CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

and

TUCKER WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

NARRATOR: W. DEAN BROWN

INTERVIEWER: Volker Janssen

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LOCATION: Modjeska Canyon, CA

PROJECT: 2007 SANTIAGO FIRE

VJ: Today is June 28, 2008. We are here in Modjeska Canyon with Dean Brown to talk about the Santiago wildfire of October 2007 for the Tucker Wildlife Sanctuary. My name is Volker Janssen, assistant professor of history at Cal State Fullerton. Dean, I want to start talking a little bit about your life first, prior to the canyon. When and where were you born?

DB: Glendale, California. I'm a native Californian.

VJ: And when was that? What decade did you grow up in?

DB: Well, I was born in 1948, so I grew up in Southern California in the fifties and the sixties.

VJ: Tell me a little bit about your childhood.

DB: I had a *Leave it to Beaver* childhood.[1] I had a very loving mother and father and older brother and sister. Lived in Eagle Rock, kind of between Glendale and Pasadena, up in that area. Folks had a cabin up at Lake Arrowhead when I was growing up, so we spent a lot of time up at Lake Arrowhead. Had our own Chris-Craft boat and water skied and sailed. Had, like a said, a very wonderful childhood growing up in the Los Angeles area in the fifties and the sixties.

VJ: And you grew up in an environment that actually had a lot of nature as part of your lifestyle, when you think about Lake Arrowhead.

[1] "Leave it to Beaver" was an American sitcom televised by CBS, later ABC, from October 4, 1957 to September 12, 1963. The theme was to see modern suburban life through the eyes of children, six-year-old Theodore (Beaver) and his brother, eleven-year-old Wally.

DB: Oh, yeah. I've always loved the mountains and being out in nature, so that was one of the reasons that drew me to Modjeska, ultimately.

VJ: Are you an experienced camper?

DB: Yes. Have traveled quite a bit around the United States and Canada in RVs [Recreational Vehicles] back in the seventies, and have been in all but two or three states and all ten Canadian provinces. Been to Alaska and been to quite a few different areas throughout the United States.

VJ: What did your parents do?

DB: My father worked for Chevrolet. He worked as a parts manager in the parts department. My mother was a legal secretary for a law firm for a long time, and later in life she worked as a secretary at the church that my mother and father were quite involved with.

VJ: Did they have a close connection to nature?

DB: I believe they did. My dad always appreciated – he was a native of northwestern Missouri. He moved out here in the thirties and liked to hunt and fish and do all of those things.

VJ: You went to high school in Pasadena, or in that area, as well then?

DB: Eagle Rock High School, yes.

VJ: What did you decide to do after high school? Did you have a clear vision as to where you wanted to go in life?

DB: Not really.

VJ: It's the late sixties now, right?

DB: Yeah. I graduated high school in 1966. Sixty-seven was a turning point year for me because I was going to Glendale College, taking general ed classes. Not really had much direction at that point in my life. My mother passed away suddenly that year, in August of '67, and at the same time I got my draft notice.

VJ: What did you do with that?

DB: Well, I checked out my options and realized that I was going to have to go in. I actually got a three-month deferment because my mother had just passed away at that time. I was supposed to go in September of 1967 but actually went in January '68. I was lucky enough to be the fifth person in a long line of draftees that were asked to step forward and we were shuttled off to a marine corps recruit depot in San Diego, and I became a marine in early January of 1968.

VJ: Just before the Tet Offensive. Just before the news broke that this was still a horrible fight.

DB: Yes. When I was in boot camp the Tet Offensive broke out.

VJ: Do you remember how you felt at the time about this?

DB: Well, I remember what our drill instructor told us at the time. (laughs) He goes, "Things are heating up. We need you over there as soon as possible." So I was in Vietnam by August of 1968.

VJ: Is that an experience that you sort of processed, or that sort of – I guess it's a difficult thing to ask, but I mean this must be something that looms large in your life.

DB: I was in for two years. I was not cut out for the military. I knew that after I was in the marine corps for just a few hours. (chuckles) So yeah, I wanted to minimize my time and come out alive. I actually was trained as a radio operator and a naval gunfire forward observer. I was attached to an amphibious float phase, 9th Marine Amphibious Brigade, over in Vietnam, and we were a lot of times on ships, or what they called Landing Platform Helicopter, LPH. I was on the old World War II aircraft carrier *Valley Forge*. It was set up though to carry helicopters at that time during the war. We would go in in waves in helicopters from the ocean side and meet up with other units doing operations in the I Corps in the northern part of South Vietnam.

VJ: Did you see direct action then yourself?

DB: Yeah. I got my combat action ribbon. I didn't get a Purple Heart or anything, but I did see quite a bit of action.

VJ: But that also means you did not get injured.

DB: No, I wasn't. Physically, no. Mentally, I was definitely injured for a while.

VJ: You said you noticed you were not cut out for the military within a few hours. What was that turning point that made you realize that?

DB: I had a difficult time in boot camp with a lot of authority that commanded respect but didn't deserve it, if you know what I mean.

VJ: Did you have any doubts about going, following the draft, when you got the notice?

DB: I had one serious time when I was actually stationed at Camp Pendleton, before I was shipping out for Vietnam. I pulled mess duty, and the mess hall was right next to the Interstate 5 Freeway there. I thought seriously about if I really wanted to do this and go to Vietnam. When I got out of the service, I actually spent quite

a bit of time protesting against the war. Opened my eyes a lot. I grew up quick from nineteen to twenty-one, in the service, in the marine corps, over in Vietnam. It definitely changed my life and refocused me.

I was very committed to going back to school. I used my full G.I. benefits and got a degree from Cal Poly Pomona in urban planning right after I got out of the service and was highly motivated to do much better in school. I had one class at Glendale College. It was a five-unit analytic geometry and calculus class. And I was not that good in math. Actually, because I didn't pass that class, I lost my 2-S classification. And they needed people in late '67 for the draft, so as soon as I lost my 2-S deferment I got my warning notice and my draft notice. So one college class in junior college can affect the rest of your life, believe me. (chuckles) And it did mine.

VJ: Big time, because you were not good in geometry and math.

DB: Yes. Right before I went into boot camp at that time I met my first wife. We actually got engaged when I was in the marine corps, and about a week and a half after I came back from Vietnam, we got married, in September of 1969.

VJ: There's a saying that you learn a lot about home when you're away, and even though I'm tempted to ask you more about Vietnam, since it's such a poignant story at any time, but particularly today, I'm going to try to keep focused on the issue that we have here.

DB: Yeah. We have much more thrilling things to talk about.

VJ: But was there something that you took away from that experience that made you sort of see Southern California in a different light?

DB: Well, it made me appreciate life a lot more. It refocused my efforts to get an education and do something. Again, I've always been close to nature and the environment, and I went through—back to college at Cal Poly and went into their environmental sciences and was thinking about architecture or landscape architecture or urban planning, the three programs they had there. Eventually, I wound up in their urban planning program. I liked that the best. So I've been a professional land planner since then.

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But California has the beaches. I grew up going to the beach, going to the mountains. We were always up in the snow, so I learned to ski. Went up to the Sierras to ski at Mammoth quite a bit when I was a kid growing up. So we had the best of all worlds here. So California really makes you appreciate the oceans, the mountains. I had friends that had summer houses in Laguna Beach, and we had the house up in Lake Arrowhead, and other people had houses out in the desert, so I got to enjoy all the natural environments here in Southern California and have always been appreciative of that.

VJ: I guess the Vietnam experience also politicized you and may have sort of given you a new focus on the issues that are most important in life, right?

DB: Very true. I did participate in quite a few protests as a veteran of Vietnam, and became a Democrat (laughs), and actually supported a lot of efforts to try and bring that war to a close. It was mostly a very eye-opening and broadening experience. I wouldn't trade it for the world, but it wasn't something I thought that our government should have been ever involved with.

VJ: So at the same time that it committed you to the need to be politically aware, it also heightened your awareness of the power of government, I guess.

DB: Very true. Yeah, I have to deal a lot with local government in my profession. So yeah, it opened my eyes to politics quite a bit more and made me get a little more involved in it.

VJ: You said that you became a professional land planner as a result of your new-found commitment to education. Did you enter the profession right away?

DB: Actually, I got a job—I was lucky enough to be graduating in 1973 with a degree in urban planning and I was lucky enough to have the California State Legislature adopt the Planners Full Employment Act, which was called the California Environmental Quality Act, which we affectionately refer to now as CEQA. I'm sure you've heard of it. It required that all projects that may have an impact on the environment would have to be evaluated, and I was hired by an engineering firm that was doing a lot of infrastructure improvements, bridge projects, roadway improvements. In the early seventies Southern California was booming and expanding, and there were infrastructure projects everywhere and now, all of a sudden, they had to comply with this new state law and do environmental analysis.

So I was hired by an engineering firm, by one of my professors I had at Cal Poly. He took me and three of my friends that were graduating in the urban planning program and got a job with an engineering firm out in the Inland Empire doing environmental documentation on all their infrastructure projects.

VJ: So the combination of Southern California's development, suburban growth, and sort of a new commitment to environmental standards really got you in the business.

DB: Yes. It got me employed actually before I had graduated from college and had a job waiting for me when I got out.

VJ: Where did you live at the time?

DB: I lived in Pomona, where I was going to school out there. And lived out there until 1975. At that time I had had enough of that one engineering firm and had an offer from another firm. My wife and I actually purchased a 1951 school bus that

was converted to a house car, RV. It was quite unique. It had a big red arrow painted on the side and a quite colorful back porch. We managed to take four to five months off in 1975, from May 'til almost October, and at that time we had a two-year-old daughter, and we took off on a little trip. And that took us through thirty-four states and ten Canadian provinces.

And, so I got back close to nature and got my confidence back in America. Met so many wonderful people on the road, visited a lot of family and friends around the United States and Canada, and actually spent four or five months on the road. And it was a great experience. We took the highest roads all the way across Canada coming back. I made it to Newfoundland and back, actually, and took the highest roads back across Canada.

When I got back I got another job with a land planning firm and moved to Santa Ana at that time. And at the same time I had a close friend I was working with at that firm who moved in to Silverado Canyon and introduced me to the canyons in 1974, '75 timeframe.

VJ: What was your first impression of the canyons themselves, and then the people in the canyons?

DB: My friend lived in a part of Silverado that was close to an infamous biker bar called the Alpine Inn. He lived actually right across the street from it. And in '76 and '77 we were dabbling in going into business for ourselves, and we turned one of his upstairs bedrooms into our office. So I spent quite a bit of time over in Silverado Canyon, commuting from Santa Ana all the time.

And actually fell in love with the canyons. Actually, one of the first times I came up to Silverado Canyon, we were standing out on his patio – I think it was August. It was a hot summer day. And I saw a—one of the large wasps, tarantula hawks they called them. It had to be three inches long, solid black, with bright orange wings. And I'd never seen one in my life before. And it flew right up into my face, and I go, "Wow! I think I'm hallucinating." I just saw the biggest, hugest, wildest wasp I've ever seen. And he goes, "Aw, no. That's just a tarantula hawk. They're up here all the time."

So it got me interested in the nature up here, and I kept coming up here. My wife and I finally fell in love with the place and actually were able to rent a home in April of 1977. And moved into the home directly across from the fire station here in Modjeska Canyon and rented a small end unit there from—actually my boss at the time, who had just purchased the house there.

VJ: So you moved into Modjeska in '77. Were you already sort of familiar with the community or—?

DB: Yes. I had been through Silverado, Modjeska, Trabuco Canyon. My wife and I had driven most of the canyons by then and we really liked Modjeska the best, so we started looking for property up here. I actually purchased a lot in Silverado

Canyon in 1976 and sold that in 1978 to buy our home which—My first home in Modjeska was on Hilltop Drive on the Olive Hill portion of Modjeska, across from the fire station there. My wife and I, after we moved out of the rental house, we purchased a house in 1978 on Olive Hill and I lived there from 1978 to 1993. I raised my two daughters there, our two daughters. So I have two girls that grew up and went to Silverado Elementary School here in the canyons.

VJ: Was there anything that you missed when you moved out here? I mean, you lived in Santa Ana before, that in the seventies was not as densely developed as it is now but nonetheless had quite a bit more conveniences available to you. Was there something that you were lacking out here?

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DB: It never affected me. I was used to going up to Lake Arrowhead as a kid and we'd bring all our groceries with us for sometimes a week at a time, and things like that. I'm sorry. I don't need a Jack-in-the-Box or a Starbuck's coffee place that's five minutes away from me. I appreciate the quietness, the solitude, the crickets at night. I love living in a dead-end canyon. I know the risks, I accept the risks of living close to nature, but the amenities that we have out here far outweigh the adversities that we're subject to, I think.

VJ: Can you talk more about the beauty of living out here? You've mentioned the quietness and the seclusion.

DB: And the sense of community. I've lived in a lot of urban environments. When I was a kid growing up in Eagle Rock, we knew all our neighbors. We all played Little League together. We had a baseball home plate and bases painted on our street. We played out in the street a lot. Our folks got together for block parties. There was a lot of community interaction back then. It seems like in a lot of suburban and urban environments you lack that. It's never been the case out in the canyons here. We all know our neighbors. We sometimes may not get along all the time. (laughs) That's not saying that there aren't disputes amongst neighbors sometimes out here, as we all know. But the people in the canyons pull together, they look out for each other. It is more of a sense of a community out here in the canyons than in most suburban and urban environments.

VJ: Do you remember the first time you really felt, Wow, this community really – they really do things for each other. Do you remember how you first met that experience?

DB: It had to be when I was involved with my kids at Silverado Elementary School. I mean, it seemed like every parent was there for Parent-Teacher Night. Everybody was involved with the quality of the school and the education. Most of the parents went on field trips with the kids and things like that. You got to know everybody, all the families, especially the kids in your classes. I still have very

good friends that grew up—that had children near the same age as ours that live throughout the canyons here that we're still in touch with and get together with.

VJ: And you said that you know the neighbors. You may not always get along, but you certainly are close. What was the point of disagreement when you first came here in the seventies?

DB: Point of disagreement?

VJ: The kind of things that neighbors might disagree on.

DB: Oh. Well, I can cite a specific example. I had a neighbor up on Olive Hill that had a light that he would leave on all night that would shine right into our bedroom. It wasn't hooded or screened or anything. Ed and I were good friends, you know, lived next to him for a decade. And I just kept asking, "Ed, could you like turn your light off, after ten or eleven o'clock at night when we go to bed?" And he goes, "Sure. No problem. I'll do it." And he never did. So one night, it was after midnight, and I went over, with my baseball bat, and said, "Ed, I'm going to turn your light out for you since you're not turning it out." And I think he got the point after that. You know, little things like that.

He also had some problems with keeping his electricity bill paid, and every once in a while we'd find an extension cord that ran from his house into our service porch, where he would come in and plug in an electrical cord so he could have some power over there every once in a while. I would tell him, "Ed, let us know when you need some power. Just don't do it. You can come over and talk to me about it." Little things like that in the canyons growing up.

It's a very amenable canyon, though. We love our volunteer fire department. They're the focus of bringing us together all the time. We have other groups, like Inter-Canyon League, that if you interviewed Phil and Melody McWilliams, who are chairpeople of our Fire Safe Council and have been involved with our community forever. He's the one who set up the early warning email. It is so ironic that they were the ones to lose their house in the fire. I felt so sad. I actually went by their house when it was on fire that Tuesday afternoon. It was heartbreaking.

VJ: We will get to talk about that. It's an important moment. But going back a little to the seventies, since I think that may still be a little bit of a different time. Some residents remember that as, for the Silverado Canyon, a community that actually had quite a few hippies. Was Modjeska Canyon that way, too?

DB: Oh, yes. That has to be another thing I love about the canyons, its diversity. We have old people, we have young people, we have very conservative, religious people, we have drug addicts, we've got a very eclectic mix of ages. It's not a homogenous population by any means, like you find in other suburbs, in Mission Viejo, or should I even mention Newport Beach, and those kinds of things. We have some very wealthy people, we have people that can barely get by. We have

just a very wide cross-section of a population here. It isn't that ethnically diverse. I would hope it could be some day. It's still a very white canyon out here. But that's about the only thing that isn't really diverse about the canyons out here.

VJ: And did your job as a planner and someone who's evaluating the environmental impact of other development in the rest of Southern California, did that make you appreciate the canyon even more?

DB: Very much. I also have worked on projects in and around the canyons here. Some of them have been very controversial. I'm an environmentalist and want to protect land, but I also support property rights and people's right to have a reasonable use of their property. So I've actually worked with quite a few property owners in the canyons here, and have supported some projects that other people in the canyons have found somewhat controversial.

VJ: A particular example there?

DB: I represented a property owner who got approval for a small commercial center across the street from Cook's Corner, a restaurant and bar. I actually got a forty thousand square foot commercial center approved there. It was very controversial, especially with a lot of people in Trabuco Canyon. As a professional planner, though, it's at a major intersection, it has a biker bar across the street, it was a well-planned neighborhood commercial center there. However, as serendipity would have it, the transportation corridor agency needed developable property out in the canyons as mitigation measures, so they actually bought it from the developer and the property owner I represented, and it is now a dedicated open space area and will be retained as permanent private open space in perpetuity now. So the commercial center never got built that I got approved down there. So yeah, that's probably one of the more controversial projects I've been involved with in the canyons.

VJ: Have you done environmental impact studies, reports, on development in Orange, or other developments that moved towards Santiago Canyon?

DB: I've done a lot of work for the City of Santa Clarita over the years. I'm doing work in the Inland Empire, have been doing quite a bit of work in the Inland Empire. I've done EIRs [Environmental Impact Report] for infill projects, like in San Marino and Sierra Madre, and projects in foothill areas, hillside projects in Arcadia, up against the Angeles National Forest there. Like I said, I balance my environmental ethic with a certain right that property owners have for a reasonable use of their property.

VJ: You look at these developments and then you gauge the impact on the environment, but you also personally, I think, might judge their impact on life quality. What do you think about the quality of life in these planned communities?

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DB: That's an interesting question. It's how the individual perceives it most of the time. I think the Southern California environment and our climate here is our environmental downfall. We have twenty-five million people from Santa Barbara to San Diego now here in just this lower portion of the state. It's such a wonderful place to live because of its climate and the amenities that are offered here, and that's why our quality of life is suffering, all the way down from our air quality being number one. I can remember in the 1960s I was on my high school football team, and we would work out, and back in the mid-sixties there were not too many pollution controls and I can remember my lungs just aching. I look at our air and environment today—and even though we probably have ten times as many cars and more pollution—because the pollution laws have become more stricter our actual air quality is better than it was in the sixties. However, we still have a long way to go in terms of our long-term health consequences of just the air quality that we have here in Southern California.

We all know about the congestion on the freeways. The quality of our transportation system here is suffering and we're maxing everything out. It looks like our limited fossil fuels and the price of oil and gasoline going up may swing it the other way finally, in terms of our consumerism and how we impact our environment.

As an urban planner, we're getting into everything green now. Everybody's trying to reduce their carbon footprint. We have Assembly Bill 32 now, which affects all of the development industry and everyone in rolling back our carbon emissions by 20 to 40 percent by the year 2020 now, so we all have to look forward on how we can consume less and make the overall environmental quality a lot better.

VJ: In the time that you've lived here, have you found that canyon residents, in some way, set a good example there, that they are more in tune with the landscape, more in tune with nature, less consuming of the environment?

DB: We have a very eclectic group out here, and yes, we do have a focus of a lot of people that are very committed to making their carbon footprint less and making things better for future generations. Then again, we have people out here that drive Hummers and big huge pickup trucks that don't see it as an issue. I think canyon people, though, are much more sensitive to environmental concerns and issues because of how close to nature we live. I mean, to see a deer hit out on the road out there is one of the really saddest things. And yet, we all need to drive up and down the canyons. It's a—a lot of tradeoffs out here. I think living out here brings you a lot closer to nature and makes you realize a lot of times the impact that you really don't intend to keep on continuing to occur out here.

VJ: I think that closeness to nature makes you appreciate the beauty but also learn of its capriciousness. So maybe it's a good time to talk about the risks that you're living with out here. When did you first become aware of the threat of fire becoming really much more closer to home, literally?

DB: When did the Indian fire occur out here? It was either '80 or '81, I think. It started way out, down towards Fallbrook area, I believe. It was a classic Santa Ana condition. I was living on Hilltop Drive on Olive Hill in Modjeska at the time, and it got to the point where the fire was being pushed from east to west. It came over through the back of Trabuco Canyon and Holy Jim and threatened that whole area over here. And it was headed directly into our canyons over here.

Let's see, 1980, '81, I had my wife and I think a five- or a six-year-old and a one- or a two-year old that were immediately evacuated to my aunt and uncle's house down in Huntington Beach. And I stayed during that fire and that evacuation. I lived in a very old house that was built in the forties. It had very little protection from fire. So I filled up a bunch of garbage bags full of water and set them on the peak of my roof so I could like let water out if it got that close.

And I can remember the fire was only like a mile in back of the back of Modjeska Canyon here when the winds finally stopped and died down. I can remember the boray bombers flying directly up canyon. I happened to be on top of Juan Flores Hill, hiked up there, and were watching the bombers fly right over the top of the hill and dropping their boray and everything right in the back of the canyons here for that fire. And it was amazing that right when it got close to the back of Modjeska the wind stopped and they were able to stop the fire.

So that was my first experience with fire in Modjeska was the Indian fire back in the early eighties.

VJ: Did you then proceed to change the condition of your home to make it more fire safe?

DB: Not really. (laughs) I don't think so. No. It was right up against the hillsides there. If there was a serious wind-driven fire, I knew that home would be at risk. It was—it did have an asphalt shingle roof, but the rest of the home was – it was all nice. Knotty pine all on the inside, a very nice older home. But I knew in a significant fire it wouldn't stand a chance, if embers were being wind-driven into the property. I mean, we had trees and everything, olive trees especially, all in that area, so if it got into the trees it probably would have had a tough time surviving.

VJ: You moved into a different home then in '93?

DB: Actually, I moved out of the canyons. I got a divorce from my first wife and moved to Newport Beach for about four or five years. Was still in love with the canyons, and I bought this home in the very back of Modjeska back in 2000, in February of 2000. So I moved back into the canyons in February of the year 2000.

VJ: Did your attitude toward fire safety change? Have you sort of started to become more conscientious over the years, or did you basically maintain the same approach that you had back in 1981?

DB: Well, this home, Dick Bates, bless his heart, who built this home in 1978, actually put a whole sprinkler system on the roof here. So I have lawn sprinklers along the peak of the house and over the whole side of the house that actually keep the entire roof of this house moist and wet. And I have a valve in my master bedroom upstairs and all I have to do is turn that valve on and the sprinklers are covering the whole top of the roof. So that was one of the reasons I really liked this house when I bought it. I knew being in this location, this close to all of the open space, that there was definitely a serious wildland fire risk out here.

I believe that helped quite a bit during the Santiago fire. Those sprinklers were running twenty-four-seven for about four days back here, in late October. And it keeps the whole edge of the house wet and moist, and I know for a fact from the embers I saw flying that one evening back here that it definitely helped the situation here.

VJ: What do you do about clearing your property?

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DB: The rear of my property abuts the county's Modjeska Wilderness Preserve there. However, I do take the liberty to have the grass and everything cleared out right down to the creek. I do have a lot of mulefat and other native species right behind the house there that are in the creek that do have the potential of a wildland fire, but I do take the liberty to have that completely cleared out there. I have homes on both sides of me that are very responsible. My whole yard is either gravel or irrigated landscape, so I've done everything with my property here, and even on the county parkland that's right adjacent to me, to try to minimize any kind of fire coming directly into the property.

VJ: You're raising a good point, because it's really not just about securing your own property, it's also about how neighbors consider the risk they bring to others, or the safety they can generate for others.

DB: Yes, definitely.

VJ: Now, do you think that the fire danger has increased over the time that you've lived here compared to the beginning, your first time in the canyon, '75. So in a span of thirty years plus do you think things have gotten worse, risks have gotten more serious?

DB: I think there are more crazy people out there. We're crime victims out here. The Santiago fire was set by an arsonist. It's clear. I think there are some very seriously disturbed people that can realize that they can wreak a lot of havoc in Southern California here during certain Santa Ana wind conditions. I hate to think about that, but when you have this diverse of a population and so many people with mental problems out there that want either some kind of recognition or create something that they can say they're responsible for that affect other people's lives, that I think there is more of a risk today.

The first wildland fire I ever experienced was when I was living in Eagle Rock in 1965. There was a fire in the San Rafael Hills just above Eagle Rock, up between La Canada and Glendale and Pasadena and that whole area close to the Rose Bowl. That whole area caught on fire. And I actually helped a neighbor, a friend of mine I went to high school with, evacuate his house that was right up against the hills there.

Usually they're started by downed power lines or something like that in a wind situation, but I think more and more these days there are people out setting these fires. I sure hope they catch the person that ultimately started this fire. I don't think they ever will. You don't hear of it in the news anymore.

The Santiago fire was just one of a dozen fires that were occurring down here at the time. Actually, our losses for the Santiago fire were infinitesimal compared to the homes that were lost up in the San Bernardino Mountains, and especially down in San Diego. They lost hundreds and thousands of homes, whereas I think we only lost fifteen in our fire up here, so—

VJ: Do you think that climate change may have made the Santa Ana Mountains more vulnerable?

DB: That's hard to say. It's such a big world, and we are having more extreme weather right now. I mean, we've got floods along the Mississippi and other rivers right now. People are suffering from significant tornadoes this year. Weather is getting more extreme, it seems like. Obviously, humans are having an impact on global warming, and it is affecting, I think, weather worldwide now, so I think we're in for some more extreme times where it's going to be harder to predict. Who could have predicted a thunder storm in late May here in the canyons that would dump two inches of rain in fifteen or twenty minutes and send debris flows down our small tributaries here that threatened everybody?

Weather is getting more extreme, it seems like, and it's probably an impact that we're having. We're just too successful of a species here on this small planet right now, I think.

VJ: Now might be a good time to start talking about the fire and what happened in October 2007. Maybe the best way to start is having you tell us where you were when you first got the news, what you did, and take us through your experience of the fire step by step.

DB: I think it was Sunday afternoon. I can't remember where my wife and I were downtown, but we were driving through Orange to try to come back up to the canyons here on Sunday evening. Let me get my calendar out. That would have been on the twenty-first, because the winds had been blowing, we'd heard about the fire in Malibu, and everything like that. I was getting a little nervous and I said, "Let's get back up to the canyons." We got up to Jamboree and Santiago area and the sheriff was already there and said, "Well, there's a fire up along

Santiago Canyon Road. We've closed the road." And I said, "Is it just closed by Irvine Lake, or where?" And they said, "Well, it's a little bit beyond that. Someplace there's a fire started out there."

So my wife and I got on the 241 toll road and drove down and got off at Portola Parkway and came back up the back side and came up through Portola Hills and got into Modjeska that way. Drove over the Modjeska Grade Road as it was getting fairly dark in the evening. It had to be seven o'clock or so, and you could see the glow off back towards Irvine Lake, that that's where the fire was. And the winds were still blowing strongly from east to west, basically, so we said, "Hey, we're fine. Looks like the fire is blowing back down towards the 261 Freeway and down into the north part of Irvine there, and Tustin, and Peters Canyon area." We didn't think there was much of a threat to Modjeska back in here, so we came back in, and—

I know my wife had an important meeting the next morning, Monday morning, in the Inland Empire. We have a second home in Irvine that my wife has. When we got married we kept both homes. And I said, "Well, with the fire burning down in that area, and if you have to be in the Inland Empire first thing Monday morning, I would suggest that you go back down to your house in Irvine so you can get to work Monday morning, because I don't think you're going to be able to drive out the canyons and go –" The quick way to the Inland Empire is down Santiago and take the 241 Freeway out to the 91, and it's a very quick trip. So I said, "You better get to your house in Irvine. I think that would be the best thing to do."

So on Monday morning, when I got up, the fire was still burning and they were talking about certain evacuations. But it really wasn't threatening Silverado or Modjeska or Trabuco canyons back up in here. It seemed like it was burning again down towards the northern part of Irvine, but then again it started burning in all of the foothills along Santiago Canyon Road here. And that's when we first realized it was now headed towards Foothill Ranch and Portola Hills as it progressed on Monday.

Monday morning, I got up and actually drove down to the water district facility that was at the entrance to Silverado Canyon right there, and I took some of these pictures right here of it burning right at Silverado and Santiago Canyon Road. Those were probably at about 11:00 a.m. or noontime or so. So still didn't think that we were being threatened that much here in Modjeska Canyon.

[0:49:30]

And later that afternoon, Modjeska still had not been evacuated yet. Most of my neighbors were here. We couldn't see anything of course from the back of the canyon, so what we would do is we would drive up to the Grade Road. These are some pictures I took from the very top of a hill on Modjeska Grade Road the afternoon of Monday, October 22. And there's the Carter's geodesic home still standing. And these are the hills that are on fire on the west side of Santiago

Canyon Road, and here's the big house that burned at the very top of Modjeska Grade Road there as well. And those were the pictures that were taken, and that's when it's actually starting to threaten the Foothill Ranch area, that whole area, and burning down towards Portola Hills.

So even Monday afternoon, the twenty-second, we really didn't think that we were being threatened that much, until it got later in the evening. The winds weren't so strongly blowing east to west any longer. We actually got winds that I think were starting to blow the fire more from the northeast to the southwest. Like I said, directly into Foothill Ranch and Portola Hills.

And so—everything was fine back here. We still had power. I was watching it on TV. I was talking to my wife on the phone. She was so freaked out on Monday, so she never did go to work or her meetings on Monday morning but actually stayed home and was watching everything on TV.

And then as Monday night progressed, we saw that it was really getting into the Whiting Wilderness Park, down in here just below us. And at about 10:30 or 11:00 p.m., after watching the news, I drove up to the top of Modjeska Grade Road, and the Zadeh development, the twenty lot development where there's only a few homes that have developed, their little street called Oriole up there, the gates were open, so I drove in to the very upper lot on that development at the top of the Modjeska Grade Road and got out to the edge and drove right up to the edge and was pretty much aghast when I looked out and saw all of the Whiting Wilderness Park below me just totally on fire.

I had one gust of wind that actually was blowing at me now, that just moved me back from the ridgeline I was standing on. I think the fire was so intense at that time that it was creating its own windstorm. And the winds were howling, and they were circulating everywhere. And that's when I realized, probably late Monday night, that it looked like the fire might be coming our way and could get across Santiago Canyon Road. And if it did, it was probably going to do it right at the Modjeska Grade Road area.

So I think, by that time, when I got back – I think Monday afternoon, Bill and Paula LaBar evacuated. And they were giving everybody – I think on Monday night is when the mandatory evacuation notices start coming through the canyons. Bill and Paula next door left, and Jim Sill across the street sent his daughter out of the canyons with the two big dogs that they have. And in talking with my wife down in the canyons, I said, "Lookit, I think I want to stay here. I think I can protect the house. If it does get really bad back here –" Our neighbors down the street, the Enochs, have this beautiful boulder rock pool, has a waterfall in it. And I said, "If things get really bad and it looks like homes are going to be lost in the back of the canyons, I've got a plan I think where I can be okay."

VJ: Hide in the pool.

DB: Hide in the pool. And Bill and Paula have a potato shed, or a little below-grade facility right out there that I could get into also, if I needed to protect myself.

VJ: What did your wife say?

DB: She didn't have much of a choice because I had made the decision. I don't know how happy she was about it. I know that she went through about twenty-four hours of hell not knowing. Because that Monday night into Tuesday morning is when the power went out, all the phone lines burned, and the phones stopped working. And as you know, there's no cell phone coverage back here. So I was calling her every hour saying, "Everything's fine. There's no problems. We're fine in the back of the canyons here."

And that's when late Monday night into Tuesday morning is when the fire finally jumped Santiago Canyon Road on the east side and started burning the homes up on the ridgeline there. I'm not exactly sure when the homes on Modjeska Grade Road started to burn, but it had to be early Tuesday morning, on the twenty-third there.

Tuesday morning into Tuesday afternoon – I think early Tuesday afternoon was kind of my low point. That's when I took these pictures. I don't know if it was like one or two o'clock in the afternoon and I took Bill LaBar's ATV [All-Terrain Vehicle] down canyon, with my camera. At first, when I went all the way down canyon, I was seeing homes that were burning right at the entrance of the canyons, and I didn't see one –

VJ: At the entrance of Modjeska Canyon?

DB: Right. And I didn't see one fire truck anywhere in the entire canyons. I came back and reported to Jim. I said, "I think the fire departments have pulled out of the canyons. I didn't see one fire truck in the canyons, and homes are burning at the mouth of the canyon."

VJ: That doesn't send a good message.

DB: No, I was getting—

VJ: Doesn't inspire confidence.

DB: No. I was getting pretty upset that it was burning right down to Modjeska Canyon Road. That's Mr. Corona's house there.

VJ: Is that Modjeska Canyon Road there?

DB: Yes.

VJ: Looking down.

DB: Yeah, looking down canyon. That's Mr. and Mrs. Corona's house. I believe he might have stayed, too, because those are his cars in the driveway. And he was able to save his house right there. But the house just down from him, a little yellow house, burned to the ground, right next to where the Fergusons live.

VJ: Do you have another picture here?

DB: Yeah. Here's a couple of pictures right off of Modjeska Canyon Road, down canyon. Those were a couple of cars burning on the Kersh's property. Rick Kersh I've known in the canyons. He and his family have lived here forever. And he has a bunch of old classic cars, and those were two he was getting ready to rehabilitate. And I'm afraid they went up in the fire. So when I saw the fire was into the homes right along Modjeska Canyon Road there – this is Monday afternoon, getting on into the afternoon, and didn't see—[speaking at same time] I'm sorry, Tuesday afternoon I knew that something was wrong and that they had pulled all the fire trucks out that had been here previously.

We learned later that they felt that the canyon was somewhat indefensible, and so they pulled everybody out for a couple of hours. And I know how that must have eaten on our volunteer fire department guys that were in their fire trucks, out at the mouth of the canyons, watching the homes burn and not being allowed back in to defend it. Until finally later that afternoon they all came back in and started parking at every single house up and down the canyon. That's when I went to my neighbor Jim and said, "They came back in! They're no longer out at the mouth of the canyon. They're back in the canyon. So it looks like we finally got some fire protection coming back into the canyon."

VJ: Now, in between, were you mostly observing the fire, or were you also busy around the house here and starting to maybe prepare for last minute evacuation?

DB: Well, again, it was burning at the mouth of the canyon. It's about three-quarters of a mile from the entrance to the very back of the canyon here. So we weren't really threatened that much until later that afternoon. And I took this picture from Jim's house across the way, when the ridgelines behind the back of the canyons were starting to show a whole bunch of smoke. So I knew that all of the hills right to the south of us basically here were on fire, and it was getting closer and closer as we got into Tuesday evening, on the twenty-third.

VJ: What house is this? [referring to photo]

[0:59:45]

DB: That's Jim Sill's house, across the street from here. I went up on the hill behind his house to get a better view. That's looking in this direction, out there.

VJ: So you didn't only have the fires coming from the mouth of the canyon toward you, where you actually by now already had firefighters working, but you also had it coming from the south.

DB: Yes. And there were no fire trucks back in the back of the canyon at all.

VJ: Couldn't get there.

DB: No. They were very busy at the front of the canyon at that point in time. So as Tuesday evening into night progressed, the fire on the ridgeline to our south got more intense, and as it got dark it just got to glow giant red, until we could ultimately see fire on the ridgeline right above us.

VJ: You actually saw flames.

DB: Oh, yes. And this was like seven or seven-thirty at night. And then all of a sudden we saw our first little what we called fireballs. They were like burning rounds of trees that actually started coming over the cliffs above us here and dropping into the dry vegetation that is just above our homes here. And slowly but surely, it was burning down to us.

At that point in time, thank God, the winds had let up, because when it finally got to the back of the canyon here and this hill behind us was starting to burn pretty good, the winds actually calmed down, to where we were only getting occasional gusts through here, and it wasn't the constant forty-to-fifty-mile-an-hour driven winds. The winds were finally starting to lighten up just in the evening on the twenty-third, that Tuesday evening, the twenty-third, as it was getting dark. And I think that may have been a godsend for the back of the canyons here.

VJ: Well, still, the fire was now burning right across the creek.

DB: Yeah. It's about a hundred yards up the hill, just across the creek, behind Tucker now and behind this whole ridgeline here. And, it just kept—the fire is creeping down. We could see these rounds of little balls of fire. I've got some out in the yard that actually made their way all the way down into the creek. Perfectly round and on fire.

VJ: They were like little cannonballs.

DB: Yeah, cannonballs coming down from the advancing armies. And because the vegetation up here was so thick and so dry, the fire started getting more intense. I kept looking at Jim, my neighbor, going, "Do you think they're going to send any trucks into the back of the canyon here?" And that's when, about nine or ten at night, four fire trucks showed up in the back of the canyon here. I do have some printouts of some emails, because if it wasn't for this group of firemen that came down from San Luis Obispo, Santa Maria, Orcutt, and one other community up there – these poor guys, dedicated firemen, came all the way down from Central California, went to the Irvine Lake staging area, and they said, "You have to get up to this little canyon called Modjeska. We want you to go to the very back of the canyon there. We don't have any support other than you guys to go back and protect the back of the canyon.

So I think it had to be nine or ten o'clock at night that these four fire trucks pull up. One of them went all the way back into the Modjeska Wilderness Preserve ranger's house, parked there. One of the trucks, the Santa Maria fire truck, pulled into Bill and Paula's driveway right here. I think the other truck parked in the lot at Tucker Wildlife Sanctuary down there, or someplace just a little ways down canyon. And they left their fourth truck back towards the fire station, further down canyon, so they could be in communication with them. Because these guys knew they were coming into the back of a burning canyon with no way out. And I have to respect these guys, because they had never been here before, it's pitch dark, and this whole ridgeline is on fire, and now it's getting very close to the creek behind the house here.

The first thing they did was they hooked up all their hoses to the fire hydrants out here and got pressure going, and they knew that they had fire hoses and everything and they could protect the houses along this side of the creek right here.

` After they had all their hoses set up and tested and everything like that, they started going into all their compartments and bringing out all of these flares and other pyrotechnics. And I go, "Hey guys, what's going on? What are you going to do next?" And they go, "Well, it's time to start the backfires." Because the fire's – it's burning very intense now, and it's only about fifty or a hundred yards up the hill from us. I mean, we've got flames that are going fifty to seventy-five feet in the air right behind the houses here. And there are embers going just about everywhere.

I had my little hose in the backyard. I had my sprinklers going on top of the house. Jim had his.

VJ: You had your little garden hose?

DB: Yes. Had my garden hose and actually shut it off when all the firemen came, and they go, "What the hell are you doing here?" I go, "This is my house. I'm not leaving. These are my neighbors' houses. What do you need to know?" And they said, "Well, we don't know the lay of the land back here at all. What's back here? How many houses are back here?" Especially when they broke out all the pyrotechnics. I said, "You're going to start backfires, I take it." Because they had little torches and everything. And they also had these little incendiaries that they could shoot with a gun, because there are some slopes back here and you couldn't just get to the vegetation that easily.

And they said, "Where are the homes back here?" So I actually took the time and took two firefighters, in pitch dark, down the creek, all the way down to the Tucker Sanctuary and the pedestrian bridge. I said, "There is a home on this side of the creek."

VJ: Michelle Gilchrist.

DB: Yes. The Tucker Wildlife home there. I said, "Lookit, if you're going to start a backfire along the creek here, please be aware that this is a home here and you need to protect it. It's the only one." So they go, "Okay. We appreciate that." I said, "Stop your backfire when you get to the oaks." I didn't want them to start any fires underneath the oaks right next to the house on Tucker right back there.

So we all went down there with flashlights and checked it out. And then they came back, and they actually cleared a whole bunch of brush behind Ruth Fleming's old house, which is the ranger's house on the Wildlife Park back there.

Then I would have to say it was getting close to midnight at that time, when they actually started setting the backfires. And they started it all the way up behind their house and started them up, and then they just moved all the way down the creek until they got to the Oak Woodland area close to the Tucker home back there. And it was quite impressive, because I would say, from about 11:00 p.m. to 3:30 in the morning, I stood right in the back here with my hose, getting as many embers as I could, going up and down for the three or four houses below me to Bill and Paula's house above me, just to make sure there weren't any little teeny spot fires or anything else. But the firemen were on Bill and Paula's house with the big hoses and everything like that, and actually sprayed out quite a few flames that were burning right at the back of the property there.

So from Tuesday night, the twenty-third, into the morning of the twenty-fourth, I spent standing right back out here making sure this didn't burn. And Jim Sill kind of watched all the homes on the other side of the street back there to make sure no embers started any spot fires back there.

VJ: Because those things can fly quite a distance, right?

DB: The winds were – there were still some heavy gusts that would come through every once in a while. Thank God it wasn't the constant thirty-to forty-to fifty-mile-an-hour-winds, but it did get gusty every once in a while. There were a couple of times right when they lit the backfire that I had waves of embers just blow right over me, over towards the property here. And I was actually spraying myself, spraying back towards the house, but thank God the house had sprinklers on the roof. Bill and Paula's roof is all aluminum there. So every half an hour I would make sure I cruised all of the properties up and down this side of the street to make sure, because if one of the homes started, it probably would have got into the trees and taken out the rest of them.

VJ: Was there ever a time when you thought, Oh, I might have to hide in the rock pool?

DB: No. Never. To tell you the truth, I never really felt my life was really threatened that much back here, with the fire trucks and everybody back here, and these guys knowing what they were doing when they set the backfires. They didn't seem to be worried, and if it got bad, I know that those guys would have been pulled out

and told to get out of here. And once they came back here and assessed the situations, they told me, they said, "We can save these houses back here. I don't think you have to worry." These guys from Santa Maria and that area really, like I said, I think helped save all the homes in the back of the canyons, and especially Tucker down there.

[0:70:09]

VJ: You got as close to the fire – or the fire got as close to you as it possibly could.

DB: Yeah. There were a couple of times, but like I said, I really never felt my life was threatened that much. The real consternation I had was, I had been working on this big plan in the city of Fontana for two and a half years, a big specific plan and an EIR on a development that the city was pursuing there. And Tuesday night, the twenty-third, was the big city council meeting to consider and adopt a plan and adopt the Environmental Impact Report that was that thick that I had prepared on the project. And I could not even call them to let them know that I could not be at that hearing. It was torn for me because I'd worked for two and a half years on this project, and I needed to be in Fontana that night to be at this public hearing. And I'm standing out here at ten o'clock at night with a fire hose in my hand going, "I should be in Fontana right now."

VJ: What will they think of me?

DB: Yeah, exactly. And I wasn't even able to call them, but I knew my wife had called my project manager out there and he knew that my house was being threatened at that time, so it wasn't an issue. Everything worked out at the hearing in Fontana. They didn't need me there.

VJ: Wednesday afternoon then, at some point did you have a chance to get some sleep?

DB: Wednesday afternoon. Wednesday morning, when it got light – I wanted to acknowledge this one gentleman. This is the city of Lompoc fire chief, Stan Hart. He was the gentleman – Wednesday morning, when we got up, we had no electricity, no phone, no nothing, but thank God we got propane out here, and I have a little percolator coffee pot, so I made a big pot of coffee.

So I was having coffee with my neighbor across the street. And this gentleman was standing on the bridge to the ranger's house in the very back of the canyon. They were starting to set additional backfires further back in the canyon because it was still burning all in the back there. And he said, "Oh, my God, what I would give for a hot cup of coffee right now." Because he had gotten here at ten o'clock last night, had been up all night fighting the fires, directing his troops and everything, hadn't had anything to eat. Had a little bit of water and that was it. And by the time I ran back and got him a cup of coffee and took it back to him he was already gone and further up canyon with two more crews, so I never did get a chance to get him his cup of coffee back there.

But I will be submitting to you an email that I got from Fire Chief Hart that described what it was like for him to drive down from Lompoc and to come into a dead-end canyon in the middle of the night when it was totally on fire, and how he felt. And then I wrote him a response from all of us in the back of the canyon that thanked him and the firefighters he brought down with him for basically saving the back of the canyon.

VJ: That required an ultimate commitment to go into a place that you don't know.

DB: Yeah. I told him I owe him a cup of coffee. (chuckles) But, yeah—

VJ: And yet you worked together. I mean, without you being here telling them where the houses are that otherwise would cause trouble with the backfire, they would have encountered serious difficulties. So in many ways it was a cooperation also.

DB: Yeah. I'm not sure. I think they were smart enough to know that they had to check things out before they started lighting backfires, but it probably didn't hurt that I was here to tell them, Hey, there are homes right here, here, here, and here, and be careful when you set the backfires. (laughs) And they go, "Yeah, you may want to stand in back of your house with a hose for a while here." Like I said, I spent the next five or six hours, from about eleven at night to three-thirty or four in the morning. I went for about a day and a half without sleep.

VJ: Now, there were these very short visits that could—evacuees could take and come back into Modjeska Canyon. Paula LaBar visited her husband, coming back here, seeing him. Did your wife come back?

DB: Well actually, on late Wednesday afternoon, because I'm president of my own company and had had some significant commitments that I'd missed – they opened up the canyons briefly Wednesday – well, they didn't open them up, but late Wednesday afternoon I actually – since everything right behind here was completely burned, and they were continuing the backfires in this direction, and there were fire trucks everywhere, and finally, some air support showed up, finally, late on Wednesday, that I felt comfortable enough to where I had to get to work. So late Wednesday afternoon, I actually packed up and left the canyons and went to our other house down in Irvine. And, actually—late Wednesday afternoon I actually went to work and sent off about eighty emails saying, "I'm alive. Don't worry about it. The house in the canyon has survived. It's fine."

And didn't realize that later on Wednesday afternoon and Wednesday evening, they lit the backfires on the other side of the canyon, and that's when Juan Flores went up, Wednesday night, and all the hills on the east side of the back of Modjeska went up in flames. But I had my neighbors, Bill LaBar and Jim Sill. I had the sprinklers still running on the house. And they were looking after things, after Wednesday afternoon.

VJ: You had said at the beginning of the interview that you saw Phil McWilliams' place when it burned.

DB: Yes.

VJ: That must have been then –

DB: Tuesday afternoon, Tuesday evening. I actually was trying to get down to the entrance of the canyon to see if I could get cell phone coverage to make a call out to my wife, because all the phones went dead earlier Tuesday. I'm not sure exactly what time. I think it was like ten in the morning on Tuesday, the twenty-third, is when I finally lost communication with everybody. And I said, "Don't worry. I'll call you in another hour." And that's when I took Bill LaBar's ATV all the way down to the entrance of the canyon. I took it later that evening, too, and went all the way down through the olive groves out to the very entrance and tried to get cell phone coverage, but couldn't, and couldn't get a call out.

So yeah, it was – one of the times when I went down canyon late Tuesday afternoon, when they had pulled all the fire trucks out, and that's when I took those pictures. And I believe that's when the McWilliams house burned, was sometime late in the afternoon on Tuesday evening. When I went by the little store right there and I got up to that point, I could see that everything down canyon on those slopes late Tuesday afternoon was on fire and that the fire was all the way through Modjeska and now was getting out and headed towards Williams Canyon and back over towards Silverado.

VJ: So you went back to work and saw your wife again? She must have been relieved to see you.

DB: Yes. I do have also a trail of emails here that she was sending to all of my family and friends, especially that Tuesday night and Wednesday morning. John Gannaway is a ranger for the county park system. He used to live in the home in the back here, and he was able because he's a county official to get into the canyons, and he came in Wednesday morning. But he had to leave early Wednesday morning and he goes, "Dean, I'm leaving. Is there anybody you'd like me to call when I get into cell phone coverage outside the canyon?" And I said, "Yes. Call my wife, please." I gave him my number. So he, I think, left the canyons about seven-thirty or eight Wednesday morning, the twenty-fourth, and that was the first word that my wife got after about twenty-four hours, that Jim and I were fine, all the homes in the back of the canyons were fine, none were burned, and everything was okay.

And I was able to get up to the top of the Modjeska Grade Road, I would say, Wednesday at about noon, and somebody else had a cell phone that worked up there and I was able to call her directly and told her that I thought everything was fine in the back of the canyons and I would be coming out and I would be down at her place later that afternoon.

[0:80:19]

VJ: Happy reunion then.

DB: Yeah. As a matter of fact, Paula and their dog Sammy evacuated to our other house in Irvine and were staying down there. So we had a nice little reunion back down there together.

VJ: Well, then you had a bigger reunion with the entire canyon community for Halloween then, right?

DB: That was a fantastic get-together. That was a catharsis that the canyons needed after that traumatic experience. And to thank our firefighters, too.

VJ: And you had so many at Station 16 that also have their own houses here.

DB: Yeah. It was very ironic that Bruce Newell, the mayor of Modjeska, and our beloved fire chief felt bad about going to his own house and defending it so it didn't burn down, and all the other firefighters that live right along Modjeska and that area. Mike Thompson and the Sheibels, all went to their own homes and actually had to make sure, because, boy, it came down – you don't realize how steep that slope is behind the homes in that part of the canyon there until everything was burned. So yeah, it was quite ironic that our own firefighters had to actually go and save their own homes.

VJ: Well, their homes were literally in the line of fire, and protecting them meant protecting houses that were further in the canyon.

DB: Yes, definitely.

VJ: I remember Bruce Newell telling me that he was conflicted about that.

DB: No, he shouldn't have been. He needed to be there. And it's ironic. Like I said, it's so ironic that Phil and Melody McWilliams lost their home, and the time and effort they put in over the years here to have everybody protect their homes. But they knew the risks, too. I mean, we do live in a severe wildland fire hazard area, and we know it. And when the Santa Ana winds blow, all bets are off.

VJ: The community has gotten a lot closer through this event?

DB: I think so. Yes, especially now that we've weathered the winter and the spring. The threat of course, as you know, was not over once the fire was out. I'm not sure how many evacuations there were during the winter storms. I didn't leave for any of those either. (chuckles)

VJ: (chuckles) I don't think so.

DB: However, I was in Fontana working on May 22nd when the thunderstorm came through. I actually got a call from Paula saying, "You better get home. There's been a flash flood in the back of the canyon. So yeah, it lasted all the way till May. I counted it out. I actually started a special file for all the emails that I got

during the fire and after the fire, all the way through the flash floods here, and I have over five hundred emails just on that.

VJ: Wow. Now, that May event, it affected your neighbors to the east of the LaBars quite severely.

DB: Yes.

VJ: Did you suffer any damage on your property?

DB: I probably had about fifteen or twenty cubic yards of mud and silt and debris wash all over the entire property. I'm a land planner. I'm supposed to be a planner, right? Well, I had sandbags out in front all winter to protect my home, you know, my gates and my driveway. A couple of times there was a lot of water running down the street, so I didn't want it coming through the property. So in late April, I guess it was, or early May, I finally says, "Well, winter's over. I can get rid of my sandbags." So what I did was I piled them all up along my back property line back here, so if the creek ever rises on Santiago I've got some protection back there.

Well, when the thunderstorm hit and it blocked the drainage course here, just all the water – the Stokes have some pictures, you've probably seen them. There was eighteen to twenty-four inches of water running down the roadway out in front of my house. So it came in through the gates and my driveway and left about a two-inch layer of silt on the front of my property, but my sandbags in the back trapped all the water and mud and debris in the back. So I had a foot of mud and other debris that got actually all the way underneath the house. Bill and Paula had three to five hundred yards of debris and boulders as big as this wash down on their property. I just had the mud and the silt. And it took quite a few wheelbarrows – Bill even had a small little tractor that helped me get a lot of the mud and debris and everything out of my yard.

I didn't suffer the damage that I'm afraid my neighbors did right next to me. But it was enough to make my carpets filthy. I still haven't cleaned the carpets since the fire. Still waiting for winter to be over now and hopefully I can clean up things around the yard.

VJ: But thankfully, most of your houses are elevated enough so it –

DB: Yes. This home was required to be built a foot above the flood plain, so everything's elevated in the house. I have a garage door with a seal on the bottom of it, and even though it got up on the garage door, the floodwaters really didn't do any damage to the house or the garage, so I was pretty lucky.

VJ: This has probably been a busy couple of months. Not only working on cleaning up on your own house and your own property after May 22, but also helping others, right? I mean, this is one of the things that you do out here.

DB: Yeah. Like you said, the work party on Bill and Paula's property over here, I mean they do so much for everybody in the canyons here that they had seventy-five people show up the Saturday after the thunderstorm to help clear up and clean up, including our volunteer fire department, fire guys again. They were out here again. It's an amazing community. I had mud everywhere, couldn't do much with them, so I was next door helping Bill and Paula. But then again, after we got them back together a little bit, Bill's over here helping me. So that's the way things are in the canyons. I love my neighbors. They're my family back here as well.

VJ: We are back in fire season. We have hot temperatures again and will probably get Santa Anas again this year, like every year. Do you think there will be anything that you will do differently?

DB: If we had another fire that threatened the homes in the back again here I'd probably stay again. Like I said, I never felt my life was really at risk when I stayed during the fire here. I'm not sure it could get much worse in the back here than what it was in late October of '07, but I'd have confidence in the firefighters that came to protect us.

I would hope that sometime in the near future we can get better cell phone coverage out here so that it isn't dependent on wire lines that can burn, so we can keep in communication. I think communication is a very important thing in fires like this. I know that the supervisor is working with the wireless carriers to try and improve service back here. As a matter of fact, part of my business is I'm an approved vendor for almost all the wireless carriers. I do site acquisition and land use entitlements for cell sites throughout Southern California. I've probably helped build a couple of thousand cell sites in Southern California since the 1980s. I started working for PacTel Cellular back in the late eighties, and then they became Air Touch Cellular, and then Verizon Wireless. I've worked for Sprint, I'm currently working for Metro PCS, T-Mobile, and Verizon, still doing sites for them. I talked to their RF [Radio Frequency] engineers. I said, "Guys, can we get coverage out here in the canyons?" There's so few people, but their infrastructure costs so much that it's a very low priority for them. But in an extreme situation when we have fires and floods, it sure would be nice if we could get some better communication back here.

VJ: Do you think the canyon has lost some of its beauty as a result of this fire?

[0:90:00]

DB: Yeah. It was depressing. After the fire, the winds were still blowing a little bit, and every day we would have a fresh layer of dirt and grit and black and silt over everything. It was horrible. Just breathing it back here was I don't think healthy at all, right after the fire. Especially when we had a few more wind episodes afterwards. One afternoon, I drove into the canyons coming home, I had to stop out on Santiago Canyon Road because the dust and debris and everything it was

blowing was so thick I couldn't see twenty feet in front of me. So coming into a dirty, silty, dusty environment for months after the fires was not pleasant at all, and I'm sure not healthy in breathing it also.

So it's been not the most pleasant over the last six months out here. Thank God the winter rains kind of calmed things down finally and kept the dust down a little bit. But even after we had a couple of rains, and the winds came up, we had new levels of dust falling in. So it took quite a while for that to clear up. And it probably took a couple of bad thunderstorms to drain all the debris down.

So yeah, it hasn't just been the fire and the floods, it's been a lot of the dust and the grit and just cleaning up afterwards. It hasn't been the sparkling clean environment we love in the canyons out here for a while, and it won't be for quite a few more years.

VJ: Can you ever see yourself living someplace else?

DB: I love the canyons. I've been out here since the seventies. I love the environment, I love my neighbors, I love the community that it has created, so I plan on being out here for quite a while. I can't say that I won't ever move out of the canyons. There are a lot of nice places to live, someplace more rural maybe some day. I have another nice house in Irvine that I can go to that's very pleasant to be at too, but I do love the canyons.

When I did get married to my wife back in 2001, I only gave her one condition and that was, I'm not selling the house in the canyons. I love it out here and I'm going to be out here for quite a while. So yeah, we have our city house –

VJ: That was not a problem for her?

DB: (laughs) I can't say it isn't even a problem today.

VJ: She's not such a fan of the canyon?

DB: Actually, my wife and I met out here. She lived in the canyons when we met each other. But she's not as in love with the canyons as I am, let's say. She grew up in the country outside of Vancouver, Canada, and has been more of a city person most of her life. So we complement each other on that, and sometimes it isn't such a complement (laughs), in that she needs to be in the city and I need to be in the country. So it is somewhat of a unique relationship that way. But I think she loves the canyons, too.

VJ: Do you think the city may eventually be coming here? Do you think that development is putting the canyons at risk so that at some point it will be necessary for you to find something more rural because the character of the canyon will be gone?

DB: The couple I bought this house from in the year 2000 felt that way, and they moved up to a more rural area in Oregon because of that. I think the Irvine Company has done a great job in saving a lot of the open space out there. There's a lot of controversy with the last twelve hundred homes that they would like to build down by Irvine Lake. But I've seen things change since the seventies. I moved out here before there was any Foothill Ranch or Portola Hills or any of those developments. But I realize, now that we have the Whiting Wilderness Park and Limestone Regional Park and all of the other open space that's been dedicated here around the canyon areas, that there won't be that much more development out here. I think the backs of Silverado and Modjeska and Trabuco will maintain their rural character and charm. There are very few places like this in Orange County. It is a unique environment that some people are attracted to.

So even though there may be some additional encroaching development, and there will be more fires and floods in the future, I think there's a lot of people that realize that this is a special place and they're willing to accept the risks in order to reap the benefits.

VJ: Dean, I think I've asked you all the questions on my list. If there's anything that you would like to add that you think we didn't really get to talk about, this would be a good time –

DB: No. I like Cal State Fullerton as a neighbor. Tucker has come a long way in the last few years. There were some problems with how it was being run and managed a few years ago. The residents were pretty upset when it closed a few years ago. But I think Cal State Fullerton has made a significant commitment to making a class facility again. It is a unique facility that thousands of people enjoy every year. I know of so many people in the city that ask me, "Where do you live?" "In Modjeska." And they go, "Well, I've been out to Modjeska. I went to a bird sanctuary out there years ago." So I think everybody knows Modjeska primarily – well, they know it a lot more because of its history over the last six months.

But Tucker is a special place in all of our hearts out here. I think Karen and everybody are doing a fantastic job to get it rehabilitated after the impacts it suffered during the fires, and during the winter rains. I see a lot of commitment to upgrading it and keeping it a class facility like it's been in the past.

VJ: Thank you. You're a good neighbor, Dean. I'm going to use that as your last word and end our conversation. Today is June 28. This was an interview with Dean Brown for the Tucker Wildlife Sanctuary. My name is Volker Janssen.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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