

Some Like it Hot: Tales from the Firehouse
Interview with Marty Stengel

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Jen Weidner 00:03 Today is July the 14th 2023. I'm Jen Weidner with the Jeffersonville Township Public Library conducting interviews for Some like it hot: Tales from the Firehouse. I'm here today with retired firefighter Marty Stengel of the Jeffersonville Fire Department. Thank you for being here today.

Marty Stengel 00:17 Thank you for having me.

Jen Weidner 00:19 How long were you with the department?

Marty Stengel 00:21 Thirty-six years.

Jen Weidner 00:22 That's quite a long time for any job but especially firefighting.

Marty Stengel 00:26 I was blessed not to have to worry about a job. Not too many people want to have a job where everyone runs out and you're going in.

Jen Weidner 00:32 Exactly. Exactly. So what made you want to become a firefighter?

Marty Stengel 00:37 Oh, I was working for the VanGilder family. Your dad I'm sure knows all of them, you might too. Anyhow Jimmy was on the fire department. And we're talking about one day because him and I worked together. He said you're thinking about trying to get on the fire department. I said, well, no, because I had application at the fire department, public servers at the time and Colgate so Rich Vissing was actually the mayor at the time, and he was a personal friend of my father's. My dad printed all his signs up for him when he first ran for office and they were good friends throughout the years and he ever a few times me supposed to be the next ones and somebody else got hired and I'm next and someone else got hired. Finally he said go take your test because he tried to get me on the police department. I said I don't want to be on the police department, I want to be on the on the fire department. So it was a it was a great choice for me to make and it's been an awesome job and it's great for

Jen Weidner 00:46 Yep. Did I read somewhere that you used to be scared of fire trucks?

Marty Stengel 01:39 I was petrified

Jen Weidner 01:40 As a child

Marty Stengel 01:41 As a child. My dad actually took me down to the firehouse and I climbed over the fire trucks that day and they actually had a run while I was there. And after that, I wasn't scared. I used to (puts hand over ears) like this when they would go by.

Jen Weidner 01:54 They are loud and little kids. I mean, yeah, that's not that's something you're used to. So if you hadn't become a firefighter, what do you think he would have done?

Marty Stengel 02:03 Oh, I'm not sure I've been involved with Mark VanGilder for several years. We're best friends and we work together. We've done heating and air work together. We've done electric work together. So I probably would have just continued to get on the public service or Colgates. I guess it's kind of good I didn't get on at Colgates since they shut down.

Jen Weidner 02:23 Yeah, my dad retired from there early retirement from there. Yeah. So what were some challenges of being a firefighter?

Marty Stengel 02:30 Probably the biggest challenge is being away from your family. You know, that's 24 hours 24 hours we did when I first started. We worked like a two three, where you would say you would work Monday all day you'd be off Tuesday, you worked Wednesday, all day, then you'd be on Thursday, Friday, Saturday. So then it transferred, they had come up with a new schedule. And then then we started working on what they call three, four. So it was like Monday, Wednesday, Friday, off Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday. So I've got two sons and they I missed a lot of back when we were younger all of us. We could come in and work for each other while we went to the game, so I didn't miss a whole lot. But there were still some times that I couldn't get to some things that I probably wished I could have been there for but just they understood.

Jen Weidner 03:14 That's your job. Yeah. So how long does it take to get used to work in those 24 hour shifts?

Marty Stengel 03:22 That really wasn't hard for me. I've been blessed through the years I've worked with great people. Never, never I was never on a bad crew that I hated to go to work, which made it you know, just everything was very

Jen Weidner 03:34 A lot of people can't say that they love to go to work.

Marty Stengel 03:38 I was an athlete in school and the fire department is like when the buzzer goes off. I've related to when you get to either the floor or the field. I played basketball and baseball at Providence and when it's buzzer goes off, you get pumped up and he's like what are we got, you know, what's going on? We're gonna deal with now

Jen Weidner 03:53 So I didn't bother you've been woken up in the middle of the night

Marty Stengel 03:56 Sometimes.

Jen Weidner 03:57 That's what I always think like that would be so hard to be sleep and all of a sudden have to get up and go

Marty Stengel 04:02 What's funny now the firehouse got these real soft alarms when I was there. It was like Ahhhhh, there's a little tone that went off first the tone the speaker was up in the lounge room where somebody's going to watch TV, some guys would turn it down where you wouldn't hear and it was just like that a big blast at once. if you could hear the tones. You never didn't really sleep good far out because you're

Jen Weidner 04:24 Always waiting.

Marty Stengel 04:25 Yeah you wonder what you're gonna run into. I didn't realize how much pressure really was on me until I got away from it. And it's just like, it just lifted away.

Jen Weidner 04:34 At the time it's your job, it's what you do. What were some of the best parts of your job?

Marty Stengel 04:45 I've had a lot of people come up and hug me for saving people, saving animals, getting personal belongings out for people. The first lesson I got was from Jim Carter. My first day on the job. He said I'm gonna teach you one thing and I want you to never forget this. I said what's that? He said the public pays your salary. You take care of the public.

Jen Weidner 05:10 Yeah, I mean it is it's a public service job and I mean yeah, the City of Jeff we thank you. What were the worst parts?

Marty Stengel 05:20 Oh my worst thing probably was dealing with death with children. I had the fire departments is not a job but you just you're not there for a paycheck. You're you either love the job or you walk away from it. Because it's not something you when you run, you're gonna run into bad things and you see bad things. And I had we had a run as with when I first started out, we didn't do EMS runs. Well, this was after we started making EMS runs. We were on Colonial Park Dr. and we got knocked out on a small infant that wasn't breathing. As soon as I went in the door the lady hands me the little girl. And she ,she didn't have she just had a diaper on. She was cut from here down to her belly. So she had heart issues. And she was not breathing when I got her,

Jen Weidner 06:17 No it's tough. I mean, at the end of the day, you're humans and things affect you the same way they affect anybody. Yeah.

Marty Stengel 06:24 Anyhow. For about the next three months. I woke up because I gave her mouth and back then we did mouth to mouth. I give her mouth to mouth all the way. The ambulance was slow getting there. So we actually jumped into a police car and I was giving her mouth to mouth on the back of a police car. And for probably three months I'd wake up every night and I see her face just like this. And I thought that will be my time to just say I'm gonna walk away. But eventually I got over it but I never forget it.

Jen Weidner 06:53 Right and you guys see horrible stuff and you're meeting people on their worst days. Whether it you know, it's a medical call or a fire, car accident.

Marty Stengel 07:01 Medical calls really changed the firefighters. You know, it gave me an all new respect. I guess I just took ambulance drivers for granted you know, they took their job just like I took mine those people go through there well, well, under funded, they should make a lot more money

Jen Weidner 07:19 Absolutely. Yeah

Marty Stengel 07:20 You know, for us being the first on the scene. Normally. It used to be you know, we did get called to the scene until after the police would be there and an ambulance would be there. Somebody had to get them extricated. Then they would call for us. But then it changed where we were first so we didn't have the ambulance people that were ahead of us. We had to deal with it.

Jen Weidner 07:39 So you guys were all trained. I don't want to say you are paramedics, but first responders.

Marty Stengel 07:44 We were just first responders. If there ever was an incentive because the girl taught the class. I was pretty good at it. And she wanted me to progress on. I thought, well, they're not paying me more money. Why would I want to do that? I just learned the basic things. You learn on the job Everything you learn on the job.

Jen Weidner 08:03 As things happen. Yeah

Marty Stengel 08:05 You learn it on the job. We didn't have an academy. They've got all kinds of training things now that we never had,

Jen Weidner 08:11 Right

Marty Stengel 08:12 We basically had your first when you walked in the door the first day. They showed you how to get on the truck where your gear was where your pack was. And that was basically it!

Jen Weidner 08:21 Oh my gosh, there was nothing like I had no idea!

Marty Stengel 08:26 When I started.

Jen Weidner 08:27 So yeah, things have changed a lot. Because yeah

Marty Stengel 08:33 It's totally different now from what a lot of the guys now it's you know, it's I try to tell the younger guys so just if you learn anything for me just learn this, if an older person talks to you listen to them, because they've either seen it or done it. And they know what it's about.

Jen Weidner 08:47 Yep.

Marty Stengel 08:48 Some took that to heart. So I'm just like, Well, the book says, you know, this is what the book says you're you shouldn't do it that way.

Jen Weidner 08:55 But books and real life as we know it's not a one size fits all and yea, learn from those that have gone through it. So I know there was like no typical day at the firehouse but like would you would go in like what were the same things that you would do like every time you went in? Did you have a routine?

Marty Stengel 09:14 Well, you did clean up first when I first started it didn't make any difference if it was pouring down rain all day long and you made runs in the rain as soon as that truck got back you washed it they didn't care if it was raining or not what I never understand why we not wait till after the rain quits to wash the truck. So but basically every day, you know you've got a work schedule that you have to follow. And normally first thing in the morning you're cleaning up. You always strive to, you know, leave the firehouse the way you got it. So if you've had a busy day, sometimes you couldn't you know if you get knocked out on a run at 6:30 and you're get ready to get off shift at 7:00 and there might be some things it's not normally you try to leave the firehouse as clean as it was when you got some kind of better.

Jen Weidner 10:02 That's just like at home just leave it Yeah, exactly. Because it made it your home. At the end of the day.

Marty Stengel 10:10 I had for 36 years, I basically had two families. I had my brothers and I fought fires with them. I had my family and you think of them both the same. There's nothing I wouldn't do for them.

Jen Weidner 10:20 You're gonna go out of your way to help either of them, right? Absolutely. Is there one call that stands out to you more than all the others?

Marty Stengel 10:27 Just the baby one.

Jen Weidner 10:27 The baby one.

Marty Stengel 10:28 That was my worst one.I've had accidents where I looked in seen people decapitated, you know, when it's just like,

Jen Weidner 10:34 Oh

Marty Stengel 10:35 Had to step back and be that's odd. Had people, one person driving with their leg out the door, toss their legs back. You know, it's, you just see a lot of things and a lot of times you pulled up on wrecks and you look at a wreck and think it's not that bad and somebody would die. And another time you would pull up on something that looked like it was demolished and they walk away from so it was just there was no rhyme or reason on how

Jen Weidner 10:58 Just that dumb luck. You just don't know what's going on

Marty Stengel 11:02 When it's your time to go the man upstairs calls.

Jen Weidner 11:04 It's your time to go. There's nothing there's nothing right? So can you tell us about your last day on the job? What happened you're going into for your last day before retirement and then

Marty Stengel 11:15 My last day started out with the we always have a farewell dinner, my crew fixed my breakfast, the breakfast that I wanted that morning. And then that later on in the afternoon my entire family was there. But my last day and then there are certain times when you retire sometimes you go home at seven o'clock at night. Other times you have to work till seven o'clock in the morning. Well that was me. I had to work until seven in the morning, if I got to go home at seven in the evening I wouldn't have had to fight nothing. But you know that that evening was special with my grandkids where my kids were there and my mom was still alive. So it was a good day. But then like I said after that I've worked a shift and it's pretty much a rule now on your last day they escort you home on your truck in the truck. So they had to wait for me. I didn't actually get done until like eight o'clock.

Jen Weidner 12:13 You got a call that morning right?

Marty Stengel 12:15 I got three calls that morning. The last call comes in at like four after six. I had a camper that a guy who was kinda cold that day because I retired in January. And the guy had a space heater inside of his camper and they caught the camper on fire which got the house on fire. So that was my seven o'clock wake up or 6:15 wake up before I got to go home so anyhow I finally got back to the firehouse then they took me home.

Jen Weidner 12:41 Oh that's so sweet. But I mean yeah, if you're gonna go out go out in the fire.

Marty Stengel 12:47 I went out in a blaze for sure.

Jen Weidner 12:51 So there's all these firefighting shows on TV. What are some of the misconceptions and things that they get wrong about firefighting?

Marty Stengel 13:00 First off if you're in a structure fire you can't see

Jen Weidner 13:02 That's what everyone has said exactly.

Marty Stengel 13:05 And everybody always asked me that what if you get on the early stages of a structure fire as a matter of fact, about a week ago there was a fire right down the street from my house. And I was on I was gonna headed home it was fourth of July night. And I was heading home and we got to an intersection and I looked to my left and I was watching the house up there and a lot of smoke coming out for fireworks. So I told my fiancée I said take me up there well sure enough I got up there in this place was smoke coming out all sides. So I jumped out of the car, and she's like where are you going. I'm going to make sure everyone is out of there.

Jen Weidner 13:38 Just because I'm retired it's still in your blood. It's always gonna be there.

Marty Stengel 13:42 So I run up there. You know the family was sitting outside and I grabbed ahold of them all, is everybody out of the house. Yes. Because at the time the fire was up into the attic and I could see clearly through the house. So I said you sure you don't have any pets? Anything like that, everybody? She said everybody is out. So by that time I could hear the fire trucks coming. Amir Mousavi is the chief out there and he was actually our safety director for the city when I worked. And so as their truck pulled up I told the guys I said look you've got a structure fire going here. I'm not sure where it's at. But they got a line off or the first thing their guy did, which is no no it was he grabbed this what they call a cross lay this way hoses are laying into a truck. You can take them out either side they're gonna go but normally when you take up a handle on off like it's just called flaking you flake it out. So you got a nice little path like this for it to go when you charge it. You can't move at much smaller lines. You can well this guy took it up there and just dropped it right at the front door. So I'm looking back so I ran over real quick and I'm straightening hose out. And so I told the guy said look, I'm retired from Jeff. If you want me to walk away I'll walk away you no you keep doing what you're doing. So I helped flake the lines out and I was gonna stand at the door with them and feed them the line as they went in with the process. But another guy come up there so he was one of the guys at the front door and I got around to the side. I said hey, you got fire breaking through the roof over here. So the guy brings a hand line over and I said I'll take this hand line so I took the hand line just knocking it out.

Jen Weidner 15:21 Your not in turnout gear or anything you're just

Marty Stengel 15:24 I was back far enough

Jen Weidner 15:25 Okay

Marty Stengel 15:25 We've had a couple guys, Greg Hammond and Mike Priest was another retired firefighter. They actually made an entry to the house and got some people out.

Jen Weidner 15:32 Yeah, I remember that.

Marty Stengel 15:35 But it's still till I got back in the car and Christie said, I'm glad to know you when you were a firefighter. I'm watching you up there. She said, He's gonna go in that house.

Jen Weidner 15:47 You're like, Nah, I'm smart enough to not.

Marty Stengel 15:49 If someone had been in there because I knew what I could do what I couldn't do

Jen Weidner 15:55 After 35 years, you know? Yeah,

Marty Stengel 15:58 A lot of guys in the fire service. You know, as I got to be a captain when you're training your crew and new guys would come in and you had to train the way you want to things done. It's like I would always make a habit to go through, if I could sneak through a house

I would make a quick run through the house before I ever put the water on because as soon as you put the water on that's gonna go black. So you get to lay out of the house. You know if somebody's in there, you can maybe have a chance to get them out. So that's what I did that

Jen Weidner 16:24 When you see on these shows, they're just running in there just like just running right in the house without even doing any checks and you're kind of like I don't think that's how it really was.

Marty Stengel 16:32 Well sometimes it is, but as it started out, you know as time progressed and and things got things got changed and they started a thing I went to a class when I was about I probably had five or six years on I guess used to be if you went to a class and you came back and give a class that you took, you got your time back. You didn't have to spend your vacation time and go to

Jen Weidner 16:51 Oh nice.

Marty Stengel 16:52 So one of the things I taught them they taught us was doing a 360 which means when you get to the house, each side was labeled ABCD and you actually did a 360 thing around there to make sure for one thing if it was a basement fire if it was a walkout basement, you had a door right there. If it's not a walkout basement, you know the layout you just got to get lay out of the house from outside. Sometimes you could look in the window you can actually see fire. You know which kind of direction you have to go. So I started teaching classes that older guys like. That's bs we can't do that. As well that's what I thought you were going to say. You know, those old guys are gonna make just like any field. A lot of those guys went into a fire and didn't take a pack?

Jen Weidner 17:37 Right!

Marty Stengel 17:37 When I started wearing a pack they were like you big sissy. I'm like hey I'm not breathing that stuff in.

Jen Weidner 17:42 Then those gentlemen probably have a lot of health problems.

Marty Stengel 17:45 Some of them did some of them didn't. Some of them made it to 85 years old, they come out of a fire without a pack. Come out smoking Camels with no filters and crazy guys like God.

Jen Weidner 17:46 Right That's just what would have that's how it was back in the day. I mean, 70s 80s probably I mean, right now we're seeing like, well, all the building materials now are all toxic.

Marty Stengel 18:06 Your gear and stuff when you come in from a fire. If it was on him all night, you got to get this set of gear called bunker gear. It was a set of boots and you're called Nighthawks and you just stepped down from put your suspenders on in your coat and hat was on the truck So we get done. We didn't wash anything. We went right into the firehouse. Sometimes you got to take a shower and stuff but majority of the time you know it's just put your

gear right by your bed. That is a big no no now. They learn things about the hoods and stuff that we used to wear. There's a lot of throat cancer. There's a lot of prostate cancer and things like that from just your beltline bunker gear so many times. Some of the things that the newer guys now are getting, they're taking off they're gaining a lot of advantage from things that they've learned from the old guys that someone didn't make it that long. So in a sense, it's a good thing that they're learning safer ways.

Jen Weidner 19:01 I mean things change and yeah, we found safer ways to do everything right. So how did being a firefighter affect your home life?

Marty Stengel 19:11 Like I said the most the hardest part was planning when you could cut grass on the days you could work, things like that. But I always worked a second job and the fire department is a stable job and there was a job you could really if you had a family you almost had to work another job. So I always worked with Mark and his dad and we we've done stuff for years like that. And a lot of times I'd get off shift to always I'm a firm believer and stay in shape. I would get up at seven , work out, take a shower at the firehouse then I would go to work another job until until I got all that night then I would go home. So someday just about the majority of the time that's, that's basically what I did. I worked another job, pretty much the whole time.

Jen Weidner 20:00 But your family understood like this is what you do.

Marty Stengel 20:03 This is my job. This is what gets you your tennis shoes, play ball or whatever and I'm not going to be at everything. But like I said when I first started it got to be we'd all cover for each other and they let us do that. Well then they got around the world was ghost employment if you were supposed to be on duty and you couldn't be there you weren't there something happened to the guy who was on duty, you know then they got into that and then went away. So I coached my oldest son until he was a freshman at Providence and my middle son or my youngest son I coached him until he was probably in the sixth grade And that's when it all changed. But you just got to understand the rules.

Jen Weidner 20:44 I mean, right and I mean, everybody might not understand it, but it is just it is what it is. Let's keep everybody safe. What advice would you give for anyone that wants to become a firefighter?

Marty Stengel 20:58 Got the heart for that the biggest thing is the appreciation that you feel when somebody comes up and actually does hug you or tells you thanks. People bring us cake and ice cream, dinners everything .We've been on fires before when it's cold cold and people went to White Castle brought I never did drink coffee but they'd bring coffee and hot chocolate stuff like that to this so we'll talk you used to be like everybody would think firemen all you do is lay around the firehouse eat, you don't you don't do how many times we went to the store. It's man those guys feed you way too good. It's like see you don't understand what you're talking about this we pay for what we want

Jen Weidner 21:39 I've had to tell people that so many times like they're spending their own money.

Marty Stengel 21:43 We don't get a food allowance. So if we want a steak we're paying for it. We're gonna eat it.

Jen Weidner 21:49 Absolutely you deserve to.

Marty Stengel 21:53 But you know, family life. It's they got they got used to it. Well, they knew I'd be there sometimes and sometimes I wouldn't. It's the hardest part though, just being away from them.

Jen Weidner 22:04 So is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

Marty Stengel 22:06 I really like I said it was a great career. I wouldn't change it for nothing in the world. I worked with to this day I've got some of my closest friends. They were on my back and I went into fire as I was on their back when they went in fire. And it's just like a brotherhood.

Jen Weidner 22:24 I'm sure the department has grown exponentially since you started. I mean, I mean I remember as a kid we had like, one fire department, one fire station. Maybe there was another one somewhere. But as far as I know, it was

Marty Stengel 22:35 When I started it was like 36 or 38. We had two firehouses. I guess they got close to 100 now.

Jen Weidner 22:42 Yeah, and need another firehouse.

Marty Stengel 22:43 And the rules change and you have to have so many people on the truck. We used to be when I first started when you got to be a driver. We have what's called a snorkel truck. And he was the only one on that truck. When they went out. They went out we had a pumper. We had a quad and we had a snorkel and each month the drivers would rotate to a different apparatus for use on snorkel use on their by yourself. And a couple guys got actually knocked out on the house fire. They were by themselves, but they took that truck and you just do the best you can do til help go there, yeah, that didn't happen anymore. So it's a lot there's a lot of things that's really changed. It's been a blessing. Probably kept me alive longer than I probably would have been, you know, it hadn't been like that. Hopefully these younger guys are all captains now and live a long life.

Jen Weidner 23:32 I hope so. Let's hope. Well thank you so much for being here.

Marty Stengel 23:34 Thank you