



MySafe:LA Podcast

Fire and Life Safety Education

Our mission: providing children, families, and seniors in Los Angeles with life-saving education, resources, and benefits.

Episode 9

LAFD FF Medic, Jayson Johnson

Todd Leitz: You're listening to a special edition of My Safe LA Fire and Life Safety Podcast. Remembering the Northridge Earthquake, 20 Years Later.

Todd Leitz: Hi everybody. Thanks for joining us for another of our special My Safe LA Fire and Life Safety Podcast. Where we've been remembering the Northridge Earthquake, 20 years later. I'm Todd Leitz the Public Information Officer for My Safe L.A. I'm talking today to Jason Johnson. He's a Los Angeles Fire Department firefighter/paramedic, 23 years on the job. He was a young firefighter when the Northridge earthquake hit on January 17, 1994, 4:30 in the morning.

Todd Leitz: Jason thanks for joining us. Where were you that day? Where were you stationed? How did that all go for you?

Jason Johnson: Todd thank you for having me. I was assigned to Fire Station 34 in the South Central Los Angeles area. Now called the South Los Angeles area off of Exposition and Jefferson, not far from Crenshaw. Considerably, a distant away from Northridge, but still struck pretty, heavily with damage.

Todd Leitz: You were not actually, in quarters, in bed like a lot of people were this morning. You were actually, out on the job on another incident.

Jason Johnson: Yes I was 34 was part of a great alarm, silent, for a structure fire on [Venice 00:01:34] Boulevard. We have actually, finished overhaul, had been there all night, very tired. We were heading back to quarters. I was looking forward to getting some sleep. While heading back our fire station I actually, started to doze off in my jump seat, and it felt like Engine 34 hit a large pothole. The whole fire engine actually, rolled. I thought we'd either hit something or hit a pothole. As I opened my eyes I could literally see the City of Los Angeles going pitch black grid-by-grid. Those were the electrical grids going out.

Jason Johnson: Concurrently, of seeing that I saw explosions. I thought for a brief moment that we were being bombed. Suddenly, what I realized was those were the transforms from the power poles that were falling, causing these explosions. I'd never seen anything like that. Quite frankly, I'll never forget it.

Todd Leitz: Once you guys realized what was going on, did you get a call on the radio to report to a specific area?

Jason Johnson: I was just off of probation by a couple of years. I was a pretty, new firefighter. I came on the job in 1991 for about three years on the job. Practice was called "earthquake protocol". Back then if the department went into the earthquake mode we would drive our first in and report back to our Battalion Chief. Each station will report back if there was any damage or any injury. We went into earthquake mode. We could tell then in South Los Angeles, and that's called the Leimert Park area, of all the damage a lot of masonry ... Chimneys fell, foundations shook. Literally, there were some houses that you could look at them and see them swaying to the side.

Jason Johnson: We didn't know at that time where the Epicenter was, but we knew that we had a pretty substantial earthquake.

Todd Leitz: There's quite a bit of damage, quite a ways away from the Epicenter. Did you guys stay in your district or did you head out to Valley? Where did you guys end up going?

Jason Johnson: There was significant damage to the Leimert Park area that we actually, had a command post there to access the damage, and check back with the Battalion Chief, who would then check back with the Division Chief. We did not know how to really, react at the time. One of the effects of an earthquake is what I call the "disaster after the disaster." Back then we didn't have nearly the consciousness we have now about earthquake preparedness, strapping down a hot water heaters, how to shut off our utilities.

Jason Johnson: I feel a lot of homes were caught unprepared. After the earthquake many homes had hot water heaters that weren't strapped down properly. By not being strapped down properly they fell to the side causing a break in the gas lines. Those went undetected in many homes for sometime. A lot of people were scared they left their homes, but they didn't shut their utilities off. By gas escaping in the home eventually, they found a source of ignition. We had many fires a day, two days, three days later because of gas leaks. One of the things I told my own family and friends, "Learn how to shut your utilities off." The earthquake may

not take your home, but the fire afterwards or the flood afterwards may.

Todd Leitz: That's an excellent point. As you mentioned before we started recording, the early 90s was a very, let's just say, unsettled time in Los Angeles both in society and also with our weather patterns and stuff we had numerous disasters. We were two years out of the riots at that point. Was there any concern from you guys with the power going out in a disaster-type situation that there was going to be civil unrest, looting, lawlessness, or anything, any kind of anarchy and chaos like that?

Jason Johnson: Actually, one thing I've learned on the job is disaster brings out the best in us and it brings the worst in us. My first five years on the job, you were right, we+

had civil unrest with the Rodney King decisions. We also had the Malibu brush fire. We had flooding from El Nino. We also had ... What's the other?

Todd Leitz: Those wildfires of '93.

Jason Johnson: The Malibu fires.

Todd Leitz: Everywhere just about.

Jason Johnson: Correct. It actually, felt like, "Here we go again." Now the really, cool thing was I saw our department respond, react. There is a cathartic feeling when you get to be in helping your city get back on it's feet. We just did what we were trained to do. In the Northridge earthquake we actually, saw civilians step up and help each. Seeing neighbors help each other. That was a really, good feeling.

Todd Leitz: I think that's an excellent point. The fire department has to operate in what's known as degraded mode. There's simply too much damage especially, in the case of Northridge for you guys to be everywhere, to respond to everybody's injury or every fire that flares up. People really, do as you said, need to step up. Is that a big take away for you, for the fact that we all have responsibility to step up in the wake of a disaster like this?

Jason Johnson: We live in the second largest city in the country. Los Angeles has approximately four million residents. That's documented residents. L.A. county has another six million. Altogether that's 10 million residents dependent upon fire departments of less than 3,000 members. Common sense tells me that in time of disaster or

adversity we have to help ourselves. That goes for my family, your family, senior citizens, children. If we failed to plan, what we're actually, doing is planning to fail.

Todd Leitz: That's an excellent point. That really, seems to be on of the big takeaways for me. It's a message we pound in all our fire and life safety education is that you've got make a plan. You've got practice. You've got to think about what your situation is going to be before disaster strikes, before something happens. For you what is the big takeaway? As a paramedic, people are going to get hurt. If we're talking an earthquake on the southern San Andreas Fault there's going to be scores, if not thousands of injuries. What should people do now from your perspective as a firefighter and paramedic before the disaster happens?

Jason Johnson: There's many levels of training a person of take. You don't have to be a firefighter or a paramedic, you could learn first aid. You could take a CPR class. You could sign up for CERT. The city of Los Angeles offers a class called "CERT", Community Emergency Response Team that teaches neighborhoods, schools, businesses how to respond in time of disaster, but just in your own home right now doesn't cost you anything. You can take plastic bag or a grocery bag, whether reusable grocery bags. In that bag put a pair of old tennis shoes, a flashlight, and a whistle.

Jason Johnson: They had an earthquake in Beijing China, not Beijing but the Schezwan region of China. A week after the earthquake the found a 90 year-old woman still alive. The reason they found her is she had whistle. As long as you have air in your lungs and can blow a whistle you have a voice. If you've been yelling for help for 24 hours, 48, 72, you're yelling like your life depends on it. You may not have that ability for people to hear you, but if you have air in your lungs you can blow a whistle. Those three simple things, flashlight, a pair of shoes and a whistle will allow you to survive. At least give you a chance.

Jason Johnson: Many of patients after the earthquake had cuts on their feet. If you have a city that has a lot of people with diabetes get cuts on their feet. Those cuts become infected. Infections become amputations. It's not the earthquake that you got you, it's the not being prepared for life after the earthquake.

Jason Johnson: A flashlight. We live in a city that's use to ambient light. You have street lights, car headlights, but if you're ever been in pitch black, and especially when it's almost lawlessness that can be unnerving. I'm a father. I have four kids, wife. I have to make sure my families prepared. If I'm at the fire station or I get called to

duty I have to make sure my home is taken care of. My son is nine. He's very comfortable with a flashlight. Each of my daughters have been trained with backpacks. One of the things I do with my kids is every school year when we start to school, start back to school, when they get new backpacks I take the old backpacks, and we make disaster kits out of them. Prepare our old shoes, some clothes, some snacks that they like to eat, something to keep them occupied, maybe a picture of the family, little things like that.

Jason Johnson: Now in this digital era you can take a jump-drive, or a USB drive, or even on your iPhone or Android phone and store your documents right there. If you have to go to FEMA or the government to rebuild your important documents, your ID, medical card all that can be digital pictures on your phone. You don't have to carry a big box of information to evacuate. There are a lot of advantages now in 2014 that we didn't have back then.

Todd Leitz: That's an excellent point. The folks who survived Katrina found out that they had lost all of their doc-, they didn't even have IDs. When they went and said, "My house was destroyed." People at FEMA would say, "Hey, I can't even prove that you have a house." It's so important to have those documents, to make that plan in advance as you say, to be ready at home, at work and in your car. As we've often said we don't know when the earthquakes going to hit. With Katrina at least they had warning that it was on its way. We're not going to get a warning that it was on its way. We're not going to get a warning. Jason's showing me his phone right now. He's got his wife's, his driver's license, his medical card, very smart, very easy to do. Most of us have our phones near us pretty much at all times. Your phone can become a little bit of an emergency kit, can't it?

Jason Johnson: Absolutely. I've learn with Katrina and other episodes of disaster that cell phones maybe your best voice. I have an app on my phone that allows me to press one button that sends out a pre-text message to my family members that says, "I'm okay" and through the GPS to let them know where I am.

Todd Leitz: So many of us in Los Angeles live in neighborhoods. We don't necessarily know all our neighbors. How important do you think it is to folks to get to know their neighbors, know what the resources are in their neighborhood. Whose got the generator? Things like that.

Jason Johnson: Fences make good neighbors, but not good survivors. I was raised by a mother and a father that taught me that "it takes a village to raise a child". What I realized it's going to take a village to survive a disaster. Get to know your neighbors. Find out your skill sets, maybe somebody's a retired nurse from the Navy, maybe somebody's a contractor, maybe somebody's a paramedic. You never know until you start to have these conversations. Somebody may bring the gift of first aid, somebody else maybe able to repair shelter. It's important that we talk to each other. That person maybe the one whose life saves your life.

Jason Johnson: I know that I watched in horror as Katrina unfolded and realized that even in our best efforts we have to take control of the advocate for ourselves. If my kids look at me after a disaster and say, "Where are going" I can't look at a phone and try to call 911. What I have to be able to do is say, "I've prepared for this. I have food for us. I have water for us. We have some money." We have all the things that we need. Basically, 10 things that every family should have stored and ready. Money, medication, a tool. Something as simple a crowbar. Costs you \$6.00 at the hardware store. I keep a crowbar actually, between my mattress and box spring. If the disaster hits just like it did in Northridge ... What time did the disaster hit?

Todd Leitz: 4:31am.

Jason Johnson: 4:41am, where are most people at 4:31 in the AM?

Todd Leitz: Most people are in bed.

Jason Johnson: In bed. If the disaster strikes, as it tends to often happen, while I'm in bed I have a tool in my bedroom that I can go through drywall, break glass, pry a door. I tell you if my son calls for me and I can't get to him I cannot explain to him why I haven't prepared for this. Disasters already has showed us its cards. My job now is to prepare for it and to be able to respond to it.

Todd Leitz: Excellent. Thank you so much. Jason Johnson, L.A. Fire Department Paramedic/Firefighter. He's stationed down in the San Pedro area at Fire Station 101. We thank you so much for your insights for your experience and your remembrance of the Northridge earthquake 20 years later. Thanks for joining us in this special edition of a My Safe LA Fire and Life Safety Podcast. We're remembering the Northridge earthquake 20 years later. Stay tuned for other of these special series of Podcasts right here at MySafeLA.org.

Todd Leitz:

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