

DSNY ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE

Narrator: Paul Brown

Interviewer: Navdeep Kaur

April 20, 2021

Navdeep Kaur: Okay, I think we're going. The day is 20th, April 2021, and we are in Mr. Brown's backyard. I am Navdeep. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Paul Brown: I'm Paul Brown.

NK: Thank you. I would like to start this conversation by asking you about your current role at DSNY and the number of years that you've had in this work.

PB: Okay. I was originally hired by the department in 1999. And I am currently the Chief of the Personal Management Division.

NK: What were the positions and responsibilities that you've held before this position?

PB: I was hired as a sanitation worker. I worked in Manhattan 9. We serviced West Harlem. Then after being assigned to the Trade Center, I was assigned to Manhattan borough for a while in their operations office. Then, I was promoted to supervisor in 2004. I was assigned to Manhattan 8 garage. A few years after that I was promoted to superintendent and I worked in Manhattan 7, which is the Upper West Side of Manhattan. In 2011, I was promoted deputy chief and I bounced around a bunch. I spent some time in the cleaning office, the collection office in the Manhattan borough. Then right before Hurricane Sandy, I was assigned to Internal Affairs, the FIAT unit of sanitation. And I have been there ever since. In 2019, I was promoted to Chief and I was moved to PMD from FIAT. And that's where I've been since the August of 2019.

NK: How long have you been living in the city now?

PB: My whole life. Here in this house for 20 years. And before that I lived about 6 blocks away from here.

NK: So, have you been in this house since the time you started your job at the Department of Sanitation?

PB: I moved into this house shortly after joining Sanitation.

NK: Where were you born and would you like to tell me a bit about your childhood?

PB: I was born here in Queens. Old Booth Memorial Hospital. My dad and mom live about six blocks from here. That's where I was brought up and went to public school here in Queens and high school in Manhattan. We stayed with my parents, myself and my brother.

NK: What does a typical day at work look like for you in your current responsibility?

PB: I do planning and staffing for supervisory and civilian populations for the department for the Bureau of Cleaning and Collection, which is a daily set up. Our unit also oversees the probationary period for new hires and promotions, things like performance evaluations and the assignment of people on medical duty or limited duty capacity, scheduling of vacations, uh, granting of overtime and the nuts-and-bolts stuff.

NK: What is your memory of the day of September 11, 2001?

PB: My wife was expecting our first child right around that time. She was due the, uh, the third week of September and we were excited and anxious. I remember going to work, I remember she was still going to work herself and trying to get in every last day before she was going to have to take leave to be able to have as much time after the birth as possible. And it started out like any other day. Then once the news came and it was easy to see I was uptown Manhattan. I mean you could see the smoke even from far away. It was all over TV and radio. The first thing I was thinking about was that she was trapped in Midtown and nine months pregnant and I was worried about her.

NK: Did you go to see her immediately?

PB: Not immediately. But in the course of that day, I did. And we got back to my garage, where I was just assigned, which although we servicemen had in our garage in the Bronx, just over one hundred forty Fifth Street Bridge. And then from there we were coming back home here to Queens. And another memory that's particularly powerful for that night was when we were driving back from the Bronx to here. We went over the Triborough Bridge, which was closed to traffic. And the police officers led us on because I was still in uniform and told them I had to go to work in the morning. But we were the only car southbound on the Triborough Bridge that night which is still a vivid memory. That was very surreal.

NK: Yes, I'm sure. On that day, were you at work in the Bronx?

PB: Yeah. I was actually working in the garage that day. So, I was in the Bronx.

NK: When did you become a part of the work involving the event?

PB: Just under a week later. Maybe five days or so. I reported it down there and then I became detached to a unit of people who stayed down there regularly.

NK: How would you describe your experience of the first look of ground zero?

PB: Just amazed at how debris covered everything was, in some places it looked like the old fashion pictures of when the volcano erupts and there was ash covering everything. And it was a mixture of concrete, dust and dirt and other pollutants. everything was covered. And the wind had just swept the debris up and down the corridors of lower Manhattan. It looked otherworldly.

NK: Were you told what you were going to be doing as a part of the work you were assigned to?

PB: No. It was a volunteer assignment. Nobody was forced down there. I can't speak to the first couple of nights because I wasn't there and I worked days. But on my first day down there I think just about all of us in Manhattan that weren't needed to clean our own districts were sent down there. And that was a lot of manual sweeping using push brooms and shovels, moving debris to clear roadways, creating egress for other service agencies like the fire department. The Department of Buildings was going around checking whether buildings were safe or not. In the beginning, it was just you were assigned as needed. And then that changed once some of the immediate needs were addressed and staffing could be decided upon.

NK: Over the course of all this work, were you assigned somewhere else?

PB: No, I remained down there. We used part of a building on South Street just north of the South Street Seaport as a staging area. And there was a garage still in servicing, the lower Manhattan and we deployed from there. We took over some of their locker rooms and some of their offices, and we had two shifts running, day shift and a night shift. We did water suppression using flusher trucks that would spray the sidewalks in the streets to keep the dust down. So, the particulate wasn't as airborne. We had a lot of manual sweeping with shovels and brooms. We also did quite a bit of hauling where we were taking away debris, to Fresh Kills to be sorted. Some of the material was meant to be recycled, some of the steel, in the beginning, we were also using, payloaders as our front-end loaders with big buckets on the front to clear streets and then ultimately to haul also, and then in relatively short order, I got assigned to a detail that was just myself to other sanitation workers and a supervisor and a couple of guys from the mechanics group. And, we ended up partnering with a bunch of people from the health department. It was our job to go around and remove all the food that was rotting in commercial establishments, refrigerated boxes, walk in pantries and refrigerators and coolers. I did that for 30 days straight. It was memorable work. It was September and most of those stores had been without electricity for a long time, and there was much concern that there would be a tremendous rodent problem. So, we went in and tried to mitigate that with the help of the health department. Some of the owners showed up to provide egress for us; open their old gates or unlock their doors. If they didn't, we had mechanics from the department who would get us in, whether it was cutting the door, opening them with saws etc. And then we had a rack truck, which is like a flatbed truck with gates on the side that one fellow drove that had a generator and some gas cans on it. We would run a generator from the street with temporary lighting down to the basement to these places, which is where most of the food is kept. We would let the mechanics open the door. Then, we would go in and run the lighting and identify where the food was kept. There was a strange division of labor between myself and another partner where we would go down into the basement, and back up the waste. Then, the health department would have a whole host of employees running from where we bagged it up, up to the street, and they would pass it all the way up to the street and then we would go up and have to put it back in our truck. The health department officials weren't allowed to operate the truck. So, it was kind of an interesting operation and as I said, that went on for 30 days.

NK: How did the relationship with the health department workers play out?

PB: Oh, they were good folks. We saw pretty much the same people day in, day out. I mean, there were three of us, the sanitation workers- one guy drove the rack truck with the generators and the lights and another fellow and I drove the garbage trucks. Sometimes we did this more than once because some of the places had a tremendous amount of waste, and a lot of it was kind of liquefied. So, if we put too much in a truck the seals on the truck would be tested so that it didn't leak all the way back to the garage, which wouldn't do anybody any favors. Sometimes we'd have to replace a truck or get a new one. The garbage in the trucks was then dumped at night. But the folks from the health department were friendly with a lot of camaraderie. There was kind of a feeling of almost forced, friendliness among everybody. I was working down there. I think everybody was walking around on eggshells. There was a lot of anxiety. And people went out of their way to be particularly friendly with their coworkers, or at least that's what I experienced.

NK: You said that this work went on for almost 30 days. I was wondering if there was a plan on going about the clearing of the food waste?

PB: I was just a sanitation worker then. I was not part of any decision-making process. The only reason I ended up on that particular detail was because nobody else wanted it. And everything we do is kind of seniority based and nobody else wanted it. We were both new and had been hired in the October of 1999. Nobody else wanted that detail because it was messy and dirty and smelly. We were going into rat infested basements to take out rotten waste. That's how we got it. We would get

a list of places in the morning that we would do in a chronological order because nobody knew how long it would take at each location. You didn't know what you were going to get. Some a lot of the places we went into hadn't been entered since before the attack. So, the owner or the manager had just closed the door and walked away or probably ran away. Some places could take a long time. If we were waiting for a building representative or somebody who was going to open those places up for us then we would really have to wait until they got there. The number of places we could do in a day was not constant and the locations were sporadic due to the driving we did from one place to another. I'm going to guess that they were scheduled in the order in which they were received, because if we had done it in hindsight, we probably could have done more economical routes with regard to how long it took to get there or what mileage you took. I have a feeling that the places were just added to a list in the order in which they were discovered, and that's how we did.

NK: On an average, would you remember how many places you did in a day?

PB: I don't think we ever did more than three. But I do remember more than one location that took a full shift just because we would load a truck and we'd have to get it out of there. Sometimes getting it out of there involved moving or waiting for other operations from other departments to stop. I remember they were putting a crane in one place. We had to wait until that was moved so we could get down the block. Another time they were going to knock the windows out of a building because the building had been deemed unsafe and we had to wait until they had blown the whistle all clear before we could enter the alleyway. So, things of that nature. It was quite random.

NK: Were you given any basic training on how to go down those places and handle yourself?

PB: No

NK: Okay. Any equipment or gear that you had to use?

PB: After our first couple of days one of the bosses that we reported to came by to check up on us and he noticed how filthy our uniforms were from the waist we were picking up. He did give us and issued us a box of white Tyvek suits. So, every location we went to, we could put a suit on, wear that for the duration and just throw that suit in the garbage. This was great because it was messy work. And once my daughter was born, I didn't want to bring any of that stuff in the house. So, I would drive back here, go into that garage, get changed there and put my dirty uniforms in a garbage bag. There used to be a service station on Northern Boulevard and the guys there let me give them my uniforms and they treated them the same way they did their mechanic's jumpsuit, which was kind of them. Aside from the Tyvek suits, at some point when we were down there, they gave us respirators. I couldn't tell you what day it was, but they didn't work particularly well. It was problematic wearing them in a dark basement especially because I wore glasses at that time. So, we most of the time didn't wear them. That was really it. I mean, the lighting was self-explanatory. You put a bunch of extension cords together and plug it into a generator. And we had mechanics there in case anything went wrong with the generator anyway. We didn't really need any special training.

NK: Apart from the respirators, you didn't need the usual masks, the kind that we are wearing nowadays?

PB: No. I'm sure they were available, but I don't remember guys wearing them.

NK: Okay. Were there any dangers that you faced while going down to the basements of these places?

PB: I used to have to go slow. I mean, you're carrying bags up and down steps. None of us got hurt that I know of. I can't speak for the fellows from the health department, the men and women that came from there. But I don't remember anybody getting hurt. One of the fellows I worked with had a bit of a fickle stomach, and he got sick a couple of times from the smell and the rodents we encountered made him nauseous, which is understandable. But there wasn't really anything other than that. There were statements made by some politicians about the air being safe down there. I still don't know to this day that I really believe anybody believed them. I mean, you could smell decay in the air. The wind was whipping concrete dust everywhere. Even blocks that were freshly swept would the next day have debris on them from being blown off rooftops. So, you'd really kind of have to have your head in the sand to think that it was a safe environment. But, yeah, we were issued hard hats, too. I remember that. Now that I think about it again, another tough thing to wear going down steps. A lot of the Lower Manhattan basements and some basements are narrow and not particularly finished, especially the older buildings. I'm over six foot. In some areas, I was banging my head a couple of times if I was wearing a helmet.

NK: Did this work change your relationship with food in any way? How did it change how you were looking at food after you came back from work?

PB: I mean, there were a bunch of places down there that popped up as time went by. In the beginning, it was just the Red Cross and the Salvation Army had aid stations. Then over time, uh, that grew. At one point, McDonald's even came and brought in a temporary set up to feed volunteers. But the truth is, being around that much rotten food, you don't have much of an appetite. By the time I'd come home, then I'd be hungry. So, you'd eat breakfast and dinner and a little bit in between. That was noticeable because once that detail was over, a few weeks after that, I started doing some clerical work and I noticed I did start eating once again. Did it change my relationship with food? there was one there was one fast food chain that we cleaned out. The manager met us there and they were on the periphery. They were very close to Canal Street, which was the border of our operations. We didn't do anything north of Canal Street. As we were removing all the waste matter from their place and they had a lot of frozen stuff that had thawed out and was quite gelatinous. I remember it took a while. The floor had tiles which were very treacherous with the slop from the food waste. They also had these gigantic plexiglass type bowls that were enormous. I mean like a five-gallon compound bucket size. They had level indicators on them, I guess, where you would mix product, whatever, and they had just been left there. So, the stuff inside was putrid. We were just assuming that that was going with the food waste and I remember the manager coming out and taking them out of the hopper, the truck, saying no, I could wash those. To this day, I've never seen that chain again, only because I found it kind of revolting. Other than that, no, I didn't have any adverse effects.

NK: So, you said that there was a truck which was carrying all this material?

PB: Well, we would have a garbage truck, that one fella from Manhattan 12, and I would drive. And then we had another truck called a rack truck, which a fellow from Manhattan used to drive. That was the one that had the generator and the gas, the lighting equipment, garbage bags and anything else we might need. Broom, shovels, speedy drive, which is an absorbent material that you use on an oil spill. So, if we did have an area that was slick, where our footing was treacherous, we could put that on steps or in our basement. Then any personal belongings that we wanted that weren't valuable, change of clothes or whatever, we left on that truck because it was much less likely to get spoiled than in the garbage truck. Garbage trucks aren't really made for whole liquid type waste. It was tricky loading them.

NK: Where was this material carried back to?

PB: Back to the garage on South Street. And then at night, a different group of people would dump those trucks. They would drive them to the dump.

NK: Where was this dump?

PB: I'm wondering, where did they send those trucks to; Manhattan at the time was dumping in New Jersey. But there were other dumps available. That was Manhattan 3. I'm not sure where their local dump would have been at the time because that wasn't my normal assignment. My regular garage was up in Harlem, well, in the Bronx, but we serviced Harlem. We went to an exit of fifteen in New Jersey. I doubt that it was Manhattan 3. Well, they might have gone to the same place at the same time, but I'm really not sure.

NK: So, this waste wasn't going to Freshkills.

PB: No, this was food waste. That would have been very unpleasant for the people there.

NK: Ok, yes. Just wanted to confirm that.

NK: The process sounds very taxing on your physical and mental health. Was there any source of support?

PB: Yes, there was. There were groups that were official and groups that were less so. I remember very early on in the process a fellow who was with our employee assistance unit within the department coming around and making inquiries and letting people know that they were there if anybody wanted to talk to them. It was made very clear to everybody in the unit that I worked in which at one time was probably maybe three hundred people or so day and night that nobody had to stay on that detail. Anybody who wanted to go back to their garage could do so. So, it was voluntary only. I think that made a big difference because if somebody was really feeling overwhelmed, they didn't have to be there. I know other agencies didn't do that. And they rotated their people in and out, like the police department, fire department. I think some of the fire department people stayed on station for quite a while, but sanitation was very good that way. If you didn't want to be there, you didn't have to do it.

NK: Did you feel overwhelmed at any point?

PB: There were times when the enormity of it was overwhelming, but not so to the point where I would say it was debilitating for myself. I can't really speak for others. I know a lot of people had some trouble with it. There were occasions where you would come across human remains or be witness to the discovery of them. That sort of thing affects everybody differently. The magnitude of it and the obvious loss of life was very, very apparent. It was all over the place. People had put up pictures of missing relatives hoping that somebody would find them or hoping against all reality that they might still be alive somewhere. That sort of thing was and could certainly be depressing, but the camaraderie and the general feeling that good work was being done, carried the day, I would say.

NK: Yes, I did hear you mention about this camaraderie in the video that was shared to commemorate the 19th anniversary of September 11.

PB: Oh, ok. Yeah. It was, it was a very powerful thing. That's not just within any one agency; it was across neighborhoods and eventually across the city. I think it was a real sense of community. I would like to see more of that under less stringent circumstances.

NK: Did you have to interact with the general public or the media at any point during the course of your work?

PB: We had media that I'm aware of on two occasions that took pictures of us but it wasn't a department sanctioned thing, that they were just out and about. And I guess somebody had let them in or they had the credentials, because at that time, the NYPD was still responsible for making sure that sightseers and tourists and just the curious didn't come in. I do remember the department taking some photographs. That was an official department photographer, but I didn't have any interaction with any of that. As far as the public goes, as time went on and we expanded farther and farther toward Canal Street from the Trade Center footprint itself, we did have some interaction with the public that would ask what you were doing or want to take a picture or something of that nature. We had interactions with the people who managed or owned the commercial establishments that we were going into. Some of them were quite defeated. I remember one place. It was a hot day. We were taking out all the waste from the location. And the guy was asking us if we could take the chairs and tables, too. And we said, not really. That's not what we're here for. I remember my partner asking, aren't you going to need them again? He said, no, all of his business was in those towers and that there's no way I'll be able to open up again. And then you had other people who were just much more optimistic. I guess the usual spread you would find in society; some half full and some half empty.

NK: Yes, definitely. Were those pictures that were shared with you, the ones which were taken by the department?

PB: I've seen some of them. I have some digital copies of some of them that we put together for possible use and then some that I had gathered for a presentation that was done. So, I guess maybe it's less than a year and a half ago now, but definitely pre-Covid, out in Staten Island, that was I believe, put together by the strongest foundation.

NK: Was there a definite to the work that you were doing?

PB: Oh yes. For the work on food waste removal, it was about 30 or 31 days. I think at that point just enough had opened up that commercial cadres could either get the rest of it off or we ran out of places to service. I don't know which one it was. I just know we were told we got three or four more places to go and that's it. And that was the hardest thing for a while. I went to, uh, back to sweeping streets downtown. And, a couple of days I got some pull out driving away truckloads of waste and then not too long after that I did the administrative clerking job down there. The fellow who had been the clerk got promoted and he went off to work out in a regular district. Then I became the clerk for a while.

NK: Was there any point in your work which was a marker of the fact that you're off that work now and that you are on to other tasks and responsibilities?

PB: Outside of the Trade Center?

NK: Yes.

PB: Yeah. I went back to Manhattan Island for a while and then ended up taking a spot with the Manhattan borough afterwards with the chief that I had met down at Ground Zero. He thought that I'd be a good fit for a project he had at the Manhattan bureau and thought I'd be interested. And I certainly was. I did that for a while. Then that ultimately led to my getting a job at the bureau office for a while until I got promoted in 2004.

NK: What is the one thing that you wish the world understood about Sanitation's role in the 9/11 response?

PB: I don't know if I could pick just one word. I think the enthusiasm with which the everyday employees embrace the task, especially at the beginning. I don't recall anybody not wanting to do what needed to be done. There was a real feel if you're doing good work here. There were certain assignments to sanitation that very few people relish, pushing a broom for eight hours a day. It's not everybody's cup of tea, but there was an enthusiasm especially at the onset, with which even the most mundane, boring tasks were done, briskly and with effort. It was just across such a broad spectrum that I think it shows remarkable hope in human spirit.

NK: Yes, definitely. It is amazing. What would you say are the most and least favorite parts of your job right now?

PB: Today or during 9/11?

NK: It would be great if you can talk about both the times.

PB: My job today is not even remotely similar to what I did at 9/11. Not just in terms of physicality but also in terms of just the purpose of what my job is. I get a chance today to help people on an individual scale who might have hardships or calamity in their lives that affords me a real feeling of satisfaction when somebody might not be able to carry out their normal routine because life has thrown them a curveball. And I'm able to get them remedy, whether it be officially or through a support service type of thing. That brings me great joy. During 9/11-- I think, I grew up in this area, I went to high school on 15th Street. My parents worked in the city all my life. My dad worked for Con Edison down at Union Square. Being part of the restoration, the cleaning up of lower Manhattan and trying to bring back some degree of normalcy, was important to me. And probably, it's easy to articulate that now because I am farther away from it and looking at it from rearview. But without a doubt, that was a place you really felt like you were doing good work. And I grew up in Queens. I worked and went to school in Manhattan, after high school. That was important to me. I also knew what the place looked like down there before the Trade Center. I don't mean before the two towers went up. But I knew what it looked like. I liked that look. Seeing everything covered in ash and debris was disturbing.

NK: Do you think that the incident reverberates for you in the present?

PB: There are parallels. I mean, you look at the lack of harmony across society today. For the most part, behavior post 9/11 was good. There were some people that were targeted out and suffered abuse at the hands of neighbors who were either ignorant or just consumed with rage beyond their own control. There are definitely parallels between then and what you see now. The anti-Asian sentiment and the violence we saw last summer, it's the dark side of human nature which is revolting and uncomfortable. I grew up on that side of Northern Boulevard, two blocks over and it's incredibly diverse. The elementary and junior high school I went to were incredibly diverse. In this local area here, this neighborhood, we didn't have any of that going on. And you know, it speaks volumes. I would love to have seen a common thread like we had after 9/11, where people, for the most part, just wanted to support each other in a common cause. I would have liked to have seen more of that in the wake of the recent pandemic. It could have been a unifying event, you know, the kind of expression of making lemonade out of lemons. There was an opportunity here that could have possibly tempered some of the tragedy and sorrow that we just experienced. Those are the parallels between now and then for me anyway.

NK: Absolutely. I do see that even during these trying times, there are so many people who are coming out to help in unimaginable ways. It is heartening to see that and makes you want to be a part of those communities which are helping in any way that they can.

PB: Yes.

NK: And things are particularly bad for us in India right now.

PB: Yes, I saw that.

NK: And it's just amazing when I see people going out of the way to make sure that others are doing okay. While the government's just washed hands off this whole issue, organizations and communities working at the ground level are coming forward to help struggling individuals.

PB: That was a distinct difference between 9/11 and today. There was a unifying overall feeling and motivation after 9/11. I don't think there was a strong central message with the pandemic. The individual localities did a better job some than others. But a unifying central message goes a long way in times of turmoil.

NK: So, I think that's what I have for you in terms of the questions. And we are 45 minutes into the conversation. I think I'm just going to pause the recorder here.

PB: Okay.