Mike Westerfield

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Amber Adamson
October 14, 2013
Waco, Texas

Project — 2013 Explosion at West Fertilizer Company in West, Texas

ADAMSON: For the record, this is Amber Adamson. It is October 14, 2013. I'm here at Waco Fire Station Number Two. And Mike, if you'll say and spell your name, tell me your rank, and how long you've been with the department.

WESTERFIELD: Name is Mike Westerfield, W-e-s-t-e-r-f-i-e-l-d. I'm a lieutenant in Waco Fire Department. I've been with the department for thirty-seven years now.

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ADAMSON: Okay, so take me back to April seventeenth, when you first heard about the event and how you responded and kind of just walk me through your experience.

WESTERFIELD: Actually, we were out at—we were on duty that day. We were out at the MCC [McLennan Community College] Fire Academy filling some air bottles; they have a fill station out there. And we had used some air bottles earlier in the day, and we were out there filling the bottles. And I actually got a call from my oldest daughter first. She lives in West and—well, she lives outside of West a couple of miles. And she asked

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me, “Did you hear anything about a fertilizer plant exploding up here?” And I said, “No, I haven’t heard anything.” About that time, I got a call on the radio from the assistant chief that he needed me to call him immediately. So, I got off the phone with my daughter, called him on the cellphone, and he started giving me some of the information that we were dealing with. He said that there had been a fertilizer plant in West that exploded, there were multiple injuries with probable fatalities, and had firefighters down. And he, over the phone, assembled a crew that consisted of hazardous materials technicians and some firefighters and got us all together, basically told us where to go and who to pick up and meet up with two other machines out on the interstate and head up there as quick as we could. So, we ended up going to number seven which is where we connected with two other firemen that were hazmat technicians that got on the truck with me. And we started to West, and we met up with the other two crews out at Lakeshore [and] I-35.

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And so, we were up there probably within almost like twenty to thirty minutes after they got the call, after we got the call here in Waco. So, it didn’t take too long to get us up there. And we didn’t know what we were dealing with. That’s basically all we heard. We had heard some radio traffic from the county—and first one thing and another—and they were calling for all the help they could get. So, we knew it was bad. As we got out of Elm Mott, we started looking for a glow in the sky, basically what we started trying to look for and never did see anything. So that was a little bit of a positive thing that it wasn’t a—

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UNKNOWN VOICE: Mike, you're not telling her that story about being on top of the gym roof, are you? (Adamson laughs)

WESTERFIELD: This is being recorded!

ADAMSON: He stops. (laughs)

WESTERFIELD: Anyway. (both laugh) God, that's a whole other story, but anyway—the traffic going up there was terrible, all the construction and that time of the day. And I guess a lot of people had already started hearing about the explosion and were trying to get up there to either help or just see.

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But anyway, we made our way up there. And as soon as we got into West, we had orders to go to the apartment complex up on I guess—is it Davis? Up there at the end of the—where the apartment complex—

ADAMSON: Reagan?

WESTERFIELD: Oh, Reagan, yeah. So we turned on Reagan and started up the street, and we were many blocks away. We were ten or fifteen, twenty blocks away, and I started to see windows blown out of houses. And we could see a couple of houses on fire just up the street from us, and we weren't anywhere near the explosion site yet. And I said, "Oh, Lord, this is going to be catastrophic." At that point, I'm trying to wrap my brain around all this, and I'm thinking we're going to have as many as maybe a hundred and fifty, two hundred casualties from just seeing that much damage that far away. And I

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knew there was a school, and I knew there was an apartment complex, and I knew there was a nursing home there close. So I'm thinking, This is about as bad as it could get. We made our way on up the street—debris laying in the road, couple of houses on fire. And it's against our nature to drive past a burning building, but that's what we had orders to do, was get on up there to the apartment complex. And so we did, drove past two houses burning, and we started seeing people walking down the street. And my first thought was it reminded me of a war movie, where a village had been bombed and the refugees were fleeing the city. That's just what it looked like to me. I mean there were wounded people walking, bleeding, limping, trying to flag us down for help, other people pushing folks in wheelchairs and just anything that they could find to get people out of there. That's what they were—backs of pickups, they had people lying in the backs of pickups, driving them out. And that was getting pretty unnerving at that point.

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We hadn't even got to the area where we needed to be. As we got closer, we drove by the elementary school—no, it's not the elementary school. I guess it was the intermediate school up there close. But anyway I could see fire on the roof of it. Again, the walls were leaning, the windows were all blown out of it. We kept going, started running over stuff in the road that I didn't even know what it was because I was afraid we were going to blow all the tires out on that big truck, but we didn't. We got up there right next to the apartment building, and that was the biggest mess I've ever seen. It was just total destruction there. For it to still be standing was amazing to me; I don't see how it was still standing. And people around there told us they thought there were still people trapped in the apartment.

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At this point, there wasn't a lot of help there yet because we had gotten there pretty quick. I don't remember any other departments that were there immediately, but I started to see some other firefighters from different cities and stuff fairly soon after we got there. And it was so chaotic—we basically grouped our Waco firefighters together, and we decided that we were going to start searching through that apartment building just one apartment at a time and see if we could find any victims. We started on the, I guess it'd be the south or the west end, and just started crawling through and lifting up sheetrock and lumber and debris and insulation just trying to see if we could find any bodies or any survivors. And we didn't know it at the time, but we found out later that they had a little bit of an early evacuation going on there. I guess when they realized there was a fire with the fertilizer plant they started doing some evacuating, so the majority of the people were out of the apartment complex. And we didn't find him—it was further down in the apartment complex—but I think they did find a gentleman and a child that were injured, but I don't think they were deceased. So, that was a good sign. Then I started to realize that most of the cars in the parking lot were gone. There were few vehicles in the parking lot, so that told me again that maybe most of them got out. And a lot of it was due to timing. If it would've been earlier in the day, there would've been a lot of kids in school. If it would've been later in the day, there would've been—most folks would've been home in the apartments and stuff. So, as bad as it was, it could've been a lot worse.

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We continued to work through those apartments; and then, we started noticing how structurally unsound it was. And when we finally figured out that probably anybody that was still alive had already gotten out, because we could see places in those apartments where people had crawled across lumber and stuff. They were cut and bleeding, because there was blood smeared on lumber or where somebody may have drug them out and that sort of thing. That was a pretty stark realization then, that there were people in this thing when it exploded. But I've never seen that kind of devastation. Literally, heavy timber beams of wood just splintered like toothpicks. And the whole building was shifted to the north, and it was unreal. Vehicles completely destroyed. But about that time, we were about a third or a fourth of the way through the building, working, trying to do kind of a search or recovery, whatever.

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And about that time, a lot of volunteers started showing up from everywhere. I mean and they were wanting to help and wanting to do something, so we got called away from there. We kind of told them what we thought needed to be done, so the volunteer departments from around started kind of picking up where we left off and did a good, thorough search of the apartment building. And then I looked over at that nursing home, and I thought, "Oh, good Lord." If they didn't get those people out of there, there was definitely going to be a problem there. Again, the communication—it was pretty chaotic and there was really nobody in charge at this point. And in a situation like that, it's hard to get everybody corralled quickly and under control—you do this and y'all do that—and that sort of thing. So, it was pretty chaotic, even at that point. But we had gotten word that they had evacuated most everybody out of the nursing home, so that was another

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good sign. That was a relief. But one of the other Waco fire crews ended up doing a secondary search of it and found another victim at the back that was still alive, and so they got them out.

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And we were instructed—the crew I was on—we got a call that they needed us to work our way around to the plant itself and see if we could go up in there and figure out how to put out the remaining fires. Because there was still some flames and some things burning over there, and there were some other ammonia tanks and some fertilizer tanks that were exposed to the flames. And they were trying to keep those from erupting or going up in flames also—(coughs) excuse me. So we made our way back down and around and across the railroad tracks to the drive that goes up to the fertilizer plant, and we met up with our training chief, Paul Simmons, there at that point. And we got in the back of the pickup and drove up in there to see what we could do or see what we thought we could do. And we got up there actually to the blast area, to the fertilizer plant, and there was an ambulance sitting there that looked like it had been dropped off of a ten story building. I mean it was—the doors were blown up, and all of the equipment inside was just scattered everywhere. There wasn't a straight piece of metal on that ambulance anywhere. I mean it was just—literally looked like it had been dropped off of a ten story building. But the odd thing was it was sitting there running. The engine was still running. And that was kind of eerie because you couldn't see anybody; there wasn't anybody around. That ambulance was destroyed like that, and it was kind of a deafening quiet to the situation. I mean it was almost like a graveyard. I mean you knew there were people dead up there and that ambulance sitting there running, and it was creepy.

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Turned the ambulance off for whatever reason, just didn't think it needed to be sitting there running, so we turned the motor off and then—

ADAMSON: Don't waste the gas.

WESTERFIELD: Yeah, you know, I mean it was—

ADAMSON: Was that the West EMS?

WESTERFIELD: Yeah, yeah. And so, we've got all the flames going back here still. And it was dark at this time, so you could see silhouettes, I mean as far as pieces of equipment and different things that were there that you could almost recognize. Like, that's maybe part of a truck or a tractor or something that was sitting there, but all this stuff around there was just ruined. I mean, it was totally destroyed from the explosion.

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When we got close enough, I was able to see a couple of bodies up in there, and it was obvious that they couldn't have survived anything like that. And so, we started our discussion about how we were going to try to put out the remainder of the fires; and about that time, one of the pop-off valves started releasing on one of the ammonia tanks. If those tanks—if the pressure is starting to get too high on them, they have relief valves that open up and start letting off pressure.

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Well, that told us that, Okay, we've got at least one tank that's been exposed to flames; and if it ruptures, we don't know what it's going to do. So we discussed it for about thirty seconds about what we thought we ought to do. And the general consensus was we need to get the h-e-double-l out of there and back everybody else up even further, because the staging area for all the volunteers and stuff coming in was right there by the school, that big field right there. And we decided that was too close, so we put the call out that there was—we call it flame impingement—on some more tanks and the possibility of more explosions. Well, they loaded everybody up and moved on out to the north side out there in that big area out there. So we got everybody out, moved everybody back probably a quarter to a half mile, and by then—let's see, we probably backed away for thirty minutes or so and sort of let everything just kind of settle down and see what was going to happen. And I mean, we literally sat there and watched another house burn down. We could see it several blocks away, and it had started out just a small fire on the roof, I guess, from some of the debris falling. We literally sat there and watched it burn down because we couldn't do anything about it. And by then the fire over at the school had gotten larger, quite a bit larger, so we ended up taking that big ladder truck that's out here.

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And by then, things were sort of getting organized. They had an incident commander and the fire department people from Waco were there. The deputy chief and the chief and all that, they had gotten there at that time and they were starting to kind of keep things or get things a little more organized, so we got more orders to go set up over by the school there and try to put that thing out before it got to be too big. We set our lighter truck around on

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it. I think Robinson Fire Department provided us with the water that they could get. We spent the night on it, putting out the school over there. And I guess after, maybe after midnight or one o'clock, we pretty much spent the rest of the night babysitting that old little school building, trying to put it out. Around six o'clock or so in the morning, six thirty, they had a pretty good grasp on how many fatalities and injuries and all that and kind of had everything settled down. And more firefighters were still pouring in from all over the state, so we were able to get some relief from our position. And they sent us on back to Waco.

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But they didn't try to—we didn't try to go in and get those guys out or anything like that over there where the plant actually was. It was just too—it was still too volatile during the night. They wanted to wait until daylight to kind of see what was happening and just from what we could see over there that night with the flashlights and light from the still-burning fires, it was literally the worst thing I had ever seen. I mean I've never seen destruction like that. And then when I was able, like I said, when I was able to make out a couple of bodies lying over there just in a silhouette-type fashion with the fire behind it, that was really—that really put the icing on the cake, you know? I said, Man, whoever was close was—they didn't really know what hit them. So yeah, that was a pretty wicked night.

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ADAMSON: What was the ride back to the station like?

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WESTERFIELD: That's kind of when I started just to gather my thoughts and senses and, kind of, take a breath. It was like, my God, this is amazing. As bad as it is—it's horrible is what it was. And you start thinking about how it happened and why and who and that. I knew Luckey Harris. He grew up out of Crawford, so I knew him. In fact he came to me when I was—I'd been in the Waco Fire Department about four or five years when he decided to get in the fire service, and he came to me and asked me what I thought about it. If I liked the job, if—you know. He was interested in it. I knew he would make a good fireman because he was a good guy out there at Crawford. He was the kind of guy that everybody liked, and he was a caring type fellow and a good family man—or kid. Even then he was good, even at a young age.

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Yeah, and then I thought he was going to try to get on here at Waco, and then I guess he got a shot up there at Dallas and took that. I ran into him over the years; and when I talked to him, we would discuss war stories and firefighting. And I knew his wife and her family from McGregor, because being from Crawford—she was from McGregor, so I knew all them real well. And that was—I try to put myself in his position, you know?

I knew that he had to know what the possibilities were there when he went up there, and even though—I don't think he was officially a member of the West Volunteer Fire Department, but I think he probably knew that they were dealing with something that they didn't really know how to handle it or what to do. I feel certain that he was up there trying to get them out, trying to get them to back away. And I guess that's the chance we take. What's the odds of that happening again?

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The trip back, of course it was daylight then, and all the news media and stuff was set up up there at the auction barn. (laughs) It was kind of funny. When we came out of West and got on the access road to get on the interstate, they saw that fire truck coming, and all the cameras come running out to the street. (Adamson laughs) It was like that's as close as they could get at that point, and they were looking for anything to shoot. They had to do with a fire truck, I guess. But yeah it was—it almost seems like a dream now, and even then it didn't seem really real. You know? You kind of get into that shock when you're dealing with that kind of stuff, and it's just pretty tough knowing—I'd gotten word late in the night that one of the guys that was missing was Luckey Harris, and I thought, Aw, man. Knowing him, I'll bet he was right down there in the middle of it. And sure enough, he was. Anyway it was a—you know, of course, we were exhausted. Coming home that morning, it wasn't a long trip, but man, it was—and I didn't realize how bad I looked until we got back to the station. And they started asking me if I was okay, and I said, "Yeah, I'm fine." And they said, Well, you look like crap. (both laugh) I go, "Well, I feel pretty much like crap."

ADAMSON: "Thanks."

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WESTERFIELD: But it was a hard night. There's no doubt about it. In thirty-seven years I've never seen anything to that scale. I've seen bad stuff, but much smaller scale. I've never seen anything that devastating. It was amazing to me. I mean every time you turned and looked at something different, there was more effects of the explosion—just

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basketball goals leaning over, and pipe fences bent, and the railroad tracks slid together. And I mean, it was just hard to wrap my head around the power behind all that. It was just—and I saw some of the videos, the YouTube videos of the guy and the little girl sitting in the pickup over there by the school when that exploded, and it kind of gave me a little bit of an idea of the massiveness and the power of what happened. Then all the questions, you know? Then everybody starts asking, "Why did that happen?" or "How did it happen?" or "Why were they allowed to have a fertilizer plant out there by the school?" And actually, the town built out back toward it. That plant was put in out there in the sixties I think, and the town expanded out there. And everything went together to go wrong. It did that day.

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But even still, if you look at the positives of it, it could've been a lot worse. Like I mentioned a while ago, the time of day, that was critical. If it had happened at two or three o'clock in the morning, that would've been—and I didn't realize really how devastating it was until a day or two later when I went back up there and actually got to some of the houses that were several blocks away again. I couldn't believe the force of that explosion. I mean, it just literally destroyed I don't know how many homes. I guess a hundred or so, a hundred and fifty.

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ADAMSON: When you guys were searching through the apartments there at the beginning, were you looking at the ground floor? Did you use the ladder to get up to the top or—

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WESTERFIELD: No, we actually just used ground ladders or hand ladders because it was a two story building. So yeah, it wasn't hard to get in and out other than the debris being everywhere. The second story, I mean it was wide open. You know what I mean? It was blown wide open, and you could get in there and poke around. And we'd call for anybody that could hear us, see if anybody was in there, and listen, see if you could hear anybody moaning or groaning or anything like that. But it was so unstable and so unsound. I was afraid it was going to fall on us. I mean we were really careful to keep an eye on things—if something started to shift or we heard some more cracking or anything like that, that would indicate that it was fixing to collapse completely.

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But in a deal like that when you have that big of an explosion, normally all the damage is done immediately. There's times when a later collapse will happen, and a lot of times if somebody's in there crawling around looking for stuff, it'll cause things to shift. But we were able to not do a really, really thorough search, but it was kind of a first sweep-type thing just to look to see if we could see somebody obviously, hands sticking up, or anything like that that would indicate—and then you go back and do a secondary search later. We were getting to that point where I was afraid that the whole thing was going to collapse and get some more people hurt, but it didn't. It stayed there until they finally bulldozed it down.

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ADAMSON: When you guys went to the plant and started putting out fires and then—or started attempting to—and then realized you needed to back away—I've heard from

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several different people about that evacuation order. So that was you guys that made that decision?

WESTERFIELD: Yeah, yeah, sure was.

ADAMSON: And how did you—did you get on the radio to—I see them—tell them?

WESTERFIELD: Yeah. The training chief, Paul Simmons, he's actually the one that made the call. We had a general—there was three officers up there, myself, Mike Nichols, and Paul Simmons, and we made the general consensus that everybody felt the same way. We need to get the hell out of here and back everybody up. So yeah, that's where that came from. Paul called Deputy Chief Gary Davis who was at the command post, and it was just a matter of a minute or two things started moving back then. And it was a legitimate—it wasn't just because we didn't want to go in or didn't want to try to set up lines or something. I legitimately thought, We're probably going to have a secondary explosion with the ammonia tanks or something. I mean the pop-off valve on that one started whistling as we were standing there, and it was like, Okay, that's a good enough sign right there. And rather than risk anymore people, it was better just to back everybody out. If it blew up, it wasn't going to hurt anything else. If anything else exploded, it wasn't going to hurt anybody else if everybody was out. So yeah, that came from us.

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ADAMSON: And then that house fire you mentioned you saw start, was that closer to the blast during that evacuation time and couldn't get to it?

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WESTERFIELD: Yeah, it was actually about maybe a quarter mile from the plant, toward the East, across the railroad tracks. We had backed up over to the—I think it's the high school at the end of that drive down there. We had backed up to that point, and as we were standing there just out front of the trucks looking and talking, you could see that house start to burn over there. And that was somebody's home burning down, and it literally just burned to the ground. We were watching it. But we were probably half a mile from it at that point, but it was—hate to see somebody's house burn down. CareFlite, or several of the CareFlite companies, had helicopters landed out there at the school grounds. It was funny. When we got over there and backed up we told them what was going up—man, they lifted all their helicopters off and moved them way back too. So, I think it was the right move. It was a good precautionary thing; and then I'd like to say, there wasn't much we could do anyway.

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ADAMSON: You mentioned coming back a couple of days later. What was your reason for—

WESTERFIELD: I'm trying to think now. Let's see now. I can't remember for sure why I went back to be honest with you. We had set up, you know—Waco had set up a group to volunteer to go up there and man the trucks and all that, but that all came about several days later. I think one reason I went back up there a few days later was basically just to look at it in the daylight, just to see what I really couldn't see that night we were up there, because at that point I still hadn't had a real good grasp on the total devastation. And you

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could get into the outlying areas and look, and I think that's the main reason I went back up there—and to see if there was anything we could obviously do.

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I mean, I went with the intent to try to help, which hundreds and hundreds of people showed up to do that. And it finally got to the point—even that night we were there—it finally got to the point where we got more help than we need. You know what I mean? There were firemen there from everywhere that wanted to help, and there really wasn't—at that point, there wasn't that much to even do that night. And even two or three days later, once all the people are out and all the patients are dealt with and in hospitals, it's pretty much just absorb it. Just look and see and try to figure out what happened, what we could've done differently, what we could've done to make the outcome better, and there wasn't a whole lot. A deal like that, it just happens all at once, and then everything else is secondary and the damage is done. And once you get all the people out, well, then the rest of it's just material stuff. But going back up there, I kind of wanted to see all of that. It makes me sound like I'm rubbernecking, but I had to get that adjusted in my mind, the amount of devastation. And I tried to learn something from it too; stuff like that you don't see very often. And I don't ever want to see it again; but if we do come across a situation where we've got similar circumstances, we might be able to do something about it before it happens. You know? And just the power of the blast, that just amazed me. That kind of stuff fascinates me anyway, like tornadoes and all that kind of stuff. The damage, that's fascinating stuff to me. Building, construction, all that comes into play when you're thinking about that sort of stuff. How you could do something that will better protect

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somebody in a situation like that. Yeah, it was—I guess I was just rubbernecking. (both laugh)

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ADAMSON: What about the following days—like when the memorial started and then they had the big memorial at Baylor—did you get to attend any?

WESTERFIELD: Yeah, sure did. I marched in down at the memorial at Baylor, and that was awesome. That was really moving. I guess after 9/11, that kind of brought firefighters into the light a little bit as far as the general public. And then like this, that made people realize that we do do things other than come to the fire station and eat and sleep for twenty four hours and play games, so it was—that was really moving to me. I mean that walk from down there on University Parks to the Ferrell Center, and all the people in the—yeah, that was touching to say the least. It made you feel a little bit more appreciated and made you realize that we do do good things. Yeah, that was—and then you get inside and you see all those caskets down there and you see all the families and the guys that did the interviews for the service, and you kind of get a little personal connection there because you get some of the details of their families. You get to see their wives and their kids and their parents, and you know their lives. You get to learn about their lives before all that.

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And most of those guys were volunteers. Well, they were all volunteers. Even President Obama, I've got to give him credit. He did a good job at that. I was impressed at how he

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handled it. He had done his homework, and he did a good job. But that was pretty overwhelming, and then the funerals—I went to Luckey's funeral up there that Dallas Fire had handled the funeral, and that was really awesome to me too. That was really moving. I mean you talk about a professional act there, that was—and the bag pipes and—oh my. We went out to the cemetery, and we were standing up there on that hill. And they come marching in down there with the bagpipes, and man, there wasn't a dry eye in the place. It's hard. It really hits home, you know? It makes us—we all felt like, All right, we're all a part of this. We lost a little part of ourselves when those guys died. And it makes you feel good that you can be a part of something like that, that those guys made that ultimate sacrifice to try to save somebody else. I'll never forget it. I know that. But that Dallas Fire bunch, they were really on top of their game. They really did a professional job, and they did old Luckey Harris justice there. They did a good job. But that's life, you know?

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ADAMSON: Does it make you think about your profession in any different way? I mean you've been in the service for thirty-seven years.

WESTERFIELD: Yeah. Well, every time something happens where—not only if it's a firefighter, but a loss of life, if we go to a house fire and somebody dies, or if we go to a car wreck and somebody dies, even medical calls, if you get there and somebody dies and you're working on them—you know what I mean? It all brings it home. It makes you realize how fragile life is and how soon it could all change. But as a firefighter, we may face something like that in the next thirty minutes. Who knows? Plane may crash five

blocks away. You never know. You never know what's going to happen. And over the years, I've learned to just try to use my best judgment. And you do what you have to do at the moment, but you don't try to take any unnecessary risks, because we've got responsibilities too. But that's what we get paid for. That's what most all of us like to do. It's a job that's a really rewarding job if everything works out okay. (laughs) Like I said, any time there's loss of life like that—those guys, you know—it's all a brotherhood thing. And like I said, we all lost a little piece of ourselves when that happened. But in a different situation like a fire or a car wreck or something, the younger the fatalities are, the harder it is. Kids and stuff like that, that really makes it difficult. That's hard to deal with because they didn't—you know, kids never really had a chance to live a life. They had their whole lives ahead of them.

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And it didn't change the way I feel about the job. A lot of people think I'm crazy because I'm still here anyway, but I like getting up and coming to work. And I'd hate to quit something that I still enjoy doing, that I still feel like I can benefit somebody else by knowing what I know or doing what I can do. When I get to the point where I feel like I'm not a benefit anymore, then I'm going to retire, but there's so much these young guys don't know.

ADAMSON: You've got to teach them.

WESTERFIELD: Yeah, and that's become a realization in the last ten years for me, that over the years I have learned a few things. But I always kind of had the assumption, if I know it, surely everybody else knows it. But I'm learning that a lot of these young guys

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don't—there's a lot of things they don't know and somebody—you know, we don't have a lot of fires anymore, so the experience of firefighting is going down. And there's guys that have been here two or three years that still haven't been on a good two-story house fire. That's hard for me to understand, but that's true. And there's so many little things that you take for granted that you think these guys know that they just don't, just common sense stuff and all that. Maybe I can keep one of them from getting killed or hurt or maybe change the outcome of a situation and make it better. I'm going to stick around a little while yet. One of these days I'll get enough, and I'll quit.

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ADAMSON: Well, before we wrap it up, is there anything else about the night that, as you've had time to kind of process and think about it—some of it that stands out to you that we didn't touch on?

WESTERFIELD: Well, I think the overwhelming reaction to it from people that wanted to help. I mean, like I said, it wasn't thirty minutes after we got there when I started seeing firemen—you know, on the backs of their coats a lot of times they had the city they're from and stuff—I started seeing firemen from a hundred miles away, volunteer departments and like Austin Fire hemp caps. And I'm thinking, Good Lord, these guys are coming from everywhere. But it was just overwhelming at the amount of help that poured in that night. That really stuck out. I know generally people are good. We deal with a lot of bad stuff and see a lot of bad people; but for the most part, people are good. They want to give. That really astounded me at the number of people, the number of firefighters, volunteers, and I think about—we went to the Oklahoma City memorial. I

don't know—it's been a while back now. And that's pretty moving up there too, but one of the stories that came out from up there that kind of resembled what was going on up there at West. There was a guy walked up there and wanted to know what he could do to help, and whoever it was said they needed boots. The workers or the volunteers needed boots to be able to get in. And the person that told the guy that turned around to do something else; and when she turned back around, there was a pair of cowboy boots sitting there. And this guy was walking away and—ah, I'm getting choked up—and she looked down and he was barefooted. He took his boots off. That was kind of the outpour up there that night, so many people wanting to help.

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As bad as it was, it could've been so much worse. And again, just the help—God, it still shocks me. We looked around and those guys from Whitney and Clifton and Hico and they were following us. They were wanting us to tell them what to do, and it was like, good Lord, these people are coming from everywhere.

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ADAMSON: What do you think accounts for that? I mean the spirit of wanting to go and help.

WESTERFIELD: I guess it's basic human nature, you know? When you see somebody in trouble, most people's first reaction is to try to help. In this day and age where we've gotten so unsociable, I'd say—like you don't know who your neighbors are—it's good to see. I think people, like I said, people are still basically good. You see all the stuff on the

news and things all the time, all the bad stuff and the robberies and murders and the carjackings and all that kind of stuff, and it makes you think the world's really getting rotten. And I'm not so sure if that's the case, or if it's just with the news media you're just able to see it instantly from every corner of the world. But I think it's just basic human nature that if somebody's in trouble, people want to help. I hope that's what it is. I hope it's just—I hope it's still there. Just the good comes out in people to want to help somebody else. And the news media thing that night was actually a good thing. When that got out, good Lord. I mean there were people coming from everywhere—just anything and everything, clothes and lights and just bottled water, and I mean it just started flowing in immediately. But I guess it's like a hurricane or a tornado or a major fire where a lot of people are displaced or hurt or lose everything. Generally, most people will still come out and try to do what they can to make things better.

ADAMSON: Sure. All right, well, I'm going to turn these off.

end of interview

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