

## DSNY ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE

**Narrator: Dennis Diggins**

**Interviewers: Ghaliyah Alhammadi and Charlotte Morlie**

**Fresh Kills, Staten Island, New York City**

**April 16, 2021**

*(We are sitting in the front of Dennis Diggins' van as we drive through the entry gates of the former Fresh Kills landfill, which is in the process of becoming Freshkills Park. It is a grey, cool, spring day.)*

Dennis Diggins [00:02:18] So this is the compost facility, this is where they bring yard waste from Staten Island and they bring yard waste and they compost it and then this is the finished product here. They put the finished product into bags. Bags are given out to the community. And also bulk compost is sold, or used by New York City Parks Department.

Charlotte Morlie [00:02:45] As soil?

Dennis Diggins [00:02:45] Yeah, soil amendment. Right.

Charlotte Morlie [00:02:50] Haven't they stopped compost during COVID? I thought that they stopped a lot of the composting in the city?

Dennis Diggins [00:02:55] They did but the process still is ongoing. So this is a company that Sanitation contracts with, WeCare, or I think it's Denali Water now, but they are the contractor for Sanitation for composting. So they're still ongoing with their composting project. They'll bring Christmas trees. You know, after Christmas, all the Christmas trees will come here and, and they'll compost those. This here is the Sanitation's Staten Island Transfer Station. So all of the municipal waste from Staten Island, not the commercial waste, but the municipal waste, comes here to Staten Island. And it's containerized. It's brought in through the front, dumped inside, containerized, and put on rail cars. The rail cars are then transported down to South Carolina and their landfill down in South Carolina. And that was part of the Mayor Bloomberg's 2006 Solid Waste Management Plan that required all of the city's waste to either go out by barge, by rail, or incinerated. Waste to energy. So this is how it goes out. This is where the trucks come in.

Charlotte Morlie [00:04:30] So before they closed, before they used to just bring it straight away to the landfill?

Dennis Diggins [00:04:34] Correct, correct.

Charlotte Morlie [00:04:42] And then those orange things, they just go straight on the rail? To South Carolina?

Dennis Diggins [00:04:46] Those are containers. Yeah, they have about twenty tons of waste in them. So if you think about how trucks... Trucks would have an average of eight to ten tons and these containers hold twenty. So for each container, it's equivalent to two trucks.

Charlotte Morlie [00:05:06] Wow that's a lot.

Dennis Diggins [00:05:16] So Fresh Kills is actually four mounds. It's not one big hill, it's actually four sections, we call them. This is the first section over here, this is Section three and four. And this was closed in 1992. This section was capped, so when they close a section or a mound, they cover it with a 60 mil, at the time it was 60, now it's 40 mil, but it's a 40 mil HDPE<sup>1</sup> plastic. So it makes an impenetrable cover over the garbage. And then they put a series, you could see a... let me just back up a little bit. (*backs up the van*) See, the gas well up there?

Charlotte Morlie [00:06:16] With the little pink flag?

Dennis Diggins [00:06:17] Yeah, yeah. So that's a gas well. There are a series of gas wells that run all across the top of the landfill and then feed a header pipe that goes around the outside. And then that landfill gas is taken to a flare station where it's cooled, condensed and then shipped over, pushed through the pipeline to a gas plant on the other side of the river.

Charlotte Morlie [00:06:47] And then that gas is used for?

Dennis Diggins [00:06:49] The gas is cleaned up, the BTUs<sup>2</sup> are pumped up, all of the noxious oxides are taken out and it's put into the national grid pipeline, it goes directly into the National Grid pipeline. So when it was operational, Fresh Kills was, when we were just doing municipal waste, we were doing about twelve-thousand tons a day and that was unloaded between two plants. There was plant two, which is behind us right here. And you would have two cranes sitting on what we used to call the pads, and would unload the barges. So each plant could unload six barges per shift. Each of those barges handled about six hundred and fifty tons.

Charlotte Morlie [00:07:58] Six hundred and fifty?

Dennis Diggins [00:08:00] Tons.

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<sup>1</sup> High Density Poly Ethylene

<sup>2</sup> British Thermal Unit

Charlotte Morlie [00:08:03] Oh my god. How big were these barges?

Dennis Diggins [00:08:06] I'll show you when we get to the other side. So this is where... But you can't see it because we're storing salt here now, but right where that salt pile is they used to be to unloading areas for the cranes and the cranes with barges would pull up to the bulkhead, cranes would empty it, put it into that pit, and then large trucks called payhaulers would then haul that material up to the active bank where it was landfilled.

Charlotte Morlie [00:08:51] The barges would come all the way here, on this stretch of the river?

Dennis Diggins [00:08:55] Yeah, I have some pictures I can show you later on. So this is the gas pipeline that goes from that flare station over there, right? It's being transmitted over here. This is section six and seven. This is another closed area. This was closed, I think in '96. Again, the gas from that plant is condensed and sent over. *(the van goes over a bump)* Oop, sorry.

Charlotte Morlie [00:09:44] It's hard to imagine it, now that it's, you know, like this.

Dennis Diggins [00:09:47] Yes, yes. It was quite a wild place when it was operational. I got here in 1991, and that's when we were still landfilling on section three and four. Six and seven was a hole in the ground. It wasn't even a hill.

Charlotte Morlie [00:10:19] Really? And so what we call the hills is because of all the garbage?

Dennis Diggins [00:10:27] Exactly.

Charlotte Morlie [00:10:28] Wow.

Dennis Diggins [00:10:31] This is Section two and eight.

Charlotte Morlie [00:10:32] It's beautiful.

Dennis Diggins [00:10:33] Isn't it? I'd use to tell people it's beautiful, they'd use to think I was crazy.

Ghaliyah Alhammadi [00:10:38] It's very pretty.

Charlotte Morlie [00:10:40] Back when it was still garbage?

Dennis Diggins [00:10:41] Well, after it closed.

Charlotte Morlie [00:10:55] What are all these trucks doing?

Dennis Diggins [00:10:58] Well these trucks, like I said, this is capped. Six and seven is capped and three and four is capped. Right now we're completing capping section one and nine. So section one and nine is the final mound to be completely closed down, and that's scheduled to be closed down by December of this year.

Charlotte Morlie [00:11:18] Oh, wow.

Dennis Diggins [00:11:19] So again, you have to put that 40 mil plastic cover on top. So the company is doing that right now as we speak. You could see up there, the work that's going on up there.

Charlotte Morlie [00:11:37] Oh, yeah.

Dennis Diggins [00:11:40] So that's where we're heading now.

Charlotte Morlie [00:11:45] And so that's also a contractor of the DSNY?

Dennis Diggins [00:11:50] That contractor is Tully Construction and they've been contracted by the city, not by the Sanitation, to cover it and close it out. Those are two of the barges right down there, you can see.

Charlotte Morlie [00:12:04] The blue things?

Dennis Diggins [00:12:08] Yeah the blue ones right there. And I'll show you some pictures later on of what it looked like during 9/11 when we were bringing material in. These big tents right here, these were built after 9/11. All the recovery from 9/11 was done by July in 2002. In 2004, I think it was, they were doing work around Ground Zero and they were doing work around ConEd manhole and they found World Trade Center debris there. So they realized that when they were, in the area where the ramp was going down into the pit, they had rushed that work there and they covered up some World Trade Center material. So what they did was they trucked all that material out here and it was sifted through a contract that the city had with a company, Phillips and Jordan, and they sifted through all of the material again, down to a quarter of an inch. And then the material was brought up top and whatever human remains or personal effects were sifted out.

Charlotte Morlie [00:13:27] So that was months after you had actually...

Dennis Diggins [00:13:29] That was years, years, years after. So that was the first time and then it happened again a few years later than that. That would have been 2004. And then I think it was in 2006 when they were bringing the Deutsche Bank down. They found more and they had to come back out again and do it one more time. So let me make a couple of calls here. So this is where the cranes would be.

Charlotte Morlie [00:14:30] Taking from the barges?

Dennis Diggins [00:14:32] Taking from the barges right.

Charlotte Morlie [00:14:33] And put it in trucks?

Dennis Diggins [00:14:34] *(picks up the phone)* Ed! We're right outside your office. I'm going to also get a hold of Jerry. Yeah, I know, I just want to know, he has to know where we're going to be, that's all. OK. Hey Jer, I'm right over, outside of Ed Zigali's trailer. Right next to me. *(laughs)* OK. *(hangs up)* So the gentleman that's going to come down is the contractor who's doing the job up here. Being it's an ongoing construction site. I want to make sure that we're not in the way of any of the equipment. So he'll guide us up safely to the top. And also, I'm going to introduce you to Jerry Basciano. He is the director here at Fresh Kills. So Jerry wants to meet you and he'll probably go up top with us too.

Charlotte Morlie [00:16:03] Great.

Dennis Diggins [00:16:03] So I put together some information for you. All right, that was just a picture. That was me in 2001. That was Richie Marks. Richie Marks was the head of the FBI here on site here. And here, I just put together some points on what Sanitation did, and I'll go through them as we go talking. Yeah, but it's just easy so you can have something to refer to. This was just what the towers looked like from up here years ago. *(flips through images)* So this was the command center that was set up over and in Manhattan.

*(opens window and greets Jerry Basciano, we do introductions and Mr Basciano leaves)*

Charlotte Morlie [00:19:02] So he runs this whole place?

Dennis Diggins [00:19:24] He does now yeah.

Charlotte Morlie [00:19:26] And he's also from DSNY?

Dennis Diggins [00:19:30] He's from DSNY.

Charlotte Morlie [00:19:33] So what's DSNY's role now in the kind of ongoing... ?

Dennis Diggins [00:19:38] Well, DSNY still owns the landfill and they're responsible for monitoring the landfill for 30 years. So the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation has regulatory oversight for it, for the landfill. And one of their requirements is that Sanitation maintains the landfill. So by maintain is, they cover it, they have a post closure care plan. So once it's all covered and closed, they manage and they monitor the surface gas emissions, if there's any surface gas emissions. They monitor the groundwater and just basically maintain it for cleanliness. And that's mandatory for 30 years, so we'll have a presence here. So did Robin tell you anything about me?

Charlotte Morlie [00:20:40] Not much. *(laughs)* She wanted to leave the surprise.

Dennis Diggins [00:20:47] So I used to be the director here. I was a director here during 9/11. And then when I retired three years ago from the Department and I ran the Department, I was the first deputy commissioner when I left the Department. So. So it's kind of for me, it's coming full circle. Right now, I'm working for a contractor over on the other side of the landfill. They're transitioning fresh kills into a park. So this is the first component of the park, it's called North Park. So the contractor I'm working with, we're building that first component. I stayed home for about three or four months and I was going out of my mind. So I ended up reaching out and getting another job, starting another career.

Charlotte Morlie [00:21:43] Wow, so you've seen this place go through everything.

Dennis Diggins [00:21:46] Exactly, exactly.

Charlotte Morlie [00:21:54] What a view!

Dennis Diggins [00:21:54] Quite a nice sight, isn't it?

Charlotte Morlie [00:21:59] This is beautiful.

*(We reach the top of the mound. Ed comes over, and Dennis tells him about the story behind one of the flagpoles)*

Dennis Diggins [00:22:45] So anyway, there was a gentleman from Carteret who used to go out to that little pier that they have over the crystal water there. And he would look out over here at our operations all the time. He lost a daughter during 9/11. So he asked us, is there anything you could put up just as a reminder or some sort of a remembrance? So we put the flagpole up.

Dennis Diggins [00:23:17] Well, it was a typical Fresh Kills pole because what we use is a telephone pole and a bowling ball on top. *(laughs)*

*(we all get out of the van)*

Charlotte Morlie [00:23:40] Wow. Oh, my God, the wind. Wow. The view! Oh, my God.

Dennis Diggins [00:24:11] That's how we saw the towers come down.

Charlotte Morlie [00:24:14] No! You were here?

Dennis Diggins [00:24:20] I was here. So on the morning of September 11, like everybody else we had heard that a plane went into the towers. So we knew we could see it from up here, the day was as clear as a bell, it was a perfect day. So we came up here and we saw all the smoke coming from the first tower and then shortly after that, the second plane hit and we knew something was definitely wrong at that point. So I was with my boss at the time and I was the deputy director of Fresh Kills at the time. Mike Mucci, who was the director, he was my boss. *(says bye to Ed)* And we watched the towers burning. And then unfortunately, then we had to see the towers collapse. And once the towers collapsed, we knew right away that we were going to be called on for equipment. We were very equipment rich at the time. That was September 11th. In March of that same year, we closed. In 1996, just to go back, in 1996 Mayor Giuliani and Governor Pataki announced the closure of Fresh Kills. They gave us until December 2001, we actually closed in March of 2001. So we were in the process, this area here was probably about... maybe 80 feet lower than it is right now. We had a hundred and sixty five acres of flat plateau on top that we had just put in a series of roadways just using milling like this material here, in preparation for closure. So because we closed prematurely, the top of Fresh Kills was a flat plateau. You're required by New York State DEC<sup>3</sup> to have it crowned so that you have a four percent runoff for stormwater. So there has to be a crown. So the idea was to take, it was a small mound that I'll show you when we will be leaving later on. We were actually going to excavate that small mound, bring it up on top to create that crown. But then 9/11 happened. That changed everything. So like I said, we were looking at downtown Manhattan and we saw the towers come down and we started to put together equipment. By eleven o'clock that morning, we had orders to bring equipment over to ground zero. So myself and some of our supervisors, we escorted our equipment over there. We took about twenty eight pieces of heavy equipment: operators, fuel trucks, mechanics, and brought equipment over to Ground Zero. We were working on the pile in the South West quadrant, around Albany Street late that afternoon.

Charlotte Morlie [00:27:40] So you were actually working at Ground Zero?

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Environmental Conservation

Dennis Diggins [00:27:42] Yeah, that day.

Charlotte Morlie [00:27:46] Can I just stop you for two seconds because the wind is really loud.

Dennis Diggins [00:27:49] Do you want to sit in the truck?

Charlotte Morlie [00:27:50] It would be better because it would be such a shame if we can't hear anything in the recording. *(we all get back in the van)*

Dennis Diggins [00:28:34] So you see everything along that green, you see that green?

Charlotte Morlie [00:28:38] Yeah.

Dennis Diggins [00:28:42] It's an erosion control. But everything on that side is the World Trade Center. So when it was all landfilled, it was all kept to a certain, I think it's six acres. Everything over there is the World Trade Center. And it's covered by probably fifteen feet of soil now.

Charlotte Morlie [00:29:14] And that is also going to become part of the park that they're doing?

Dennis Diggins [00:29:19] Ultimately, everything is going to be park. Ultimately, it's all going to be park. So do you want my story? Do you want...

Charlotte Morlie [00:29:33] OK, so we're going to take it back a little bit.

Dennis Diggins [00:29:36] OK, go ahead.

Charlotte Morlie [00:29:37] And get to 9/11. But the idea is to get a sense also of your own career at the DSNY and what you were doing before you got involved with all the work in the response. So, Ghaliah do you want to start? We also brought the consent forms. *(Interview pauses to sign consent forms)*

Charlotte Morlie [00:31:20] So we're Friday, 16th of April, 2021. We're currently at Fresh Kills in Staten Island. My name is Charlotte Morlie, I'm with Ghalia and Mr. Diggins.

Ghaliah Alhammadi [00:32:28] My name is Ghalia.

Dennis Diggins [00:32:29] Dennis Diggins.

Charlotte Morlie [00:32:31] OK, great. So we can start.

Ghaliah Alhammadi [00:32:33] OK. So we can start with, uh, you've already said your name and where and when were you born and a little bit about your childhood.

Dennis Diggins [00:32:45] I was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1954. I grew up in East Flatbush, which is a nice, tight neighborhood. I had a pretty happy childhood. It was a blue class, blue collar neighborhood. Most people worked in police, fire, Sanitation. And I got married very young, I got married when I was twenty years old. We moved to a different neighborhood. We had our first child daughter, my oldest daughter in 1977, we got married in '75, my first daughter was born in seventy seven, we bought our first house in '77 and ended up having four children, three girls and a boy. Uh, they're all older now. I have six grandchildren.

I went to work for the Department of Sanitation in 1986 and served for thirty-five years, working my way up, ultimately retiring as the first deputy commissioner. So at that point, I ran all operations for the Department. Most of the time, though, was spent in the Bureau of Waste Disposal, which is this Bureau here. And the Bureau of Waste Disposal was responsible for, at that time, the early days was landfilling or incinerating all of the city's waste, but then with the closure... Fresh Kills was the last operating waste disposal system in the city. So once this was closed, everything had to be exported out of the city.

So then we went from an operational waste disposal bureau to more of contract management. And that's what we were doing until the Solid Waste Management Plan required us to start barging and railing out. We became operational again. We run the Staten Island Transfer Station, we built four marine transfer stations, which take waste from different areas of the city. We had the North Shore Marine Transfer Station up in college point Queens. We have 91st Street, which is the Upper East Side [of Manhattan]. We have Brooklyn, Hamilton Avenue. And we also have in Brooklyn Southwest, which is over by the Belt Parkway. So we're back in the operational end of it again, which we always wanted to be, in charge of our own destiny. So that's a good thing for us. The waste goes out in efficient, clean, containerized manner.

One of the problems that we always had with Fresh Kills or one of the issues that we always had with Fresh Kills was the fact that all of the garbage that came to us from marine transfer stations at that time, the city operated eight marine transfer stations around the city and it would go into a barge and the barge would have a net that would cover the entire barge so that, as it was being transported down the river, the waste wouldn't blow off, but it was still an open barge. So when we got the barges in here to Fresh Kills, they would be stacked up along our mooring rack here and... garbage smells. You know, there's nothing you're going to do to make garbage not smell. So. Staten Island always felt that they were carrying the burden for the city, being the last of the city's waste disposal facilities. And at that time, we were pretty much getting all of the waste from the city. Manhattan was still sending some to a waste-to-energy plant in Newark. But for the most part, it was coming here, so when we started exporting and we started to close this

facility, it was already being kicked around that at some point it was going to be a park. The facility is twenty two hundred acres. If you compare that to Central Park, it's two and a half times the size of Central Park. So in terms of open space that we can give back to the people of Staten Island, it's pretty impressive. The size is pretty impressive. I mean, you can look around and see how much it encompasses. Most of the park land will be passive park land.

Charlotte Morlie [00:37:46] What does that mean?

Dennis Diggins [00:37:50] Recreational in terms of walking paths, bridle paths, kayaking, some ball fields. So, like I said, it'll be a boon to the people of Staten Island after the years that they had to deal with Fresh Kills in their area.

So, again, like I said, we were in that transition point, back in 2001, getting the top of Fresh Kills ready for closure and 9/11 happened. Again, you know, when you look across at lower Manhattan now, you can you just feel like you can reach out and touch it. And that's what it was like that day. And that will forever be in our memories. *(pause)* So that's a brief history of me. *(chuckles)*

I love working for the Department, the Department was my life. You know, I bleed green, green was the Sanitation color and I bled green. I just, I love everything about the Department. I think we were a critical service to the city. We were always there for the city. One of the things that came out of other agencies coming into our facility and seeing the way we operated was they all came away with the same opinion that we were a lot more than just picking up garbage and, you know, pushing snow. They didn't realize just all the expertise that we had in so many different fields and how equipment-rich we were and the experience that we had in moving large volumes of material. I mean, the fact that we were a barging operation for years and years. When it was talked about taking the material from Ground Zero to here by barge, we were totally prepared for that because we've done it for years and years. It was never an issue for us. So we did it efficiently. We did it effectively. And we made sure that every pound of material that left Ground Zero made it here to Fresh Kills and made it to the forensic folks at NYPD<sup>4</sup> and FBI<sup>5</sup>. That was our mission. That was our basic mission to make sure that everything from Ground Zero made it here and made it to those folks for them to search through the material.

Ghaliah Alhammadi [00:40:36] Can you tell me what drew you into Sanitation? It's interesting.

Charlotte Morlie [00:40:42] Because back in, you said '86, right?

Dennis Diggins [00:40:45] '86, right.

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<sup>4</sup> New York Police Department

<sup>5</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation

Charlotte Morlie [00:40:46] What was your first..?

Dennis Diggins [00:40:48] So I worked for a construction company for a few years. I went to college and then I got a job in construction, after my first year, where I was making more money than my father, which was probably a bad thing. So I did not go back to college after that first year. And I stayed working in construction for a few years and then 1976... 1975, construction died in the city. We had a downturn in the economy and I ended up going to work for a coffee company, I was a sales representative for a coffee company, and I stayed with that up until I got, I had gotten... I had taken the test for the fire department, the police department, Sanitation. My father was a fireman. So when you grow up in a working class civil service family, my uncle was a fireman you just naturally look to follow in their footsteps, so. So I had taken all these tests back in the.. I think it was the early 70s, we took these tests. But then there was a hiring freeze for a number of years, and it wasn't until that '80, '81 when they started hiring again. So I had gotten called for Sanitation. So I took that and... It was a few, maybe four years later, I actually got a call for the fire department. But at that time, I was on the list to be promoted and I was up for promotion, within about a couple of months of getting called for the fire department, so. At the time my father said, stay where you are, he says you're going to do better where you are. He says you're already getting promoted.

Charlotte Morlie [00:42:45] He was right.

Dennis Diggins [00:42:46] Well, I did do well. I did do well. But sometimes you think back and you say, I wonder what life would have been like if I had gone with the fire department. But that's life. You can't, you can't go back and change it. So. So I took the job and I absolutely loved it. I got promoted. My first promotion was in '86, to supervisor, and then from then on, I just...

Charlotte Morlie [00:43:19] Where was that?

Dennis Diggins [00:43:21] That was in Brooklyn, I was in Brooklyn and... I was working in downtown Brooklyn, and then I got promoted and sent to the Greenpoint area to run a Sanitation garage there. And I ran a garage there for two years. And then I transferred to the Edgemere landfill in Rockaway. Rockaway, Queens. And so I said, let me just go see what waste disposal is like so I could kind of round out. Sanitation is broken up into two operational bureaus, the Bureau of Cleaning and Collection and the Bureau of Waste Disposal, at that time. So I had already been working in BCC, Bureau of Cleaning and Collection, so I wanted to round my career out a little bit and see what the world of waste disposal was like so, when the opportunity came up for a transfer, I took it and I liked it. It was very interesting, very hands on. You saw how you got things done every day and you saw achievement just by the mound getting higher and higher and you're doing it cleanly and efficiently. But then Edgemere was closed in '80... In

1990. So Edgemere closed in 1990. So I went back to BCC, stayed a year as a supervisor out in the field and then in '91, I got promoted to superintendent and got assigned out here to Fresh Kills. Fresh Kills was not my first choice to come to. I was not a happy camper when I found out I was coming out to Fresh Kills.

Charlotte Morlie [00:45:09] Why?

Dennis Diggins [00:45:10] Fresh Kills in those days was... To the uninitiated, you would think it was mass chaos because there was equipment all over the place. It wasn't like BCC, where everybody was in uniform. Sanitation workers wore one uniform, supervisors wore another, superintendents wore another. Here in Fresh Kills, the Sanitation workers could wear civilian clothes. The supervisors wore a uniform and the superintendents wore a uniform. But everybody else was in civilian clothes. So you had a multitude of trades working here. You had tractor operators. You had launch operators, you had all the tradespeople, electricians, plumbers, steamfitters, then you had all the mechanics. So you had probably... 500 people working here. And of that, most of them, you couldn't tell what they were or what their job function was. So just getting used to all that, in the beginning, was a leap. But once you saw, once you made sense of all of these moving parts, because it was a lot of moving parts -- Fresh Kills at that time, you had Plant One, which is on this side over here. You had Plant Two, which is on the other side that I showed you. And there was also two, what we called, truckfills. There was Muldoon truckfill and there was Victory truckfill. So those two truckfills were for material that came in from trucks on Staten Island. So all of the collection that was done on Staten Island would come to the truckfill. At that time, back then, we would also take in commercial waste from Staten Island. So we would take in the trucks from that commercial waste came in.

So you had four different operations going on at the same time. So just to see how everything flowed and get that in your head... took a little while! But once you got it, once you got it, you really appreciated the intricacy of how everything melded and how everything got landfilled, because, again, you're taking in 12,000 tons of material a day, you can't turn around and say, wait a second, hold on a second. We got to put a pause on this. We got to figure something out. Doesn't work that way! Because it's only going to back up at the curb. There's no place for it to back up. So if you had issues or you had problems, you had to work them out on the fly, because the garbage is going to keep comin'. It doesn't stop. And you've only got a finite number of barges to handle all of that, which we, we had over 100 barges, so we did have enough capacity. But again, there's still a finite capacity. You can't store it forever. So, again, if you had problems, and the problems were just primarily weather related, if you would get a long period of sustained rains, you can imagine what it's like operating in a landfill with rain. You got rain, garbage, mud, dirt. And we also had transitioned back in the early '90s to Payhaulers, which were huge trucks that we would load down at the unloading pad and truck it up. They used to come up and these tracked equipment called atthey wagons, but we got away from the atthey wagons and... the atthey

wagons were probably not the best method of bringing material up from the unloading point, but they were able to get through the mud and everything else. Trucks, you had to have a paved road and then once it got off the paved road at the top, you had to have a whole road that was firm enough for them to make it out to where they dumped on the active bank. So there were challenges. And again, most of them, like I said, were weather related. But we made it through and we made it work. It was an interesting, interesting career. No day was ever alike. There are always challenges. And we were like a small family, you know, everybody knew each other here. A lot of the tractor operators had been working here for years and years. The other family members. You could talk to just about anybody on Staten Island and say you worked at Fresh Kills, and they say, oh, I know somebody! Because again, we had quite a few employees at the time and... it was a big facility. It probably takes up one fifth of the overall land area in Staten Island. So it's a sizable spot.

Ghaliyah Alhammadi [00:50:15] So you just said that each day was different. But one of my questions was, how would you describe your week before September 11th, like a typical day that week.

Dennis Diggins [00:50:30] Before September 11th?

Charlotte Morlie [00:50:32] Yeah, the week leading up to it.

Dennis Diggins [00:50:34] OK, so at that point, again, we had already closed, so we had stopped taking in waste. We were preparing the top of section one and nine for ultimately moving that smaller mound up here. So it was just creating a network of roadways, making sure we had all the equipment necessary and making sure that we had the materials necessary. Back in those days, we used to get material in from the DOT<sup>6</sup>, the millings, the road millings. So whenever they're putting down a new road, you ever see those milling machines that go in and they scrape up the old road? Well, that goes into trucks, and they used to bring those milling trucks here and we would use those milling trucks to create our roadways. So we had a whole series of roadways up here in preparation for moving that material up from the old Muldoon mound. So that was it, it was just basically getting the area prepared.

Charlotte Morlie [00:51:37] How long had you been deputy commissioner?

Dennis Diggins [00:51:43] Well, that came much later.

Charlotte Morlie [00:51:45] OK. So what was your role at that point?

Ghaliyah Alhammadi [00:51:47] Superintendent?

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Transportation

Dennis Diggins [00:51:48] So at that point I was the deputy director of Fresh Kills.

Charlotte Morlie [00:51:51] OK.

Dennis Diggins [00:51:58] And again, Mike Mucci, I think you're, I think they're interviewing Mike. I think they're interviewing Mike. So Mike was the director at the time. So then... Go ahead. I don't want to jump ahead.

Charlotte and Ghaliah [00:52:14] No, no, no, you go.

Dennis Diggins [00:52:16] So what happened was... September 11th happens. I went over to Ground Zero and I ended up staying at Ground Zero. They put me as like a liaison to the Debris Task Force there. I think I have... Would it be easier if I just go along with some pictures for you?

Charlotte and Ghaliah [00:52:41] Yeah. Whatever is good.

Dennis Diggins [00:52:44] (*showing pictures*) So this was the Debris Task Force. This is where the command center was. So you would meet with all the other agencies and this was made up of four contractors. The city contracted with four major builders at the time. Tully, which is the contractor for this job, was one of them. So they broke up Ground Zero into four quadrants and each contractor was given a quadrant. And they would come to these meetings along with all the other city agencies like the Port Authority, Department of Buildings, Water Department. Anybody that would have a role in getting the material out of Ground Zero and brought... Weeks Marine was another company that we chartered, contracted with to move material out of Ground Zero. So it was interesting when you were down at Ground Zero, initially, my first impression when you looked and you saw the devastation and the amount of devastation was we're never going to be able to put the city back together again. It was just, it was just too vast. It is just too much. But when I got assigned to the command center as the Department's liaison, I walked in there and here were these CEOs of these four major contractors sitting on these little... This was in a middle school. So they were sitting on these little chairs like kindergarten chairs and little kindergarten table and sitting here discussing how we were going to put the city back together again. And you said, if these people can check their egos at the door and get this done, then, you know, we'll get through this, you know... Because you just, it made you feel good that people were not sitting there all with the same mindset that we're never going to get this done. They didn't care. They just sat down. All right. Let's roll up our sleeves and figure out what we're going to do. And that's how that's pretty much how it was every day. So I was assigned here until... October 12th, I think it was. In October, I was ordered back here [to FreshKills] and I ran the operations at night, so this operation, when it started out -- and again, just to go back. That

night, September 12th, September 11th, that night, I escorted the first load of material here. We brought in around two o'clock in the morning. And that was... that was the beginning of bringing everything from Ground Zero to Fresh Kills here.

I mean, it was kind of a no-brainer of why to bring out to Fresh Kills. Number one, it's a city-owned facility. It's secure, has a fence around it. We had a 165 acres of flat terrain to work with. We had equipment, we had marine unloading capability. So, again, the decision to bring the material here was probably the only decision. I mean, I know they had considered Kennedy Airport, parts of Kennedy Airport. But again, they would have been overwhelmed, you needed tremendous space. And to do it by truck, one of the things that they had a problem with in the first few days of material coming from Ground Zero to here, they had a dedicated lane all the way from Ground Zero out here to Fresh Kills. But the material that was being loaded was incredibly dusty. So you had that material being blown off, coming all the way through the city streets, which was not something that they wanted to happen. And then they started wetting the material down and they set up washed down areas for the material for each truck that left.

Also, you had issues of chain of custody... because it was considered the largest crime scene in the history of the world. All of the material from that crime scene had to be monitored from point A to point B. Chain of custody is typically done with documentation and it's along the way, any place that's touched, it's recorded. So when the Army Corps... The way it works is when the president... When the Stafford Act is enacted, which is the emergency act. It calls on the Army Corps of Engineers to take care of the issue. I'm sorry, it calls on FEMA<sup>7</sup>, to manage the event. FEMA's contractor is the Army Corps of Engineers. The Army Corps of Engineers also subcontracts out in different areas of the country to companies that respond to earthquakes, tornadoes, hurricanes. So if there's a hurricane in South Carolina, they go to their contractor that covers South Carolina and say, okay, you're going to respond, we'll help you manage it, but you're going to respond. So when the Army Corps reached out, when we were working with the Army Corps on setting up manifests for the material leaving Ground Zero and coming here to Fresh Kills, we used our old snow loading report as a template for them. And they actually used that for probably the first two weeks until they turned around and they actually got a GPS system going. So they monitored everything electronically, that which is probably ten times better. But in the beginning, again, they used our expertise in how we move equipment and how we monitored snow movement... Because snow we pay for, when we hire equipment to get rid of the snow because that's a pay item, we always monitor it. So they used our template for that and it worked. We also became from Ground Zero, because of the fact that we could record how much material was loaded onto barges, trucks, as it came into the facility, were counted and measured physically, we became the the agency of record for providing FEMA, the Army Corps, and the Mayor's Office with how much material was coming out of Ground Zero each day. We were the agency of record doing that every day.

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<sup>7</sup> Federal Emergency Management Agency

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:00:29] So every day you would give them the number of...?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:00:31] We would give them a report on how much material was moved out from Ground Zero.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:00:35] And how much was it per day?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:00:39] In the beginning... Maybe seventeen to twenty thousand tons per day. And again, that's steel and mixed debris. In the very beginning, everything was coming here. Now the large structural steel pieces we had actually stacked up, just behind us here, and I think I may have a picture of it. But the size of the pile was becoming very overwhelming to us and we were also concerned with the weight, because it's a landfill, you have to be concerned with stability. You don't want, especially if it's on the side of the landfill, that additional weight may push out and cause a failure of the landfill, which we certainly did not want. We did have stability monitors around the perimeter called pezomitors that were measuring the stability of the landfill. We also have a great landfill engineering unit and the head of that unit was Phil Gleason and Ted Nabavi. And those two guys did a great job in making sure that this facility stayed stable and safe throughout the whole project, which was pretty daunting because you still had the DEC<sup>8</sup> was here monitoring everything that we did. So, because we were doing things that have never been done on a landfill before, you know, the DEC worked with us. They knew that they couldn't stop us from doing certain functions because you couldn't stop this operation. But Ted and Phil were able to work with them to make sure that they were satisfied, that it was done in an environmentally safe and effective manner. So they did a great job. I can't tell you how much that made us, our story, a success.

So anyway, we had all the steel coming in and finally we had to tell them, listen, we have a contract with Sims Metal Management on the other side of the river in New Jersey. You got to start shipping it direct there, you can't, you can't bring it here. So a lot of it was like box steel. So we said you can just have somebody inspecting the box steel on the New York side before it goes over, because that's what they were concerned with, they were concerned with maybe there might be human remains or something inside the box steel. So they were able to inspect it before it went over to Jersey. And then at that point, we hired a contractor to come in and start cutting up the steel. And when the steel was cut up, it was transported to Sims and then it was recycled. So we just basically piggybacked on our own metal contract that we had with them to take all of the steel. But all of the rest of the material was continuing to come in. So, again, because it was a crime scene... *(shows picture)* This was September 12th, and you could see the police Department was setting up outside security, making sure that the only people that were allowed in were part of the operation or a city agency. So they maintained security throughout. *(shows*

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<sup>8</sup> New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

*picture*) And this was at Ground Zero. This was showing our trucking. So a lot of people don't know, but the trucking from Ground Zero that came out of it, we accounted for about fifty percent of all the trucking that came from Ground Zero. And if you mention Sanitation to people about the 9/11 operation, recovery operation, most people won't even know that we played a role in it, but... We played a major, major role in it. We're very proud of the work we did. And again, just the nature of Sanitation... You're always in the background. So you're not a first responder like PD or fire, but you are playing a critical role in making sure that everything is moving. And...So we used our trucks to move material out from Ground Zero. And a lot of it was brought to marine transport stations that we opened up again. (*shows picture*) This is that wet down that I was telling about, where they wet trucks down before they left Ground Zero.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:05:32] For the dust.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:05:33] Correct. So we started up two of our marine transfer stations again for this operation, 59th street and also Hamilton Avenue. So you can see the trucks were brought in, World Trade Center material was dumped into the barge. And you can see just how dusty the area was. So you can see we had removed sixty-two barges out of 59th street four hundred and forty seven in Hamilton. (*shows picture*) These were skip pans. These are pans where the trucks dumped up, backed up onto the pan, dumped the load and then the pan was loaded into the barge. This was a school ... that was located right on Church Street and West Street, and we had to have water constantly because of the dust issues surrounding the school. That's also where the DDC<sup>9</sup> command center was. (*shows picture*) We also set up steel over pier six, which is on the east side (*shows picture*) So this is what the barges look like when they came into Fresh Kills. So we would have our crane unload the barge. This is a skimmer boat out in the water. You could see how the barges looked when they came in. (*shows picture*) These cranes were set up for handling waste, not steel. But we still managed to unload the barges with them.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:07:25] You didn't have to get any new or different equipment you could do everything?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:07:30] We did, actually, we bought quite a few new bulldozers and some off-road equipment, to haul the equipment. But you can see how that steel is being picked up by the crane bucket.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:07:47] So barges were just like constantly coming in?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:07:53] Yeah. (*shows picture*) So you can see, these are barges that are lined up out here on the water. This is the top of Section one or nine where we are right now.

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<sup>9</sup> Department of Design and Construction

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:08:01] So everything was brought here?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:08:03] Everything was brought here (*shows aerial view picture of Fresh Kills*) So this was in the early days. This is all that steel that I talked about, that's how it was all stacked up. Over here, is where we had all of the cars and fire trucks that were brought in. Here is where you had your search areas where the FBI and NYPD would do their search. So, again, Mike Mucci was here running operations and getting everything set up.

And at night after I was done at Ground Zero, I would stop by just to see how the place was changing and how things were growing... and it was absolutely incredible how fast this virtual city was growing up around Ground Zero. So you could see all the trailers over here that was part of the command center here, you had a mess tent, you had decon tent. (*shows picture*) This was, again, the debris field..vehicle... and this is the area here where everything was ultimately landfilled all to this area right in here. So when.... This was the early command center. I'm going to... you can have all these pictures. Again, this shows you how the operation was laid out, the search fields. It was actually separated. Building Seven, which was a federal building, was separated because there were some confidential documents that came out of that building. There was also weapons and things of that nature. So we had multiple federal agencies. Some of them were actually camped out here, doing the sifting operation of that.

So this is the Payhauler that I was telling you about. So this truck would be loaded down below and brought up, dump the material, we would tag the area until it was searched and then changed the tagging. (*shows picture*) And this was the search area that was done, originally, it was done just with rakes and shovels. So early on, different agencies were bringing in equipment to search through the material. So the FBI would bring in equipment, Police Department would bring in equipment, the Army Corps would bring in equipment. And then they wanted Sanitation to manage that because it was equipment, they figured Sanitation could manage it. The problem is with equipment, you get operators and the operators are not Sanitation employees. So you have to maintain their time sheets, you have to maintain who gets assigned to what for how many hours, you're setting up scheduling. Also, the equipment had to be maintained, they all had different maintenance programs, they all had different maintenance contracts.

So we told the Army Corps of Engineers that you have to get a project manager in here because Sanitation, you know, we didn't have the depth to do that. Because remember, while everything is going on, while we're doing this, the rest of the city is still moving on. We're still performing our core services, which is collection, cleaning, waste disposal. So we're still performing our core services while all of this is going on so... We have a certain amount of depth, but we didn't have that much depth. So we told them that we needed a project manager to come in. So like I had mentioned before, the Army Corps has contractors regionally. So the contractor for this region was a company called Phillips and Jordan, and they were out of Lakeland, Florida, I think

they were out of. So they came in. They changed out all the equipment, they streamlined everything, and... We were kind of skeptical of their ability to do what they said they could do. But they ultimately won us over. They were a great contractor. They were able to provide a system that allowed the FBI and Police Department to look at that material and search it down to a quarter of an inch.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:13:00] Wow.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:13:02] So everything that came through, came through and went on these ramps. All right? Here it was searched down, and to a quarter of an inch. Which when you think about one million, four hundred and sixty two tons were screened and searched down to a quarter of an inch. That should give families a reasonable expectation that everything was humanly, humanly possible was being done.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:13:30] Yeah, because were there doubts about that or?

**Dennie Diggins** [01:13:32] Yeah, I mean, at the end of the operation, we were accused of taking the material that was originally landfilled, that material that was originally hand searched. We were accused of not looking at that. Yet this crane right here (*shows picture*), we brought this crane up. Our engineering unit had GPS coordinates for everything that we originally landfilled, so we knew exactly where that material was placed. We went and we dug it back up and we put it through the screeners. So, you know, all this was very personal to us. This whole operation was very personal to us. Sanitation, just the people right here in Fresh Kills -- we had a tractor operator who lost a son. We had a crane engineer who lost his wife. We had a superintendent who lost his brother. So to us, this was incredibly personal. And we wanted to make sure that everything was done in an efficient, honorable, caring way. So when we put our head on the pillow at the end of the night and we said that everything was searched, everything was searched. No questions asked. When we finished with the barging operation, I hired a diving team to go down. Anything that might have fallen off the crane as it was being unloaded, I was brought up. So, again, you know, the level of intensity from everybody that worked here was absolutely incredible. There was... Nobody was going to dog it here. Everybody did what they had to do. And again, you know, you had guys who were moving garbage here every day. And next thing you know, they're out in a search field, moving material around for the forensic teams to look at. And they're seeing body parts. And, you know, for somebody who's not trained in that, it's not something easy to become acclimated to, I don't think they ever got acclimated to it, but. (*pause*) This was a rough and ready crowd that we had working for us. These guys were... these guys were up to the task, even though, again, it was things that were asked of them to do... there was no training for it. You can't get trained for seeing human remains out in the field. But they did it. And they did it with humanity..., and I'm just... I still get overwhelmed when I think about what they're able to do. And again. (*pause, chuckles*) I just get it, because, like I said, I bled green.

Sanitation did all of this, and it's like nobody ever knew that they were part of the operation. When we made sure that every ounce of material from Ground Zero made it up here (*clears throat*) the roadways, we would excavate off the side of the roadways and the culverts, we would excavate that material, bring it up, run it through the sifter. Everything that was down from the, the whole road, all the way up, daily, excavated, cleaned, sweepers were brought up, dumped, went through the sifter. Roadways coming in. Same thing. Everything went through the sifter. Barges. At the end of the operation, barges were vacuum cleaned. All that material was brought up here and gone through.

We had over fourteen hundred vehicles here, that were brought here from Ground Zero. And... The insurance, a lot of the insurance companies wanted the vehicles back. But we had some people here, from an industry, I can't remember the name of the industry agency, but they're charged with criminal activity within the insurance business and they convinced them that, listen, these vehicles all have asbestos, they're all asbestos contaminated. There's no way we can certify them that the asbestos has been completely abated out of these vehicles. But we still had to clean them... Enough so that we could crush them, load them into a barge and bring them over to... Sims for ultimate recycling. So we did that. But there were some sad stories that came out of that, too. They had, a woman was brought over, they brought people in so that they could get their belongings out of their vehicles, and this one woman came over... and it was a present in the back of her car, and it turns out the present was for her and... The husband died and, and, that was her birthday, September 11.

So. (*pause*) So, there were some pretty sad stories that came out of this too, you know, things that happened here that, you know, weren't advertised. They also had family members come in on Wednesdays. The FBI and the Police Department would bring a certain number of families in, to show them the operation, to give them some sense of comfort that everything humanly possible was being done to recover their... And listen, there were a group of people who wanted no part of the World Trade Center being landfilled here. They felt that no matter how far you search it down to, if it's searched below a quarter of an inch, they're still human remains that are going to be landfilled... in a landfill! And they did not want their loved ones being part of the landfill. (*pause*) The decision to keep the material here was way above my pay grade, and I can understand what their position was. All I could state was that we did everything we could... to possibly, you know, to make sure that everything was searched down. And... that's all we could do, is reassure them. But again, we ended up ultimately being sued in federal court, I had to go testify.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:20:53] Really? That must have been difficult.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:20:57] (*chuckles*) Not one of my more pleasant chores, no, but... But we were able to show that we did everything that we could, we did not -- we didn't shirk our responsibility, so.

So anyway, the material, all of the World Trade Center material is over on that side of the landfill. You know, maybe, maybe because of its proximity to lower Manhattan and you can look across and touch it maybe... While it might not be the... purest spot... I think, the fact that it overlooks the city. I kind of think it's apropos. Plus, you know, I'm sure Robin [Nagle] can tell you, all landfill is the... is where the remnants of the city ends up and that's certainly a remnant of the city. (*slight pause*)

So, again, I came, (*chuckles*) I came back here in October, I worked nights until January, and then my boss, Mike Mucci, got promoted, moved into the city, and then I became the director here. And then I was a director from January through the end of the operation in July. And then stayed here until 2006. But. It was an amazing operation. (*slight pause*) To those of us that took part in it, is an incredible amount of pride. You know, when you read every day that people have passed away, you know, quite a few people in numbers had health issues as a result of working. That'll never go away. But I don't know of anybody that would have not continued to work because of that possibility. But we've lost a number of good people. And...you know that's a sad part of the aftermath that, now, again, not a lot of people are aware of.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:23:28] Were you aware when you were working of the kind of health risks or other kinds of risks involved?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:23:34] Woof! First night we were there, we had brought dust masks, which were just these particulate masks that you would use if you were doing work around the house. They were not N95s, you know, they were just typical dust masks. The problem was, when you got over there, and we were backing in equipment, backing in off-road equipment, we had front-end loaders. So you're calling, you're trying to call out to them to give them directions and you couldn't do it with a mask on, so you ended up pulling it down and... But the amount of dust in the air... When I got home around three o'clock in the morning and I had to take my clothes off out in the garage, because I was, I looked like somebody dumped a bag of concrete on me, on my head. And... just went and took a shower and I think I got up maybe five o'clock in the morning. I was back up here at six. It was something you didn't want to be a part of, you want to be away from. So you did what you had to do. And again, I don't know if... I don't know anybody I know that I worked with, would have not been a part of it, you know, even if they knew what the ultimate price would be... just that kind of an operation.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:25:07] Yeah. So you slept two hours per night for months? How did you survive? (*laughs*)

**Dennis Diggins** [01:25:10] Well, no, (*laughs*) that was the first night. That was the first night. After that, I got a little bit more, but we were working twelve, fourteen hours a day. Typical day was fourteen hours, so. And we did that... I think the first day we had off was maybe Thanksgiving, we had, they gave us off. And that was the one day we had off and probably until Christmas, but again, you just, you know, you felt compelled to be here. You didn't, you didn't think about anything else.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:25:49] Yeah, it must have been weird coming back home and kind of, you know, living your life normally when all of this was happening.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:25:57] Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's kind of like [Hurricane] Sandy, you know, and when you saw, when Sandy hit and all of Lower Manhattan was out, I was talking, we had a deputy commissioner who lived up in the Upper West Side.<sup>10</sup> And he says, man, he says. You wouldn't know anything happened up there. (*laughs*) Well, stay down here for a little while, he says, so you can share in my pain. Because at that time, I was dealing with that, but... But Sanitation has always, always risen to the challenge of whatever we were given. And again, the Police Department, the FBI, when we were done with this operation, they all said the same thing. They couldn't believe, you know, the... The expanse of our expertise, they didn't think that... They thought it was just picking up garbage and clearing streets of snow and ice and cleaning the streets. And everybody that we deal with, as we went along, the Office of Emergency Management, same thing, they knew what we were capable of. During Sandy, most companies, most agencies, when they come in, FEMA, when FEMA comes in, FEMA pretty much takes over, they have the Army Corps take right over. But during Sandy, they realized that the Department of Sanitation -- and we were the co-chairs for the Debris Task Force for that, for the debris removal -- had the expertise to manage this on their own. They just gave us auxiliary assets. So we requested additional assets to get into areas that we could not do contractually or by city charter like Breezy Point. Breezy Point is a private cooperative. So we brought in the contractor that handled, to handle, Breezy Point. But they recognized the fact that Sanitation had the expertise to... so they could step back and... let us run the show, which was appreciated. But it was also nice to know that we're recognized for the expertise that we had, so we appreciated that.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:28:24] Did you have to teach, like what was it like working with all these other agencies here for the response to 9/11? Like, how did the cooperation work? How did you ... Did you have to kind of... because they had no clue how to?

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<sup>10</sup> Hurricane Sandy, which hit New York City in October 2012, caused an estimated \$19 billion in damages

**Dennis Diggins** [01:28:36] We had a daily operations meeting. Every day, we had an operations meeting where everybody would review what they're going to be doing for the day if they were... And there was also a site safety meeting that was held separately. So Ted Nabavi from our Department, from the engineering department, he would work with the site safety people to make sure that all of the safety protocols that were required for the landfill were being met. When they set up the search areas, they created what they called exclusion zones, where anybody within the perimeter of those exclusion zones had to wear a certain level of PPE<sup>11</sup> -- Tyvek suits, full face respirator, goggles, hood, boots, gloves. So if you work within that exclusion zone, you had to be wearing that PPE. So there was, like I said, every day work operations were reviewed before the day started. Everybody knew it was going to be going on. There were no surprises. We knew how much material was coming out. We would go over how much we were processing per day. Obviously, as we became more and more efficient, we were pretty much able to keep up with it. Again, it was averaging about seventeen thousand tons a day coming in. So we were finally able to meet, everything that was coming in was being processed out. So we finally hit that static point. And again, that was just everybody working together, and I can attribute a lot of that to Phillips and Jordan in setting up the equipment to handle that, they were great. So, again, here we are twenty years later. Hard to believe. And, it's going to get capped, we'll be done by the end of the year, and I don't know what's gonna, I don't know what's going to be put here. I keep asking, I'd really like to see something notable put up here. Even if it's just a couple of benches so people can look out on a lower Manhattan and... And know what they're sitting next to. We'll see. We'll see.

**Ghaliyah AlHammedi** [01:31:09] Did you at any point ever feel like you were putting your life at risk?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:31:16] No, no. I knew it wasn't the healthiest environment, you know, like I just said, you had those exclusion zones. But I worked up here at night, so at night you would have these huge klieg lights set up all over the facility. So when the material was going through the sifting operation and front end loaders were dumping equipment, dumping the material into the hoppers, you would see the dust cloud come up. The dust cloud did not stop at the perimeter of that exclusion zone, it continued to carry over, where people are walking, no PPE, because it wasn't required. So while you understood that there had to be a health and safety plan, and that was part of the health and safety plan, you also recognize the fact that it's not being totally contained. You know, so there was a certain amount of exposure that you knew you were being exposed to. (*slight pause*) You just, again, you just did it, you just did it.

**Ghaliyah AlHammedi** [01:32:33] One of the questions is it must have been very challenging, of course, and a very difficult work. Were there any support systems for you in place?

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<sup>11</sup> Personal Protective Equipment.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:32:45] Well, we have an Employee Assistance Unit that we could go to if we feel we need to talk to somebody, the Department has that, that was available. The Army Corps had some people here that you could talk to if you wanted to go into the mess tent or request counseling if you wanted to have it on site. You know, most of the time, any counseling was done around the lunch table, you know, guys would just sit and talk, and talk through what had happened, what they'd seen, and get past that just by sharing it. *(slight pause)* But no, I don't... there may have been one or two guys that took advantage of it. I don't really recall. But it was available, it was certainly available and we made sure that everybody knew that it was available. So.

**Ghaliyah AlHammedi** [01:33:59] So when did the project end for you personally, like everything went back to the, you could say normal, I guess, or back how it was?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:34:11] Well, we finished here on July, I think July 31st was the last official day of the recovery operation, and then it was on that day that the governor closed the landfill again officially. So at that point, we were back to somewhat normal operations. So, again, one of the sad outcomes of that, were that, you know, the city financially was on a downturn following 9/11. So, the plan to move that mound up here, from down below was off the table now, because that would require all these tractor operators that we had that were employed would be moving that.

So, at the time, there was a program in the city called the Mayor's Interagency Cover Program. So what that program did was, any capital projects going on in the city that required excavation. The dirt that was generated from those excavation sites could be brought here for free. So what that did, it allowed us to bring in material for free. We're not trucking it. We're having the other companies truck it in and they would bring it up here and we would just place it to create that crown. So, again, we didn't need the tractor operators anymore or we didn't need as many tractor operators anymore. So we ended up laying off quite a few of them, which was sad because these guys worked there for years and years and years. The landfill was opened up in 1948. It was only supposed to be open for a couple of years, it was only supposed to landfill so that they could put in housing, but that never, that never happened. That was part of Robert Moses' plan, but that never happened. So it was ultimately kept as a landfill. But a lot of these tractor operators, their fathers worked here, you know, and, it was part of their history. So it was sad. We lost, we lost a lot of good people. We had to lay them off. And, uh, then this operation became a fill operation. It was just basically bringing material in and filling it in and raising the crown. Until ultimately we had enough in, and then we contracted with Tully to come in and do the finished work. So a kind of routine. You did have a couple of things that happened, like I said, you had, when they found the material in the ConEd manholes, they brought it in. So we got involved with that whole operation that lasted a little over a year, I think, maybe close two years. So we were involved in that operation. And then ultimately in 2006, I got promoted and moved up to

Manhattan. And someone else took over as director here and I would keep in contact with them, I was their boss at the time, then. Fresh Kills was in the rearview mirror at that point, you know, it was going forward with export and export was keeping us busy. Then the Solid Waste Management Plan was keeping us extremely busy, getting that up and running. So we had more than enough to keep us occupied. Like I said, never boring. Just different. Just different.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:38:19] Must have been weird working here after 9/11, did it ever feel normal again or did you always kind of see this?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:38:28] It's weird being here after it closed because you can't imagine what it was like when it was operational. I mean, there was movement all over. Wherever you looked, there was equipment moving and... Like I said in the beginning, for someone who was uninitiated, it looked like chaos, but once you saw the beauty of the the movement of equipment, you know, you appreciated just how how incredible it was that we managed to landfill 12,000 tons a day, and all the parts that were necessary in order to do that. You had a barging operation that when barges just came in, back in,... I can't think of... 1988, I think we were sued by the town of Woodbridge, the town right over here.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:39:25] In New Jersey?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:39:26] In New Jersey. Because there were needles that were showing up on their shoreline, so they were claiming that it was coming off our barges, so we were sued and we ended up having to operate under a consent order. And part of that consent order was that we had to initiate all these water quality initiatives... Which also involved putting in the netting. We had a lock system for barges that came in so that litter would not move out. We had those skimmer boats that I showed you. Skimmer boats would constantly be patrolling different sections of the waterway. We had water quality officers who would make sure that there was no debris blowing into the waterway from the onshore side. So there were quite a bit of water quality requirements that we met the conditions of the consent order and allowed us to operate, in what we felt was a responsible manner. *(slight pause)* So, again, all of these different components that were necessary to make this whole operation work, it was fun! Making sure that everything.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:41:01] Like a giant puzzle.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:41:02] *(shows picture)* Yeah, yeah. This is a picture of the fire department apparatus that was...

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:41:09] Oh wow that was here as well?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:41:10] Yeah, yeah. Like I said, we had fourteen hundred vehicles. You can see how they're stacked up. These are police cars. Police cars.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:41:19] Yeah. Robin mentioned something about you also having to take care of the vehicles? She wasn't sure.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:41:25] Yeah, we had, like I said, ultimately we had to... Thirteen hundred eighty nine were recycled, 17 went to museums and 14 were returned. So 14 people wanted their cars back. I don't know why!

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:41:40] Wow they made it all the way here.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:41:41] Yeah, exactly. So, uh, so in order to recycle them, we had to, like I said, we had to abate them as much as we could. So we created these pits where we wash them down. We had to power wash them. We had an asbestos company coming in and taking the water out, because that's all we could do. We could only wash it out. So we had a company removing the water, the waste water. But in the very early days when I would come back to see the site as it evolved, Mike Mucci, who was like I said, was the director, he, we would come up here and he says, you can't believe this. So we were walking through and it was like stacks on both sides. But some of the cars, the batteries were still hooked up. Batteries were still alive. So you would actually hear the radio squawking. So it was the most eerie thing you could imagine, as you're going through these corridors of crushed vehicles, hearing radio squawking. Oh, my God, that was terrible. *(slight pause)* So, like I said when, at the end of the day, we were extremely proud of everything that we did. Whether we get the recognition or not, that's, that's up to history, but everybody that was involved in the operation is incredibly proud. *(shows picture)* This was a piece of steel. This piece of steel nearly broke our crane. This, Northrop Grumman<sup>12</sup> had requested a piece, the largest piece of steel we had, that was going to be put into the USS New York<sup>13</sup>, into the bow of the USS New York. They melted it down. So, again, we nearly brought that crane loading up. But this was the ship that it was put into.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:43:52] Oh the crane? Or the steel?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:43:54] The steel, the big piece of steel here. So that was. So anyway, these are all yours and you can go through them at your leisure.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:44:08] Thank you, that's amazing.

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<sup>12</sup> An American aerospace and defense technology company.

<sup>13</sup> A transport dock ship of the United States Navy named "New York" in honor of the victims of 9/11.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:44:09] Yeah. This also tells you everything that we had done down at Ground Zero. You know, you got to realize, too, all those apartment buildings around Ground Zero, there was no power for months and months and months. So all of the waste that was in those refrigerators was going bad, so working with the Department of Health, Sanitation would go around and we would remove that waste, which is actually an incredible -- an incredible -- when you look at the number of apartments that are around there, and buildings, restaurants, businesses. But we, you know, all of the equipment that was working at Ground Zero, we fueled it all for the first two weeks until they could get a contract in place. So we did all the fueling, all of the dust suppression, we took care of. Lighting. A lot of the lighting we provided, not all of it, but a lot of the lighting in the beginning, we provided with light packs that we had. The tow contract that we had for the barges, all the tugs, we reactivated contracts with them to get barges moved. We reactivated our contract with the recycler too, to handle the additional steel that we had, transfer stations that we got up. So, and then we also worked with the DEC to to permit the loading facilities at Ground Zero that they ultimately used. So they used our, they used our expertise in many, many ways. So that's yours. *(gives all the picture)*

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:46:04] How much time do you still have? *(laughs)*

**Dennis Diggins** [01:46:09] *(laughs)* How many questions do you have?

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:46:10] Maybe we could ask, um, yeah. This one, because Robin wanted us to ask this one and then yeah, we can wrap it up pretty soon because it's been almost two hours already.

**Ghaliyah AlHammedi** [01:46:25] So one of the questions is, what do you wish the world understood about Sanitation's role in 9/11?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:46:38] I wish the world knew just how efficient we were, how professional we were, how dedicated and passionate we were -- as much, if not, as much as any of the agencies that lost personnel. Again, like I said, Police Department lost people. Fire Department lost people. Port Authority lost people. We didn't lose anybody, but our family members were lost. So to us, that was as personal as you can get. And I'm just talking about family members from personnel working here at Fresh Kills. I don't know what it was like in the rest of the agency. You know, we have 7500 uniformed personnel and another 2500 civilians. So out of 10,000 people, I don't know how many others lost people. But it was personal to everybody because this was our city. I mean, I used to have anniversary dinners at the top of the, you know, the windows of the world, with my wife and... That was... That was a huge center of our city and to see it, to see it knocked down. Like I said, everybody took it personal. So Sanitation...was an incredible asset that was... unheralded, widely used by the agencies who needed it, namely FEMA, the Army Corps. I mean, Phillips and Jordan, who, like I said, was the contractor brought

out here, we ended up building a mutual respect, where up until about two years ago, I still kept in touch with the supervisor in charge of that company and... *(pause)* so I would like, I would, I wish that people knew just what we did, doesn't have to do with the details, just know that Sanitation was there. And what we did.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:49:02] What would the, because you mentioned that recognition will be kind of up to history, but what would it look like for you?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:49:12] Just to know that, you know, even if it's a footnote that Sanitation played a major role in the recovery. We can't say in the search and rescue, we can't -- that's not our job. Yet when I was down there, especially in the early days, just to give you an idea of what it was like, I would go to, they had two meetings a day at the Debris Task Force. So after the 1:00 meeting, I would go and I would work with crews that were cleaning up lower Manhattan. So that first week, Mayor Giuliani said he wanted everything below Canal Street cleaned so that it would give the impression of normalcy. So it actually rained that weekend. So that helped us. But we had crews going street to street, washing down buildings with the hydrant hoses and washing down the streets and sweeping the streets to get rid of the dust and debris, just to give that sense of normalcy. Because, again, if you talk to experts about recovering from a disaster, a natural disaster or a manmade disaster, they said having the area returned to its normal state helps in the mental recovery of people, so. So anyway, the Department was able to do that for the first week and... But anyway, I would go and I would supervise a couple of crews out there and they would *beg* me, the Sanitation workers *beg* me to go on to the pile so that they could be part of the bucket brigade of bringing material off the pile. And I would have to tell them, listen, the work that you're doing here is as important as the work that they're doing there. I said ours is different, but it's just as important. So I said, you have to stay here. But a lot of them, after their 12 hour shift was over, would go on to the pile and work the pile, you know, in the bucket brigade.

So, listen, like I said, my impression of our workers rose unbelievably high because of what I saw on a regular basis. I mean... People wanted to do everything they possibly could do and more. So. That's it.

**Ghaliah AlHammedi** [01:52:03] I feel like it's all been answered.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:53:07] Yeah. Can I ask one last question? *(laughs)* Trying to sneak in.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:52:17] You're going to be a journalist, *(chuckles)* you have to get used to it

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:52:19] Exactly that, yeah. I was wondering more largely, as a New Yorker, how does, you know, that tragedy, does it still affect you today or has it still kind of changed the way you see the city or kind of more broadly?

**Dennis Diggins** [01:52:42] There's always reminders of the loss that we had had. You know, I didn't lose family members, but I lost childhood friends that worked for the fire department. One of them... One of them played the drums, I'm in a pipe and drum band, so we would play parades throughout the city and out in Long Island and I used to run into Kevin out in Long Island and also in Bay Ridge, those parades. And he joined the band and played the bass drum just so that he could be with his boys because his boys played the pipes, his two sons played the pipes. So you know when I had read that Kevin, he was in Rescue 5, he got killed, you know that... So every time I went to a parade where I would normally run into him, that would break my heart. Because, you know, he did everything that he could... And his sons now are both firemen, too, his sons are firemen. One of them went to West Point, but...

You know, and then when you have, like, a neighborhood, if there's a neighborhood get-together, you know, people will talk about the ones who died. Donnie Regan, he was the brother of a bar owner, by me. And, you know, when his first kid was born, he asked me to jump behind the bar for him. And while he ran to his wife and she was at the hospital giving birth. And, you know, just little stories like that, you know, you never forget. And it's just sad to see good people who died because of it. So it never goes away, never goes away. *(pause)*

You just hope, going back to what you said before, I just hope that... a lot of the things that got a lot of play in the papers was, when the Families for A Proper Burial, that's what their name was, we were, Sanitation, was kind of isolated as the bad guy, as the culprit in this, and I was never comfortable with that, and I said, first of all, we were never the ones who made the decision to keep the material here. I can tell you that we did everything in our power to make sure that it was, everything re-searched and nothing was left behind. But I was never comfortable with the fact that, you know, it was like... when it was time to go to court, everybody else was over here and still the heroes and Sanitation was over here playing defense.. And I wouldn't want to have that part of the history that Sanitation was... was considered, I don't know, culpable in putting the material in the landfill or just because it was our landfill, that was not our decision.

But again, we made sure that it was done correctly. So that's it, I'm just, you know, you just don't want, you don't want anything negative and that hurt us when that was done. I remember the people who were kind of the leaders of that group, we had a meeting in my trailer down there and the husband asked me, he says, "So who told you to put the material here?" he says. "Well, that came from the Mayor's Office." So he says, "So you followed orders?" "Yeah, we follow orders, yes." So he says, "So like the Nazis, you just followed orders." And I just said, "Well, this meeting is over," I said. If you're going to compare us to Nazis, meeting's over. Like,

blindly, blindly following orders, I said, that's not the way it works. So that kind of left a bitter, bitter taste in your mouth, you know? And again, you know, they're citing things that the FBI and the NYPD said. And I said, "I can't speak for what they told you." I said, "I can only tell you what was here before, what's here now." So, that was, that was not a pleasant part of the operation. It's starting to rain, girls.

**Charlotte and Ghaliah** [01:57:25] Yeah, yeah.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:57:30] Thank you.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:57:32] Good?

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:57:33] Yeah, but more than good.

**Ghaliah AlHammedi** [01:57:34] That was amazing.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:57:36] So much.

**Dennis Diggins** [01:57:38] I hope it made some sense.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:57:40] Oh yeah,

**Ghaliah AlHammedi** [01:57:41] Definitely.

**Charlotte Morlie** [01:75:42] A lot of sense.