

FORT BEND COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION

ORAL HISTORY COMMITTEE

Interviewee: **Michael Lee Youngblood**

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Interviewers: Jesse Matthews and Jane Goodsill

Transcriber: Bob Gaffney

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Transcript

MATTHEWS: My name is Jesse Matthews with the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. I'm at the County Courthouse in the Historical Commission Offices interviewing Mike Youngblood, the Fire Chief of Richmond, Texas. Is your given name Michael?

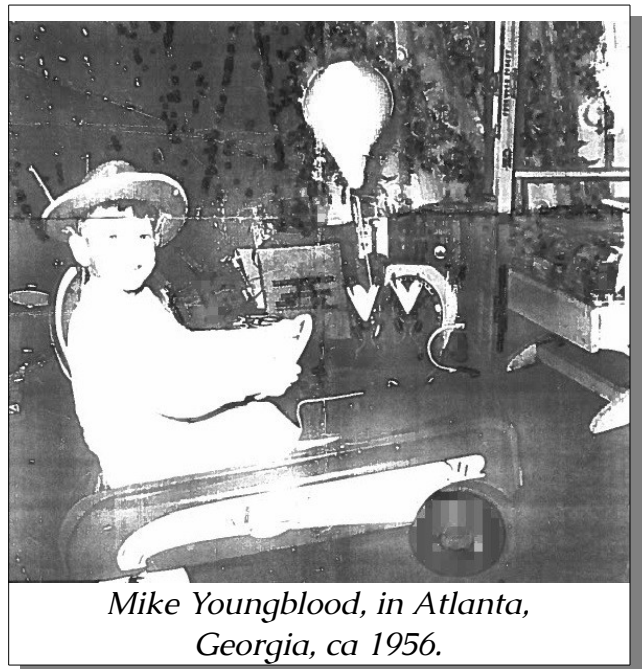
YOUNGBLOOD: My given name is Michael Lee Youngblood, and I go by "Mike".

MATTHEWS: What we're here to do today is to find out how you became fire chief of Richmond, Texas. Will you tell us where you are from?

YOUNGBLOOD: I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1951. I pretty much grew up and went to high school there. My family moved to Macon, Georgia, in 1970. That's where I resided until 1978, when I moved to Houston, Texas. The economy was a little shaken, but Houston was booming.

MATTHEWS: Were you married at that time?

YOUNGBLOOD: No, recently divorced. Phyllis, and I were married here. We have five children; four from my previous marriage. The eldest is Dane Youngblood, then Jeremy and Dustin and my daughter, Summer. My youngest son is Michah.



*Mike Youngblood, in Atlanta,
Georgia, ca 1956.*

I started working in Fort Bend County October 25th, 1981. Micah was born a little over two years later; our family's first Native Texan. When I first moved, I lived in an apartment in north Houston. In 1982, I bought a home in Stafford, Texas.

MATTHEWS: What did you do when you got to Stafford?

YOUNGBLOOD: I worked in the glass business, glass and mirror work, for a company, and then opened my own business. I did that for about five to seven years, and then in the 1980s, there was a real shakeup in the economy. I was looking for work that would provide a salary and insurance for my family, so I started looking into public service work.

I had the opportunity to be hired in Missouri City as a dispatcher. That's where I started my paid career in public service. I joined the Stafford Volunteer Fire Department in 1988. I found some very nice friends over there and enjoyed serving the community.

MATTHEWS: I understand that from where you lived you have a connection to Texas and, actually, to Fort Bend County.

YOUNGBLOOD: Well, kind of the general area. I wasn't fully aware of it until I was attending one of the annual memorials for President Mirabeau B. Lamar. When they started discussing where he was from, we were from the same area; Lamar County, Georgia. It intrigued me that he made his move to Texas from the area where I came from. He left his whole family back there. I came to understand that they were statesmen, attorneys, and the founders of that area. So that was my personal connection to a Georgia boy.

MATTHEWS: You said when you got here you were a dispatcher. What exactly does a dispatcher do?

YOUNGBLOOD: I was a 9-1-1 dispatcher. I worked in Missouri City, dispatching emergency calls for police and fire. I did that for about a year and a half. During that time, I decided I wanted to try to get hired on as a full-time, paid firefighter. So I went to fire school. My supervisor with Missouri City allowed me to work the night shift. So, I'd work from 10 p. m. until 6 a. m. and go home, take a shower, clean up, and then go to Fire School from 8 a. m. to 5 p. m. Then in the evening, take a nap and a shower and be ready to go to work. I did that for about three months.

MATTHEWS: What school was it?

YOUNGBLOOD: Missouri City used a crosstrained department at that time, They took police officers and trained them as firefighters, and they took firefighters and trained them as police officers. I was permitted to attend the academy that was going on right there at our back door. I got to work closely with a lot of police officers on the street first hand, where as a dispatcher, I was in a room and with mostly voice-to-voice contact. I got to know many of the paid Missouri City firefighters who were instructing the program. I built some close bonds and associations.

MATTHEWS: Were there any other schools you attended?

YOUNGBLOOD: Not for the Fire School. I got hired with the fire department February 17, 1991, which was my first day as a paid firefighter with Missouri City. I had a couple of really good mentors. One was Kevin Dixon, and the other was Mike Melton. They encouraged me to diversify. What they meant by that was to pick up more certifications to enhance my resume. I attended any class that came down the pike. I went to Inspector School, Investigator School, and eventually to Police School, and I became a cross trained police officer/firefighter with the City of Missouri City. But that didn't really end my education. I went to Paramedic School, and in 1996 I became an Arson Investigator for the City of Missouri City.

MATTHEWS: You said you were a volunteer fireman for Stafford?

YOUNGBLOOD: Yes. I began my career in Stafford. Friends that were doing some recruiting came by my shop where I was in business in Stafford. They were looking for some items to clean some equipment. They mentioned they were recruiting firefighters. I told them I'd always been interested in being a firefighter and they said, "Well, come to a meeting." Shayne Carter was a captain with the fire department. From the very first meeting, I decided this is what I wanted to do for a living. I spent twenty years with the Stafford Fire Department as a volunteer.

GOODSILL: What does a volunteer fireman do?

YOUNGBLOOD: As a volunteer, you responded to calls when you weren't working, or sometimes if you were working and your job allowed it. Back then it was very low tech. Pagers would go off and give you a basic alert, and you'd respond to the station, which in Stafford was usually pretty close by. That's how I got started with responding to emergency calls. When I became a volunteer with Stafford, they promoted through training as well. I took my basic EMT (Emergency Medical Technician) course while I was with Stafford to be able to run medical calls and provide assistance to our citizens on a medical basis, as well as fire services.

GOODSILL: So as a volunteer, you actually did the job that a firemen does?

YOUNGBLOOD: Yeah. There's a very fine line between volunteer firefighters and paid firefighters, and that fine line is a paycheck. They do, pretty much, everything that a paid firefighter does. They're just not compensated for it monetarily. It's usually the camaraderie and service to the community that holds those troops together. Being a paid firefighter you have the reward of drawing a paycheck and benefits.

GOODSILL: Does the fire department still use volunteers?

YOUNGBLOOD: Stafford still has a complement of volunteers. Richmond Fire Department has fully paid, full time firefighters. We also have a staff of part-timers that are paid firefighters in other departments. They help us with our staffing.

MATTHEWS: I'd like to know a little more about arson investigation. What schooling do you go to?

YOUNGBLOOD: At the time, the arson investigation Fire Marshal for Missouri City was Steele Powers. Steele is a legend in Fort Bend County, especially when it came to fire marshal and fire investigation. He recommended a class down at Wharton Junior College. A lot of good information came out of there. That's where I got my foundation. During my time as an arson investigator, he encouraged me to attend some FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) courses that taught interview techniques, interrogation, handwriting analysis, etc. These things help during an investigation interview and in evidence collection. He was pretty adamant about being responsible when we did an investigation; that we got all the facts and documented it on paper.

I also went to many conferences that had to do with fire services or arson investigation and a lot of internal-type courses. I finished with Columbia Southern University with a Bachelors Degree and now I'm working on my a Master's Degree. It's taken me awhile. A few years ago, after prodding my children to try to finish degrees, I entered back into the formal education process to finish a degree to try to provide an example, you know? Don't talk it, do it. I found that it was very enlightening, and that I did not know everything. There were many things out there for me to learn. I think finishing my college degree made me a more well-rounded person and a better supervisor.

GOODSILL: What is your degree in?

YOUNGBLOOD: Fire Science Technology. That was the Masters that I'm pursuing, but it'll be with Business Administration. They don't offer it just a Master's Degree.

MATTHEWS: What do you think makes you good at what you do?

YOUNGBLOOD: Let's do the investigation part first. I had a really good mentor in the Fire Marshall's Office, Still Powers. There were some really good police officers that walked me through the learning part of this. They would work with you and coach you along.

MATTHEWS: What inner skills do you think personally made you good at what you do?

YOUNGBLOOD: My parents were dedicated people, hard-working with a "no quit" attitude. I think I learned that over time. I didn't go through my teenage years feeling that same way, but as an adult I realized that once you're dedicated to something, you take a moral oath to it. The moral part I derived from a belief in a Loving Creator, that established moral principles that help with making decisions based on an altruistic view of serving others. You know, the 'love your neighbor as yourself' attitude.

MATTHEWS: That's a good thing. That brings us to the Richmond Fire Department.

YOUNGBLOOD: Yes. After 21 years of service as a firefighter, I went from being a Lieutenant, to a Training Chief, and eventually to the Assistant Chief with the Missouri City Fire Department. I never had aspired to be a fire chief. My supervisor at that time, Russell Sanders, was the fire chief of Missouri City. He's the one who gave me the courage to venture out. I learned a lot from him. I started testing the waters and applied at a couple of places. I was offered a position in Port Lavaca. We went down there and my wife said she didn't feel like being so remote, but she'd support whatever I did. Driving back from that interview, I told her I didn't think it was the place for me, and she asked me, "Where would you want to go?" I said, "A department I would really like to go to is Richmond. However, I don't think Steven Noto, (fire chief at the time) is ever going to leave. He's going to be there for a long time."

About eleven months after I made that statement, Steven retired, so I put in for it, on a whim. It seems to have worked out so far. I've been with the Richmond Fire Department six years now. It's all going so quickly. I retired from Missouri City on February 28, 2011, and began my career with Richmond on March 1, 2011. So I enjoyed that 11 or 12 hours of retirement and then got right back to work. It's gone by so quickly. For ninety days, I tried to set up a 5-year strategic plan because my goal was to do five years and then retire out of Richmond. But there was so much enjoyment with the job and with the City of Richmond itself, and the people I worked with. Those five years are not going to do it for me. If they'll allow me, I'll do another five, and we'll reassess then.

Terri's basically the one that hired me, with the Commission's approval. When I did my interview, I didn't really hold anything back. I said, "We'll see where it goes." When I got here, I went to talk to Terri and thank her for offering me the position. That's when I found out I'd been working with her husband for over 15 years and didn't know it. He was the finance director in Missouri City. She probably knew about me before I got here.

Fortunately for me, Wes Vela, her husband, and I had a good relationship. He was in finance, and I had a lot of connection with him doing budgets. I think that helped me out. I probably have never enjoyed working with a supervisor as much as I do with Terri. She's very employee-oriented. She's beyond being intelligent about how the City works.

She began her career in Richmond as Finance Director, then she was promoted to City Manager. She's really created a good environment for not only administrators, but employees to flourish and thrive. With a growing city, she's really hard at work trying to hold it all together. She told me one time, "Some of the best challenges I have are those with growth. You know what your challenges are with a diminishing population or diminishing commercial environment. When those challenges of growth come up, just embrace them and enjoy them while you have them." That's the kind of supervisor she is.

MATTHEWS: What does it take to be a good fire chief? What does it entail?

YOUNGBLOOD: I've known many Fire Service Supervisors in my career. The range runs from authoritarian through dictator, to kind of *laissez faire*. I think to be a good fire chief running a fire department, you have to have a little bit of all of that and be able to manage the gap between the public service part and the city administration, as well as to the public. We're public servants first, keeping a balance of all that and having your staff keep the same balance. That's our job. Our primary job is to be public servants, though we have a responsibility to the city to manage our funding and tax revenues. Sometimes this work has a negative impact on a person; from what you see at work to the hours required.

The recent floods [Memorial Day 2016] took a taxable toll on the human body and mind because most of us were working around the clock. Even though they had some down time, the administration was even putting in eighteen to twenty hours a day, sometimes grabbing a nap, and then being right back to work. We try to keep people motivated and also see to their needs; you have to have a good balance of that. I think I do okay with that because of my environment growing up with my family. They taught me to be compassionate with others, really, no matter what the circumstance. It is also important to be a peaceable person. I wasn't always that way. Not only just to be peaceable, but to be a peacemaker whenever possible.

MATTHEWS: You recently moved into a brand new fire station. Can you give us a little insight as to the old station and coming to the new station?

YOUNGBLOOD: Sure. When I first arrived, we were in a station that was probably 65 years old. I think it originally began as a police station, and then we inherited it as a fire station at 112 Jackson Street. It served its purpose, but we had pretty much outgrown it. Even the bays that the apparatus went in had only one or two inches of clearance. We had some equipment that wouldn't even fit in the station. When I did my strategic plan, one of my first goals was try to figure out how we could move into a more appropriate station. A company came in and talked to me about building a new fire station. I said, "I've only been here a few weeks and I don't think we're going to look at that any time soon." They left me a desk calendar that had pictures of fire stations on it. As I went through that calendar, I tore off the months, I'd put it in interoffice mail to Mrs. Vela and say, "This little note is just to suggest we think of the possibilities, and maybe next month dreams will come true." For about six or eight months or more, I would send those every month.

One day she called me to the office and had them all laid out on her desk and said, "Did you see one you liked?" I said, "Oh, I like anything." That's when we really started to talk of building a new fire station. We're now at 200 Houston Street. It was County property; they allocated the property to the city to build a fire station.



City of Richmond Fire Station #1, 200 Houston St., Richmond, Texas

There were some buildings that had to be removed. I think one used to be the old Jury Assembly room before the new Justice Complex was built. The property wasn't a problem anymore, it was just getting the funds to build our station. The City Manager, along with the Finance Director, Susan Lang, some of the Commissioners, Mayor Hilmar Moore originally, and then Mrs. (Evalyn) Moore came in and things really moved along. That's why we're enjoying the nice, two-story station that fits all of our equipment and personnel that we have now.

MATTHEWS: It's state-of-the-art is it not?

YOUNGBLOOD: A lot of technology in here that we didn't have before. They didn't hold anything back on the technology. We have interactive TVs that we can work on that's even beyond the "smart" type TV that we can send messages through. We have a conference room where we can actually meet as a group. We do that for our training. When we built the station, we wanted to retain the feel and history of Richmond and the original fire department. From the entrance into the building, our old Model T fire truck, the first fire truck Richmond Fire Department ever had, is displayed in the lobby.



In 1925 Richmond purchased its first piece of motorized equipment, a Model "T" Ford fire truck known as "Old Tin sides" and was given the name No.1. It was equipped with all standard equipment, including a 50 gallon booster tank.

MATTHEWS: What year was that?

YOUNGBLOOD: 1926 or 1927, something like that. Then the next fire truck was a 1937 Dodge. We have it as well, in one of the bays. Throughout the whole building, even with its modern technology, there's the flavor of the history. There are walls with pictures, cataloging the history of the department and the members that have served here.

MATTHEWS: How long did it take to build this fire station?

YOUNGBLOOD: It took us a little over a year. From the conception, it took us about three years, from that meeting with the city manager the day we were looking at calendar shots.

MATTHEWS: How many chiefs have there been in Richmond?

YOUNGBLOOD: Nine total, counting me. Richmond has the only staffed dive team in the county. If we have to go subsurface, or we have to go underwater, Richmond is called. We have equipment that will facilitate that, even some technology with sonar. We're the only department in the county that has that. Beyond that we have special operations; HAZMAT response, technical rescue with collapsed rescue, trench rescue, and high angle rescue. Most of our staff is trained in that.

GOODSILL: High angle rescue?

YOUNGBLOOD: We've used it a couple of times. We had an event at one of the water towers in the county where we had to go and make a recovery. We were able to do that. Imagine a multistory building where you have to use ropes and traverse someone off a building without using the normal ways of traveling down hallway stairs, like a water tower or a bridge.

GOODSILL: Do you have a lift, a basket?

YOUNGBLOOD: They do it all with ropes and pulleys. We run three stations, and out of the station, we have a first line fire engine pumper, and then we have two reserves. If something goes down or breaks, we have two reserves we can man. We also have a hundred foot tower platform. Fort Bend County helped fund part of that.

MATTHEWS: Commonly known as a ladder truck?

YOUNGBLOOD: We commonly use that as a tower. The distinction between a ladder truck and a tower is the tower actually has a platform for the firefighters to work off. If you ever see pictures where it looks like a square bucket atop the ladder, that's a tower.

We also have three boats that we used for water rescue the last part of May and June in 2016. Our department is staffed with the Battalion Chiefs or the Shift Supervisors. They have a vehicle we call the Battalion Vehicle. That's where the Command sets up. They usually run the scenes. Supporting the Battalion Chiefs, we have Lieutenants. They're the supervisors of each station. The fire department supervises the Fire Prevention Office, which is the Fire Marshal and his four inspectors. The Fire Marshal has four personnel and also the Building Official's Office. That was something I didn't realize until about a month after I was here, that I supervise the Building Official's Office. That's the Building Official and three Permit Specialists. I had to learn a little bit more than I thought when I came to help supervise those positions.

I had served in fire prevention as an investigator for those years. The Fire Marshall's Office was pretty easy. Plus our Fire Marshal, Albert Cantu, grew up in Richmond. He was able to educate me and make me aware of a lot of things for the history of Richmond. He knew a lot of the citizens. He grew up here and went to school here. If I needed to know anything, he usually had a story to go along with it that could help me.

MATTHEWS: You have a personal secretary, I think.

YOUNGBLOOD: We have an Administrative Assistant who's the core of the operation. That's Dawn Engeling. She's been here right around 25 years or so. She started when she was 19 and basically grew up in the fire department. She's pretty much the core of getting things done. You meet Dawn first, and that's where everything goes from there. The Building Official is Laurie Bounds. But as far as the fire department staffing and operations, we have 33 paid firefighters. Just recently we found out that we've being awarded a grant for three additional firefighters. That will bring us up to 36 paid firefighters.

MATTHEWS: I'm curious – the average day of a firefighter?

YOUNGBLOOD: I usually arrive at work early because the firefighters creed is if you're on time, you're late. If you're early, you're on time. Be there early, because you're relieving someone. When you're relieving someone, they're planning to go. You don't want to walk in just as the clock ticks seven. You want to have time for them to prepare to leave and maybe do an exchange of the events of the day. That's usually how it begins. Then we check out all the equipment, check the truck, make sure everything's up and ready to go.

Once that's done, if time allows and we don't have calls, we may be able to sit down and have a meal together. Then we focus on what we're going to be doing the rest of the day, which usually includes some kind of training or some kind of organized educational environment. Then we run our calls. Right now, Richmond's averaging ten or twelve calls a day, up to up to 25 calls a day. We're pushing 5,000 calls a year. So, we are growing. The Richmond Fire Department doesn't cover just the city limits of Richmond. We cover just shy of 60 square miles of county area in our ETJ (Extraterritorial jurisdiction). We run from Brazos Lakes out on the southwest side all the way to where the Palladium Theater is at Long Meadow Farms. In these areas outside of our city limits, the City Manager has established contracts so they pay the fee for their fire service. That brings revenue into the city.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ) is the legal ability of a government to exercise authority beyond its normal boundaries. Any authority can claim ETJ over any external territory they wish.

MATTHEWS: That does help. Future fire stations?

YOUNGBLOOD: We're planning to build a brand new station on Williams Way and Ransom Road right near River Park West subdivision. That area is becoming one of Richmond's most populated areas. I'm not sure who the responsible party is, whether it was the developer of the River West Homeowners Association, but they actually deeded that section of the property over to the City of Richmond.

MATTHEWS: What will be housed in that station?

YOUNGBLOOD: That station I kind of term as a "pocket station". It won't be as large as our headquarters. We're looking at trying to put in a two-bay fire station to house fire apparatus and maybe a support vehicle. It'll have probably three firefighters on a regular staffing day and maybe eventually running four firefighters out of there. That area is really becoming more populated. I think it's going to be a strategic point to place a station because of the apartments and new commercial areas going up out there. Plus River Park West is built and we have access to Highway 59, and we have contract areas on the other side of 59, like Canyon Gate. The concept is to build it so it fits right in with the community. The architects have been told to look at their community center and Hutchison Elementary, and combine those so it all blends in.

MATTHEWS: Anything else in the future that you can foresee for Richmond Fire Department?

YOUNGBLOOD: The recent growth of the community and the increased commercial use with (Highway) 59 growing, and new developments coming in all the way down Williams Way. A lot of this is in our ETJ, not in our city limits. But it very well could come to our city limits. I think in the next twenty years, Richmond will develop to where it will not even be recognized from what we're seeing today. All of 59 will be developed. The fire department will have to grow. In my next five-year strategic plan, I put in the idea of another station on the other side of 59, opposite from River Park West.

When I first started with Richmond, I developed three priorities. One was salaries for our employees. If your salaries aren't there, you may lose good employees. They'll go to Houston, or they'll go to departments where salaries and benefits may be better. The next was facilities; building stations that would accommodate our staffing and also be well representative of the public. The next was apparatus. You can't give fire help if you don't have anything to ride in. So we're trying to update and put new apparatus to help serve our public. Those were my three highest priorities.

We have a lot of outreach programs for the public. We do glucose checks and blood pressure checks for citizens, but at any point in time, they can come to the station and our crews will be glad to check those things for them. We have a fire prevention program that's really robust during October Fire Prevention month. We go "hands on" with all the schools and daycares in our city and our community. We have a program called "Keep Them In Sight", that's about watching your children around water. We have things to remind parents that even if you consider it a safe water environment like a swimming pool, you can't be too careful so always keep a watch. We have the Operation Safe Kitchen Program where we have information about how fires start in the kitchen from cooking.

Most of our employees live and work in the area of Richmond. When I worked in Missouri City, I think we only had one employee that lived in the city. Everybody else lived outside the city. With Richmond, it truly is neighbors helping neighbors.

MATTHEWS: How does your station interface with the Office of Emergency Management (OEM)?

YOUNGBLOOD: We found that out a couple of months ago during the floods (in 2016). Even though our station was not the Emergency Operations Center, we used our conference room as a support area. With our interactive equipment on our phone system and our monitoring system we could set up a support staff at the new fire station.

Ray Burciaga, our Emergency Operations Coordinator, handled that and ran operations. It was dependent of the Emergency Operations Center, but it wasn't at the center, so it allowed the flexibility of having two locations in case one had a problem. With this last flood event, we were all over the sixty square miles with issues. Of course the flood didn't involve a lot of fire problems, but we had a lot of evacuation. We supported over 500 evacuations. We interacted with Texas Task Force 1, Fort Bend County, and other agencies that came in to help us. We used our boats and apparatus to move people out of high water situations. Not only that, but once the initial crisis of getting people to high water was over, then we had the problem of putting things back together, especially on River Edge, where we had a lot of homes damaged. I think we had 60 plus homes that were affected there. Once the rescue was over, we still had water and did periodic checks to make sure people's property was still intact. The police department along with the fire department stayed in the area to make sure.

When the water started receding, we setup a little mobile City Hall right there in the neighborhood so that people who wanted to start rebuilding their homes didn't have to go to City Hall to get a permit. They could come right to that mobile command station. We waived all the fees for permits, and we were able to issue the permits right then so they could get started. We had inspectors that worked with the fire department onsite probably 17 hours out of a given day to help the citizens determine what they needed and get inspections done right away, so the work could continue without delay. In the most affected areas, like River Edge, some manufactured homes had a lot of destruction. Some of them had water three-quarters of the way up their sides. Their whole home was inundated with water. Some of those you could repair but some you couldn't.

GOODSILL: Is that building inspections or fire inspections you're talking about?

YOUNGBLOOD: Our inspections are building and fire. They do both. With the fire department, we supervise overall city inspections. We have plumbing, mechanical, and electrical inspectors. Our inspectors do all of that.

GOODSILL: Do other cities do it that way?

YOUNGBLOOD: Not usually. Richmond is a little unique in that respect. In a lot of larger cities, building inspection falls under the building official. That's usually a separate entity from the fire department. Richmond has worked under that for many years. Initially, it was out of a need that it had to be supervised like that because of personnel.

But as we're growing, we separated those divisions a little bit by giving the supervision of the inspectors to the Fire Marshal and the Building Official to the Permits. It gives a layer of supervision there. It all comes under the auspice of the fire chief. I intermingle with those divisions frequently. I try to visit with the Building Official and the Fire Marshal three times a week at a minimum, sometimes on a daily basis if we have a lot going on. We have a lot of construction. The Building Official takes care of that. We have a lot of inspections going in the city. If they need something, we facilitate it pretty quickly.

MATTHEWS: We talked about the whole water event, as it's called, I just want to make sure for historical reasons, when exactly was this?

YOUNGBLOOD: Right near the end of May 2016 is when we had a historical event. I don't think it broke the record of the early 1900's, but I think we topped out at about 61 feet. They initially predicted it wouldn't reach over 51 feet, 52 feet.

GOODSILL: Fifty feet rise in the river you're talking about?

YOUNGBLOOD: Yeah, based on 50 foot elevation. But it did, and a lot of areas that have never been affected before were affected. Some of the 'old schoolers' that I've talked to and gotten to know down off River Edge and... I say 'old schooler' respectfully because I'm an 'old schooler', have been long-time Richmond residents. Some of them were in their eighties. They'd never seen the river this high. It's historic for us.

INTERVIEWER'S NOTE: This is Jesse Matthews with the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. This is a continuation of Mike's interview. He wants to talk a little bit about some things he didn't talk about last time. The following text was added by Michael Lee Youngblood on 10-20-2017.

YOUNGBLOOD: In August 2017, Richmond experienced some of the worst weather-related disasters in its history. Along with days of rainfall from Hurricane Harvey, record water levels from the Brazos River were projected. For days, the storm held the gulf coast in disaster mode and presented many challenges to manpower, staffing, resources and to our citizens experiencing flooded homes and displacement. Businesses were closed, main travel arteries were closed, and most regular daily routines were disrupted. All Fire department members were called in to be available for emergency response. Many members left their own families to serve the community. I have never witnessed such dedication, determination and dependability, or a group of people that so selflessly gave of themselves.

Over 300 evacuations/rescues were facilitated by the Richmond Fire Department. High-water vehicles and water craft were used to help citizens escape rising water. Even after weeks of working to recover, many homeowners were still displaced.

In the aftermath, firefighters, inspectors, code enforcement personnel and permit specialist worked to help people get what they needed to return home and obtain basic necessities lost in the storm. The entire Fort Bend County and Houston area were affected by this storm. NO deaths or injuries related to the storm were reported in our area. That is remarkable!]

MATTHEWS: I have another "in the future" question. What about water availability in Richmond for firefighting purposes as they transition from ground water to surface water?

YOUNGBLOOD: In our city, we have plenty of water and the flow rate can cover most anything we have. As our commercial builds up in the other areas, we're looking at that closely because if it goes high rise, that's where some of your challenges can be. Whenever a high rise goes up, we recommend putting fire pumps in their system. I'm very confident in our water ability.

One thing I've gotten to know about the Public Works since I've been here is that the water system is very strong. When you've got an historic city, your boundaries sometimes are set. You can only make improvements where you can. They're working on that. There are a lot of plans in the future for getting over the railroad tracks with overpasses. The future looks bright for us as far as being able to travel and respond with the Tenth Street project that's coming. It'll connect our north side all the way out to FM 359.

The fire department used to worry about getting caught at the railroad tracks by a train. But we're getting some relief from that. When we had this recent flood, the underpass under the tracks at Second Street was flooded. Even the bridge was a little bit damaged, too. The trestle bridge was damaged during the event. We had staffed in apparatus in a fire truck on the north side near the Public Works. If something happened and there had been a train crossing and we couldn't make that underpass, then we already had staff on the north side. We kept them over there through the duration until we had access to the other side.

The Richmond Fire Department has been around for a long time. It was one of the first organized fire departments in Fort Bend County. When someone needs something, they'll call Richmond. I am proud of that.

GOODSILL: What is the average age of a firefighter?

YOUNGBLOOD: In our fire department our average age is probably 35, but one of our new recruits came in at 19. We have some of our firefighters in their sixties.



Opening of Richmond Fire Station #2 in 2016. Chief Youngblood is in the back row, center.

MATTHEWS: To what age?

YOUNGBLOOD: As long as they can meet the demand. We do a regular physical training program. For those who may be struggling with physical issues we work with them on that. We have a fitness training room in our new station, and we encourage physical fitness. That's one of the bigger things in fire service today is fitness of the firefighters. We have a regular program that we do, and we do a biannual assessment of each one of our personnel. It's graduated by age. There's some consideration with age, but it's all based on what the military uses.

INTERVIEWER'S NOTE: This is Jesse Matthews and I am with the Fort Bend County Historical Commission. It is September 14, 2016. This is a continuation of Mike's interview. He wants to talk a little bit about some things he didn't talk about last time.

YOUNGBLOOD: I've been thinking about your questions about what it takes to be a good fire chief. My success will be determined, probably after my tenure's over. However, I think it is important to comment that being good at anything is about having humility.

I learned early in my investigative career how to deal with people no matter where they're at or what they're doing, especially if you're investigating some type of incident that may have negatively affected them. Something I try to instill into my sons and daughter is humility. It's important to know your audience when you begin to talk to somebody. Try to know a little bit more about them so you can have either empathy or relate to them a little better. I learned that, really, through principles that I was taught early on in life. It's just I didn't pay as much attention to them until I got a little older; until I began to appreciate spiritual matters.

It's those principles that you follow when no one is watching. I work to be constant, predictable and reliable, attributes that a balanced and disciplined person can do to build confidence in themselves and others. Being grounded in a belief system that promotes these attributes, has really helped me overcome some major personality flaws. Being forgiving and understanding of others with a sense of impartiality, will help anyone be a more successful leader.

MATTHEWS: We didn't talk much about the arson investigator part of your job last time. What does it entail?

YOUNGBLOOD: I served as a police officer with Missouri City. The Fire Marshal at that time, Steele Powers, was looking for some investigators for arson and fire investigation. Being trained in fire services as well as being a police officer, he reached out to me to ask if I'd be interested. Initially I wasn't too interested, but the more investigators I talked to that did investigate fires, I became more interested in it.

This was probably 1996. Still sent me to a few schools specific for arson investigation, and I was appointed as one of his arson investigators. A couple years later, I was appointed as the Lead Arson Investigator. I really enjoyed it. I had a passion for that. The inquisitive part of my mind enjoyed it. I still hold my police commission today. I supervise a group of arson investigators. So, that little bit of experience I had helped me to work with the team that I work with in Richmond.

MATTHEWS: Very Good. Any experiences you want to share?

YOUNGBLOOD: Yes, I can share some of those things that helped with adjusting my humility from time to time. There are three specific incidents that stick out in my mind. I never really talk to anybody too much about them. Over my career, I investigated three fires that ended up being homicides. They were to cover up homicide or at least evidence of homicide. I had to meet with some people that were getting some really bad news. Sometimes we take it more as a job, and we don't empathize as much as maybe we should. I learned that you have to deal with people gently sometimes, especially when you're breaking bad news.

One case began as a car fire. My initial impression was that it was a fire that was started to avoid a car payment. I went at it a little aggressively, trying to reach the family members. That was on Sunday morning. The car was found in a remote area. As the investigation moved on, I realized that the operator of the vehicle was not found; couldn't find her at all. The family was pretty upset about that. The reality check was that maybe I was making some accusations of the family that should have been rethought. I found out later that the owner of the vehicle was missing. That turned into a search that our investigation revealed was actually an abduction and a murder. We pursued the case diligently. A lot of good investigative skills went into it with interviews, sifting through the car for evidence, and even tracing cell phones and getting some of the voice messages where the victim was trying to call someone.

When I realized this may be an abduction, I called in the FBI. They were very helpful in resolving the case. We did get a good determination of what exactly happened, and we were able to prosecute those involved. We did not find the victim until about a year later. She had actually been dumped in the Brazos River. At that time it was two cities away. The investigation actually took quite a bit of time and involved a lot of people.

I base my principles and some of my decision making on the principles I was taught early in life. These are based on physical, emotional and spiritual aspects of guidance. It took me awhile to get that maturity, but I try to pass them on to people. Some listen and some don't.

I didn't talk very much to people about these incidents other than those people who were involved. A supervisor of mine years ago set me down one day and said, "Think it through! Before you say it, before you do it, think it through. Evaluate what the consequences may be from your words and your deeds."

MATTHEWS: Very good advice. Do you want to share another incident?

YOUNGBLOOD: Yeah. I've investigated many fires. Seemed like most of the fires that are arson usually involve money or a crime of passion. They're trying to get money from the arson or punish someone they love or loved. We had a call several years ago about a burned van in a remote part of Missouri City. I approached my investigation a little more genuinely to find out where the owner of the van and the family were. The van had been stolen out of Houston. The van owner lived in Missouri City, however, he was doing some work in Houston. A person murdered him to get his van, but burned it within a mile of his home. That was just the circumstances. I called in the Fort Bend County Sheriff's Office tracking dog because I felt if someone drove the van here and stopped, there must be a reason why they put it here. Maybe they lived in close proximity.

I thought the investigation was only going to be a couple of hours, but it ended up being pretty much overnight. It was midday when it started. Probably three hours into the investigation, I was able to determine that the person had discarded some clothing near the van. The fire had actually flashed back on them. They pulled a shirt off and threw it up under a culvert, and we found it. That's when we called the dogs in and began tracking.

MATTHEWS: Milton Wright was the sheriff at that time?

YOUNGBLOOD: Yes, sir. Milton Wright was the sheriff at that time. When we found out the address of the vehicle owner in Missouri City, instead of just making a phone call, I had one of our investigators in a marked police unit, go by the home. They found the wife of the victim there and talked to her. When we realized that there may be more to it, we called in the Victims Liaison from Missouri City, who was Andy Wilte at the time. We had them there with her. She said her husband had been working in Houston. She was able to find a check stub from the apartment complex where he was working. That's where the incident happened. When I sent an investigator over there, they drove up to find the crime scene being conducted by the Houston police. That's how we found out that it had been a homicide. Once we put that dog on the ground it tracked right to the back door of the residence of the murderer. Part of the reality check is to use all of the resources that are available to you. Same thing with coming up with a good team, you bring a few people in to help you, and sometimes you get very good results. In dealing with the victim's family, having some support when she got the news that this was going to end in a bad way, helped as opposed to someone delivering a death notice to her.

I think my time in investigations helped make me a better supervisor. My former supervisor's point about thinking it through was particularly helpful. Think of what the consequences may be on someone else or yourself. I utilize that in my decision making process. Try to get all the details before you just make a decision because what you do can either positively or negatively affect someone. It's going to be one way or the other, and you always want a positive result. Even if it's negative information, you want to keep the exchange as positive as possible. Along with that goes having a quality of humility, which I'm not good at. That's something I have to practice. Sometimes I come across as a little abrasive or pushy. Especially when there is a serious effort to get things done. But I think taking a step back and thinking of how your actions are going to affect others will help in decision-making.

MATTHEWS: Well, I think personally, from what I've heard of your story, the City of Richmond is very lucky to have you. Thank you for your interview.

Interview ends