their resources. Again, it's a cycle that you see. When I mentioned earlier that you have to make sure you're being able to work with the individuals and know the individuals and trust the individuals that you work with, it's because of those stressors. So that could become very impacting, especially if you've been up for forty hours because you get manditory'ed to work or you're working an overtime shift or a trade shift. For somebody who's on day number two on Engine 1, you have an average of about a good solid one hour of sleep. You have to be on your toes. You need to make sure that you're delivering the proper medicine, the proper care, proper attitude to these individuals, as well as on fires, as well as you have to make sure that you're making the right choices, the right decisions, you're being safe, you're being proactive. All those things come into factor. You can't do it alone. You have to do it as a team, and you have to make sure that when you are doing this amount of a call volume that we have in Engine 1, or at Station 1 per se, that your personal beliefs and personality do not conflict with the clientele that you're serving. As you can see, there's a lot of things. You can have personal frustration because you know what these people are doing; but you can't allow that frustration to come out of your position as a uniformed public servant, if that makes sense.

Farrell: Yeah. So because you would get to know these people by first name, one of the names, the colloquial names that they were known by was frequent fliers. These type of people, or these sort of cyclical systemic issues, were there ways that San Francisco, the city, was addressing these and trying to stop these cycles from happening?

02-00:10:04

Baxter: It's such an institutionalized cycle, as you're stating, that you can't put your finger on it. If you're the layperson that's addressing the issues, you can see the nonprofit organization—with my fingers making the quotation mark. If they don't get the clientele, they don't get paid. They don't get their money. So if we go out and we take their clientele out of the system to get them institutionalized, into rehabilitation, into detox, whatever their services are, they start lacking the money. They start doing political pressure, stating that we're taking the rights away, of those individuals. They have a right to drink alcohol on the corner, they have a right to defecate on the street, they have a right to urinate in the middle of the street, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Then those people get back, because now political pressure disallows us from doing those objectives. So it's a cycle. I've seen four or five times where we've

started putting people into things, and we've actually seen a huge impact of our call volume going down, we've seen the individuals off the street, we've seen the individuals sober and clean and dressed and acting like normal individuals, their normal selves, because they're not so intoxicated, and then you see the whole cycle begin again. We're now at a cycle point in this department where the city is allowing us to address the social needs and services of the individuals again, and we're now seeing that these individuals are now getting pulled off of the streets. They're getting the services because we're mandating it and we're making them stay in, based on a criteria, to get the detox, to get the rehabilitation for the issues that they have, and to get them the housing and forcing them to stay in the housing, based on again, criteria that's set forth within a parameter. When that cycle will end again, your guess is as good as mine. But in my position, I've heard the nonprofits within the area that I work at get upset at us because we're taking people off the streets. We've had nonprofits who are making six figures themselves as a nonprofit organization tell us that by us taking the people off the street, they're not able to give the services, which means that they're not able to get paid. Then they try to wrap that around, to say that they're not able to use that money to provide it to the community that needs the services. It's this big game and a cycle that you have.

Farrell: What were some of the programs that the fire department uses?

02-00:12:37

Baxter: We have a program called EMS-6, which is a civil service paramedic joint venture, where we have our captain paramedics, our rescue captains, working with social service advocates from the Homeless Outreach Team to go around and start documenting the individuals that are using the system excessively, abusing the system. The terminology frequent flier, those individuals that we have, based on certain criteria, we start documenting the services that we're providing them, the services that we're offering them, the amount of times that they're declining these, the amount of times they're going into these services and leaving those services, coming back into the system, and the drain on the system that you have. We had an individual last year that was well over a million dollars in city services that the taxpayers paid for, for 911, hospital, and social services. That's one individual, based on their choice to continue to go around the system and utilize the system. By isolating it and using laws and procedures to get these people the help that they need, and mandate that they get the help that they need, that will break that cycle. It's been shown in the past in small bits, and then they drop it and they fall back into their same realm. You also have to walk that fine line of, you're in my shoes, seeing the cycle; but now you're a well-intended, good-hearted person who wants to do a nonprofit, and you only see your side and your effort. I'm a firm believer that people get the tunnel vision. People are oblivious to what's outside their box, or they just don't want to hear it. They don't want to hear that their program is not working. That's on both sides, fire department,

nonprofits, community services, et cetera. So we're now at a point where we're collectively trying to work together, which is a great thing, to address those issues.

Farrell: What was that like for you to learn how to sort of balance the frustration with how things were going, but also be that public-facing uniformed officer?

02-00:14:59

Baxter: For me, again, like I say, I have no problem running a lot of calls. I enjoy running the calls, I enjoy being out there. Being downtown, you get to see a large amount of different cultures and the diversity of our city, the tourists that come into the city. You get to talk to the community. Being out there forty-plus calls a day, with even if it's the same person, you just have to allow yourself to have fun with it. Not at the individual's expense, but in the point that you show up and you give them the same service. You give everybody the same service that you're going to give anybody else. If you're an alcoholic or a drug addict that's passed out, that's called us six times, and you've defecated and urinated on yourself and you're using slang words and swear words and so forth at us, they get the same attention that your mom or your grandma or your family member would get if you had to go to them for an emergency. You keep that attitude and that personality, then you can continue to move forward. Again, that comes back to where you have a team player, because you have to realize everybody's human. You're going to have those times where you will get frustrated, and that's where your team members are able to say, hey, step back; we're going to address this issue. Or simply just saying, take a breath. Then you're just like, you're right. Take a breath and continue with being the service provider that you're paid to do and that you're expected to do.

Farrell: How have you seen the neighborhood change over time—South of Market? A lot of businesses and tech companies are moving in. Have you seen a shift in demographics or types of calls?

02-00:16:37

Baxter: There's not really different type of calls. We get the same calls, no matter if you're poor or rich. You're going to get drunk, you're going to get sloppy, you're going to crash your car, you're going to hit your spouse, you're going to get in a fistfight. You're going to have your stabbings, you're going to have your robberies. Everybody's human and the calls are going to be different. What we don't see too much in downtown is the calls you see in the more residential neighborhoods—the amount of strokes, the amount of heart attacks, those types of injuries. With all the construction and building, we have seen more industrial accidents. We'll see those more here than you'll see in the outlying areas of the city, as well.

Farrell: Has there ever been a time that you've felt like your safety has been threatened?

02-00:17:28
Baxter: Oh, yeah. I've had a gun pulled on me. I've actually taken a gun away from an individual. I've been assaulted, to the point of being transported to the hospital; I've had numerous knives pulled on me; I've had numerous times where I've been attempted to be stabbed; had numerous times where we've had to physically restrain individuals, in waiting for the police department. We've been involved in two actual shootings, where we were there with the bullets flying, within my career. But again, it's a matter of situational awareness. The incidences that I'm depicting are not incidences that we walked into blindly; they're incidences that either evolved around us or evolved as a result of us being in an area with a hostile crowd. So that's something that you work with your crews collectively, to have a plan to address it when it does occur, and being able to react to those incidences collectively, calmly, and safely.

Farrell: Have those situations ever made you question being a part of the fire department?

02-00:18:37
Baxter: No. It's part of the job.

Farrell: You had mentioned before that you had owned a spot and there's a bidding process. I'm not too familiar with that. Can you explain to me what that means or how that process works?

02-00:18:54
Baxter: Yeah. If I want to be the driver or the engineer spot for—we'll use Engine 1. I want to work there every single day that I'm scheduled to work. That's where I want to be. You have a bidding process. That's every January, based on seniority and availability. If that spot's open—meaning somebody doesn't own that spot or somebody's leaving that spot or someone's been promoted or they retired out of that spot—you put in for it. Then our assignments office goes through a process, by seeing how many people have, number one, put in for that spot. Then based on that, they go off of the seniority. If you're the highest senior person that put in for that spot, then you get that spot. It cannot be taken away from you unless that spot is deemed not there, for like the paramedics, when they deal with the paramedic engines, or you decide to leave it yourself.

Farrell: So when you get that spot, that's what you mean by owning it?

02-00:19:51
Baxter: Mm-hm.

Farrell: Okay. Then how easy is it to move, if you decided that you want to switch stations?

02-00:19:57

Baxter: It all depends on the availability. You can always give up your spot and they put you in what they call vacation relief, which means you never know where you're going. You show up to work at a specific location, and you could be going to the other side of the city or you can be staying there, or you can be going downtown. You never know. You don't own a spot and you would move around. Those were always an option you have, as well.

Farrell: Do people tend to stay in spots for long times? Do you see that pattern?

02-00:20:25

Baxter: Yeah. Yeah, we have people that have been in spots for almost their entire thirty-year career, depending on the areas, if they like it. Which is a benefit to the community, as well, because that individual now knows the community, knows the area, knows the demographics, knows the building types and so forth. There's an advantage to having that, as well as disadvantages, which are personalities, more social aspects within an individual or the people that they work with.

Farrell: In terms of resources, both I guess personnel and equipment, with the teams that come in or groups of paramedics, does the size of the amount of paramedics fluctuate? And if it does, what are the factors that influence that?

02-00:21:17

Baxter: For the firefighter paramedics, it all depends on retirements, injuries, vacation times, sick leave, with that. So right now, we're currently at thirty-three ALS engines, out of forty-five engine companies. Hopefully, we'll have everything ALS. But I've been here sixteen years and I've heard that for sixteen years.

Farrell: Does it fluctuate at stations?

02-00:21:44

Baxter: Yeah, it depends if your station is BLS [basic life support] or ALS. If your engine company is an ALS company, it's always going to have the paramedic on it now. If you're a BLS station, you're not going to have a paramedic on your engine.

Farrell: What does ALS and BLS stand for?

02-00:22:00

Baxter: Advanced life support and basic life support. One would have a paramedic and the other one would just have EMTs [emergency medical technicians].

Farrell: Okay. Then to stay up to date as far as resources go, with equipment, is the fire department pretty good about examining new equipment and trying to bring it in and train people on that?

02-00:22:26

Baxter: Yeah. We try to examine and utilize equipment as best as possible, including our apparatus. We've had a fluctuation of, if they want to call it the recession or not, 2008 era, where our city budget was asking for money back rather than giving money to provide to our community. Those caused issues with equipment not being up to some people's standards, but it's working equipment. I'm referring to our apparatus, such as engines and ambulances and vehicles. As for the actual equipment that we carried on person as paramedics, I believe—I have believed and continue to believe—that we are one of the most advanced paramedic delivery systems in the nation, where we are allowed and afforded the ability to perform procedures on individuals that you would normally get in an emergency room, which are life-saving measures, immediately—which is an advantage to everybody who lives in and visits the city.

Farrell: Can you tell me why the fire department—I understand the essence, but—how and why they've chosen to promote that and allow that? Because sometimes things get lost in bureaucracy and it's hard to prove certain programs. But I guess the support of the fire department to promote the use of advanced technology.

02-00:24:06

Baxter: Well, the county's emergency medical service authority dictates what policies and procedures we're allowed to do. We have a voice in that, as the 911 paramedic provider. The paramedics want something; we can push it through the EMSA [Emergency Medical Services Agency]. If the fire department doesn't want something but the paramedics want something, we can go to the EMSA and have it pushed and become policy, which the fire department has to adhere to and give us the equipment to utilize. With that said, we've always—again, since I've been here in 2000—we've always had state-of-the-art equipment on the paramedic side to utilize, to deliver to our individuals and our constituents. That's never really been an issue. As to the advancement of being [an] extremely aggressive, proactive emergency services organization for paramedicine, I think that's just been institutionalize in our city for decades and decades, before I was even here.

Farrell: Do all the paramedics across the board receive the same training, so they're able to do all the same procedures?

02-00:25:14

Baxter: Yes.

Farrell: Okay. What is the training program like, and how does that continue and be an ongoing educational component?

02-00:25:22

Baxter: So paramedics, by law, are required to do either twenty-four or forty-eight hours of mandated training per two-year period for their license, depending on when you were licensed. The city is obligated to provide this training to us on duty, which we do on a rotating basis, on a calendar schedule, for each one of those parameters. There's outside classes that people can go to on their own, which is just extra learning, and that's based on a person's own moral ethics and professional standards.

Farrell: Have you seen the new innovations with technology be more effective in treating some of the calls?

02-00:26:05

Baxter: No. Some of my best tools as a paramedic are the things I learned twenty-five years ago, when I became a paramedic. You see new things and new items. It's kind of like a revolving door. You know, you've seen it twenty years ago, you've seen it fifteen years ago, and it didn't work. Now somebody else brings it back. Somebody younger comes up with the idea again and they push it and they want to use it, and it doesn't work. Again, some of the best things that I've seen are items that we've had in the past. Our advancements socially, with allowing paramedics to do more, such as twelve-lead electrocardiograms, which is what you would get in an emergency room, as opposed to just doing a one shot picture to see if you're having a heart attack or not. To be able to telecommunicate those pictures to an emergency room staff or having the paramedic read it themselves, again, would be something that a doctor would do in an emergency room, but now we're doing as a paramedic in the field, to start the process of getting that advanced care a lot earlier, which is showing, throughout the ward and our nation, a decrease in fatalities from a number of issues.

Farrell: What are some of those tools that you learned twenty-five years ago? Can you tell me a little bit more about what those are?

02-00:27:26

Baxter: There are a lot of things. Chest decompressions. When I first started working, we had real emergency room style chest tubes. Then because of politics, they took those away from paramedics and gave us little, tiny needles, which didn't work. Then the chest catheters came back. Then they went away again, to little, tiny needles. Now we're getting back to a point where we're doing more pleural decompressions and chest tubes and stuff like that, depending on where you're working at as a paramedic. Intubations. We've never seen our intubations go away. We saw intubations with pediatrics go away, with what they call King tubes or different type of basic airways. Again, that's all been

pushed on politics, statistics, numbers, who's doing the numbers, what the numbers are showing, what the numbers are not showing, who your medical director is. You see those parameters. Tourniquets is another great example. When I first started, don't ever use a tourniquet; you'll make their arm or their leg go away. Then it was like, oh, tourniquet s are great. Then it was like, oh, tourniquets are horrible. Now tourniquets are again great. So again, it's this big cyclic loop that you see. Being a paramedic for twenty-five years, working in a high call volume system, I know what works. You see what works. When you have the first-hand knowledge of what works, and then past that, being able to open up your toolbox and go into educational seminars, training seminars outside your area. Go to a different state, go to a different country, go somewhere else; see what they're doing, learn what they're doing, practice what they're doing, see if it actually works, and bring it back to your community to see if it works here. By doing all that stuff—and this is over a twenty-five year span—you kind of figure out what actually works and what doesn't work. The best way to know that is by actually doing it, not just once but multiple times, to actually see the benefits and the outcome of it.

Farrell: You moved up the ranks, before your current position, but you became the Lieutenant of Suppression. Can you tell me a little bit more about moving into that position and what your role was?

02-00:29:46

Baxter: It's just a supervisory role. You just are obligated to be in charge of the personnel that are on your apparatus, to make sure that they're safe, to make sure that they're utilizing the proper tactics, make sure their training standards are up to date. On an incident, whether it's a medical incident, a fire incident, a rescue incident, making sure that the right calls are made and that everybody's working as a team throughout that. There are certain individuals that will direct and mandate, you're going to do this. The way I've been brought up, through being able to select who I work with, is that you always work as a team. It doesn't matter who's in charge of that team, you always have to work as a team. But it's always the person who is in charge, to make sure that those decisions are safe and current.

Farrell: Was that the first time that you had been supervising a crew?

02-00:30:46

Baxter: No, as a paramedic, you're always supervising one person. When I started, you always worked with an EMT, if it was on an ambulance. If you're the paramedic on a scene, you're supervising. Even if you have a captain or a lieutenant with you, the paramedic's running that call. You're the highest medical authority. When you're dealing with medical calls or rescues, the paramedics—. You'll always get somebody who will dispute it and go, "I'm the captain. I'm the boss. They're no in charge." But in reality, the paramedic, by state law, is making the calls for that patient care. You're always kind of

supervising that. Being able to understand personalities, egos and so forth is a huge tool in your toolbox, to sit back and be able to be very sly in how you address a suggestion to somebody who's a supervisor. I've seen in my career, especially in this department, when I lateraled over here in 2000, where you had paramedics from DPH [Department of Public Health] who were so {steadfast?} as being, I'm in charge. They would push that and they would say, "You're not in charge, I'm in charge." When you're saying that to somebody who is the captain of an engine company or a truck company or a rescue company or a battalion, they're obviously going to butt heads. What happens to your patient care? What happens to the rescue? What happens to the fire? It becomes secondary, because now you have two personalities conflicting, which can cause fatalities, can cause injuries, can cause more property loss. You have to learn how to be amenable to all those egos and all those personalities that you work with.

Farrell: Yeah, what was that like, sort of taking on more crew members and having to manage personalities like that?

02-00:32:43

Baxter: It's never been a real big issue. I've had issues with other people making bad calls, and I've confronted those individuals after the incident, just keeping a cool demeanor on scene, as long as it's not going to be detrimental to the patient care or to the incident objectives, and then just basically go back and tell those individual, this was wrong. Sometimes those were heated and verbal; sometimes those were well received. If you don't say something, you're never going to be able to get your outcome. I might be wrong. I must just have had an issue and went to somebody and said, this was not cool, what happened here, and is this is why I think it's {[not]?} cool. The other person sits back, and they have the same oversight that I do and they're like, well, this is why we did it and this is why, and because I trained with this and I knew this was going to work, and this is why I did this. Then I'm like, well, okay, I was wrong. Well, thank you for explaining that to me. So there's always two sides to how you address those issues.

Farrell: How often were you working with the medical director?

02-00:33:57

Baxter: We never really work for the medical director. The medical director is the oversight for the county. Basically, every paramedic in this county works for the medical, under that medical director's license. If I go out and do something egregious and ridiculous and out of protocol, there's protocol set to protect that medical director. But if that medical director says, I'm going to allow everybody to drill a hole in someone's head on a car accident to release intracranial pressure, and all the medics go out there with drills and start drilling into people's brains, now that medical director is going to be in trouble. They have to make the right choices and the right decisions with what

they'll allow us to do. Now, there are counties where medical directors, for whatever reason, are not like ours. They won't allow intubations, they won't allow chest decompressions, they won't allow certain medications, because they believe their liability with increase. So it all depends on the community you work at, who your medical director is, what your city organization is. There are so many factors that go into that.

Farrell: Dr. John Brown is the medical director now. How do you think that the fire department has sort of benefitted under his direction?

02-00:35:23

Baxter: Well, he doesn't work for the fire department, he works for the county.

Farrell: The county. Okay, sorry.

02-00:35:26

Baxter: Yeah. He's the county medical director. With every county, there's going to be things that we want that he doesn't want or things that he wants that we don't want. It's being able to work together and come to an agreement on what's going to be best for the community. I've worked in a number of systems. I've worked in systems that I feel have been a little better than our system, and I've worked in systems that I think have been worse than our system. It's all a weight and balancing.

Farrell: Okay. You're part of the union. Can you tell me a little bit about when you joined and the union that you're involved with here in San Francisco?

02-00:36:09

Baxter: Yeah. So Local 798's a labor organization. I joined, I think, the first two weeks that I was here. I've always been a union individual. Our system is, the union protects an employee from any egregious issue. You always want to have your insurance policy, if you want to look at it as an insurance policy, within an organization. With every group that you have, or subgroup, you're going to have egos and personalities and tradition and so forth. Like I think I mentioned last time we talked, when we first came to this department, the union, which was the collective body of firefighters, did not want the paramedics in this department. They made that very, very verbal, through expression and actions. However, you can't affect change without being a part of that, so you become a member of that. We've seen that over the last decade, and probably within the last seven years, where paramedic firefighters have started getting into executive positions within the union. People have retired, old personalities have retired, and we're becoming more proactive, twentieth century style organizations.

Farrell: Do you regularly attend union meetings?

02-00:37:35
Baxter: No.

Farrell: Okay. Are you sort of tapped in and know what kind of issues that they're working on or they focus on?

02-00:37:42
Baxter: Yeah. We get a newsletter, and you get a recap of all the meetings that you have throughout the month, so that you can stay vocal. As far as I can recall, at least 90 percent of all our votes that we put in, I've voted on. There's always going to be the one or two you miss. It would be in the 90 percentile. But I've always been involved with issues that are affecting the department and/or the union, through our voting processes.

Farrell: Can you tell me about what some of the issues have been since you've been part of the department?

02-00:38:22
Baxter: In this department, we've had labor management issues, we've had hiring issues, we've had lack-of-staffing issues, we've had equipment maintenance issues, we've had equipment dilapidation issues, we've had lack-of-strategic-planning issues, we've had alcohol issues, accident issues, vote of no confidence for the command staff issues. Again, these are all things that you have two sides to and you have two voices. I think when I was talking about being a supervisor, I said you always have to be able to look at both sides and you have to be able to come to a medium. You have a number of individuals who will—and this goes on both sides—you'll have a number of individuals who hear one story or see one story, and that's the only story they're going to listen to. But there's another story over here that may explain why this is occurring. There's always two parts that you have to listen to and then go, what's the best way to bring this? Do I just sit here and say this is nonsense? Or do I try to affect change? It's hard to see which side is right sometimes, which is where going to a union meeting, which I've done. A few times in my career, I was being confused. So okay, I'm going to go to the union meeting and find out what exactly is being said. I'm going to go to a commission meeting and find out exactly what's being said, because I want to know what this issue is about and why this is a problem. One of the things when we first came in was the implementation of paramedics on the engines. That took a long time, a long process. There was this mentality from the older vetted firefighters that paramedics couldn't do what a firefighter did and vice versa. Then in addition to all that, there was issues with tradition and so forth going, well, these paramedics that are coming in, they didn't go to one of the local high schools, or they didn't go to a private school, they didn't grow up in the city, whatever it is. It's all things that are very important to individuals. But again, you can't allow those personalities to affect your uniform and the position you're sworn to. That's always been my fallback when I've been in

this department, is hearing these issues and hearing these problems, is differentiating between that's a personal problem, that's not a system problem, that's not a department problem. I said, "You took an oath to serve and protect, but now you're complaining about something because I didn't grow up in the same neighborhood as you." Those kind of issues were, and a little amount continued to be, prevalent in our agency. But like I say, we've made so much progress, specifically in the last seven years, with a proactive approach to improving this department. It's made a huge impact.

Farrell: What are some of the other issues that you kind of went to the commission and the union meetings to better understand?

02-00:41:37

Baxter: A lot of them have been the staffing problems. Lack of staffing, keeping firehouses open, making sure that that got pushed through. Lack of equipment, poor equipment. It's like, why don't we have this equipment? Et cetera. Then you hear different stories from different mouths. Like you'll hear one mouth saying, well, the administration's not doing this, they're not doing that. Then you'll hear from the administration, the union's trying to block us from doing this, trying to block us from doing that. Then you'll hear from the supervisors, oh, we're taking money away from everybody, because we don't have any money and we need more money for this—completely separate from the entire fire department. That's where you have to look at everything and just be a voice and say, this is what we really need. I think in a smaller department, when I first started out with a small department, it's easier to see what's actually happening because they're so small. But when you're so big, like in San Francisco, there's so many players and so many components to each one of these issues, you really have to take the time to be involved with it. You have people that just aren't involved. You have people that show up to work, do their job, pick up a broom in the morning, check out their equipment in the afternoon, go on a couple of fire calls, go on a couple medical calls, then they go home. Then you tell them, hey, did you hear about this issue, and they have this blank stare on their face. It's all, again, professionalism, morals and ethics on an individual.

Farrell: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit more about the staffing issues and keeping firehouses open? Has that changed with the city's economy and how things have fluctuated?

02-00:43:23

Baxter: Yeah. So when the economy was low, we started closing firehouses to accommodate the budget. That's where you can use an example of the union and the administration, then again, walking a fine line, in saying working together. But you have the union, who really made a community impact by putting a ballot measure together and having the voters vote on making sure that we're never going to be understaffed. That's an amazing feat for a labor

group to do for the city. Not for the individual firefighters, but for the city. We need to protect our constituencies. That's one issue that we've seen a huge impact and a huge promotion from.

Farrell: This is sort of moving back in time, but it's kind of related because it was all hands on deck. But you had joined the San Francisco Fire Department in 2000, so you were here for September 11, in 2001. Can you tell me a little bit about your memories of that day?

02-00:44:34

Baxter: Yeah. I remember waking up to my phone ringing. It was my mom, and she was like, "Turn on the television." I turned on the television and it was like, what are we seeing? Just like, is this for real? Then being able to process it. For the fire department here, we didn't have a recall, we just had situational awareness. There was nothing really big and impacting that we did here. Then we had a group of firefighters who were able to go, mostly from Station 1, over to New York to assist with the efforts that were undergoing down there. Then secondary to that, going back to the funerals and assisting the families and doing items for the families. Being involved with that and being able to assist with fundraisers and being able to assist with demographics and stuff like that, even offsite, are things that we collectively did as a union labor group and as a department in the whole.

Farrell: Did that event change any procedures or strategic planning with the San Francisco Fire Department?

02-00:45:47

Baxter: Over the years, yes; immediately, no, in my opinion.

Farrell: Okay. Can you tell me about what sort of changed over the years and how?

02-00:45:53

Baxter: Well, I think society's changed, the world's changed. We used to be this coveted nation of, you can't touch this. 9/11 opened the door to that and it's like, yeah, we can definitely be touched by that. You're now seeing the number of protests becoming violent. You look at the virtual social war on police officers as a public uniform that's occurring in our nation. Wouldn't have seen that twenty years ago. You're seeing the plots against society, bomb threats, suicide bombers, shootings, stabbings, violence. All that stuff is increasing, to a point where it's not acceptable, but it's expected now. You wake up in the morning and you want to watch something cool on TV; but you know if you put it on the news media, they're going to be showing something and pushing something really exciting, because it has death and it has hysteria and it has dramatics in it. A lot of that is pushed by the media, pushed on the citizens. The citizens, again, hear something from one source, and that's what they believe and that's what they push with. And that pushes their personal beliefs and their attitudes, which falls back onto us as a public

service organization, to ensure that we provide safety measures, protect lives, protect property, but at the same time, protect everybody's First Amendment rights.

Farrell: How has all that trickled down into strategic planning for the department and the future, I guess?

02-00:47:29

Baxter: Yeah. We're currently working on our current strategic plan. That's all vetted into or implemented into the strategic plan. We have to vet a lot of issues and programs that other agencies have done, and if it's going to work for our agency and how we're going to move forward with our agency. One item would be the implementation of tactical paramedics and active shooter training and policies for our department. That again is something that twenty years ago, as a fire department, we would never have thought we would be taking a role in.

Farrell: Can you explain to me a little bit more about what tactical paramedics is and what that looks like?

02-00:48:18

Baxter: It's just a specially trained unit—individuals, but it would be a unit, so you can't do anything by yourself—that would be trained in ballistics and law enforcement tactics and procedures on how to extract persons from a hospital incident. So traditionally, pre-Columbine—not pre-2000, but pre-Columbine—fire departments would stage their ambulances blocks away and wait for the police department to go in. Three, four hours later, the police department would call up and say, okay, we have eighteen people that are shot. You can come get them now; it's safe. Well, out of those eighteen people, seventeen of them were dead because they waited too long and they bled out. So not saying that's the case with Columbine, but that's the way we responded to things, pre-that. Now, now it's expected for public safety agencies to go in almost immediately. That's where you have law enforcement being armed with contact teams to go in to address the threat; and then rescue task forces, which are fire department personnel, EMS personnel, paramedic personnel, that are protected by additional law enforcement to go in directly behind those teams, to start bringing out the victims, providing minor medical aid in the emergency zone, and bringing them out to a safety collection point and getting them placed to the proper location that they need to go to.

Farrell: Has the department, or people in the department, been supportive of that move?

02-00:49:55

Baxter: For the most part. Now, one thing you have to train for and plan for—and this is another thing with strategic planning—is you know that there's going to be firefighters that are going to say, there's no way I'm running into that building

where there's someone shooting. There's no way. So plan for it. What's that person going to do? What's that person's role going to be? It's the same with a police officer. They're going to pull up to a fire and they're going to go, there's no way I'm going to run into that fire and pull out a person out of that burning building. There's these dynamics that you have to think about. You overcome those by doing training and education. That allows people to say, oh, okay, I can do this; okay, I feel comfortable doing this. That's the first phase, is the training and education. But you're still going to have people after that, that don't want to do it. Do you want to force somebody to do something they don't want to do? Does that person become more of a detriment than a proactive component? So give them another job. Put them into a staging position, find something for that individual to do, before that incident. That would be an example of what you need to look for, for strategic planning.

Farrell: I wanted to talk a little bit about the leadership of the department when you kind of came in, in those first eight to ten years. Can you tell me a little bit about what you learned from some of your chiefs or immediate supervisors?

02-00:51:25

Baxter: I came from an advanced, proactive department when I lateraled over to this department. I'm confident in using my own personal statement, in saying that when I first came over here, there was a lack of professionalism. Not entirely, but overwhelmingly, throughout this department. We're talking 2000. Now, with that lack of professionalism, that was institutionalized. To the people in this department that were vetted with that, that was the norm for them. Again, with progression, that's where you see the progress to being a proactive, aggressive department. It's always been an aggressive department, but in the past, there was a lack of professionalism with a number of items. Now, is that a lack of professionalism to my standards? It may be. Again, it's my personal visual observation, from being in this department. Nevertheless, I did state earlier that I was able to select who I wanted to work with, which officers I wanted to work with, and that's what I did. You don't sit there and go, everybody is horrible; I'll just be horrible, too. It's like no, here's an officer who's really proactive; I want to make it my mission to make sure I'm always working here, and then start picking those people brains and getting that information. The other thing is to not allow your personality and your ego to be utilized. So I had a number of incidences. There was a certain fire station when we were on the ambulances that had a small table. You would show up to work and it was such a busy station that you wouldn't be there until lunchtime or after lunch. You would show up and you would have a little, tiny plate, with your food hanging over on the plate. It's like you're not allowed to eat at the firefighters' table; that's your little table over there. You have to go over there. Now, there are people who would argue and moan and have a fit about it. But it's like you know what? This is hazing. Maybe you want to use that word, or antics or whatever. But you're being sized up. Realizing the nomenclature of that era, you just fall into it and you don't allow them to win.

Oh, cool. Hey, thanks for giving us food. Oh, this is awesome. This is great food.

Same station, same antics, coming back at nighttime and there was pie that looked really good that was sitting there. Visually, you're going, hmm, this isn't right. So cut a slice of it, took a bite of it, and it was made with all salt. You can see people peeking around corners, seeing what you're doing. I ate it, cut another slice, ate another piece, went, "Man, this is the best pie I've ever had. Thanks, guys. This is so important." Then the call goes off and we have to leave again. You just drink a couple thousand bottles of water to overcome it. By doing that personally, you open barriers and you open doors that would not be there if you would've been like, oh, this is stupid. You guys are jerks. Why did you do that? Whatever the negative response would've been. Or some people might say whatever the appropriate response would've been, because yes, it's not right to do that. However, understanding behavior, understanding psychology, understanding this close-knit group when we first came in here, is important to be able to progress. I've heard stories from firefighters that this was the worst thing that they've—or from paramedics—that this was the worst experience they ever had. You had a number of people that would lateral here like I did, and then they would go back, taking $20-, $30,000 a year pay cuts to go back to their organization, because they just couldn't handle that interaction that was here. But you just let it flow off your shoulders and have fun with it. Again, that allowed me to not have hardly any issues or conflicts throughout the years. Were there people that are just pissed because they were being childish and unprofessional? Absolutely. Did I agree with it? Absolutely not, with the antics. Would I ever do that on an individual? Absolutely not. You learn from that. But this is how you progress forward. So those are some of the small antics that would occur.

Farrell: Have you seen that dynamic change over time?

02-00:56:08

Baxter: Yeah. We've seen that with increased training, increased standards, increased hiring standards across the board, more professional firefighters coming into our department, more lateral firefighters coming into our department, higher educational standards throughout, just overall. Again, I'm using seven years because it's really been this last seven year period where you see more professional cadets or recruits coming in, more dedication to public service, more increasing your knowledge, not in the department, but outside the department, and bringing that information back. That's kind of across the board; that's not isolated to one area of our department or individuals, like I stated what it was like twenty years ago. This is now kind of widespread.

Farrell: Do you think that that, in the past seven years, has changed because of administrative leadership?

02-00:57:09

Baxter: I think it's changed because of the dynamics and the caliber of people we've been hiring over the last seven, eight years coming in. And then the promotions of different officers in the positions, as well.

Farrell: Actually, we're actually probably pretty close to twelve-thirty, so that might be a good place to leave it today, and then we'll kind of talk about some more of that stuff next time, if that works.

02-00:57:32

Baxter: Okay.

Farrell: Okay. Thank you.

Interview 3: August 11, 2016

Farrell: Okay, this is Shanna Farrell with Jonathan Baxter, on Thursday, August 11, 2016, and this our third session for the California Firefighters Project-San Francisco Fire Department Oral History Project. Jonathan, when we talked before, we had briefly talked about the EMS merger that started in the late nineties, under Chief [Robert L.] Demmons. At this point, that was a little over sixteen years ago and you've been with the department since then. I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about how the paramedics has become more integrated into the department and how it's evolved over time.

03-00:00:54

Baxter: So evolving over time. It was integrated probably too hastily, at the beginning, in my opinion, just being able to take a backseat and watch it. Again, like I stated before, my personality is public service and to do a service and let the politics ride. Watching how it was integrated a little bit fast, you have a couple things. You have individual egos, which I think were the biggest factor; you have operational issues; and you have individuals who were placed into positions that they didn't really have a working knowledge of, at the very beginning. If you take the egos, the egos wanted the kingdom and the kingdom's not going to be theirs, or it was taken away from them. That would be the EMS professionals that worked in the city that were merged into the fire department. That caused a lot of conflicts at the beginning, and I think that carried through for at least a decade, as through attrition, those people retired out and those issues got out. With that said, also the individual firefighters who were here, with their egos clashing with those perceptions, caused a lot of bad taste in their mouths. That challenge carried through for about the same period, through about a decade period. So then you move forward from the egos and then you have the operational aspect of it. With the operations—the fire department taking over the operations, not really knowing much about the ambulance service but knowing it's a service that needs to be done, and then having these conflicts of the EMS professionals and the fire professionals all clashing, having their own agenda, having their own thought process—that was a little scrambled. That's why it was a little bit, as I said, hasty to really jump into it.

That caused a lot of issues for about the same period, working around a decade period. Then at the end of it, you had the individuals themselves. You had people that were placed into positions that didn't really know what the working knowledge was of that position. You have a fire professional who's been in the fire service for twenty-five years, and now you're telling him to take care of a ambulance profession division. Not the best choice. But we're not unique to that. San Francisco's not unique to that aspect. We see that happening throughout the nation, with the integration of public service or third-party-entity ambulance services into fire services. Somewhat better, somewhat worse, some were the same as ours. Not saying that that's peace of

mind, saying that oh, okay, we're kind of at the average, but that that's what happened. Nevertheless, the service was needed. You needed to integrate the service; you needed to get better medical services to the individuals. That's where the fire service has been heading, more so from a fire service to emergency services agency. You look at our call volumes, well about 70 percent of our call volume has to do with rescues and medical emergencies throughout the year. But even then, 30 percent of that is others, which is fires and hazmats and so forth, which are items that have to be addressed, and they have to be addressed with proper staffing. If we didn't have the staffing to take care of the 70 percent, we wouldn't have the staffing to take care of the 30 percent at all. If that makes sense, when you're looking at a budgetary thing or when people say, well, why do you have firefighters going to medical emergencies? How come we need that many? All the questions that come out, especially at budget time. That's why. You need that services, and if this is a way to ensure that those services stay, then that's where you have to move forward at.

03-00:04:47

The other item that was integrated throughout this process was the paramedics on engines. You have ALS first responder delivery systems, which increases the amount of time that a paramedic arrives on scene to give you care. Now, if I live in a city that has BLS—basic life support—EMT fire service, and they arrive on scene and eight minutes later the paramedic arrives on scene and my loved one dies, I'm going to question that fire service as to why I didn't have a paramedic, because that's where the standard is going throughout the nation with it. This department saw that well before that became an issue, and started to integrate that process with having ALS engines. Currently, we're up to about thirty-three of our forty-five engines being ALS on a mandated daily basis, and hopefully, we'll see all forty-five engines advanced life support with a paramedic on them. Hopefully, in the future, near future. That's pretty much the integration with the paramedics in this department so far.

Farrell: Some of the issues and the challenges that are related to that integration and that kind of a slow process, how has that been received at commission meetings?

03-00:06:12

Baxter: Well, again, you have people who have agendas and you have people who they're worried about their kingdoms not being kept, and you have egos that are played in there. You have individuals who think something should go this way, and they might not have the whole picture. You have somebody else who thinks it should go this way, and they might have more of a picture. Then you have somebody who has both sides of the picture and they know what the budget is, they know was the politics are, they know what the resources are, and they know what we can deliver now, but later on might get better. Well, we might as well have something now than nothing at all. That's where you

have all these three sides kind of converging on each other to be argumentative about something. Now, it's hard to put into perspective how things actually play out. Ten years ago, when I was on the ambulance predominantly—or well, even fifteen years ago on the ambulance predominantly—it was like, why can't we be on the engines more? That's before we became completely engine-based. The perception was, oh, people don't want to do this. The admins are doing this to get back at us. The administration doesn't like us. The administration wants to get rid of the paramedic division. These are all rumors that go around, and no one controlled those rumors. Nobody came up and said, this is not correct; this is what we're doing. It was business as usual.

Then on the admin side, it was like, oh, well, these people are just crying about this. They don't appreciate what we're doing. They don't appreciate that we're trying to move forward. But then again, there was a lack of communication between all these things. You had people pushing their separate agendas, and no communication between those agendas. But on top of all that, you had individuals who had egos, with they wanted it to stay this way or they wanted it to go that way, and they were going to do everything in their effort to make people in this group believe that what this group is doing is wrong and what this group is doing is wrong. Then vice versa, going across the board. It's human nature. The biggest key that I think out of all that was a lack of communication. If they had a mediator that came up and just worked between all these components, said, this is what's going on and this is why it's going on, you're still going to have people who don't believe it and who are going to be argumentative.

Farrell: Has the level of communication changed since then?

03-00:08:41

Baxter: Yeah, there's more communication in the last probably two years, from the administration, going down the pipeline. In the past, you had collective labor groups and organizations that were giving one message out, and the administration not having a voice. Now you're hearing a voice from the administration, which is giving individuals more of a balanced approach. If I was giving you one side and continuing to give you one side, you're going to end up believing one side. When you have over a thousand members in a department, they're not all going to take the time on their own to go, you know what? They're telling me this, but I'm going to go find out and ask them about this. They're not going to do that. We need to offer that, and that's what the administration's been doing. Now people have both sides and they're able to make an educated, factual opinion, and choose where they want to be on their opinions.

Farrell: How does the administration communicate to the rest of the department?

03-00:09:39
Baxter: Currently, face to face, newsletters, and through the commission meetings. Then open-door policy by the administration, also, which I don't think is widely used enough by our members.

Farrell: Have there been new rules created that help with the communication?

03-00:09:58
Baxter: My position in public information has been created, and a strategic planner position, which is Olivia Scanlon.

Farrell: Okay. We'll get to your position in a second, but—.

03-00:10:10
Baxter: No problem.

Farrell: Can you talk a little bit about how much of the budget or resources, either be that financial or personnel, how that has changed in relationship with the emergency services?

03-00:10:35
Baxter: Through the whatever-you-want-to-call-it 2008 era, there are all these opinions. It wasn't a recession; it is a recession. Whatever it was, there was a lack of funding.

Farrell: Right.

03-00:10:48
Baxter: We can agree on that. Even with the lack of funding, the voters in San Francisco put a ballot forward in early 2000, that mandated that all of its fire engines and stations always stay staffed. So with that, we didn't have really a staffing issue, but we had a mandatory issue. We had people being forced to work overtime. What's funny is in the past, people were upset because they couldn't work overtime. They couldn't staff an engine. An engine might get browned out. Then as we move forward, now we're in a position where we have to staff it, and we have a lack of staffing because of lack of funding, and now we're doing mandatories, and those mandatories increased. But as the budget starts to increase, as the economy started to increase, especially within the last year, we've now seen a huge increase in budget, citing our new budget that was just signed last week by the mayor, giving us millions of dollars for equipment and for apparatus and for maintenance and for structural upgrades to our stations and for staffing, giving us a dedicated budget for two classes of academies up until 2020, budgeted and placed in, so we're guaranteed to get those spots. That's something that we haven't had. Now, when I first started in 2000, we were fat with people, also. It's kind of this revolving door. Now, I've been in the fire service since 1989. If you look at the mid-nineties, it was the same type of thing. The late eighties, '89, '90, '91, we were really fat. We

had a good economy, we had a good budget. The fire service was doing great. Then for whatever reason, we went for a downfall. Then around 2000, 2004, ’5, ’6, we were great. Couldn’t get an overtime shift because we were fat with people. They were telling people to go home. Hey, if you’re here today and you want to take a vacation day, call the assignment office, because we have too many people working today. Then we fell back, and now we’re moving forward again. It’s a revolving door. You talk to agencies like L.A. City, L.A. County—not San Diego; I don’t have info on them—New York, Chicago, Boston, very similar in the aspects of how this stuff fluidly moves and how politics and budgets and stuff like that really form.

On top of that, the issues that we saw with our paramedic and with budget issues and with staffing issues and with perceptions and with egos, and this side saying we’re not doing enough, and this side saying we’re trying to do the best that we can, and a lack of communication in between—very common. We need to break that commonality, which we’re doing, which I know L.A. City’s been doing for the last couple years with their public information, the internal-external communications. New York City’s doing an exceptional job with their internal-external communications now, probably for the last seven to eight years, if not more. It’s a trend that you can see, as the fire service is noted for being very proactive in addressing problems such as fires. We do a lot of prevention work, such as educating people. We do a lot of education work. We try to put our jobs out of need, by doing all that. But we see a problem and we try to come up with a solution. We’ve noted this problem—and when I say we, I’m saying collectively, the fire service, not just San Francisco—and you try to address it. I think that’s where we’re at. There’s upward motion, again, to progress forward progressively.

Farrell: There was a five-year pilot study that was done from 2004 to 2009, about ways in which to reduce call volume, if that’s correct, and using a team of paramedics, social workers, nurse practitioners, and homeless outreach workers in tandem, to kind of work on that. Do you know much about that study? Were you involved in it?

03-00:14:56

Baxter: Yeah. You can put politics of the top of the scale for that, and probably just leave it at that, as being a playing factor. Call volume, when I started off as a paramedic in early 1989, my call volume was sick people, heart attacks, trauma—real patients. When I say real patients, some people might say, well, everybody’s a real patient, Jon. {Said?} no. If you’re doing emergency medicine, a real patient is someone who actually needs services that are of emergent need. Not social services, not social aspects, not general medicine, an emergency service. I know people that are in my area will agree with me. There was a huge increase in non-emergent 911 use directly correlated with when Hollywood started putting out movies and series such as “Emergency 911” and really pushing the aspect out there of glorifying that if you call 911,

all these cool people are going to come up, and my God, you might get on TV, because we might air your emergency. So then we started seeing, I have a headache, can you call me? Now, a headache can be an emergency. It can be a true emergency, especially if it's a stroke or something like that. You had people calling up going, I ran out of my medicine. I need to go to the hospital, and I saw on "911" that you have to take me to the hospital. True story; I've had the call. It is true; we can't refuse services to anybody, as an emergency provider, and all this information's going out there. Then we started becoming a taxi service. We would have individuals in this city that would be downtown, and they knew that if they called 911, we would give them a free ride—because they're not going to pay for it—to UCSF, if they wanted to go to the beach.

We would take these individuals and we would give them a ride to the hospital. They would get out of the ambulance and they would go, oh, I don't want to be seen, and they would walk out. They would do it right in front of you, and there's nothing that you can do about it. They would do it repeatedly and repeatedly. That increased our call volume to a point where it was non-attainable. It was ridiculous. One of the efforts that we had is, we had a group set of individuals who were really abusing this 911 system within our own city. On top of that, we had other city agencies throughout the United States, which I believe our city attorney addressed recently, that would actually give individuals bus tickets to come to San Francisco, citing to them the resources that we had and how accepting we were, and so forth like that. So now you've expanded how many people are here and abusing the system.

03-00:17:53

We enacted the EMS-6 program to try to combat this. There was political issue that made that go away. That recently came back, and recently it is again being attacked by state agencies and nonprofit agencies, stating that it's outside of our scope of practice to do the social service work. We're trying to work on how we can mitigate the issue and keep this service, because this service, when it went into effect 2004 to '09, was a huge decrease in the abuse of 911 providers. I know one person—and one person out of a five-year program, I'll take the one person—one person that I know personally, from 2000 to about 2005, I personally went on this person, I'd say, at least ten times a month. That was one medic about of 300-something medics at the time in the system. Always just completely drunk, always completely out of it, just a mess. This system helped that individual. This person, still to this day, is working, sober, and part of the community, attributed to that program. So it worked. If we know one person that it helped, it helped a lot more. There were efforts that were going forward, and that is one of the efforts, to try to decrease the system.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about what the specifically EMS-6 program is?

03-00:19:30

Baxter: It's a social service worker attached to a paramedic captain or supervisor, that at the request of a 911 crew on a 911 emergency, will respond to an individual who is known to be excessively using the system, and to talk with that individual, mirror that person all the way to the hospital. Not interacting in the complaint that they have and not holding back any of the care the person potentially may need, but simultaneously seeing what they can do with social services with the city, to get this person into either rehabilitation, into housing, into care. Anything that we can do for that individual to get them off the street and get them help. But they need to want the help. These are the individuals who aren't going to do it, so they take a step further to see what they can do to actually provide that help. I don't want to say mandate it, but essentially, mandate that help to them.

Farrell: What direction do you think the role of the emergency services, EMS or paramedics, and the fire department should go in the future?

03-00:20:37

Baxter: It should stay the course. Now, there's a lot of talk—and this is just my opinion, but there's a lot of talk out there—that we should go into the public health sector. We should start doing inoculations, we should start doing vaccinations, we should start doing health checks, we should start doing all this stuff. That's all nice and it's a great service; but there's professions for that. There's nurses for that, there's doctors for that, there's social workers for that. Paramedics need to be available to treat a life threatening emergency and they need to keep a skill set to deliver that, through the fire department or through a private service, a 911 ambulance system. Now, if they want to make a separate division that might be a paramedic that does that separately, that would be a great tool to give to the community and to have. But it should not be something that every paramedic should do. An example would be, let's say that we have to do family health screenings on request. You have a paramedic on an engine in your neighborhood, and all of a sudden your engine is tied up eight hours a day doing family health screenings or doing shots for diseases, whatever it might be. You call 911 and you have to wait an extra four minutes, because the next available engine with a paramedic was the next engine in the next district. That's where that becomes an issue. I think we need to stay the course. That is, to continue to provide emergency care for emergency medicine. That's my opinion, not this department's.

Farrell: I guess since you've been part of the department, there've been a number of changes that have happened in San Francisco. That has to do with the first tech boom and then the economic downturn around 2008, and then sort of the regrowth with tech and that people are moving to the city, and there are a lot of issues around that. But I'm wondering how the changes that San Francisco has experienced over the past fifteen to twenty years, how that's affected the fire department.

03-00:22:55

Baxter: The fire department has been a progressive component in the community. Moving forward, I don't see it really impacting us directly. Well, it impacts you directly; but I don't think as a department, it impacts you, because we adapt to what we need to provide. A fire department, but in particular, a firefighter who can't work outside of a box, shouldn't be a firefighter because every single call you go on and every time you come to work, you're working outside the box because nothing is ever the same. So with that said, you can have an economic boom and yeah, we're going to be doing good. We have more things to work with. We might get new equipment, we might have new tools, we might have new people to work with, we might have a lot of staffing. Then the economy takes a dump, and now we don't have a lot of people and our equipment's getting old and so forth. You need to adapt, and you need to provide the service that you're expected to deliver with the available items that you have. That kind of goes back to a question you said earlier, as to people's perceptions and so forth like that. That's the time where the line staff personnel might get upset with the administration, saying, they're not buying us this, they're not doing this, they're not getting that. There's a whole process that goes through here, that in the past, was not communicated to the staff. The staff only heard, the admin doesn't want you to have this stuff. I'm using that as an example. That's not paraphrased per se what was said, but that's the perception that's kind of being given. Then the line staff is giving the administration staff that those people just don't care. Whatever term you want to use. They're upset. But again, that's because no one's communicating back to them. So moving forward like outside the box, that's where we're heading to with better communications and so forth.

Farrell: Then I guess sort of moving on to your experience personally, you've received a number of awards for your service. I believe that you won an award during the National EMS Week.

03-00:25:13

Baxter: Mm-hm.

Farrell: And in 2014, for EMS field provider, which recognized performance, patient advocacy, and promotion of new technologies. Can you tell me a little bit about what it's meant to you to win these awards?

03-00:25:31

Baxter: I'm not in it for the awards. Awards are from your peers. It exemplifies that you're doing a good job. You could be humble about it and appreciative that you're getting awarded, you're being acknowledged for your work; but it just shows that you're making a difference and you're doing the job that you set forth to do.

Farrell: Then you recently moved into the position of public information officer. Can you tell me a little bit about how you made that tradition or that promotion came about?

03-00:26:04

Baxter: One thing that I've been doing for my entire career is, every year I'll take classes on my own. Whatever it might be, whatever pops up. Free classes are usually better, if they're offered by the government. You take those classes that come up. I had a number of classes that were directly related to fire service communication and public information. We had a thing called—I can't remember the name of it right now—Urban Shield in the city that was being hosted by Alameda County. For each group, they wanted a public information officer. I was asked to help out, volunteer my time for that, which I did. I guess the level of how I was able to accomplish that was relayed back to my chief staff. Part of our strategic plan with this department, and part of the Civil Grand Jury report that came out, was a lack of communication, and a suggestion was a public information officer. Coincidentally, those things kind of mended together. I was called into the chief's office, thinking I was in trouble, because when else do you get called into the chief's office, and I was basically asked if I would take on that position. So me being who I am, I would much rather be on an engine. I would much rather be out in the field doing my job that I've been doing for twenty-five years. However, I'm still under the mindset that if a chief officer, whoever that chief officer is, is asking you to do a job for your department, which essentially is for your community, you need to step forward and do that job. I was able to ask for a day or two to look into the actual position, to come up with an actual curriculum for the position, so I can make sure that I have the right equipment, the right resources and stuff, before saying yes to it. I had a long list of items to come back to, and I made a mental note that if the administration said no to more than 50 percent of the items, I wasn't going to take the position. I sat down with my big list of demands, if you want to call them demands, and said, "I would love this position, but I can only take this position if these are adhered to." We went through each one check by check, and they approved every single one of them. There's no room to back out, at that point.

Farrell: What's it been like for you to transition from being on the ground, on a truck, to being at headquarters?

03-00:28:38

Baxter: It's different. But like I said earlier, if you're a firefighter and you're not able to work outside the box, then this isn't the profession for you. You need to step forward and take your task and kind of kill it. That's what I've done. I'm very self-motivated—hyperactive, if you want to use a term from the eighties—and really have learned in this position that I have to learn how to pace myself, because there's lots to do. But the work that we've done as a department since January, in the field of public information both internal and

external, has really shown positive effects within the seven months that we've been deploying in this position. We have a better working relationship with the media, we have a better working relationship with the community, we have a better working relationship and perception from our line staff personnel, we have a good working relationship with multiple agencies within the city, on our department and our efforts to work collaboratively with them. That's within seven months, and that's a huge step forward. I'm excited to see where we're at, at the end of the year.

Farrell: You work directly with the chief of the department, in community affairs, outreach, and media relations. How has it been working with a team of people more administratively, versus on the ground?

03-00:30:10

Baxter: It's the same. It's the same concept. The fire department is very structured. We started the concept of incident command—ICS—structures, back in I think it was the late '70s, early '80s in California, which is prevalent throughout the fire service now. That is my whole era. I've been structured the whole time. You have a chain of command that you adhere to. I've been at the very bottom up to company officer. Then from company officer, being in charge of three to four people, coming over here. I'm a team of one, so I'm essentially my own boss; but I answer to my command staff, which again, is my chain of command. It's easy to transition that, if you have that body to work off of. It's not really been too hard, professionally, to put the work forward. The lack of the days off and stuff like that, that you have with the traditional twenty-four hour schedule, is definitely different than what you have on this schedule here. But again, you're doing the job in public safety to make a difference. Whether that's putting the Band-Aid on the cut or preventing the need for the Band-Aid to be on the cut, you're doing the same job, and that's where I'm at now.

Farrell: I guess as part of being public information officer, can you tell me a little bit about what some of your roles are, I guess some of what your day to day is like?

03-00:31:45

Baxter: Yeah. The biggest item is putting the right information to the right people at the right time, for incidences, disasters, and emergencies. Controlling the media is a term that was put out there by professionals from public information. I don't like to use the term controlling the media. I like to work with the media and making a working relationship. One of the things that I really saw as being important is letting the media know that we as a department are going to give you something. We're not going to say no comment. So far, I've been able to stay true to that. We'll give you something, but you have to give us that time. With that, in the past, you'd have media coming into incidences because they're allowed to, which becomes a

hazard—not only for them, but for us. But they're allowed to be there. We've been able to direct those media individuals to a collection point, using social media, using your cell phone, using face-to-fact contact. Hey, I'm going to give you something in ten minutes, over there at that corner. If you're not there, if you're over here, I'm not going to come look for you. I'll be there in ten minutes, maybe sooner. What do they do? They go over there, because they know you're going to show up. At first, a little bit of people being people. But if you stay cool, calm, collected, and talk to them, show them that you're going to give them that resource, they start to flock over to that spot. Now it's only seven months into it. I go to a major incident, and I tell the media, on social media or face to face, in fifteen minutes, I'll be at X, Y, and Z corner and I'll give you guys all an update. Please use my photos, if you want, that's on social media. They all go over there. We don't see anybody within the incident, and we're able to control it. More importantly, phone calls into our 911 system by the media. Hey, what's going on? That's the person who should be answering the 911 call. I can't breathe. Sorry, I have to put you on hold; I'm talking to the media. We've had incidences, major incidences in the last seven months, where our dispatch center has gotten zero calls from the media, because we've been on scene with a public information officer.

Farrell: In working with the public and conveying certain aspects of what's been happening—recently, there've been a number of Mission fires, and I'm wondering how you convey—there's a lot of speculation. It's speculation, so whether it's true or not, I guess, is sort of irrelevant. But how do you convey what the public needs to know? What are your best practices with that?

03-00:34:38

Baxter: Yeah, so using the Mission fires is a great example, because you have a group of individuals, some of which are politicians, that have a very good intention, because they have a contingent that has a grave concern. However, you have two items now. You have a group of public service officials or politicians, and you have a group of citizens. If this group is feeding into this group or this group is feeding into this group, it causes chaos. And when I'm saying chaos, it causes people to be fearful. And fearful is not productive. Fearful causes more injury than an actual fire will cause, I think, psychologically, emotionally, and possibly physically. One of the items that we've had to do is we've had to control both aspects. If you look at the public service position, we give these people the information, and then they give the citizen or their followers information that they want to give out, and they feed off the demands. We can use gentrification as a big civil issue right now, saying that gentrification is a cause for these fires and people are burning buildings down in the Mission District intentionally, so that they can get more money by the techies. We tell this side this is not true; these are the causes of the fires. This is what's happening. It gets relayed over to these people that the fire department is telling them nothing, per se. Or the fire department is saying these are unknown. They're putting a spin on words. That causes even more

confusion and dissention. We started off in January, trying to control that, and quickly figured out that we had sides that we had to counter. So using social media, using community meetings, doing community organizations, working closely with the politicians or the public safety individuals, we're starting to get more of a message out there. A milestone with that is we had a community leader say, "So an arsonist actually has to have an intention to start a fire. So the fires that we're talking about, where somebody might've been drunk and their candle or their hot pot or their crack pipe fell down and caught the building on fire, that's not arson." I said, "No, because they didn't intend to cause that fire. It's an accidental fire." Is it negligent? Possibly. But is it arson? No. So an arsonist is a perception of somebody running down the street with Molotov cocktails and a blowtorch and lighting places on fire, for whatever reason. That's an arsonist. That's what certain people are trying to push to the community as what's happening. So our job is to redirect that and to say no, it's not. You can't be argumentative. You can't be belittling anybody, because people don't know. They have to be informed. Some people don't want to know. They don't want to hear what you have to say, and you have to break that. No matter how many times you have to tell them, how many ways you tell them, you just have to continue to get to them until they actually understand it and they can actually believe it. That's where we're at now with trying to get that information out. We are working very closely with a number of groups. It is isolated, per se, to Mission, Excelsior, Bayview type districts right now, even though we're having more fires in other districts.

Farrell: One of the components of your job now is that you have to work, you were just sort of talking about it there, with city administrators. Can you tell me a little bit about your experiences working with city government? Whether or not it's on this issue, or just in general?

03-00:38:37

Baxter: Yeah, I think very proactive. Before I took this position, again, I had one voice telling me what was happening. My impression of city government was that they were against employees and that they were just out to do whatever. But being in this position, even just the brief seven months that I've been in here—and people who do know me know that I will tell the truth, so if it wasn't this, I would say the other, but everybody's been very proactive. Everybody's been very receptive. People are listening to things. There's a lot of problem solving and solution workgroups going on throughout the city. There are a lot of younger individuals who are in positions of leadership within the city, that are really trying to push the department and the city forward in a positive motion. I can speak for the last seven months, and say that this is a positive workflow group and I've had no issues working with anybody. I can't speak for before I started this position in January, where I heard from one singular source that this is how things were going. I'm not seeing that now. I would like to believe that it never was the latter; but then

again, knowing what I'm seeing with certain politicians and so forth, I can see that actually being valid.

Farrell: Similarly, but on the other side, can you tell me a little bit about what it's been like working with the fire department administration?

03-00:40:13

Baxter: Yeah, absolutely fine. I've had nothing but overwhelming support. My personality is 150 miles per hour forward. I've had a couple of incidents where I was like, okay, I'm going to see what's going to happen, and I've gotten a, "Hey good job," or I've gotten a, "Hey, somebody wasn't too happy about what you did. But you're doing a good job, keep doing it." I've gotten those comments. It's a learning curve, and they've been very receptive to the learning curve. I've had a couple of things that I'm not used to, when it deals with politics, politicians, city heads and stuff like that, and it might be construed as, oh, I think you might've stepped on that person a little bit; you might want to reword your delivery message next time, so it doesn't do that. Then also, the aspect of making sure that all components in a message are taken care of. If you have a fire that was a homeless encampment tent, you might say, hey, it was a homeless tent, and the media does: homeless encampment set on fire by homeless person. That's not true. You have to really look at the item and you have to say an individual trying to cook his food accidentally set his tent on fire at the corner of X, Y, and Z; nobody was injured. Doesn't matter if the person's homeless or not. Why do we care? It doesn't matter if it was a homeless encampment, and why do we care? What we care about is that this was accidental, it was not intentional, it wasn't arson, and it was a result of this method. So those are things that you have to think about collectively, when you're working with all these city organizations.

Farrell: Especially given that you've been in this role for seven months and you were on a truck before, what are some of the things that you've learned about leadership from working with the administration?

03-00:42:11

Baxter: That's kind of a hard one. You don't want to seem conceited and say, I think I've had a good working basis from my peers and from my experiences here in this department and elsewhere, to hold a good leadership role. You're always learning something every day, from people that are in leadership roles and people who are not, just by the general public. I think again, going back to the fact that this is a structured organization, that I've been used to that structure, is a contributing factor. I don't really see too much at this time with anything that's really greatly different. It's the same. It's the same type of style of leadership; it's just coming from different people.

Farrell: I guess another way to sort of look at that is, what do you—so since you've been with the department, there have been four chiefs, is that right?

03-00:43:09
Baxter: Yeah.

Farrell: So Chief Demmons, Chief Tabacco, Chief Trevino, and Chief Hayes-White. What do you see as some of their great contributions to the department?

03-00:43:22
Baxter: Chief Demmons, I was more in the phase of establishing myself in this department, so I don't have much to say about Demmons. I don't have a good working knowledge of Demmons. Chief Tabacco, I think, did a great job integrating the perception of paramedics with the firefighters. He really tried to break the ego that I was talking about earlier, when he was in this department. He truly was passionate about this department and really moved it forward. Personally, I think it's a shame that he wasn't selected for the full-time position. He was an interim chief, and for whatever reason, we went outside to Chief Trevino. Chief Trevino coming into this department, he was the first outside chief in this department, I think ever. There was a learning curve for that. He had some good information that was outside the box, that this department didn't have before. There are a lot of contributions that he made to this department that—he was here, and he was for a short period of time, for whatever reason. So really not enough time by him, vested in our department, for me to come up with a great conclusion to that. Chief Hayes-White, who's been here for the majority of my tenure at this department, she's established a diverse workforce. She's increased a diverse workforce exponentially, with ethnic groups, cultural groups, gender equality. We're the highest number of female firefighters in the nation, we found out yesterday, for that. We also have one of the highest numbers of ethnic breakups of any public safety organization in the world that we're very happy to do. That's a direct result of her working relationship with other department groups and with community groups, to make sure that we address those issues. We have the EMS integration, we have budget issues—there are just a number of things that she's done in the tenure that I've been here. I don't contribute that to the person, necessarily; I contribute that to who she has working for her, the availability for funding and for resources that you have in that position; and then also the timespan. She's been here for almost twelve years, I think. When you have that timespan, you're able to build relationships and you're able to progress forward. And we're seeing that progressing forward, especially now, with everything that we're getting with the budget and with equipment and with grants and so forth.

Farrell: Speaking of I guess sort of contributions and big things and legacy issues, it's the department's 150th anniversary of the paid department. Can you tell me a little bit about your involvement with the anniversary?

03-00:46:21

Baxter: Yeah. My involvement is basically, push this out publically, with media, social media events, website promotions, stuff like that. It's interesting, because it's all based on contributions. It's all donations that we're getting to fund this; it's not a city-paid venture. The Guardians of The City are the ones who are the funders for this. They take all of the donations and they're able to put that into the funding aspect. This is a great time. Who else gets to say they were part of the 150th anniversary of a fire department? My siblings will probably not be alive for the next 300, if you look at it that way. But even the next 50th, if you go to the 200th. There's a very few amount of people that are going to be there. So the memorabilia that we're getting from this, the experience, the photo opportunities, everything that we have with this, to really show where we're at is amazing. Now, we don't know where we're going to be in fifty years, whether we have spaceship fire engines or whatnot. But if you look at right now, what we're showing, especially in some of their exhibits, is that 150 years ago, we had horses that were drawing our fire pumps. We didn't even had fire pumps. You had steam engines, but that was a little bit after we had the horse-drawn engines and stuff. There's such a huge progression from where we were at only 150 years ago to where we are now that giving that to the community is huge. But the biggest thing is the lessons that we've learned from 150 years ago and how we haven't just been like, oh, yeah, we've burned down half the city; okay, whatever. No. We're like, oh my God, we burned down half the city; how do we prevent that? Then we had the big earthquake. It's like, oh my God, we didn't have water for that. We burned down half the city again. How do we prevent that? We expand on that and we move forward with that. Then we come into 1989. We have another big earthquake and we have other big issues. It's like, well, how do we prevent this from happening? We expand on that and we move forward. So you have all these big incidences with 150 years that we've learned from, and rather than just saying, yeah, we had them, we've educated ourselves, we've made preventative measures, and we've made ourself and our communities a lot safer and prepared for the next big disaster.

Farrell: Can you tell me about maybe some of the events that have been the most well attended by the public?

03-00:49:02

Baxter: We had the opening ceremonies, which was really the biggest ceremony we've had so far. September 24 and 25, we're having the next big event, down on the wharf with a bunch of steam engines. They're going to be doing mock rescues from the 1900s. They're going to be using horse-drawn carriages, going to historical fire sites that are still here in the city, and reenact the actual entire fire with the ladders they used back then, with the pumpers they used back then, with the horses. The horses, but not the ones that they used back then, because they're not alive. But with horses and stuff like that. It's going

to be a great event by the community, and I think a lot of people are actually going to attend it.

Farrell: What do you think that it's meant to the firefighters and the people who've been in the department for years now, to have these events?

03-00:49:56

Baxter: Again, for the firefighters themselves, again, it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and it might be a once-in-a-generational-gap experience for their kids and their families growing up, to have that experience within their own family, from their parents or from whoever they might be at that time, but from their family folk. For the community, again, I think it's huge because it shows how we've grown as a community, how the community's fire department, their fire department, has grown to make sure that they're protected more, and how preventative measures we've taken from everything we've learned, to contribute to them. It's good for the community to see where we are, where we're at, and what we're planning to head towards. That only gains more trust and more support. You have to have trust and support, especially during a major disaster.

Farrell: I wanted to ask you a few reflective questions to kind of wind down the interview. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about how your time in the department, from when you decided that you wanted to join to now, how your experiences have either changed your perception of the fire department or maybe reinforced your perceptions.

03-00:51:16

Baxter: When I first started, I was only eighteen years old, so my perspectives were different. My perspectives were to go out and save the world and go to the biggest fire ever and do the best rescue ever and stuff like that. Growing through that, you see tragedy, you see death, you see impacts on both family members, you see impacts of fire service professionals. Time change. We had 9/11. 343 firefighters died. That's an impact that you kind of get the reality check. We've had a number of line-of-duty deaths in my career, where your fellow peers that you work with and you knew perished in a fire that when you started, when I started eighteen years ago, I never thought about that. It's like, invincible. Hard as wood. Nothing's going to happen to me. Then these things happen, so it kind of changes your perception. But you continue to move forward, through peer support and through the department. Now, I have seen the fire service progress through the time. I've seen this fire department progress throughout the times, addressing all those things. So to say that I've grown, I think the entire service has grown, and you grow with that service, kind of like a family member.

Farrell: We just talked about the 150th anniversary and the 200th. What are your hopes for, I guess, the next fifty years or the future of the department?

03-00:52:42

Baxter: Well, I hope I'm still around. That'd be awesome. Collecting a pension. I just hope that the 200th shows the same as we're showing now, that we've progressed from 150th to the 200th; that there's been a large progression in both prevention education and department resources.

Farrell: How do you want the legacy of the fire department to be remembered by residents of the city?

03-00:53:14

Baxter: Kind of I think the same as we have now, that this is a proactive, aggressive fire department that has the community's best interest at mind; that their firefighters take an oath to serve and protect them, up into giving their lives if necessary, for their lives. That's something that we've instilled in this community, it's something we've proven to this community that we will do, and I'm pretty darn sure that that's what we'll continue to do.

Farrell: Since you've been with the department, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about maybe what some of your biggest either successes or challenges or both have been?

03-00:53:48

Baxter: Challenges are every day. Again, it's outside-the-box stuff all the time. It's just being able to understand people and be proactive with it. There's times when you get frustrated with individuals, and that's where teamwork really comes into play, so that you can collectively address an issue. Obstacles and differences and stuff like that, again, it's a family and you grow with your family. I don't look at things as, this was a huge issue. Everything that you see is something that you can overcome. And it has to be for the betterment of the department and the community, rather than you as an individual, because the fire service is unique in that you're working with the family per se, and you're working close knit with these people that you work with all the time. Again, you're still a public servant and you are responsible for the public and you're responsible for their lives and for their property. Those challenges that you have, they can't be personal challenges at work, because they have to be addressing the community. Now, personal challenges that you have, you just deal with that with your family members, with peer support, and with the people that you work with outside of that, by doing more social activities and so forth outside of the work arena.

Farrell: Lastly, what has it meant to you to be a part of the San Francisco Fire Department?

03-00:55:18

Baxter: It's great. I know it might sound biased because I'm here, but I think it is the best fire department in the nation, if not the world. We're an aggressive fire department, which you don't see much of anymore. We do a lot of interior

{attacks?}, predominantly. We do a lot of rescues; we save a lot of people. We have an aggressive EMS system; our paramedics are allowed to do a lot of emergency medicine on their own, without making permission-based contact with physicians. That's very unique. It's an unbelievable position to be in. There are always other aspects. You look at other departments that have helicopters and more boats and stuff like that. Again, we're here and this is our community and we do a great job. We do a very good job with addressing the concerns of the community and making sure that they're safe, so I'm proud to be here.

Farrell: Did you want to add anything else?

03-00:56:15

Baxter: I think we're good.

Farrell: All right. Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]