

Former fire captain faced ongoing trauma

By Ceili Cornelius
Correspondent

Former fire captain Justin Waalkes knows just how important the Central Oregon Public Safety Chaplains are to the well-being of first responders. Executive Chaplain Joel Stutzman helped him out of a spiral following critical stress incidents throughout his career.

Waalkes went into the fire service just out of high school, going straight into fire science at Central Oregon Community College in 1989. Waalkes had been brought up around military and fire-service members.

Waalkes began training with Black Butte Ranch Fire District and ended up training and working with the advanced life-support team. At the time, Black Butte Ranch responded to critical incidents as Sisters hadn't developed advanced life support yet. Waalkes responded to fatal calls in his role as a young firefighter.

"There was nothing in place to deal with the aftermath of seeing that on the fire-service end at the time. We didn't get taught how to deal with what we were seeing and often take avenues that aren't good," said Waalkes.

Waalkes eventually moved up to head paramedic with Black Butte Fire.

"I had five years of the crappiest calls — fatal accidents and the like — and as a coping mechanism, I isolated myself and fell into a trap of drinking and putting on a brave face and be solid for the other guys and the public," he said.

Over time, not coping or dealing with all that Waalkes had seen, started to build up and become a burden. The more calls he got of a patient dying, the more it took its toll.

"I learned to not take credit for the wins, and take the losses personally," he said.

In 2010, Waalkes got into treatment for drinking and after six months of being sober, everything he had suppressed had come flooding back, and he had no way of knowing how to deal with the flood of memories and incident trauma that was coming back.

"Therapy at the time didn't do much; the only thing I had was the discipline of my own will," he said.

Waalkes knew he had to do something to get out of the spiral of not sleeping, over-training, and not performing well in his job. Waalkes worked with Joel

Stutzman, the chaplain at Sisters Fire District at the time, and Stutzman assisted in getting Waalkes the mental health help he needed. Waalkes took leave as a fire captain and spent two weeks in the mental ward of the hospital. After two weeks of intense treatment, he knew he needed to establish some help outside of the hospital and in his home environment, so he continued to meet with Stutzman, who was a rock for Waalkes.

"Joel took time out of his busy schedule to meet with me every couple weeks over coffee or breakfast — even on weekends. He's one hell of a guy and an absolutely amazing asset to the chaplaincy and first responders in Central Oregon," said Waalkes.

Stutzman put him in touch with Bend psychiatrist Dr. Larry Campbell, and Dr. Campbell put Waalkes into a program called Save a Warrior (SAW), which works with veterans and first responders dealing with PTSD and mental health issues.

"They start you out with an intensive day class and within hours you are crying and talking and starting to deal with stuff," said Waalkes.

This was the time Waalkes truly felt like he was working through all that he had seen and experienced in order to heal himself again.

After treatment with the program, Waalkes expected to be able to return to work, but he realized he couldn't be in the fire profession anymore as it brought back too many traumatic memories. Waalkes now works for Laredo Construction, "where I can do a good day's work and can come home and be home with my wife," he said.

Waalkes believes that moving forward, there still needs to be more of a focus on the mental health of first responders.

"They are the fix-all people, they are the ones people call when something is wrong and it is a large burden for anyone," he said.

Through the help of the chaplaincy program and other programs, Waalkes was able to get the help he needed to work through the traumatic things he witnessed as a young firefighter all the way up to his time as a captain.

"It is important to know it's OK to open up and start the process and I want to be here for any firefighter that needs to talk, anytime, anywhere," he said.



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