

Some Like it Hot: Tales from the Firehouse
Interview with Justin Rich

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Jen Weidner 00:03 Today is June 29, 2023 I'm Jen Weidner with the Jefferson Township Public Library conducting interviews for Some Like It Hot:Tales from the Firehouse. I'm here today with firefighter Justin Rich of the Jeffersonville Fire Department. Thank you for being here today.

Justin Rich 00:17 Thank you for having me on.

Jen Weidner 00:18 Everyone has a story to tell and I want to give Jeffersonville firefighters a chance to share their stories. How long have you been with the department?

Justin Rich 00:25 It will be eight years this August, Augusts 5

Jen Weidner 00:33 So what made you want to become a firefighter?

Justin Rich 00:37 It was always in the back of my mind. Growing up. My dad was a firefighter for 27 years with the Louisville Fire Department. And it just always seemed like a career that would make me feel like I was doing something positive for the community.

Jen Weidner 01:00 So if you weren't a firefighter, what do you think you'd be doing?

Justin Rich 01:04 Well, I might still be working in a restaurant. I managed a restaurant before I got on the Jeffersonville Fire Department.

Jen Weidner 01:14 So what are some of the challenges of your job?

Justin Rich 01:25 All the crews that I've worked with have been really cohesive and worked well together on the job. All the challenges that have arisen have been overcome very, very well. Off the job. It can be challenging family life being gone for 24 hours at a time. EMS runs sometimes can be challenging having to see people in pain but just knowing that you're there to help the situation as opposed to you didn't do anything to make that situation happen. You're just there to help in any way you can. Just having the right mind frame for it really makes a difference.

Jen Weidner 02:35 So you mentioned home, are you married?

Justin Rich 02:50 I am married, I've been with my wife since 2010 and we have an 18 month old boy Jonnah.

Jen Weidner 02:51 So how hard is it being a firefighter and having a family?

Justin Rich 02:54 Well like I said, being gone for 24 hours at a time is really difficult, especially when your son is teething and he is only sleeping three hours at a time. But my wife and I knew that was going to be the case and you know we planned accordingly. She does a great job when I'm not at home and it's difficult being gone for 24 hours but if you have something that you need to do, you can take emergency time and the fire department works really well with you. If something's going on with your son and he's actually sick you can call in and have a sick day. And just a month before my son was born, the city started paternal leave. So I did get six days off that I didn't have to use my vacation days for, which was really nice. You know, we're a brotherhood at Jeffersonville Fire Department. So everybody has a family. Most people have a family. Everybody has been through it and they help you work through things.

Jen Weidner 04:03 Well you all are a family.

Justin Rich 04:06 Somebody's going to help you out

Jen Weidner 04:07 Right? Because you all our family at the department. I mean,

Justin Rich 04:11 We are

Jen Weidner 04:11 As much as you all go through.

Justin Rich 04:13 If I came to my crew and said hey, this is going on with my son and I need to go home and take care of it. We would either find somebody to cover my shift for a couple hours or a couple of days if needed. Luckily nothing like that has happened and my son is healthy and happy. But you know we all work together.

Jen Weidner 04:44 And your wife knew going into that yeah, you're a firefighter and this is how things are.

Justin Rich 04:51 Yeah, it was. We saw I started a Jeffersonville Fire Department in 2015 and he wasn't born until 2022. So we've been used to the schedule the schedule is nice, you know, every five days you get four days off,

Jen Weidner 05:09 Just like a mini vacation.

Justin Rich 05:10 It could be if you don't take overtime and most, most guys take one day of overtime during their four days off and you know, one year maybe you'll get every other four days off and the next year you'll get two days of overtime during your four days off. But you don't have to take it.

Jen Weidner 05:36 I mean why not? If you can. So how long did it take you to get used to working these 24 hour shifts?

Justin Rich 05:45 It wasn't hard to get used to honestly getting woken up in the middle of the night is a little difficult to deal with. Depending on how the night goes you might get woken up four times or no times might get woken up and go to a fire and be out for four hours or you might be back from an EMS run in 30 minutes. So it just depends. And that's still something you have to work through on the nights that you don't get much sleep and you're dragging the next day. I mean you still have to get things done. I think I deal with that pretty well. I can usually find time to get a nap in the afternoon if I need to. But I can usually just power through it's not really too difficult. And if there is a difficult time it's usually only two or three times a year.

Jen Weidner 06:55 So do you still have I don't want to call it anxiety but like you're laying there waiting for a call to happen waiting for the alarm to go off or is that something you kind of...

Justin Rich 07:04 Oh, I think I got over that within the first month or so. I can pretty much go to sleep within 10 minutes of wanting to go to sleep at the fire department without any issues and I don't really have any anxiety about getting woken up or having to go to a run or anything

Jen Weidner 07:28 What are some of the best parts of your job?

Justin Rich 07:34 As I mentioned before with crew integrity. I've worked on quite a few different crews. The brotherhood that you mentioned it's, it's really neat, you know, even though we can go out and do a job the it's very difficult. We come back and we're joking and we're eating our cold dinner because we had to leave it right before we started eating and after that we get all everything cleaned up and get the rest of our job done. We sit down and watch a basketball game. It's, it's a job you can feel good about. You know, I've done tile work and I've done I did dishes when I first started working in restaurants. You know you get home from that you feel tired and you don't really feel like you've accomplished all that much. But the fire department most runs I get back from I feel like we've at least helped somebody in some way.

Jen Weidner 09:12 So is it hard for you to decide what movie to watch?

Justin Rich 09:14 Usually, the remote gets passed around because nobody wants to decide what movie to watch.

Jen Weidner 09:15 Oh, I see.

Justin Rich 09:15 I find that I will be the person most of the time ending up deciding on what movie to watch. And then everybody will tell me what a bad pick it was.

Jen Weidner 09:42 You're like when nobody else was the one to pick. That's funny. That's just like at home. So do you all take turns cooking meals or do you have one person that?

Justin Rich 09:51 Yeah, we all take turns cooking meals. I seem to do a little bit more of the cooking on most of the crews that I've been on. Having come from the restaurant industry. I did have some experience in that. I'm currently working on a firehouse cookbook actually trying to go around and get some recipes from a lot of the guys that I've worked with and just putting something together something we could pull out if we can't decide what we want to have maybe I haven't worked with Captain Terry in a couple of years. Man, I remember his pot pie was really good. And it could be at all the fire houses and anybody that wanted to cook it. That is if I can talk Captain Terry into giving me his recipe.

Jen Weidner 10:48 (laughing) We all have that secret recipe. That's a great idea though. So but you don't have to be like trying to think every time like oh, we're gonna cook or just like at home.

Justin Rich 10:58 Yeah.

Jen Weidner 10:58 Have you thought about maybe selling those cookbooks as a fundraiser?

Justin Rich 11:02 Um, I haven't really given that much thought yet. I'm still just kind of trying to pull the recipes together. But yeah, that's a good idea. fundraiser might be

Jen Weidner 11:14 For the Crusade for Children or something.

Justin Rich 11:16 Yeah.

Jen Weidner 11:18 So I know there's no typical day in the firehouse but like when you first come in the morning what are some things that you do every time you come in?

Justin Rich 11:26 So the first thing you do is you put your gear on the truck and you do your truck check. You really need to check your equipment because it's what's going to keep you alive and save lives. First thing I do is I turn on my air pack, make sure that my mask is working and make sure that it's topped off. After that you just go around the truck man you open every compartment and you check oil gas, the hydraulic tools, make sure everything is where it's supposed to be, you know, the the upcoming group and have had a an incident at 3:30am and forgot to fill up the peat bucket or refill the water can. After you make sure that all of your equipment is working properly. You can tend to other things in the firehouse make sure everything is cleaned up. We usually do clean up first thing in the morning. And then after that, we'll probably take a 30 minute break or so, maybe somebody will cook breakfast. Maybe we'll have a crew breakfast, maybe not. Right now my current crew we're not doing breakfasts. We just some guys don't eat breakfast and guys that do will eat on their own. And then we usually have training sometime between 10am and 1pm. And that will last anywhere from an hour to three hours. And the training will either be a department training or crew training department training, we might go down to Jeff high and do a pre-plan of an incident that could happen there with another engine or truck and a crew training might just consist of the three or four guys on your crew getting together in the Watch room and taking out some rope and going back over all the knots that you need to know for rope rescue sometimes it'll be an hour's worth of us watching a refresher course on EMS classes online. But every day we do some sort of training.

And it just depends on how long it is usually get to go to the grocery on crew as long as the groceries within your stations area.

Jen Weidner 14:36 So up there at four what do just the Kroger?

Justin Rich 14:39 Yeah, Kroger is in District Four. So we can go to Kroger. Sometimes guys will just bring in stuff from and then we don't have to go anywhere. But when we were at when I was stationed at station one downtown, we didn't want to go out of our district. Even though we could if we let the battalion chief know. We wanted to have our district covered so we would either have to bring in food for the whole crew or we could go to Old Town but most of the time somebody brought in food from Kroger.

Jen Weidner 15:22 So it's very important to keep up with your training?

Justin Rich 15:27 Yes, it is very important.

Jen Weidner 15:28 People might not understand that. But I mean, just because you learned it a couple of years ago when you first started, you need to constantly be doing the thing because we want to make sure everybody's safe.

Justin Rich 15:39 That's correct. And some of the most important things to train on are the things that you do very infrequently. So we don't need to train on how to take somebody's blood pressure because we're doing that just about every day. But like I mentioned with the knots, you know, if you haven't tied in a knot in a year, you might not be able to do it as quickly as you need to or you might need to tie that knot when you can't see your hands when you have firefighters are

Jen Weidner 16:13 It has to be muscle memory and

Justin Rich 16:15 Yeah, you have to be able to tie it without being able to see the rope even just going off feel. A lot of the technical rescue aspects are the things that we focus on training on because they are some of the things that we do that are very important, hazmat training can be very important and is difficult to remember some of the some of the chemicals that we could potentially deal with. We're not going to remember what the explosive limit is. But that's why we carry a book on the truck called an ERG and we can quickly reference things like that. So you don't have to memorize everything. You just have to know how to get the information.

Jen Weidner 17:10 As quickly as possible.

Justin Rich 17:11 Yeah

Jen Weidner 17:11 And you are up there like near River Ridge and all those places, right. That's kind of what you all cover.

Justin Rich 17:17 So yes, we do.

Jen Weidner 17:19 So there's lots of potential chemicals.

Justin Rich 17:23 There are Yes there are. And I think that's why station four is the HAZMAT house. So we have at station four we have two different apparatus. We have the engine and then we have a tanker and the tanker carries 3000 gallons of water. But we also have a Dually truck that we hook up to a relief trailer and also a HAZMAT trailer. The relief trailer is something we would take to a fire that was lasting a long time either in the middle of winter when it's extremely cold or in the middle of summer when it's extremely hot, not just for firefighters but also maybe for residents of the building so they can get out of the elements. It's got heat in the air conditioner and we always make sure it's stocked with ice and water and Gatorade. There's a microwave on there in case we're there for a really long time. So we would hook that up and we would take it to a fire. HAZMAT trailer has everything we would need to deal with the HAZMAT situation you know all of our class A Class B suits and different different things we might need for HAZMAT situation

Jen Weidner 18:48 And you guys can go all the way up as far as like Charlestown State Park right for part of that?

Justin Rich 18:56 There is a small part of Charlestown State Park yeah that we go to. District Four is just as big as the rest of the city. We it was I think it was originally that way because it was so rural. But in the last five years, it has exploded in population and the businesses seems like there's another million square foot building built every other month.

Jen Weidner 19:28 Every time I go up Charlestown State Park I'm amazed at how much growth there is up that way.

Justin Rich 19:33 Yeah. And it has been very fast new roads, new buildings. And a lot of times in District Four the training will consist of just knowing your area. So if there's a new building, we'd go tour it. There's a new road, we drive to it and we figure out where the hydrants are and we come in and out of that road both ways taking everything into consideration. Construction, you have to know what's going on in the city so that you don't get stopped with construction. There's usually three or five ways to get to a certain place.

Jen Weidner 20:19 You have all those railroad tracks to worry about to up that way.

Justin Rich 20:23 That is true. Luckily, I haven't (knocks on wood) had an incident with a train but that is a potential hazard. It's every year or every other year, we do a training with them can't remember the name of the railroad might be LnN. Either way, we do a training with the railroad where they go over how to disengage the engine and how to stop the cars. They give us updated information on who to call if there was a derailment.

Jen Weidner 21:06 You have it all covered, you hope,

Justin Rich 21:11 Hopefully so we try to be I would say Jack of all trades. But kings of all trade.

Jen Weidner 21:19 Okay, there you go. Yeah. Is there one call that stands out to you more than others?

Justin Rich 21:56 A year ago there was a rope rescue that I was on. It was one of the few technical rescue operations that we've done. There was a gentleman who was working in the quarry and fell off the side of the cliff and that was in District Four and engine 44 responded and was the first on the scene. And it was about a mile back further than the engine could get. So first thing we did was we loaded up all the equipment that we needed and we put them into the police and fire Derangso and got back to the scene. I was one of the first people there and I was doing a scene safety check. And by the time I got all of the rope equipment out and sorted. Tower 41 had gotten there. They are our rope rescue team. And I had previously been stationed at station one and I'm a Rope Rescue Technician. So I worked with tower 41 and engine 43 and engine 44 personnels. We set up a three to one pulley system and lowered two firefighters down to the ledge that the gentleman had fallen onto; it was about 35 feet down and he was in pain. We went down there. I didn't get lowered down. I was working on the three to one rope system. They administered some EMS help. They stopped bleeding and got him moved over to where the haul system was. And we got the gentleman up and out of that situation in a pretty short amount of time with all the different things that we had to overcome. Recently, I think that's the only thing that stands out.

Jen Weidner 24:34 That stands out to you. I'm glad you guys were able to be there and get to him.

Justin Rich 24:39 Yeah.

Jen Weidner 24:41 Did he survive?

Justin Rich 24:42 Yes, he did.

Jen Weidner 24:42 Oh, that's great.

Justin Rich 24:43 Yes, he survived, made a full recovery. Pretty decent fall and he was pretty lucky.

Jen Weidner 24:51 That's a scary fall. Absolutely. What are some misconceptions about firefighting? There's so many fire shows on it. It's kind of it's always like I'm sitting there I mean, obviously I'm not a firefighter but I'm sitting there going, there's no way that stuff happens in real life.

Justin Rich 25:05 No. I can't even watch those shows. Like some of them are more realistic than others but like there was one show I saw where one of the firefighters took the firetruck out by himself. And he was doing something that was, you know, crazy as well. But one thing that we have to do is we have to be able to be together and on our apparatus very quickly. We're not going to go that far away from our apparatus. Because we have to be able to respond quickly. One guy is not going to go to the grocery alone. If you see firefighters and grocery and there's

four firefighters together. That's because they have to be together and they have to be able to get to their fire truck as fast as possible. I don't watch a lot of those firefighter shows.

Jen Weidner 26:13 I've had others say like fires are not that clear. Like there's so much smoke you can't see anything and on these TV shows like they walk in and there's a fire but they can see everything.

Justin Rich 26:22 Yeah, well. That's very true. Any fire that I've been on I don't think that there's been a single one where visibility has been clear at all. It's usually after the fire is put out, that you can start seeing things because after you put out the fire, you come in with ventilation. So ventilation can either be horizontal ventilation, where you set up a fan at the door and open a window in the rear of the building and start blowing smoke out or it could be vertical ventilation where you put a hole in the roof. A lot of times that can be done simultaneously when you're hitting the fire and visibility will become a lot better. Quickly but the hard part of fighting a fire is you can't see anything. Let's see what else

Jen Weidner 27:18 it just seems like on the shows there's a lot of drama.

Justin Rich 27:32 Yeah

Jen Weidner 27:33 People always fighting people are hooking up this and that and from what I've gathered from who I've interviewed it's it's not like that you guys

Justin Rich 27:42 That's not been my experience. In my almost eight years you know every once in a while there will be verbal altercation, but I've never seen one that has been much more than just hey, that wasn't nice. And, yeah, things are very relaxed at the firehouse. When we have a job to do we go and we get our job done. We come back, we get things cleaned up, then it's time to relax. We've done our training, we've done our cleanup. We've already been on a few runs. We're gonna watch a movie or if you want to go work out you can go work out or you lot of times I'll take a lawn chair out the backside of the firehouse and read a book. Some guys will bring in woodworking projects. You know you're there for 24 hours and spending two hours in the evening working on something else. It's nice to be able to do

Jen Weidner 27:57 I know there's a misconception that oh all firefighters do is just sit around all day and they're easy chairs they don't do anything. But I don't think people understand what you when you are on a call. It can be very intense. So yes, you need to be able to come back and decompress. You have that time or else you all would burn out. I mean so quickly.

Justin Rich 29:15 Yeah. Being able to decompress is really important. One thing with crew integrity is learning what type of instances we really do need to decompress and when we need to talk about things. Seems like it goes from joking about an incident to being serious about an incident and then back to joking about it. And that's just how we deal with things. When you know the guys that you're working with, you know, how to talk to them about something that we've seen together. That was traumatizing

Jen Weidner 30:01 I think a lot of us use humor too as a coping mechanism.

Justin Rich 30:05 Yes, that's why we go back and forth, making fun of a situation to talk about how it really affected us.

Jen Weidner 30:14 Do you feel like you have support for your mental health?

Justin Rich 30:20 I know that the support is there. If I was

Jen Weidner 30:23 If you need it.

Justin Rich 30:23 Yes, there are certain scenes that require decompression where we have to talk with either a chief or they will bring in a therapist if there's been a very traumatizing situation. And luckily I've only been a part of one of those. And it was quite a number of years ago. It was very hard EMS scene and when we got back, we talked about what happened. And we were told that if we needed to talk about it more that it was available and we didn't have to speak up right then they said give this number a call. Not only that the union provides mental health services and just knowing that that's there in case I did need it is really nice. Luckily I haven't had to.

Jen Weidner 31:33 I know there's just such a high incidence of PTSD for any first responders. Because of what you guys see, you know, see day in day out but I'm glad to know that there are things available if you need it and you have that support.

Justin Rich 31:47 There definitely are. Yes. A lot more than there used to be.

Jen Weidner 31:51 Yeah, no, it used to be just suck it up and move on. But that doesn't work long term.

Justin Rich 31:56 No, it doesn't leads to not good for the firefighter. It's not good for the community. Because if you've got a guy that isn't putting the work in for his health, he's not going to be able to be there for the community when they're needed

Jen Weidner 32:13 And it leads to addiction and other things. We don't want anybody to have to go through that.

Justin Rich 32:17 No.

Jen Weidner 32:18 So I know a lot of firefighters have other jobs besides firefighting. Do you have another job?

Justin Rich 32:23 I'm currently fixing up a house that I bought. And I'm going to rent it out. I plan on having it rented by August. I've been working on it for about 10 months now. New wood floors, completely redid the kitchen and new doors, new paint. Just kind of slowly working on it. But once I have that rented out then I'll also be the property manager. And before COVID I worked in a restaurant as well, haven't worked there since COVID. They had to the restaurant that I worked at they had to let a few people go because of how little business they had. And so

obviously I didn't need to work. I was more or less helping them out and working there maybe once or twice a month. Just because it was fun.

Jen Weidner 33:30 Yeah.

Justin Rich 33:32 Every once in a while I'll do odd jobs for a guy that needs a hand. I don't have another career job like some guys on the fire department like one guy I work for. He does tile work and he has a big job or he got too many jobs this month. I'll help him lay some tile. So every once in a while I'll do some odd things.

Jen Weidner 34:03 What advice would you give anyone wanting to become a firefighter?

Justin Rich 34:16 First off, I highly suggest it. I think that if you think that the schedule could work out for you and you're driven by the want to be a productive member of your community, then it's a great job. It's really fulfilling. I think that you need to have I think that you need to understand that once you get on. The continual education is something that's every day and you're going to have to deal with that. Some people like me, like doing that type of thing, and I'll do more research afterwards. Just because I find it interesting. If it's not interesting to you, then you know, maybe you might want to think about something else. But usually you can find something that interests you in the fire service because we do so many jobs and certain guys will make it their career to focus specifically on certain aspects of the fire service. I kind of have done a little bit of everything whereas some people will just focus on rope rescue some people focus on hazmat and just whatever interests you you can usually become the go to guy on the fire department for that. Yeah, you still have to know your knots so you still have to go through and make sure that you're up to date on your EMS things but you. I think it's a great job and anybody that can deal with the schedule would really enjoy it.

Jen Weidner 36:16 Every one of you all that I've interviewed have said what a great job it is.

Justin Rich 36:20 It doesn't really feel like I'm going to work when I wake up at 5:30 in the morning to get ready for work. Usually I wake up five minutes before my alarm and I have time to drink some coffee beforehand. I get into work and I'm doing things that are work but it just doesn't feel like work. It feels like another day and hanging out with the guys.

Jen Weidner 36:47 That's very cool to hear.

Justin Rich 36:49 And gals. We had two women, firefighters, that I worked with.

Jen Weidner 36:54 They both retired.

Justin Rich 36:56 They both retired. One was my captain when she retired, one was my lieutenant when she retired.

Jen Weidner 37:00 Oh, very cool.

Justin Rich 37:02 I had the chance to work with Captain Blanchard and Lieutenant Allen for the last three years of their time at the fire department.

Jen Weidner 37:15 Very, very cool. And I know you're trying to recruit more women. So anybody listening to this in the future. Check out firefighting if you're a woman. Do you have anything else you'd like to tell us?

Justin Rich 37:41 Can't think of anything off the top of my head.

Jen Weidner 37:43 Well, thank you so much for being here today.

Justin Rich 37:45 Thank you very much