

*Keynote Presentation given at The 200 Club of Wake County Annual Luncheon on March 19, 2014. Written and delivered by Phil Zachary, a 200 Club Board of Trustees member.*

**SOMEWHERE IN AMERICA, IT'S LIKELY A FIRST RESPONDER DIED LAST NIGHT.**

It might have been Paramedic Raymond Allison of Sterling City, Texas. On February 12<sup>th</sup> of this year, his ambulance lost control on ice, flipped upside down and burst into flames killing him and two people he was transporting to the hospital.

Or, it could have been firefighter Thomas Lee of Four Oaks. The 67-year old volunteer died February 1<sup>st</sup> of a heart attack after his crew responded to a motor vehicle accident on Highway 96 South.

Or, it could easily have been California Highway Patrol Officers Brian Law and Juan Gonzalez. Both were killed February 17th when their cruiser approached the scene of an accident and they swerved to avoid hitting one of the victims.

Or, it might have been Rocco, an 8-year old K-9 for the Pittsburgh Police Department. He died of multiple stab wounds January 31<sup>st</sup> while protecting his handler from an attacker. And before you brush off Rocco's death as "just an animal," you should know 12-hundred members of law enforcement turned out for his funeral.

**CHANCES ARE, A FIRST RESPONDER DIED LAST NIGHT.**

And if recent statistics and the law of averages hold up, another will die tonight and tomorrow and Friday for the rest of our lives. Ordinary people, really. Men and women who show up for work just like civilians but have a much higher calling than most of us. And as heroic as their work may sometimes be, all of you in this room know that most of your days are spent doing things decidedly non-heroic: training, preparation, patrols, paperwork. The writer, Christopher McDougall goes so far as to say “extreme heroism springs from something that no scientific theory can fully explain; it's an illogical impulse that flies in the face of biology, psychology, actuarial statistics, and basic common sense.” In other words, to believe McDougall is to agree there's really NO preparation for the superhuman acts first responders do every watch, every day in every jurisdiction of America.

#### A FIRST RESPONDER DIED LAST NIGHT.

Boston is a city rich in tradition. Founded in 1630 by Puritan colonists from England, Boston was the scene of many key events of The American Revolution including Paul Revere's famous ride, the Boston Tea Party and the Battle of Bunker Hill. Bostonians are an odd lot of grumpy Irish, Italian, Portugese and Jews with a rapidly growing population of Asians and Middle-Easterners. It's been said Bostonians aren't happy unless they have something to complain about, and in my five months there, I'd say that's dead on.

Bostonians are particularly fanatical about their pro sports teams and, if they're honest with themselves, recognize they're spoiled by the 34 world titles shared by the Red Sox, Patriots, Celtics and Bruins. One particularly hallowed day each year is Patriots Day, celebrated on the third Monday every April. Patriots Day honors the battles of Lexington and Concord, the first of the American Revolution, and is a statewide holiday. It's a day-long celebration in the streets of Boston and always includes a Red Sox home game and running of the Boston Marathon.

For 117 years, runners have converged on Boston to take part in this granddaddy of all long-distance running events. Last year, more than 26,000 entered the race watched by more than a half-million spectators on a bright, warm April morning. And in what has become an all-too-frequent occurrence in our nation's recent history, it turns out two of those spectators (PAUSE) were terrorists.

Two Chechen brothers, Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev, detonated a pair of pressure cooker bombs near the Marathon finish line killing three people and injuring 264 more. Because last year's Marathon happened to take place on Tax Day, April 15<sup>th</sup>, public opinion immediately raced to pin the blame on domestic anti-tax factions. While the media chased that and other erroneous rumors, first responders mobilized in a far more measured and determined fashion.

Thousands of police, fire, EMS and federal personnel poured into Boston, and what ensued over the next three days was a manhunt of unprecedented proportion. Not since 9-11 had so many authorities been organized in one singular public safety effort. The city itself became a virtual ghost town as officials shut down schools, public transit, main thoroughfares and most businesses.

On the night of April 18<sup>th</sup>, just before 11:00PM, police officer Sean Collier was shot in his patrol car while responding to a disturbance call on the campus of MIT. Subsequently, investigators would suggest Collier was executed by the Tsarnaev brothers to further arm themselves and provoke a shootout with police. Less than an hour later, officers exchanged more than 300 rounds with the Tsarnaev brothers in a standoff on a quiet residential street. Officer Dick Donohue was called to the scene of the shoot-out in Watertown and was struck in the right groin area by a bullet that severed his femoral artery and caused extensive bleeding. Officer Donohue was courageously extracted from the firefight by EMS personnel who ultimately saved his life. Officer Collier wasn't as lucky.

FOR REASONS THAT ONLY MAKE SENSE TO EXTREMISTS LIKE THE TSARNAEV BROTHERS, A FIRST RESPONDER DIED THAT NIGHT.

Ironically, most first responders don't perish in the cinematic fashion of officer Collier. Many die in auto or training accidents, from heart attacks, asphyxiation or heat stroke. Like those of us who aren't sworn to serve and protect, public safety officers typically perish in ways that are decidedly normal. And that's why they deserve our gratitude. You see, a case might be made that what motivates men and women to wear the uniform is some John Wayne vision of swooping into the most dangerous circumstances of our lives, saving us from our own calamities, then dusting themselves off and hopping back on the truck to play it out again and again, like some weekly television drama. But the statistics would indicate that lives of first responders are antithetically punctuated by the cadence of tedium and the haunting mindfulness that there's no such thing as routine.

If, as Christopher McDougall argues, heroism is illogical, insensible and something that cannot be scripted, then every first responder is inherently a hero, regardless of whether or not he or she ever saves a life, discharges a bullet or, for that matter, does anything even remotely heroic. You see, for years I've argued that the TRUE function of the 200 Club is not to step forward immediately to financially bolster the families of first responders who perish in service to Wake County. Rather, I believe our greatest calling is to stand always ready—as the public safety officers we're chartered to serve—in the hope our support, our HEROISM if you will, might never be needed. That the very existence of the 200 Club, and the community support it embodies, signals to every law enforcement officer, every firefighter, every EMS technician that we're right behind them. Every day. Every tour. Every watch. No matter how mundane the duty.

Will Rogers said “Being a hero is about the shortest-lived profession on earth.” Heroes themselves will often tell you they have little recollection of their courageous acts or, if they do, that their actions were hardly premeditated and, instead, were spontaneous and, in their minds at least, the only viable option at the time. Those acts usually last but a few moments but have a prolonged and profound impact on those involved.

Take the story of Tyler Doohan of Penfield, NY. On the night of January 21<sup>st</sup>, he awoke to the smell of smoke in his grandfather’s residence and immediately woke six family members escorting them from the burning home. When Tyler realized his grandfather and disabled uncle were still inside, he raced back in to save them. Sadly, all three perished in the blaze. Tyler was eight years old, simply sleeping over for the MLK holiday.

At his funeral, hundreds of firefighters in dress uniforms and white gloves traveled from all over New York state to pay their respects to a fourth grade hero. Outside the church, fire engines lined the streets and firefighters directed traffic. At the church entrance, Penfield’s fire chief held a red-and-white helmet with a shield bearing Tyler's name, which he gave to the boy's mother. The chief said "We consider him an honorary firefighter. A true hero, one of us."

I THINK WE’D ALL AGREE: A TRUE FIRST RESPONDER DIED THAT NIGHT.

Worcester, Massachusetts is an old mill town situated 45 miles due west of Boston, just off the Mass Turnpike. It’s the second largest city in New England but has seen better days. Old vacant buildings and rickety triple-deckers riddle the cityscape, and firefighters there know to expect the worst when an alarm is sounded. Such was the case on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1999 as smoke erupted from the six-story Worcester Cold Storage Warehouse, one block from the city’s central fire

station. The building's exterior walls were 18 inches of brick and mortar, with no windows above the second floor. Inside was a maze of old storage rooms, meat lockers and corridors coated with decades worth of paint and insulation. The lack of available windows prevented firefighters from making an accurate initial assessment of the fire. Initial breaching of lower-floor doors, combined with venting the building by smashing an elevator-shaft skylight, effectively turned the structure into a massive chimney.

The first alarm was dispatched at 6:13PM followed four minutes later by the second. By 6:20, Worcester Ladder One reports fire on the second floor with multiple 2-and-a-half-inch lines deployed. Four minutes later, Central Alarm reports there may be vagrants inside the burning structure and a team is dispatched to find them. At 6:40, less than a half-hour after the first trucks arrive, the third alarm is struck. Six minutes later, Rescue Team One reports to command that they are lost on the fourth floor and running out of air. One minute later, at 6:47, Rescue One calls Fire Alarm requesting they clear the channel, and they have an emergency. The dispatcher sounds the alert tones. At 6:52, the fourth alarm is struck and all chiefs are summoned to the scene. The building is now fully engulfed with firefighters trapped inside. At 6:53, Command Car 3 orders Rescue One to activate their PASS—or Personal Alert Safety System Devices—to aid other companies in locating them. Two minutes later comes the response, “They are activated.” It would be the last audible transmission from Rescue One.

Nine minutes later, at 7:04PM, Ladder 2 asks Portable 1 his location inside the building. Portable 1 replies “Good question.” Ladder 2 is now lost with Engine 3 on the fifth floor. At 7:08, Ladder 2 requests the Chief send a crew to the stairwell and yell, so they can find it. They also report they are running low on air. Seven minutes later at 7:15, Ladder 2 radios “This is Ladder 2 to command, we’re done.” This is the last transmission of the four man search team from Ladder 2/Engine 3. At 7:26, the 5<sup>th</sup> Alarm is struck and trucks pour into Downtown

Worcester from as far away as Boston. At 7:53, Command Car 3 signals for all companies to evacuate the building at once. At that moment, with the blaze raging, temperatures inside exceeded 3,000 degrees.

SIX FIRST RESPONDERS DIED THAT NIGHT, THE 20<sup>TH</sup> DEADLIEST FIRE IN AMERICAN HISTORY.

Six lives. One hour and forty minutes; the timeline a shockingly simple sequence of events that chronicles trained professionals doing their jobs right up to the moment of death. 50,000 people turned out for the funeral six days later. And the former mill-town of 180,000 Irish Catholics and Italians and Lebanese still honors its heroes by going about its daily business forever inspired by the courage and dedication of a half-dozen public servants who perished doing nothing more than the jobs for which they were paid. It would seem ordinary people doing ordinary things beget heroes doing the heroic.

Maybe that explains why the 200 Club truly matters. It's symbolic, I think, that business and community leaders who serve Wake County through our own vocations look beyond our life purpose to ponder the calling of others. And if that roster doesn't begin with those whose destiny is to protect these lives we've toiled for decades to build, then who does matter? It's but the epitome of narcissistic arrogance that we believe we're somehow self-made, self-actualized, self-sufficient. Especially when, as we witnessed in Boston and Worcester and right here in Wake County, our manicured, mortgaged, meticulously managed lives can be so permanently disrupted by the sparks of a fire, the bullets of a gunman or the contents of a simple backpack.

The 200 Club of Wake County, and like-minded organizations nationwide, serve a far greater role than mere financial backstops at a time of tragedy. The 200 Club

casts a reverential glow on the work of those who see their jobs as no more or less important than those of us up here but without whom there would be no protection for the things in life we treasure most. And because that protection is indiscriminate and without regard to class, race or political leaning, the 200 Club is a mouthpiece for a grateful community representing even those citizens who might openly defile the badges of the very men and women sworn to protect their property and family. Believe it or not, ladies and gentlemen, not every citizen we ask to become a member accepts our invitation. In fact, you might be surprised at those who believe they do their part by simply paying taxes, and they're not all that happy about that either. But that will never deter us from doing what's right by you and the men and women you represent. For as long as there's a dollar in our coffers, a single member in our group and the family of a first responder who needs our help, the 200 Club of Wake County will stand tall and unwavering in our gratitude for all you do....for all of us.

Thank you.