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Lee Roghair

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Narrator's name: Lee Roghair
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Place of interview: Orange City Fire Station
Interviewer's name: Ann Lundberg
For: Northwestern College

A.L.: This is Ann Lundberg. It is August 27, 2020 and I am interviewing Lee Roghair, as a student firefighter with the Orange City Fire Department who has moved on to a full-time paid position – actually more than one of them in the fire service.

So Lee, could you start by telling me when and where you were born?

L.R.: Uh, I was born in Orange City, Iowa, June 30, 1998.

A.L.: And your – you come from a family of firefighters.

L.R.: Yes.

A.L.: Your grandfather and your dad.

L.R.: Yes.

A.L.: Were both firefighters, and now your dad's an assistant chief on the Orange City Volunteer Fire Department. Um, tell me something about how those men being firefighters influenced your early life.

L.R.: Yeah, no, that's a good question... You know I always grew up in the fire station. I grew up coming on Saturday mornings with Dad, and you know that really – that's where it all started, coming on Saturdays. And I've always known that firefighting is what I wanted to do. But being around the trucks, being around the guys, that's where it all started, you know. It's cool that my grandpa was able to serve, and my dad, and my brother and I. And then it just - I had no question, I guess. But, yeah.

A.L.: Do you have any specific memories from when you were a little boy coming to the fire station. Like, "I remember when..."

L.R.: Um, yes.

A.L.: (interrupting) Or like what you used to do when you were here?

L.R.: Yeah, we always would play around the trucks, I guess, and help clean. I remember cleaning a lot of trucks. Let's see, what else...

A.L.: And you and Riley were friends when you were little, too. Riley Jeltema.

L.R.: Yes, we were super close. He was – we played together, we had fire gear together, we would come to Saturdays together. And.... what else...

A.L.: Did you ever get in trouble at the first station when you were a kid?

L.R.: Yeah, yeah, there would be times when you would get in trouble. When you were horsing around, running around... yes, there were times that you'd get yelled at.

A.L.: Do you remember any?

L.R.: I don't. I know that it was my punishment – if I was bad at home or something like that – I wouldn't be able to go to the first station that week. That was awful, terrible.

A.L.: (Laughs)

L.R.: And I still love coming to Saturday mornings. When I even got off the department here, when I went to Sioux City, I still came some Saturdays. That's what I love to do. But, as far as stories... maybe honking the horn in the truck sometime.

A.L.: On purpose?

L.R.: No, well – Not really, just playing around or whatever.

A.L.: Scaring yourself?

L.R.: Yes.

A.L.: Startling yourself?

L.R.: Yes.... I don't always – I don't really – I was young too. Super young. I don't really remember a lot.

A.L.: You were very young. So, when you were in high school, you became a student firefighter on the Orange City Fire Department. Tell me something about that experience, what it was like to move to the next level.

L.R.: So, I guess where that whole student program came from was when Brad White and Scott Arft, and they said "Hey Lee, how long until you can be a student firefighter?" Ah, only seven years.

A.L.: (Laughing) Only seven years.

L.R.: You know, that's where it started, they'd say "Well, do you wanna do this?" And I said, "Yeah, I wanna do this! I can't wait for seven years to come." And all of a sudden it came.

And it was like finally. Finally I can – I've been all around this stuff my whole life, and now I can somewhat be a part of the department.

A.L.: You've got real bunker gear.

L.R.: Yeah, real bunker gear, I can go on calls. At first, it was like – yeah, I was really excited, but I also didn't know as much as I thought I did. It was an eye-opener. Your first call your like, ok this is what happens.

A.L.: Do you remember your first call?

L.R.: Yes. You know the first call was actually that night I got on. It was a fire alarm. You're running to the station. Actually, it was -

A.L.: Because you live less than a block away, so you were literally running.

L.R. Yes, yes. We ran to the fire station. I was like I don't know if my pager actually went off. I stopped midway running to look at my pager to see, okay, do we actually have a call or if it was in my mind. And we did. But we only rolled one truck that night, so I never had to go on. But, my first call . . . I think it was.

A.L.: Did you beat your dad to the station.

L.R.: Yes, most of the time. Sometimes he was quick. Uh, but I was always excited. I was super excited when the pager goes off, and I still am now. But uh, no I'm sure it was a fire alarm or something my first call. As we progressed – as we spent more and more time, my gear was on one part of the station, and Michael Dekker, he was on with me, was on a different part. So we had basically our own seats. We knew what seat we were going to each time because we rode rescue. That was cool. That was always cool. You know that was my seat, and -

A.L.: So you decided who got which seat.

L.R.: Basically, yes. We weren't – we knew exactly where we needed to go. And anytime we actually got to roll with the truck was awesome. I loved going down the streets, especially at such a young age, it was awesome. Not a lot of other kids get to do that. Leave school, whatever, and go on fire calls. And even as a student, you are limited to what you're able to do, but being able to help guys out on fire scenes, help clean up stuff afterward. That's a time to learn. You learn a lot.

A.L.: Any calls that stood out for you while you were on the department?

L.R.: Yes, as far as being a student?

A.L.: Yes. When you were a student firefighter.

L.R.: Oh boy. You know there was a hay fire north of town.

A.L.: At the feedlot?

L.R.: Yes.

A.L.: Oh dear, yeah.

L.R.: That was the first one – I actually got home from school that time, was putting my gear – I did a speech for school about bunker gear – I was putting it away at the station here, and we got called out for that. And we were gone till, I mean it was probably 1 o'clock in the afternoon, till, and I think it was about 1 in the morning when we got back. I remember that one, that was a lot of work. And even for students helping guys, helping spray water. We were dog tired afterward. That was one of those fires that afterward, you know what, this is what I want to do. I got to help all these guys out. I was still a student, so I couldn't pack up.

A.L.: So what are some of the things you did on that call?

L.R.: Spray a lot of water. We got to spray water which was awesome. Help guys change out air packs. You're holding ladders because they had to go up over the silage pile. Holding ladders. We got to actually do a lot on that call which was awesome. And then another one I remember was we had an attic fire right by the elementary school, and, yeah, after the fire we were kinda tearing things apart. My dad and I were up in the bathroom. We were kinda tearing stuff apart and whatever, just mopping up. Then we cleaned the bathroom out for the people. We threw all the insulation out. And that was another time where it was like, dad this is what I want to do. I love it. I absolutely love it. You know, there are just different moments that I have.

A.L.: What do you love about it?

L.R.: Oh, that's a good question. Everything. Everything. But that's too broad, I wanna dig a little deeper. I love the teamwork aspect about it. I love working as a team. I love going down the streets with lights and sirens. I love going to fires when they happen.

A.L.: The excitement.

L.R.: The excitement, oh yeah, for sure. But also, when you're able to help the community out. When you go, ok, you might have lost – I remember another fire we went. They had a basement fire. One of the kids I knew going through high school, his whole room was burnt. He lost everything in his room. Yeah, to think good, I got to go to a fire, that was awesome. I got to help out. I was also a student at the time. But then you step back and you go, this guy that I knew lost his whole childhood, whatever was in his room and then some. Being emotionally connected to it, it also is like, I'm glad I got to help out, but this also sucks for these people that have to go through this. But if weren't there it could have been a lot worse. And I'm glad that we can be there for the fire, but also be there for the people

that are going through this. Having fires is a tough deal. My grandparents' Quonset hut burned when I was in high school. This emotional... It was very emotional. A lot of stuff burnt.

A.L.: Grandpa Roghair?

L.R.: Grandpa Kludas

A.L. Oh Kludas. OK.

L.R.: Yeah. So they had a bunch of stuff when we were growing up burned. So, that's where I kinda connected it. You know, that when it's like, it's not only about firefighting and it's not only about putting fires out. It's about helping them get through, and then, you know... yeah. Fire's devastating. It is. One way or another, it wrecks a lot of stuff. Even smoke or heat, or whatever you want to call it.

A.L.: Even the fire we catch early.

L.R.: Yes, oh yes. Absolutely.

A.L.: Huge amount of damage.

L.R.: Absolutely.

A.L.: If I'm remembering that basement fire correctly. That house was un-occupiable for many many months.

L.R.: Yeah, they had to strip everything.

A.L. Smoke damage.

L.R.: Unbelievable. You know, and then you look at – it was just a one-room in the basement but that heat traveled up the stairs and melted a light fixture right above the stairs. It's like ok, the room was on the other side of the basement, how did it melt that? It was just crazy how the heat- yeah. But that was also cool to see how that stuff kinda works. It's the kind of things that you don't see. That was kind of one of those fires that maybe we'll see once in a lifetime. Normally, the house is so sealed up that it would choke the fire out. Now, if they had door open or something else. It could have been a whole -

A.L.: Or came home at the wrong moment.

L.R.: Exactly. Anything, and that's what one of the – I think Denny, the chief said – we'll never see this again in our lives. And that stuck to me. It's like yeah, we need to remember this. Yeah, they were fortunate, but unfortunate at the same time. That one stuck in my mind.

A.L.: Tell me something about the time you spent with Scott Arft and Brad White who were college students when they were on the Orange City Fire Department.

L.R.: Yeah. They were a huge part of my life. Absolutely. 100% percent. I have my grandpa and my dad, and stuff, on the department. That was big, but they are my heroes. Still are today. I wish I remembered more. I was pretty young. But, especially it came into play later on in life when I was starting to apply for jobs. Getting my EMT, getting my fire certs¹. Asking, ok, this is what I have, what else do I need to do? And, they'd give me guidance or whatever, and in high school – actually, just out of high school – I went to Colorado Springs and saw Brad. That was crazy.

A.L.: Tell me about that trip.

L.R.: Boy, I didn't want to come home, at all. So I talked to my dad and I said, "You know I really want to see either Scott or Brad" because they both said "Hey, come one out anytime and we'll either take you for a ride-along or just hang out." I didn't even, seeing them was the best part. I talked to Brad and I said hey – err I talked to my dad about the trip and he goes "Once you pass EMT. You have to pass EMT first, and I'll pay for you to go out. Or you can find your own money." And I was like, yeah, whatever. So anyway, I passed my EMT, which is a whole other story. And I got to go out and see Brad. I actually got to do two 24 hour shifts with him.

A.L.: Wow.

L.R.: So not only was I able to see Brad, I was able to do a ride-along with him for two shifts, on a full-time department. Massive department. And I had my EMT – had just got my EMT. I had no idea what I was doing or anything like that. So normally people are only allowed eight-hour shifts with them. Ride alongs.

A.L.: Oh.

L.R.: Somehow Brad got a pass to let me do two 24-hour shifts. Which is – ah man – they are one of the busiest stations in Colorado Springs, so a lot of action.

A.L.: What were some of the calls you went to with Brad?

L.R.: Um. We went to a couple medical calls. They have a dual house, so you have engine eight and truck eight. I got to ride on both trucks. Whatever went out the door, I was on, especially the first day. I don't know how many medical runs. We went on a lot. No fires with the first day, but I ran on the engine and it was – uh, I don't know how many calls, a lot of calls. I actually talked to Brad not too long ago and I said, how busy is your station. He goes, "Well between the two trucks, we run an average of 23 calls a day." That is insane, that very little sleep at all, figure 23 calls that's at least one an hour. A call normally takes half hour to an hour. So, you're always running calls. Always on. That was my first day, ran a lot of medical. Ran some with Brad, but mostly medical calls. I think a couple

¹ Certificates.

fire alarms. For the second shift, I said, “Ok Brad, I just want to ride with you today on the truck company.” You know, I saw a lot of stuff with the engine, or whatever, and that was good, but I really want to, because the truck company goes to accidents that involve extrication, fires, and not so many medical calls. So, the second day we actually had a water rescue. That was crazy. And then, I think, two car accidents, and then we ran some medical calls. So that’s how they do it, when the engine’s out, then the truck company will run medical calls in the district. But it’s just mainly the engine going on medical calls. That was – the only unfortunate thing was that night I was with Brad, I switched rooms, because there was a guy that came in and was supposed to be on vacation. In each room they have a light panel, so you pick what calls – if you’re going to go on engine, trucks calls, or just trucks or just engines, you know – and mine was only on like the truck company’s calls and the volume was turned down. So I missed all that calls that night. They had a fire that night, they had about three or four calls that night. I was like man – I felt bad, Brad felt bad.

What an eye-opening experience because this was – I haven’t seen Brad for, oh man, ten years. New department, had no idea who these guys are, but what a cool – It was a bunch of people that accepted me. And actually, I was interviewing for Sioux City at the time, I was going to either the day after I got home or... yeah it was the day after I was supposed to get home from Colorado I had my interview for Sioux City. So I told the guys at the station, he says, “You have any interview experience?” I said no. One of the other guys, John Roy, he was on the engine that day. I said no I don’t. He says, “I teach a class at the community college in Colorado for interviews. Firefighter interviews, this is all we do.” I said, “Really,” He goes, “Yep, we’ll do a crash course, do whatever.” And we did. We sat there, it was probably two hours long. We sat there and they went through everything, interview, whatever, and – when I was hired by Sioux City after a couple months or whatever it was. My first time applying for an EMS job, EMS/fire, whatever you want to call it, job, I was lucky enough to get it. Crazy, they sat me down – first of all they welcomed me into the house, like I was one of theirs. It was awesome. It was just awesome.

A.L.: Did any of the questions they asked you in your mock interview come up in the real interview?

L.R.: I’m sure. I’m sure there was.

A.L.: But you went in with a lot more confidence.

L.R.: Yes. A lot more.

A.L.: Brilliant. Brilliant. So tell me after you graduated from high school did you do any additional training beyond the EMS course?

L.R.: I went to WIT² in Sioux City for a year for my fire science degree. It was a two year – it was like firefighter/paramedic degree. So your first year is EMT and all these fire courses, I already had my EMT, basically.

² Western Iowa Tech Community College

A.L.: And were you on the Sioux City Department at the time when you were doing this training or was this before you got on?

L.R.: No. Yep, this was before. This was the year before. I graduated in May, started class in the fall, so... And, yeah took the classes and still didn't really know – I had my EMT, had Fire 1, Fire 2 by the time I left here, Orange City. I did that my junior year. Did my EMT my senior year.

A.L.: So while you were a student firefighter you did Firefighter 1 and 2.

L.R.: Yes.

A.L.: Even though you couldn't be a full member of the fire department.

L.R.: Exactly, but they still let me take it which was awesome. Awesome.

A.L.: Brilliant.

L.R.: That's another thing I'd recommend to any student firefighter that wants to do this full time. Get those certifications early. Take all the opportunities you can. Because this place is good at providing those for you. They do a really good job of building those young guys up... if those young guys want to do it. So, anyway, I went to college and, you know, took the classes or whatever, but then that second year would have been my paramedic and I'm like, "I just got my EMT, I'm not ready to be a paramedic." And then I was like, ok, if I'm not going to go back to school, I need to get a job. That's when the whole thing with SPI in Sioux City, going to Sioux City Fire – having the Sioux city Fire take it over, so it would be Sioux City EMS. And they said, you know, a couple instructors that I had in college through WIT were Sioux City firemen. They said it's probably a good idea to get on – to get experience as an EMS, it might help you get on the fire side eventually. I was like, I need a job, so I just got my EMT, so I just applied. A couple months later, I got an offer, so I took it. I wasn't – I didn't know what I wanted. So I got hired in July of 2018, had no idea what I was getting myself into. Pretty soon, started working Sioux City EMS, we ran... It was probably – we averaged at least ten a day, if not more. There would be times you'd run fifteen. That was really my first time in a full-time firehouse. You work right next to the fire guys, you're in the same station. I got lucky enough to be at station 4. It wasn't the busiest, but I think, I may have been prejudiced, but overall it was the best station. I loved station four, I loved the guys I worked with. When I showed that, ok, I wanted to go beyond the Sioux City EMS, I wanted to be a firefighter, they would actually help train me. We'd go over the truck, we'd go over some pumping. I tried to jump in whenever I could with them. I was there about a year and a half, towards the end of my time with Sioux City EMS, I actually helped Engine 4 teach Fire 1 with the WIT students. We took our medic unit down there with Engine 4 and I got to help teach. And that was awesome. That was so cool for them to trust me and to help teach with them. Over there, it was kind of divided between EMS – you weren't...

A.L.: You're not firefighters.

L.R.: You're not firefighters, exactly. But to be able to help them and stuff, it was awesome.

A.L.: And now you work at?

L.R.: I work at the – I'm an airport firefighter at the 185th Air Refueling Wing. So, actually one of the guys at Station Four is on the military side of the 185th, and he said "Hey, they're looking for people. Apply. I'm not sure you're gonna get it." I said "OK, I'll apply." You need your Fire 1, Fire 2, EMT, ARF. You need just three of those.

A.L.: And ARF is?

L.R.: Airport Rescue Firefighting. So I had my Fire 1, Fire 2, and EMT, so I got an offer and I took it because I wanted – it's not like I wanted to leave Sioux City. Sioux City was great. I learned a lot, ran a lot of calls. I wanted to get some fire experience, so I took the job and a week into it, I got sent down to Alabama for ARF school, been there ever since, so.

A.L.: Have you had any fires on base?

L.R.: Yes. My third shift on we had a fire. That's been the last fire. We don't get a lot of calls on there, but when we do, it's normally pretty serious. We go to Seaboard³, we have a couple packing facilities down there. Its -

A.L.: So you cover things off base as well?

L.R.: Yes, we have a little district off base, but it's normally people that get their hands caught in machines and all this other crazy stuff. So the medical calls we do go on are normally pretty legit calls which is nice, but we just don't have a lot of them. We're there for the military, but we also do a little civilian...

A.L.: ... while you're there. But you are not military yourself.

L.R.: No I am not. I got hired as –

A.L.: A civilian employee in a military institution.

L.R.: Yep.

A.L.: And so what are your goals? What do you see in your future with the fire service?

L.R.: Uhhhh, I'd like to... be on a bigger city fire department. You know, I'm still young, so – yeah I got lucky enough to get a fire position when I was 20, so I don't want to stop here. It's good to – it's um – it's a good job. There is no doubt about it. At the 185th it's a great job, but I want to run calls, I want to be on a bigger department sometime. And they're

³ Seaboard Triumph Foods, a meat processing facility.

hard, the bigger departments and stuff, it's hard. Trying to get a fire job in general is very hard. It's very competitive, so we'll see what happens, but I'm still very happy where I'm at. I love going to work every day. That makes a big difference. Like in Sioux City, it's not like I didn't want to go to work, but you ran calls 24/7. And... I love going to work. What I want to tell everybody, really try and enjoy what you do. If you don't enjoy what you do, try and find something different that you might enjoy. I was lucky enough to be around the fire service and I love going to work. It doesn't feel like coming to work.

A.L.: Find it early and stick with it.

L.R.: Yes.

A.L.: So any other takeaways from your time as a student with the Orange City Fire Department? Things you used in your professional career?

L.R.: Just stay committed and try to learn as much as you can, just be a sponge. And then again if full-time fire is where you want to go, do ride-alongs, take classes, take whatever you can – take as many opportunities as you possibly can and stay flexible. Don't pass up opportunities if you can. It will come. Very hilly trying to get into a full-time fire position, because you're going to have a lot of let down, but when you get a phone call from the chief saying "Hey, I'm offering you a position," it's the greatest feeling. It makes all that work, all that hard work, and makes it all worth it. Hang tough. Yes.

A.L.: Thank you so much, for talking to me today.

L.R.: Absolutely.

A.L.: I enjoyed learning about you and your career as a firefighter. And I think we'll call this the end.