

I removed crutch words, false starts, and “ums/ahs” from this transcript

By: Tyler chadduck, Spencer Keating, Geo Davis, and Will Hemmerly

Tyler Chadduck: Conducting the interview is Tyler Chadduck, Spencer Keating, and Geo Davis. The interviewee is...

Ben Murdock: Ben Murdock

TC: This interview is being recorded for the use of Longwood University, any information given may be made public.

TC: So we'll start with something simple, are you from the area?

BM: I'm from Roanoke about 2 hours away.

TC: When did you come to the Prospect/Farmville area?

BM: 1986

TC: For any specific reason?

BM: For a job at the hospital.

TC: That must have been interesting.

BM: It was a job to begin with and I liked the rural area so it was a good fit. I didn't want to go to Richmond or a place any more congested than Roanoke.

TC: What was the area first like when you got here?

BM: There were probably about four stoplights in Farmville if you can believe that. A lot less than there are now. It was a small town, hard to fit in at first until you got to know some people. A lot of people in the community [their families] had been here for generations and everybody knows everybody. I was in my early 20's then so I didn't think about it much then. But over time you're still an outsider.

TC: Before you came here while you were in Roanoke, what high school did you go to?

BM: Northside High School

TC: Were there any sports or hobbies you enjoyed playing while in high school?

BM: I did a lot of sandlot stuff including JV football. I grew after I got out of high school.

TC: So after high school is that when you moved to the Farmville area?

BM: No, I went to Virginia Tech and got an accounting degree. I worked for a year at Roanoke Memorial Hospital before it was Cerulean and they had management contracts with rural hospitals and this was one of them. And I worked there a year and traveled to Tazewell, Franklin County, Bedford, Lonesome Pine, and Twin counties in Galax and would help out with whatever tasks they needed doing with their controllers. And then I came down here as a business office manager. It went for 23 and a fourth years and when Centra took over they closed business operations down in Farmville and moved everything to Lynchburg. I went awhile without a job and the next job I took was as a kitchen supervisor at Buckingham Correctional Center supervising offenders not inmates. [I worked] all hours of the day and night and that was kind of hard and then I got a job as the assistant physical director at Kataba Hospital back in Roanoke. I thought my wife was going to move down and maybe work at the V8 hospital in Salem but that didn't work out. Then I [took a job] in town with a home health agency and I had an interview at Longwood to become a sparring senior budget analyst.

TC: Been all over the place.

BM: Yea a little bit, not by choice but by necessity.

TC: Did you like attending Virginia Tech?

BM: Oh yea, it's a lot different now than it was but yea I enjoyed it. I hung out with the agriculture guys and it was kinda odd but I made a lot of good friends.

TC: If you don't mind my asking, what was your family life growing up?

BM: I have three brothers and my parents got divorced when I was about 10. I had a half-brother. So my dad has 5 VT sons and my mom has 4 VT sons. I'm the second youngest of my mom's- right in the middle of the other ones.

TC: Big family.

BM: Yeah, yeah pretty good size

TC: What's your fondest memory of growing up in Roanoke?

BM: Uhh I don't know anyone. One time with my grandparents, both sets of grandparents weren't very far away. They were very involved after my parents split up, they helped my mom out a lot. She went back to school and got her nursing degree when I was in junior high. I look back and I'm proud of what she did and the sacrifices she made for us.

TC: Why did you become a firefighter?

BM: A couple of my friends were on here and me and one of my friends joined at the same time. I'd helped them some with the harvest sale- just enjoy helping out. I've kinda morphed into the kitchen person and I'm also the treasurer.

TC: How long have you been a firefighter?

BM: Since 1993- 22 years.

TC: Always with this department?

BM: Yea.

TC: That's a long time.

BM: Yea, it happens before you know it.

TC: How do you feel the department has changed over the years?

BM: We've updated a lot of equipment and gotten more county funding. People are better trained now. They've always been volunteers but there wasn't a lot of training, instead a lot of on the job training. We've been fortunate not to have any serious injuries. And it can be a lot of... even going to a car wreck there's more danger from the people not slowing down when you're trying to flag traffic coming by you at 60 miles an hour. I think the level of training and the equipment updated communications all the way around.

TC: How do you feel the personnel have changed over the years? Number wise and people wise.

BM: We've kept it close to the same amount, we are usually between 30-35 members. It's like any other group you have the good, the bad, and the ugly. Some kind of get in with good intentions and either aren't able to devote the

time. There are different levels of people who contribute time, some like the chief he doesn't go a day without spending time at the department. I might go once a week checking the mail and taking care of the bills or something but not every day. I might attend 20-25% of the calls. I can't leave work so I don't carry a pager to work or anything. Some are able to.

TC: What is your favorite part of being a firefighter?

BM: It's the comradery, being around people with a common goal and they're good people. Go to church with them and work with them, ya know familiar. I joined with Tracy's ex-husband, we joined together Greg and I. I guess they've been split 7 or 8 years. Life happens.

TC: If you don't mind, what was your least favorite part of becoming a firefighter?

BM: Wife nagging about spending time up here. It comes and goes but I'll be trying to coordinate the kitchen, spend one evening going to Sam's and hauling stuff up, straightening up, and cleaning. It's not like I ignore family duties or anything it's just some people feel the need to... I guess they're jealous I don't know.

TC: You got two families now.

BM: Yea you do.

TC: Growing up did you always see yourself becoming a firefighter?

BM: No, I kinda grew up in Holland's at Roanoke- it's not downtown or anything but after out here it might be a tenth of a mile to the next neighbor. I go back and look in the neighborhood where I grew up and it's like god these houses are really close together. My grandparents lived in the city where you could virtually spit out one window and hit the next house so it wasn't that bad but it was a change. But I didn't see myself being a firefighter.

TC: Didn't see yourself living in the city either.

BM: No I knew that from being at Tech. Actually between Montgomery County and Roanoke one area of Roanoke is the Cataba valley if you ever go the back way well all my friends could... Roanoke County adjoins Montgomery County some of my good friends would live on the county line almost so I was up there a lot. I exactly worked with one of them at the Cataba hospital, an electrician I grew up

with. He always lived up there but I really enjoyed that, it's a really historical place up there where the sanatorium and the psych...

Spencer Keating: Virginia itself, real good history.

TC: Are there any specific memories from being a firefighter over the years that have stuck with you?

BM: Oh yea, first fatality. Worst one we had was a about three years ago right at this intersection on 460, tones went off middle of the night I'm coming up the road. I live opposite direction about a mile and I can see the flames in the sky. Usually at two in the morning I'm just slowing down for the stop sign to see if I see headlights. Well, here's like 50 people standing around at the thing and off to the right a car is on fire. A gentlemen had a driven from concord up on the wrong side of 460 and head on collided with a PT cruiser. Well, what had happened, there was group that went to a bar up there from Lynchburg. "Fevers", it's pretty much a black nightclub. Chartered a bus, one girl had driven herself because she missed the bus, she wasn't drinking, they left to come home her brother decided to ride with her. They were in the PT cruiser. So, the charter bus is right behind them everybody in the bus knows them. That's why the fifty people were standing around. I mean... they were toast. We were around till the next morning. You never forget that, trying to help get the bodies out and stuff. The other big one was the Longwood fire, spent the night at Longwood, wasn't with any chicks. We were actually up here- I don't know if you yall know Dr. Perkins, he's psychologist maybe sociologist, he's a lifetime member. But his father passed away and he was down at South Carolina or something. We were up here trying to send some flowers and we actually got a hold of the funeral home and spoke to him, within minutes about that time the tones went off for going to Longwood and when you turned off 460 you could see that fire up in the- Sky was lit up.

TC: I heard that was long night for the department

BM: Oh yea it was crazy.

SK: What was it- How many hours did they say?

BM: It was all night. I mean I left the next day, we went over to the dining hall and had breakfast.

TC: How was that experience?

BM: It was wild. It was confusing as well because they decided not to attack some of the fires. I can remember seeing there was a little porthole window way up high, and I don't know if it was Lancaster one of those buildings, I'm like there's a fire up in the attic up there. [They] let it go. I think it was just overwhelming because there was 8 departments and 70 trucks and 110 people or something. If you talk to Reggie who is the dispatcher for the town he's got the recording of it, he will playback for yall I'm sure he'll share that with you. He dispatched it.

TC: So that was an experience then?

BM: Yea yea, but fortunately- You may have had people injure themselves fighting the fire, but there were no fatalities or anything. So, it was strictly property.

TC: How long had you been a firefighter here when that had happened?

BM: Probably about 8 or 10 years.

TC: So that was the biggest fire you've ever seen?

BM: Yea. The other worst ones are like brush fires. About in the say February range, a lot of things affect it, available fuel; the foliage is out on the trees it kind of suppresses fire in a way because it doesn't create that chimney effect and draw air in to fuel the fire, but before the leaves come out you can get some wicked ones and we had a- Three years ago I think the highest fire rate, they have a rating system for fires, a five is- Not like California, but it's not good. Couple things like that have been scary. The other is always when the roads are nasty and you're trying not to slide out of the road with the fire truck to get somewhere to help someone out. So, Ice storms.

TC: Are there any good memories that really stick in your head from being a

firefighter? Past all the gruesomeness.

BM: Well, like I say just fellowship, helping each other out with different things. We lost our long time leader about year and half ago, Howard Campbell, he had been in the department, his father was a charter member when they started in the late 60's or I mean late 50's early 60's. He grew up in it and he was probably not quite 60 when he passed. A lot of good memories with Pete, we rag on each other. He loved to eat, I like to eat too. Always called him the cookie monster, make fun of him having an ugly old girlfriend, somebody in the community liked him or whatever. Hanging out with the guys, and girls now, but-

TC: You mentioned comradery earlier; does that help everyone here deal with what happens, with what you guys see on a regular basis?

BM: Oh yeah. And they'll have some- I don't know what they call it, if something bad has occurred they'll have debriefing I guess.

Geo Davis: So like a group talk

BM: Yeah. They'll have a counselor come in and help you with it if you feel you need it. Sometimes just discussing it in the group- Hadn't been anything that's kind of had a long last, I mean memorable, but not like a freak me out or anything. What gets me is like when I nick my finger in there with the onion thing and I see my own blood. I just broke out in a sweat and I'm a little light headed let me sit down a few minutes. There are some more gruesome things. It was odd within 100 yards of where the two people got burned a gentlemen went over to the store, may have been intoxicated I don't know, but walked across 460 somebody wacked him with the car sent him down the road and hit the guard rail, took part of his skull off. What's weird with that is the memory of that is, if you ever see on TV where it they say it knocks them out of their shoes and stuff, it truly does. His wristwatch, his tennis shoes, a bunch of stuff just [gone]. Knocks them out of their shoes.

TC: Now, earlier you just said the girls joined the department, did that have any effect on anybody here? Like any major-

BM: No, probably something else for the wives to fuss about. Some of them are

prettier than the others. It's not been a problem its better help, sometimes in different situations- You might go to a scene and you know, yea you got to fight fire, but then you got to deal with family that's losing their home and sometimes a different perspective, a female perspective is more compassionate and can better deal with someone that's facing it. You know come on over here, let's get in the car keep warm whatever, is there somebody we can call. You know different aspects, different perspectives on things it's good to have. Bunch of dumb old guys sometimes just blunder through something not really consider something else.

TC: This area has a long history of race issues; did you ever notice any of those within the department?

BM: Not within the department, certainly in the community. First start to work at the hospital, certainly. Old school people and comments, feelings, the private school, the public schools being shut down for a while all that still kind of in the play. It's odd, I wasn't used to that. There was probably, I would say maybe in my high school ten percent black or less. Here's more fifty-fifty in general. It's hard to understand, I mean I can understand when you experience someone, and there not a good person, not a hard worker, or just always free loading or something. Feeling one way, but that doesn't deal with race. That's just someone's integrity or personality. Alfred's a trip, Alfred Washington, he works down at the bus, school bus garage. He directs traffic every morning in front of the schools and he'll be out there just dancing and carrying on having a great time. Have to stop and think how many black members we have, Saiku and Alfred I think are it. One other gentleman was, but he left the department.

TC: So, all the firefighters here are volunteer correct? So, do they all work other jobs or are some of them just retired?

BM: Yea, we have people that are retired on the department. Not as active some, some more active with the business side, meetings, and so forth. Wide array, we've lost several members here, three in the last 2 years.

TC: That's a lot.

BM: Yea.

SK: Is that just because of age or-

BM: Yea, not so much Howard, the other two were probably 80's and on up and their kids- One's got a son in the department here, the other guys nephew's in. A lot of generational things too. One of my good friends his father died of a heart attack after a fire call and he was like thirteen years old, so he'll be up here later. He's got a line of duty. If you ever go to the court house, at the county administration there have been I think four deaths in the line of duty of the years. One was like a game warden that got shot in 1930 or something, but there was a Hampden-Sydney firefighter that was a student and he was killed. You know how you see the men who stand on the back bumper of the fire truck, doing that on a fire scene and there was an accident. And then my friends dad- Come here, what is it?

Grace Murdock: Can I get one of those things, like the thing you got last year for where I buy stuff and they write it down? And then you pay.

BM: Yes.

GM: What is that called?

BM: A tab. You can run a tab, yes.

SK: How old is she?

BM: 11. That's the yours, mine, and ours. I got a 26/27 year old daughter and this one and three step-kids.

TC: Big Family

BM: Yea, and we had five teenagers between my wife and I at once, then we had her, so it kind of kept us in perspective. Her name is Grace, we called her our saving Grace because we would have went nuts with the rest of them. Have good luck with them from 0 to about 13, but then they need to go somewhere for a few years, let them become human again.

SK: That's what my parents always said too.

BM: Not just me

TC: What would you say the mean age, like about that average age, is on the department?

BM: Now, overall probably in the mid 40's. Of the active fire calls probably more like earlier 30's, early 30's. Some of the members probably never- probably 10 or 12 will never show up to a fire. It's the old 80/20 rule. 20 percent of the people are going to run 80 percent of the calls. They keep stats on it and everything, but I haven't looked at them.

TC: Are there specific reasons for that or just?

BM: I think it's any volunteer, given a church group or something. The ones that are going to be there helping and doing are in the minority, typically. I think that's like me with the fire calls; not as able, back surgery, fatter, slower, hurts more when you get up the next morning. I don't take a lot of physical training; probably need to. Like, if I am going to respond to a fire, I'm not going to put on an air pack and go inside and everything anymore. I'll run the truck, I'll run water shuttle, you know, support. Trying to watch out for on the fire scene, if anything looks bad; somebody's unaccounted for or anything like that. I support the guys that are, and try to keep them safe.

TC: Helping out any way you can.

BM: Yeah. Yeah.

TC: There's a lot about that though, showing up even though you know you can't go in, you're still able to. . .

BM: Yeah. Yeah. It's just, I don't want to endanger anyone else in that situation and I haven't trained for a long time.

TC: Is there anyone in the department that really is what makes it run, work like clockwork?

BM: Probably Al. I mean, he is just so involved. And he may not have a formal education, but his knowledge on fire scene, and getting people motivated to what needs to be done, is extraordinary. So, I admire him a lot for that. He is very dedicated. He was a chief in Farmville, until he got married and moved out here with his wife. So we kind of robbed him. But, he's been. . . That is his sister. It's a family type affair. His mother and step-father, his sister, brother-in-law. His nephew is on the department with us. There on auxiliary. They have a very active auxiliary that raises money for us. Helps in many, many ways; support us.

TC: Is it strange seeing all the families in the department like that?

BM: No, no, it's just always been that way.

SK: I had a great-uncle who was also a fire fighter. He was a fire fighter up in New York. I'm sure that is much different seeing how the building size up in Farmville and all that. I just can relate to all the fire fighter life. I have good friends that have been in the force.

BM: Yeah, it's hard for me to imagine as a job. Now say you started out as a volunteer here, and I think it worked for Ridda for a while, and Eddy got out into Chesterfield and Ryko and fire service and probably been in for 15 years now or so. Doing it paid. And there are some in the, there are what eight fire departments in the county, seven or eight, we have an association. And many of them are, more of the leadership are paid, fire department.

TC: This is going to be a strange question, but have you guys ever gotten lost trying to find a fire since, you know, were kind of in a very rural area?

BM: Yeah, they've only had roads named for eight or ten years, probably. Then it was always just the numbers. So, what one of the guys here was, you know, "Go to old man Smith's place was" and he hadn't been alive for 30 years or much less. Yeah, you'll go by, or some areas are even dead spots on the radio so you have to

wait until you get past it to get better directions. But, yeah, certainly. I think there's some roads that are a "Street" a "Drive" a "Lane" with the same first name. And even the roads that go from Prince Edward County, same road, into Buckingham County and the name of the road changes. So, yeah, it happens.

TC: Are you guys fairly busy with calls?

BM: No. We probably have, average, six to ten a month. It's sporadic. Sometimes you'll have 15/18. Typically, probably around 100 a year, ballpark. Probably be more around eight average.

GD: What's kind of like the typical call?

BM: Car wrecks. That's probably 2/3, 1/2 to 2/3 of the calls. Anymore, thank God structure fires are not as common place. Maybe a little bit more now, with the weather getting cold. A chimney fire, or something like that. But, fortunately, it's typically, it's the least fortunate that it happens to. Trying to keep an uninsulated house or something warm and have a kerosene heater in a trailer and something is too close to something. It's typically the structures but we do see some brush fires. Some just, a tree falls over on a power line or something. A power line down. Car wrecks are the majority.

TC: Those are never good.

BM: No, it's amazing, sometimes we show up to some and there was one down here overturned and the wheel's still spinning and there's nobody around. Funny, the car gets reported stolen after that. Somebody was intoxicated and fled the scene or whatever. You never know. All kinds of stuff.

TC: Has being a firefighter over the years, changed your view of the world?

BM: I don't think so. Working a prison, that will change your view.

SK: That's what I want to do. Have there ever been any calls that are over exaggerated by chance? Like any calls that you get there and. . .

BM: Yeah, typically the first fire person on scene will try to give a better size up as people's emotions, fears, you know, drive the calls a lot of times. And it's conveyed to the dispatch office and then back to someone else. But anytime the hospital or the college smoke alarm, they have their sprinkler systems and flow detectors in the water lines, when water moves, it sets the alarm off. You know, you don't know if it's a fluke or a bum call or if it is actually going to be something big. Some of the items like the hospital or the college will tone out three departments from the get go. They don't, like, wait for someone in the department to check it out and report back. They have different criteria for what they dispatch out. But, yeah, sometimes they'll say, "Oh, we just got a pile of leaves" and that just takes time for us to get here and get there. You might have an acre on fire in the woods by that time.

TC: Do you see a lot of fires from stupid people errors?

BM: The majority of them are. Stupid or foolish, maybe. I mean, I've almost had to call the department out. You know, you have a garden spot or some of that old wire grass. And it's been mowed and it's February and you're burning a little leaves and the wind gets up and you can't get that dead wire grass. . . you can't stomp it enough and the hose won't reach and the winds keep blowing it over.

SK: Yeah, we had that at a camp site.

BM: Yeah. But the ones that are like, "well, left my gas can too close to the pile of burning leaves" and things like that are worse. Or, you know, with just available fuels.

SK: Did that camping. Almost set a fire. Put it out but. . .

TC: Have there ever been a time when you regret becoming a firefighter?

BM: no, I haven't regretted it. I think it's good to help others, and help the community, and it is self-serving in some fashions to enjoy being around people and friendships, so it's rewarding in that way. You feel good about it, you probably always feel like you could do more, but you kind of have to balance it.

TC: Earlier you mentioned you couldn't imagine being a paid fire fighter and doing this as a job.

BM: yeah, just to devote the amount of training and from what I understand they do dispatch fire to every EMT call, and they do both. It's just hard to think of it in that way.

TC: would you say it's good for guys to get away from the fire house sometimes and go do other things maybe just to take a break.

BM: yeah, some of them are good friends outside of the department and do a lot of things together, but sometimes that leads to the breakups too. Anytime you got husbands and wives and everybody involved, people get close and sometimes leads to the breakups of one running off with the other. Any kind of life, it's not different, here, it's representative of relationships and life in general. Everything doesn't go smooth and the way you think it's supposed to all the time.

GD: Is there any time during the year that you get more calls than normal?

BM: Brush calls is typically in the spring, like I said, because everyone is trying to clean up the yard and so forth. The structure fires typically this time of year when the weather is changing. Car wrecks are just all year round. First of the month when the state checks come out, low on well-fare money.

GD: so like you said, there was more updates to the facility. What were some of the items updated?

BM: our trucks, we've gone about twenty years without buying a new truck. And, I guess we've turned every one of them over in 2015, but no we are looking at close to half a million dollars for a new truck. We are getting about a 70,000 dollar a year support from the county, which is great, but it doesn't do much for the capital needs. We are relying on the fundraisers and the auxiliary and everything else. We had to get twenty-something new air bottles; they're only good for twenty years if they were metal and the ones we had, all of them went out of date virtually at once, so I think if you were buying them individually they would

be 1,300 dollars a bottle. We got a cute deal so they aren't quite the money, say 650, 700 dollars. To put turnout gear on someone in the neighborhood, probably 1,600 dollars. Boots, pants, coat, gloves, hood, helmet.

TC: Is there any advice you'd give to future fire fighters in future generations?

BM: yeah, take care of yourself, take care of your fellow fire fighters. Because you aren't doing much good for people you serve if you're not watching out for one another.

TC: thank you very much for the interviews

BM: sure! Think it's time to go get some baked beans going on the oven right now!

