

DSNY ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVE

Narrator: Michael Mucci

Interviewer: Demetra Maragos

By telephone

April 20, 2021

Recording Prompt [00:00:07] This call is being recorded.

Demetra Maragos [00:00:10] All right. Hi, Mr. Mucci, if you could just introduce yourself, where you're joining us from, and the date and time.

Michael Mucci [00:00:20] Sure. Good morning. My name is Michael Mucci. I'm retired director of waste disposal for New York City Department of Sanitation. I'm doing the interview from my home in Tinton Falls, New Jersey. It's April 20th, 2021, and the time is 12:04 p.m. Eastern Time.

Demetra Maragos [00:00:43] Wonderful, and I'm Demetra Maragos currently recording this interview from Vancouver, Canada, and it is 9:04 a.m. here. So let's just jump right into it. Can you tell me about a little bit about when you were born and a little bit about your childhood, where you grew up and everything in your family?

Michael Mucci [00:01:03] Okay, I'm going to give away my age. I was born in November, 1955. I grew up in Staten Island, New York, where I spent 63 years of my life. We just moved to New Jersey two years ago. That's pretty much it. I mean, we grew up -- I actually lived within a couple of miles of where I grew up. After I got married -- I got married in 1977, going on 44 years this year -- so we pretty -- I pretty much spent my entire life in Staten Island before moving to New Jersey, which was a big change.

Demetra Maragos [00:01:47] And do you have any siblings or anything?

Michael Mucci [00:01:51] I do. Both my parents are deceased, I have a brother who lives in Toms River, New Jersey. I have two boys -- 38, Michael, and Justin is 36, and I have four grandchildren: Giovanna and Nico, Giovanna is 10, Nico is going to be 8, little Mickey here in New Jersey, he's 4, and Juliana is 2. My youngest son lives in New Hampshire, so I travel up there once in a while.

Demetra Maragos [00:02:27] Oh amazing, and were you somebody that was really interested in school? Were you into sports or anything? Can you give us a little more insight about what you were like when you were younger?

Michael Mucci [00:02:38] Yeah, no, school was not -- at that time we weren't really pushed -- parents pushed us to do civil service at the time and sports was a big thing in my life, especially growing up -- baseball, that's what I was big into, baseball. And Staten Island is a big -- was a big sports community.

Demetra Maragos [00:03:06] Do you have a favorite team?

Michael Mucci [00:03:09] Oh, of course, New York Mets and the New York Giants.

Demetra Maragos [00:03:14] Why did I even ask, so obvious? *[laughs]* So you mentioned that your family really pushed you to go into civil service. Is that what drew you to Sanitation? Can you tell us how you decided to go into that?

Michael Mucci [00:03:28] Yes, my mother's side of the family was businessmen, they were entrepreneurs, so everybody all owned businesses. So I started out of high school working for them and then I took all city tests. And I got called for the Sanitation in August of 1981, and my wife at the time said to me, "You're going to pick up garbage?" I said, "I don't know, I'll give it a try." I never knew anything about it, so I took the job. My wife -- my mother was ecstatic. But that's how I got started, I didn't even know what I was going to stay there, I'll work 20 years, I'll leave and see what it's all about and it wound up being pretty good to me.

Demetra Maragos [00:04:15] You mentioned some of the tests. Can you take us through what those were like?

Michael Mucci [00:04:22] Sorry, Sanitation tests?

Demetra Maragos [00:04:24] Yes.

Michael Mucci [00:04:27] Yes, well, I started when I took the test for Sanitation. It was basically a written test, which was pretty easy, and then the physical was the hard part, that's back at that time, that's what they went by, the physical -- your written test was just to get you qualified for the physical, which was the whole basis of the list that they came up with. And ongoing throughout my career, there were tests for a couple of levels. And then after that it was interviews. You had to submit resumes and be interviewed by two different committees before you got promoted.

Demetra Maragos [00:05:13] All right, so you said you were hired in August of '81, is that correct?

Michael Mucci [00:05:20] Correct. August of '81, I was assigned to District 5 in Manhattan East, that took in from 14th to 59th Street, between Eighth [Avenue] and Lex [Lexington Avenue], it was right smack in the middle of midtown Manhattan -- Theater District, Garment Area, Flower District. It was a pretty nice place to start to work. From there I was -- when I was promoted to supervisor, I was sent to Brooklyn 6, which is pretty much downtown Brooklyn, Red Hook area. I stayed there only for about a year. I put in a transfer into Fresh Kills.

Demetra Maragos [00:06:02] [crosstalk] And when were you promoted? Sorry, I interrupted

Michael Mucci [00:06:03] June of 1986, I was promoted to supervisor. [crosstalk]

Demetra Maragos [00:06:18] No, sorry, go ahead, I interrupted.

Michael Mucci [00:06:22] And I was assigned to Brooklyn 6, which is in the Bureau of Cleaning and Collection, and I stayed there for a little over a year. I put in a transfer to go to Fresh Kills.

Demetra Maragos [00:06:35] And can you talk about what your responsibilities were like as district superintendent supervisor?

Michael Mucci [00:06:41] Well, supervisor in Brooklyn, you're assigned to supervise the collection trucks, the cleaning in the streets, the mechanical brooms, we did time-keeping. We wrote summonses, derelict vehicles, supervised snow operations. As a district superintendent, I was in Fresh Kills when I was promoted to district superintendent and at Fresh Kills, you were responsible for whatever happened on your shift as the district superintendent. At that time, when I went in -- I was promoted to superintendent in 1990 and at that time, we were still in operation. So you were in charge of the unloading of the barges, whatever shift you were on, the operation and the -- what

they call the “active bank” -- landfilling the garbage, covering the garbage, all operations that entailed at Fresh Kills landfill at the time.

Demetra Maragos [00:07:49] And then – so, and then you were promoted once again, correct? You've been promoted quite a few times, I just want to say, but what was your next promotion after that?

Michael Mucci [00:07:59] Quite a few. Right, after that, I was promoted to what was, at the time, was assistant borough superintendent. Now it's called a deputy chief. It's basically district superintendent, level two. And I stayed my career in Fresh Kills as I was promoted. So from there, when you were assistant borough superintendent in Fresh Kills, you were assigned what they called the Plant. We had Plant One, Plant Two -- at the time truck fills was open, so I kind of bounced around in that. I was in charge of administration for a while, land cleaning operations, Plant One. Plant One was the big, the big area in Fresh Kills where you had a couple of unloading pads where most of the people worked. So I kind of got familiar with every single aspect of the operation at Fresh Kills. And then I was promoted to, they call borough superintendent. Which kind of made me in charge at the time, was all of Fresh Kills. But that time was, like, 19 – it was late, like, 1997, so we were winding down operations already at the time.

So from there during the 9/11 operation, I was promoted to a three-star chief, which is what they call full chief in Sanitation. I stayed at Fresh Kills during the 9/11 operation, and then I was assigned to the main office¹ in February of 2002. From there, I worked as a deputy director of the Bureau [of Waste Disposal], which put me in charge of everything. I reported to the director. So any aspect that was going on within the Bureau of Waste Disposal, which was Fresh Kills, the closure of Fresh Kills, the continuing 9/11 operation. We were starting to export garbage at the time. So all the contracts, we were negotiating long-term contracts. So it became more of an administrative deal at that point. And then I became the director of waste disposal for the last five years of my career.

Demetra Maragos [00:10:32] And you're also a four-star chief, correct?

Michael Mucci [00:10:36] That's the director, yes, the director of waste disposal is a four-star chief of the Department, there was at the time, two, one in charge of the Bureau of Waste Disposal and one four-star in charge of the Bureau of Cleaning and Collection.

Demetra Maragos [00:10:52] Can you take us through what it means to be a four-star chief, because from what I understand, it is quite rare to achieve that status in Sanitation.

Michael Mucci [00:11:02] Well, it is the highest uniformed position within the Department. The next position up is what they call a civilian position, the first deputy commissioner. So, yeah, it is a lot. You're in charge of the entire Bureau, all the personnel who work in that bureau, you're in charge of your budget, which for waste disposal was over \$300 million at the time. You dealt with other agencies like the police department, fire department, people with your rank, you representing the Department to the DEC,² community meetings, and you negotiated long – I negotiated contracts with the all the waste vendors that the city now deals with long-term export contracts. So it was pretty – you had a lot of responsibility at that point.

Demetra Maragos [00:11:57] Were you ever overwhelmed at all? Like, were you -- did that kind of responsibility – obviously you'd worked in the department for like, over 20 -- 20 years by that time, but was that responsibility overwhelming for you?

¹ DSNY headquarters at 125 Worth Street in lower Manhattan

² New York State Department of Environmental Conservation

Michael Mucci [00:12:16] I'm going to say no, because of the experience gained during 9/11, I think, prepared you for a lot because that was like crisis management at the max. The only -- I'm not going to say it's overwhelming, but I did have to learn how to -- you know, contracts and legal, you dealt with a lot of lawyers, and that was kind of -- I'm not going to say overwhelming -- frustrating, put it to you that way. And when you've been in an operation part of the Department your entire career, to switch to more of an administrative way, you knew how to get things done, but now you had to try to put it in writing with lawyers and how to get things done with outside agencies and other companies was extremely frustrating. Sometimes it took ten years just to write a contract.

Demetra Maragos [00:13:22] So do you think starting off as a sanitation worker and working your way through the organization set a good foundation for you? How do you think that helped you?

Michael Mucci [00:13:34] Well, I believe it definitely helps -- experience -- you could read the manuals all you want, but just dealing with people is an experience. We've seen throughout the years how different people react to giving orders, some people you gotta push, some people you don't, some people you have to watch. I see through the years, too, and maybe getting older, the newer generations, maybe a little problem trying to get to work and I don't know what that is, maybe a different little work ethic as younger people, maybe. Like I say, as you get older, you kind of, I don't know, react to it a little differently, maybe. Every generation is a little different, but you do see a difference in the workforce. People don't realize -- I'll put it to you this way: back in 1981, when you got this job, you were kind of really happy you got it. Today, people complain how we work too hard, we don't make enough money. I used to talk to the class, new sanitation workers when they came in. And at the end, I would tell them, "You just hit the lottery," and they would look at me like I was nuts. I said, "You're going to get a check for the rest of your life, think about that. Not just 'til you work but for the rest of your life, you will be getting a check, and the higher you go in the Department, the more you're going to get. That's worth something."

Demetra Maragos [00:15:16] Oh, absolutely. You mentioned when you were a sanitation worker that you learned how to deal with people. Can you talk about a few specific memories that really taught you something about working with others or working with -- working in public service that have really stuck with you?

Michael Mucci [00:15:41] Well. When you first come on, you really -- I don't know, you get to work with different partners and believe it or not -- well, back then it was three men on a truck picking up garbage. So if you had two guys that you really got along with -- and one of them that I worked with a lot is still my friend to this day -- you had a good day, and if you did your work, nobody bothered you. But if you got a bad partner, your day was miserable. And some guys wanted to work, some guys spent more time trying not to work and to just do the job and then as you became, you know -- you go up the ranks, you kind of see how some people, even though they did their job, they might not be as efficient, they might not -- some people, some people care about what they do and some people don't. I worked with one guy in Manhattan who was a good worker, but he was a little crazy and he wound up getting arrested while he was working, we were working together. So you kind of see a lot of different personalities out there.

Demetra Maragos [00:17:01] Okay, so I want to jump in, to fast-forward a little bit now, we talked about it a bit, but when you were the director of Fresh Kills, can you give us kind of like a rundown of what a typical day was like in that position? You talked about a little bit, but just a little bit more in depth.

Michael Mucci [00:17:23] Well, when I was a director, we were winding down, so I'll take you back, like, as an assistant director. When we were in full operation, you would come in and the first thing you would do is, check to see what the night shift did. Our goal was three boats per digging operation. You checked there, make sure they did what they were supposed to do, you checked all the incident reports, make sure nothing crazy happened, and then you checked for your day. Do you have enough boats to dig? Are the cranes up? That was the main thing -- if the cranes weren't in operation, your day was done. And then you checked personnel. Did you have the right amount of personnel, equipment? When you talk landfill operation, you had your cranes, you had bulldozers, dump trucks, front-end loaders. Cover material had to be brought in, so you went through it like a checklist, personnel, equipment. Is this up, is this up, is this up? You had your orders for the day, call New York [Sanitation main office], see if anything changed, and then you gave out your orders to the different plants, Plant One, Plant Two -- this is what we got, this is what we're doing. Maybe we didn't have three boats to dig. Maybe we were only digging one pad and we were on maintenance on the other. So your day was based basically on the amount of material you had and how many barges you had to unload, how many -- what the personnel you had with your equipment was, you checked with the Bureau of Motor Equipment to make sure that they had mechanics working and you basically did this through your assistant directors and your district superintendents who were assigned to Plant One and Plant Two.

We also had at the time, when I started there, we had a water cleanup operation. Which, to give you a little background, we were sued by the New Jersey town of Woodbridge for floating garbage. And so we had skimmer boats that went around and cleaned up the water as we unloaded boats and we had to make sure that they were up. You had a whole unit of district superintendents that were in charge of just strictly monitoring water cleanliness, so you coordinated with them. And basically, that was it, and then you just ran your operation through the day, make sure everything's going smooth, have everybody report to you.

Demetra Maragos [00:20:32] [crosstalk] Oh, no, sorry, you continue with your story my --you go ahead, my fault.

Michael Mucci [00:20:38] Oh, no, that's okay, go ahead.

Demetra Maragos [00:20:41] I was just going to say, how many personnel did you oversee, just to give context?

Michael Mucci [00:20:47] Well, when Fresh Kills was in full operation, in the mid-, early '90s when I was there, it was about 600 personnel and that included assistant borough superintendents, district supers, supervisors, sanitation workers, operating engineers, with -- crane operators and tractor operators was another different union, oilers who worked in conjunction with the crane operators. You had attendants who cleaned equipment for you and cleaned litter out on the highways and cleaned the offices, you had clerks in the offices working, you had mechanics, you had welders, riggers. So launch operators who were actually captains were operating the vessels, the skimmer boats to clean the water. So all in all, at the height, at the peak, was about 600 people. That's 24 hours a day, six days a week.

Demetra Maragos [00:22:04] WOW. So obviously, you're the director during a time when it was closing. Can you take me through how those 600 people were dispersed once closure proceedings started?

Michael Mucci [00:22:16] Yes, as soon as we started winding down, the garbage was exported by borough, starting with the Bronx, so it actually went a lot faster than anybody thought it would do. So at the time, now you have -- you have people where you can reassign, like sanitation workers

and supervisors were very easy because they just went into the system. They went either to an MTS³ that was operating still or most likely back into the Bureau of Cleaning and Collection, which is throughout the city; in the districts, they pick up garbage and clean the streets. Tractor operators were a little more difficult, and there was a lot of them. Some of them went to DOT, Department of Transportation. Couple might have went to Department of Parks. Some of them actually got laid off by the city and they went back into the union. Crane engineers were the same. They went to Department of Transportation, I think one might have went to Department of Ferries, and then they were dispersed through their union to where -- any other jobs they had, because we had no use for them at that point. We kept a few tractor operators, because they, we still had a lot of closure work in the landfill itself, as far as cover material. They kept the crews, sanitation workers, to continue cleaning, we used to clean up the perimeter of the landfill. Launch operators, some of them went to work on the ferries, some of them went back to their union. And during this time, too, a lot of people, if they had their time, they just retired. Mechanics just went through the system. They went back into the Bureau of Cleaning and Collection, wherever needed by the support services. And that's a -- it's funny you ask that question because it leads into something when we start talking about 9/11.

Demetra Maragos [00:24:37] And sorry, how does that lead into 9/11?

Michael Mucci [00:24:41] Okay, so -- on 9/11, we were closed at the time, so there was only a handful of personnel left. It was some tractor operators if we were moving material, moving dirt, and some sanitation workers. So when we started going full scale, we had to get these people back. So, again, Sanitation was very easy because they worked for the department. We just put out, you put out a teletype or email and said, anybody that worked in Fresh Kills that wanted to volunteer to come back, this is how many people we need, and you got them. Tractor operators might have been a little different because we had other agencies where they were sent to, and get them back. Crane engineers, we had a few because we were doing maintenance, but we had to get some of those guys back from the ferries also. So that was one obstacle. That actually went pretty smooth, but it took a couple of days to get everybody back in place.

Demetra Maragos [00:26:01] Okay, so now that we're talking about 9/11, what was your memory, what's your memory of the morning of 9/11?

Michael Mucci [00:26:14] Well, that morning was, we were working to close the landfill, so all we had really was a cover operation. What I mean by that is, we were taking in clean fill to bring the landfill up to grade so it could be -- so a cap could be put on it. So that morning, I was actually in my office talking to one of my former bosses who was in the main office, and he said to me, "A plane just hit the World Trade Center. I got to go." Okay. So naturally you turn the TV on and see what was going on. But the day was so clear, so we took a ride up to the top. And -- you're not really familiar with the landfill, but the top of [Section] One and Nine was probably, I don't know, 280 feet above sea level, and you were able to see directly into lower Manhattan and watch the tower burn. So then we came down and watched it on TV and as soon as -- as soon as the first building collapsed, you knew -- I knew some way we were going to be involved and I didn't have to be told. I called -- at the time the deputy director was Dennis Diggins, I believe somebody's going to interview him, and I told him, I said, "Den, just get everything that we think might possibly be needed. Just get it ready." And then we got a call to send whatever we could to lower Manhattan. So that day was just like -- started off, I guess, like everybody says, like any other day, it was a beautiful day. Once that -- once that collapsed, I knew.

³ Marine transfer station, where barges are loaded with garbage or/and recycling

Never thought in a million years we would be getting all that material at Fresh Kills, that wasn't a thought at that time, just -- let's see what we can do. And we got front-end loaders, dump trucks, a bulldozer, we had a truck crane, which was a movable crane. Whatever we thought, we put in a caravan and that afternoon sent it to Ground Zero. Actually, we were staged in downtown Brooklyn for a while, and then it just escalated from there.

We sent whoever wasn't in that caravan, tractor operators, sanitation workers, we sent home and told them to come back at 10:00 at night. This way, we knew we would, if needed, we had a 24-hour operation.

Once that was done, you kept getting little bits and pieces of how you -- what was going to happen with the operation. Basically, what I remember after that is getting a call from my boss telling me somebody from the FBI was going to meet me tomorrow morning and look at the unloading. They were talking about bringing barges in. Okay. So at that point, it was like, I waited for the 10:00 crew, gave them their orders, we put them in vans, then I went home. So I worked from, like, 6:30 in the morning 'til 11 or so at night.

I got about three hours sleep and the phone rang, it was the supervisor from the 12-to-8 shift at Fresh Kills, going crazy that the FBI is there with trucks and they want to know where to put them. I said, "What are you talking about, they weren't supposed to come until the morning." So then he says, "I'll call you back," so I said, you know what? I can't do this, my kids, my wife -- I got to go, I'll go back to work.

So I remember going there at 2:30 in the morning. And there were two trucks. And each one had a young kid from the FBI, and they were all carrying machine guns. And they want to dump these two trucks. I says, "Well, you can't, you've got to put them over there. You can't." "No, we're going to put it right here!" I said, "You can't put them here. If you put them here, you're going to just close the whole place up. We got to go back there. We got to start separating, doing a landfill operation with these trucks." So he says, "We got to separate the buildings, Building One and Building Two." And I said, "Well, that's impossible." So he asked the guys, they were from the Housing Department, "Where you come from?" "I don't know." "Where you come from?" "I don't know." I said, "See that, you can't separate." So that's how, that's how the first two trucks came in to Fresh Kills: 2:30 in the morning on September 12th.

Demetra Maragos [00:31:30] You mentioned that you worked from, like, you had, like, 12-hour days. Were you ever concerned about how that would affect your own personal health at all, working such long hours and assuming that went on for a few days?

Michael Mucci [00:31:44] Oh, more than a few days! The first week, that whole week, from Tuesday, well, we worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week, so never had a day off, I didn't get a day off for a few weeks, but it was more than 12 hours, in the beginning was probably 15, 16-hour days, because as a director, you got there in the morning, you met with all the different agencies and in the beginning it was crazy. And you waited 'til the next nightshift came in and gave them their orders before and they operated before you went home. But the whole -- every day for probably the first month, just evolved, just got busier and busier and busier, and the whole operation just evolved into what it became, which was a pretty smooth operation after a while.

Just to give you an idea, we started taking trucks from Ground Zero, and then they wanted to bring in barges. So we -- like I said, we were closed, we had transformed a couple of our cranes into what we call digging cranes or big backhoes, but we -- we kind of went from being totally closed to being fully operational within a few days as if nothing happened. And the amazing part about this whole thing was, we closed the landfill, the last barge came in in March of 2001. So from March into

September, they said we had to bring in, like, a million yards of dirt, because we closed early, so we had to bring the entire landfill up to grade for drainage, and during that time we kept building roads for access. If the landfill wasn't basically flat at the time and we were building these road components, 9/11 [investigation and recovery operation] would not have happened there. There would be no possible way that we could have did the operation that we did. So go figure, right?

Demetra Maragos [00:34:38] [crosstalk] No, no, no – sorry, I'm not used to talking to somebody without seeing their face. I feel like I keep on interrupting you. I so apologize.

Michael Mucci [00:34:49] No, that's okay because it seems like there's a little delay.

Demetra Maragos [00:34:52] Yeah, I think there is with the recording, I'm sorry, but so you mentioned when the FBI showed up, they just kind of showed up with two trucks. They didn't really know what was going on, but then I read that you guys organized everything into two piles. What kind of screening practices did you guys put in place and sorting practices? How did you guys go through all the material so thoroughly?

Michael Mucci [00:35:20] Okay, in the beginning, a lot of trucks were bringing in -- basically ash, crushed dust, and in the beginning it was a lot a lot of steel, a lot coming in by barges, some of it coming in by trucks. A lot of sheeting from the building, I-beams, that was all put in a separate area so it could later be recycled. Now, the other material, at first we started bringing it in and they – we would lay it out in fields, and spread it out, and FBI and NYPD would go through that with rakes and shovels and just to look for any personal belongings or any body parts, actually. From there we realized it wasn't that efficient, so we brought in, what we used in recycling and then like rock recycling, rock plants, like a big sifter that we put the material on and it sifts little different sizes through, down to a quarter of an inch, and then that was spread out and checked.

Eventually they kept trying all these different machines and we came up with like a, I guess, a variation, where you would use one of these big round sifters that they would use in any kind of recycling plant and it would put different sizes of material, basically rock or dust or dirt, on different conveyers. And the police department would man these conveyers, and they would check, as the material was coming along. If you've ever seen a recycling plant or like they call – recycling that takes single stream recycling. It goes into a conveyor and then they have air that blows the paper away and then there's people on a conveyor to take big pieces off. It's basically exactly what this was. And it was multiple stations of it. And as the material went through was checked, whatever came out the other end that they felt was clean, that they found nothing in, we would landfill it. So we did that for ten months.

The only building that was separate was Building Seven, because that was federal -- FBI, Secret Service, everybody, all federal agencies were in that building. So a lot of that material was searched separately. Even at the end when we were done, the three or four weeks, I'm not sure exactly of the dates that we did this, separating manually, searching manually. We actually dug up and re-searched everything through the machines because we knew it was more efficient. So that was how this -- and the way this came about was, we would have an operational meeting every morning with the police department, Sanitation, FBI, FEMA.⁴ FEMA brought in a company, a private company that they use for disaster. The name of that company for us was Phillips and Jordan, and every day we would go over things and we would take advice from all different agencies and we brought mechanical people in and little by little, we evolved into a very, very efficient operation. And it was extremely -- to get all of these agencies to work together, that don't happen! And during all of this, I had to maintain, or Sanitation, we had to maintain the integrity of a landfill, we still had a landfill

⁴ Federal Emergency Management Agency

here. They couldn't just go digging in certain areas or putting up tents in certain areas, they had to watch out for methane gas wells and vent pipes and leachate. So it was a challenge. But again, in a disaster like this, everybody worked together. Not only -- I mean, the sifting operation was one thing but there was so much other stuff going on, like the steel. At one point we were running out of room, we had to bring in a company that did our recycling. I think the name at the time was Hugo Neu, but they changed their name so many times since then. But they had to come in and cut up and remove all the steel so it could be recycled because we couldn't -- you couldn't just bury it in the landfill. Not only that, it was recyclable material. I know we're in the middle of a disaster, but we had to put wells in in certain areas and once that stuff was in there we wouldn't be able to do that.

And then one of the bigger challenges we had was, we started taking in cars from the parking garages, from the streets, fire department vehicles that were crushed, police department. Hundreds and hundreds of vehicles. And that was a *major* challenge to get rid of them. We had a -- if it was a city vehicle or state or federal vehicle was a little easier in the fact that, all we had to do was get that agency to condemn it and allow us to just scrap them. But any private vehicle, we had to notify every owner of every private vehicle, and let them know we had it, and they had to release it to us. So that took a tremendous amount of time. It's funny, the police department at one time, they just didn't want to be bothered with it, they said, they're yours you could do whatever you want with them, it became a real nightmare.

And then to recycle them -- we came up with a pretty good system where we barged them out of Fresh Kills, but you couldn't just put them on a barge, you had to remove the batteries and you had to remove all -- any gas and oil, then any fluids in the car before they could be transported. So that was a big undertaking.

And I'll tell you a little footnote story, a little scary story, a little horror. Back then, I guess it's more modern cars today, but at one point, I went up to the top of the hill and it was just becoming dusk and all of a sudden all these vehicles that were out in the field, lights started coming on. They had automatic sensors for all the lights. And then there was a police department or FBI, some of the radios started squawking, people talking, and I said, that's it, we can't have this. Send the mechanics up and cut all the batteries on all these cars, because this is spooky.

Demetra Maragos [00:43:46] So you mentioned earlier that you were working with the FBI, NYPD, Phillips and Jordan, so obviously government agencies and other organizations. What would you say, what did you have to teach the other agencies? Because obviously, they weren't coming into this with the same information -- you just mentioned that you have to still run it as a landfill and so there are all these different protocols. What were some of the hurdles you had to -- the Department of Sanitation had to overcome when working with these other agencies and organizations?

Michael Mucci [00:44:22] Well, basically, the NYPD was in charge of the entire operation. They were the overall overseers. So we kind of supported them. But we had to show them, like, organize where we would organize our trailers, where we put our compound, and you couldn't just go knocking stakes in the ground. You had to be protective of the integrity of the landfill. The landfill wasn't closed so we did have some leeway where we didn't have a cap we had to go through, but you had to watch out for if there was any, if they put a stake in the ground you didn't want any methane leaks coming up, methane wells that come out of the ground, you have to make sure that they weren't run over, vent pipes. So you just basically -- to let them know our DEC regulations and the DEC did have representatives up there also -- make sure that basically we kept the integrity of the landfill, keep dust down. Same as we were running a landfill operation. We had to wet all the roads, we had to cover our loads to make sure we minimize the dust. Health and safety was a big, big issue that -- so we had not only DEC but just from a health and safety standpoint, I can get into

that a little later, what we had to do for that, but that was basically just to make sure we kept the integrity of the landfill so that we didn't breach anything that shouldn't have been broken.

Demetra Maragos [00:46:13] Well, you mentioned health and safety. I've heard that there are a whole bunch of different hazmat protocols for each agency and organization. How did you guys come to an agreement on what to do universally and what did the final protocols entail?

Michael Mucci [00:46:31] Okay, what we finally did was, we had to put a health and safety committee together, so there was representatives from every agency, including the DEC, FEMA and Phillips and Jordan had a health and safety expert there. So what it came down to was, in certain areas, we marked out and we mapped out the entire operation -- at this point, it was an operation. There were meeting trailers and operation meetings and trailers and locker rooms and lunchrooms and mess tents -- we had a city. We had a self-sustained city at this point. So they came up with a map that, any sifting area that we had was what they called an "exclusion zone." So all the sifting areas and the barge unloading areas were exclusion zones, and in that exclusion zone, every personnel must wear a fit-tested respirator and complete Tyvek suits. And that was strictly, strictly adhered to. Even if an operator was in his truck, he had to have his respirator on. We were actually questioned why we did that when a lot of times at Ground Zero, they *didn't* enforce it. I said, well I can't answer you for that, but we strictly enforced the rules when it came to health and safety. Basically, it was dust. Nobody knew -- they took air quality monitors they put all around the facility, but you didn't know what was in the dust. But we -- the exclusion areas were the main spots where, no matter who you were, no matter what title you were, you wore a respirator, and if you were working in that area, you had to wear a Tyvek suit.

Demetra Maragos [00:48:53] Robin mentioned that a story about a firefighter going up the hill, of Fresh Kills, and there was some controversy over wearing his PPE. Do you remember that story or can you expand at all on it?

Michael Mucci [00:49:08] No, I'm sorry I didn't

Demetra Maragos [00:49:11] Okay, never mind. She told a story about there was a firefighter who didn't want to wear PPE and he was basically kicked off of the premises. But that could be wrong.

Michael Mucci [00:49:24] Well, good. Well, they do have a tendency not to want to do things like that. They didn't at Ground Zero. That I don't -- might not have been aware of that story, but it's possible.

Demetra Maragos [00:49:44] So there was a lot of debate and conversations around the material from Ground Zero going to Fresh Kills, especially with the families of the victims whose lives were lost as a result of the attack. Did this affect you at all?

Michael Mucci [00:50:07] Well, I think if you were from Staten Island you were affected because we all knew somebody. I had a very good friend of mine who lost their brother and he was never found. Matter of fact, I don't know in Canada if you've heard, ever hear about the Tunnel for Towers Foundation?

Demetra Maragos [00:50:31] No, actually.

Michael Mucci [00:50:34] You should look that up afterwards, you'll get a good perspective of the kind of community Staten Island is, but they never found -- anything of him, and I mean, I dealt with the victims' families, we met with them, I understand their concerns. It was impossible to really do what they were looking for to do. We had one of the tractor operators lost his son, so you

can understand how that affected people. I – you can never imagine. We met with them many times with their lawyers and tried to respectfully do something as far as a monument and some material somewhere, but it just became an overwhelming task to try to – you couldn't move out 1.2 million tons of garbage, of material, you just couldn't do it, but you understand where they came from, you really felt for them.

Demetra Maragos [00:51:49] You mentioned Staten Island and the community and you're from Staten Island. Do you think there -- I know that they that the residents of Staten Island and Fresh Kills had a little bit of a -- not tumultuous, but a difficult relationship. Do you think their perception of Fresh Kills changed post-9/11?

Michael Mucci [00:52:11] Probably not. You used “tumultuous,” it was tumultuous. It was – it was not a good relationship, put it to you that way. I used to have to go out into the community on odor complaints. You read about it in the newspapers. We went to community meetings where people called you murderers. So no, Fresh Kills, I think they tolerated the 9/11 operation, but I don't think that really changed their perspective of it. Maybe now, afterwards, that it's closed, is being transformed into a park, you might see a different perspective, but – you know, the Staten Island community came together during 9/11. We received calls, people helped us to volunteer, local restaurants sent food up every day. So in that perspective, I think they weren't upset that we were dealing with 9/11 there, I never heard of any complaints, but I don't know if it actually changed the overall perspective, they still were not happy that Fresh Kills was ever there.

Demetra Maragos [00:53:36] Was that ever difficult for you to handle at all, going to those community meetings, meeting with members and everything?

Michael Mucci [00:53:47] Yeah, I kind of got lucky in that respect, and I will admit to that, that when I was going to those meetings, I was never the man in charge. They always took the commissioner and he took the brunt of everything. So by the time I was in charge of everything, we were closed, so people were kind of happy, it was a little different, and the attendance started dropping tremendously. So in that case, I will admit I got very lucky. Community board meetings, we would go and they were pretty easy. They would just ask for – they really had no power and they would just ask for more equipment, and what are you doing about this, and what are you doing about that? But the annual Fresh Kills meeting could get very, very testy. And like I said, and I'll admit, that I got lucky and I didn't have to really stand there and answer questions.

Demetra Maragos [00:54:55] So you mentioned obviously Fresh Kills closing. Can you tell me about the closing event of the hill? Actually, sorry, I'm going to -- we'll come back to that. So you had all these contracts for the waste -- not waste, all the material being moved all throughout different states and contracts. How were those contracts affected post-9/11? Or were they affected?

Michael Mucci [00:55:28] No. Well, I didn't really deal with those contracts 'til 2006. Well, actually, no, 2002, when I went up to New York [the Sanitation main office] in 2002. No, they were really not affected. We never – it was an amazing part of the Department is that they never, even after 9/11, the only area affected by garbage pickups was that lower Manhattan. The rest of the city were on. Garbage was picked up, whatever had to be done was done, the contracts were in place, and waste was exported. Really never, never missed a beat as far as that goes. Once you deal with a public entity, private companies, as long as they can get out of the city, in and out of the city, they were okay. By at that point, everything was going out by truck that they might have had a little issue, going over bridges and that thing, but in that area. But other than that, no, nothing ever missed a beat.

Demetra Maragos [00:56:52] All right, let's go back to Fresh Kills. Can you tell me about the closing event on the hill of July of 2002?

Michael Mucci [00:57:01] The closing event of 9/11?

Demetra Maragos [00:57:05] Of 9/11 and of Fresh Kills I believe.

Michael Mucci [00:57:12] Well firstly – [crosstalk] -- I'm sorry?

Demetra Maragos [00:57:15] I know that there was, like, I just know that there was an event in 2002, I think it was on, regarding 9/11, but...

Michael Mucci [00:57:22] Yeah, well, there was an event in March of 2001 where everybody celebrated the closing of the landfill -- that was the last barge floated into Fresh Kills, it was unloaded probably a day or two after that. They had a big ceremonial, dignitaries were there, the governor, mayor, everybody was there. And that was like a big celebration: we were finally closed. And then in July of 2002, there was a closing ceremony for 9/11. We still had some work to be done, but all of the material from Ground Zero was already brought to Fresh Kills. Again, Governor Pataki and I guess [Mayor] Bloomberg at the time, everybody was there and then -- they just gave a nice ceremony, all the different agencies, and thanked everyone. There was no, nothing crazy, all the press was there. But that was in July of 2002.

Demetra Maragos [00:58:38] Was that emotional for a lot of the members who worked there?

Michael Mucci [00:58:43] I imagine so, everybody thought of it differently. You gotta remember even during this whole -- the whole Fresh Kills operation, people had access to clergy, to psychologists, any help you needed, you were able to get it. Most that was probably more with the police department and seeing things that they saw, as far as our guys were kind of -- some guys were affected by it, but most of it, you were pretty away from it. You drove your truck. These guys actually sifted through all the material. You know, you seen things. I think the biggest thing for me was when I started seeing crushed fire trucks coming in. That was emotional, like, wow, who was in that truck, at the time my son was seeing a girl whose father was a fire captain. And again, he's another one that they never found, never found any remains for. So instead on Staten Island, as the days went by, everyone knew somebody missing -- there was no possible way. Staten Island was a big civil service community.

Demetra Maragos [01:00:25] So looking back, now the closing event has happened, as the director of Fresh Kills, did you ever receive, like, feel like you received any, like, unwarranted scrutiny from the media or feel like the media represented any of the work you or the other employees did at Fresh Kills in regards to 9/11? Or do you feel like they missed what a huge part of the operation sanitation workers were?

Michael Mucci [01:00:56] I don't think Sanitation ever got credit that we should have gotten. That's definitely one part of it. Well, we never get credit, you know; we only credit if your street isn't plowed. But without us there, they would have never been able to do what they did. Without us, with our barging system, with our whole infrastructure that we had, and the expertise of the personnel, there was no way they could have did what they did there. They would have had to go out and hire cranes and barges and, it would have never been done, they would have been doing it in a parking lot somewhere or fields. And again, being a, I guess, a support operation for the police department -- even the fire department didn't have a big presence at Fresh Kills, they were more down at Ground Zero. I don't think we ever get, or we ever got, the credit deserved for the amount of work that we did. And that's okay. We're used to.

Demetra Maragos [01:02:17] Why do you think that is?

Michael Mucci [01:02:21] It's a good question. I guess we're not in the front lines, you're not considered, even though we were at the time, you're not really considered a first responder. The only time -- I don't even know if we get accolades for cleaning snow, you just get criticized. It's a tough place to be, that's for sure.

Demetra Maragos [01:02:59] Would you say that's one of the more difficult parts of the job?

Michael Mucci [01:03:05] No, not really, not unless you take it to heart, most people don't. Sometimes they'll -- you'll complain a little here and there, but I think most people understand.

Demetra Maragos [01:03:23] Did the perception of your job change at all post-9/11?

Michael Mucci [01:03:30] As far as I'm concerned, or the public?

Demetra Maragos [01:03:33] Both, actually

Michael Mucci [01:03:40] I don't know. The perception? Yeah, it might have. I think, you -- I think we might have been seen in a different light by different agencies, they didn't realize what we actually did and what we can accomplish. I think that definitely helped. I think the leaders of the police department and fire and everybody was up at Fresh Kills realized what we were capable of doing. Even with export, I've had people come to me from private companies that we deal with and they would say, "I have no idea how you guys do what you do every day, if we would have two thousand trucks that had to be dumped and cleaned for the following morning. And you guys are just amazing to do that." So I think -- as people get into the department, and they realize what we do and what we're capable of doing, then they're impressed, but when they see -- it's not an agency that's out in the in the front lines. So but when they dig deep and they realize, wow, these guys, they do a tremendous job, that I don't know how they do what they do.

Demetra Maragos [01:05:06] So I know that there's a DSNY WTC Facebook group and there are things like the WTC Mt. Sinai Health Registry. How do you think this -- how is this event reverberated into the present? How do you think it affects DSNY workers? or sanitation workers?

Michael Mucci [01:05:25] Well, I can't comment on the DSNY Facebook, because I'm not on Facebook. As far as the health registry clinic, I think that's a good thing. I belong to it. I've probably been going for about 15 years now. And I encourage anyone who went through 9/11, even if you're not feeling sick, to go. I don't go to Mount Sinai, I go in the different outlets now, I go to Rutgers University in New Jersey. But it's definitely something that I tell everyone to do, even if you don't feel sick, because you don't know what's going to happen down the road. Not to be personal, but I was just diagnosed with basal cell cancer on my arm that had to be cut out, removed. So it's 20 years later, so you just have to go. Luckily, it's nothing bad. I know a lot of guys that go, most people have respiratory issues. But if you were there, you should go, it is a great thing that they need to keep going, at least I guess until everybody, another 20 years, hopefully. But that is a good thing, and they are very, very nice people, they're very accommodating to you if you need something, they're there, so there's really no reason for anybody not to go.

Demetra Maragos [01:07:23] Do you ever feel like there could be? Do you think that sanitation workers who were either on the ground at the World Trade Center or at Fresh Kills aside from the health registry have been supported medically or...

Michael Mucci [01:07:46] Oh yeah, if you went there, they don't turn you down. So no matter what ailment you have or any complaint, I don't see anyone that would be unhappy with what they do. They send you right away to specialists. They don't leave a stone unturned, they don't question you as far as if you want to see a different doctor, they just they just try to take care of you as best they can. I don't see any sanitation worker that could say that they weren't satisfied with it. As far as I know, everybody that I know that goes, goes every year and they're fine with everything.

Demetra Maragos [01:08:38] Do you commemorate the anniversary of 9/11? If so, how? I know some people like to be out of the city and some people like to be in the city for the day. Do you commemorate it at all?

Michael Mucci [01:08:56] Not really. I watch the ceremonies on TV. I honor 9/11 through, like I said, that Tunnel to Towers Foundation, they have a race annually. And it follows the footsteps of this fireman that I'm good friends with the family. He was working in Brooklyn, he was on his way home and he heard the call for all hands and he turned around, he couldn't get through the tunnel, the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. So he put his gear on and ran through the tunnel to the Trade Center. And he was never found again, so this race follows his footsteps. So I have actually a bunch of Sanitation guys that help me that day, we volunteer to help clean up, and -- it went from a race of 500 people to a race of 25,000 people now. And it is in his honor, but it expanded so much, it is a tremendous Foundation. And they do so much for the community, if there's disasters, they do so much for fallen firefighters, police, soldiers, any police around the country that are killed, they build homes for heroes. They do a tremendous, tremendous amount of work. So that's one way that 9/11 tragedy turned into a really good thing.

Demetra Maragos [01:10:43] Do you feel like the DSNY, as a community, was pulled closer together because of 9/11?

Michael Mucci [01:10:52] Maybe during that time, I think it's all forgotten now. During 9/11, during the operation, yeah, I think a lot of people didn't -- even in the Department itself didn't realize what we did at Fresh Kills. And what we did at Ground Zero, around the Wall Street area. I think it did bring the Department together, but more towards that time. Most of the people on the job now weren't even around then.

Demetra Maragos [01:11:38] So now we're obviously coming towards the end of your career at the DSNY, can you take us through when you retired and what life kind of looks like after? Post DSNY?

Michael Mucci [01:11:58] Yeah, well, I retired in September 30th of 2011, that was exactly 30 years and one month, or two months, after I took the job. I had to retire because the pension ended at 30 years, so -- I was a little young to retire, I'll admit that at this point, probably could have worked a little longer. But there were different circumstances as to why I retired, and after I retired, after a year Superstorm Sandy hit in the New York, New Jersey area. And one of the companies that we had dealt with the exporting of waste asked if I would help them during Sandy. So I did that for a while with them. We actually did a reverse operation at Fresh Kills, where instead of unloading barges, we loaded barges with debris. And I stayed on consulting for a little bit. I still do a little consulting here and there just to keep busy. That's basically it. Grandchildren. That's what we do know. Like I said, I was... [crosstalk]

Demetra Maragos [01:13:25] Sorry, you go ahead, I interrupted again.

Michael Mucci [01:13:28] That's alright, it probably would have been smarter to work a little longer, just because I was still kind of young at the point. Hopefully, if there was other consulting, I

would have probably done that, but now I just try to keep busy, play golf and babysit and go see my grandchildren up in New Hampshire.

Demetra Maragos [01:13:59] Okay, and then finally, what do you wish the public knew specifically about your job as a director or about the DSNY at large? Do you feel like there's a misconception about the organization or the Department at large?

Michael Mucci [01:14:17] Probably that they just don't know what it actually takes to get the job done. Not even Fresh Kills, just where the public is, the public sees the sanitation guys, they come out, their garbage is gone. Half of them don't even see where it went, they don't care where it went. But if they only knew what it took to get that truck out there, to get the garbage picked up, to get it brought to a facility, and now it gets put on a train, put on a barge, onto a train, and where it goes. I don't think any -- not many people have a clue, or really care, what is actually involved in it, and that's probably just the biggest misconception out there: "they're garbage men, they pick up the garbage," they don't realize what actually goes into that. At this point, it's a very intricate system. Your garbage gets picked up, that sanitation worker drives it to either a transfer station where it gets put on a rail or to a marine transfer station where gets put in a container, gets put on a barge, that barge gets loaded and put on a rail somewhere, and a train goes to South Carolina, or Virginia, and then it's got to come back. It's a big circle. If one part of that chain is broken, then your garbage don't get picked up. Definitely nobody out there that understands or cares about any of that, long as it's picked up, everybody's happy.

Demetra Maragos [01:16:06] All right, that's the question I have for today. Thank you so much. I'm going to stop the recording and then I'll give you a quick call back, if that's okay.

Michael Mucci: Okay