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A Journey of Service and Adventure



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How has your NEMA membership impacted your career?

My NEMA membership has had a profound impact on my career. I attended my first NEMA meeting in 1997 while working with the New York City Office of Emergency Management. The Director, Jerry Hauer, an extraordinary emergency manager, introduced me to key professionals who taught me the intricacies of emergency management, the importance of leading with compassion, and the value of simplifying processes to aid those impacted. Over the past 25-30 years, my NEMA membership has been both professionally gratifying and personally enriching. It has allowed me to maintain and grow a network of dedicated professionals who share my passion for this field. I would like to give a shout out to Lacy Suiter for teaching me how critical of a role emergency management is in protecting our citizens and for instilling confidence in me at the start of my career.

The relationships and professionalism I have developed through NEMA have been instrumental in shaping my career and fostering a supportive community committed to excellence in emergency management.

Your work has also extended internationally, as you have aided in the response to the catastrophic Haiti Earthquake in 2010 and, recently, the creation of the National Bushfire Recovery Agency in Australia. What challenges or lessons have you learned in aiding emergency management efforts internationally?

My experiences in Haiti and Australia were vastly different. In Haiti, where the lowest estimate of lives lost was 280,000, the challenges were immense. People were dramatically deprived of water, food, and shelter. My role was to help set up camps and clear debris, which introduced me to the UN's cluster system. This system, where multiple organizations collaborate to address various aspects to a problem, was a revelation and contrasts sharply from the US system. The cluster system's success was evident as I watched various countries take on different pieces of the rebuilding plan. This experience underscored the potential for greater international cooperation and the role the US could play in enhancing its efforts.

In Australia, the situation was much different. The Prime Minister's recovery effort brought me and my team in to assist, revealing a robust state-level emergency management system. Here, the states possessed more capabilities and resources than the federal government, showcasing a different model of disaster response and highlighting the importance of strong local governance and resource allocation.

However, both experiences reinforced the significance of human compassion and empathy in emergency management. In Haiti, despite having almost nothing, people shared what little they had, demonstrating the greatest strength of emergency management—our innate empathy. These international experiences have taught me that while systems and resources vary, the core of effective emergency management lies in the ability to work together compassionately and efficiently.

Your experience includes supporting/contributing to the creation of the New York City Office of Emergency Management, the standup of the Office of Homeland Security in the White House, and the Department of Homeland Security. These are incredible feats that have significantly transformed emergency management within our country. With these in mind, what do you consider to be your greatest accomplishment?

First and foremost, I must emphasize that none of these achievements were accomplished by me alone. I was fortunate to be a support player, guided by exceptional leadership throughout my career beginning with my time as a firefighter and the outstanding leaders I had the privilege to learn from. One of my most significant accomplishments was developing the Command and Control of Emergencies document for New York City and my involvement in HSPD-5, which laid the foundation for the National Emergency Management System. This effort required extensive collaboration and negotiation to get twenty-two varying departments and agencies to agree on their roles and responsibilities. The document's longevity and continued relevance are testaments to the hard work and dedication of many, including those at FEMA and at various associations across the US.

Creating an environment where people can excel and perform the work they signed up to do is crucial for successful leadership. This philosophy was central to our efforts in developing a unified system for domestic crisis management, ensuring there was no learning curve to understanding one other's processes. Ultimately, my greatest accomplishment lies in the friendships and professional contacts I made at NEMA that made all of these initiatives possible which have enhanced our nation's emergency management capabilities. The heart of this work is the shared desire to help when needed, and I am proud to have contributed to creating systems that embody this spirit of compassion and collaboration.

You led the FEMA disaster response and recovery operations in New York City after the tragic 9/11 terrorist attacks. What was the most impactful lesson you learned from this experience?

The most impactful lesson I learned from leading FEMA's disaster response and recovery operations after the 9/11 attacks was the incredible strength of character and resilience displayed by all volunteers and public safety personnel. Despite the enormous tragedy and destruction, most remained focused, organized, and systematically approached the daunting task at hand. Their dedication was truly remarkable.

Having a history with the World Trade Center, as my fire company, Ladder 12, was the first to enter Tower 2 during the 1993 bombing, added depth to my perspective on the 9/11 response. I will never forget the destruction and the unwavering commitment of those on the ground. One of the most touching moments was when I was handed a bottle of water from a Red Cross truck with a thank-you note from a kindergartener. This simple act of kindness reinforced my belief in the innate empathy and willingness to help that defines emergency management. The unity and compassion shown by everyone involved in the recovery efforts were profound. Tragedies like these, while horrific, bring people together and foster a unified response.

I returned to New York in 2016 as a Deputy Regional Administrator of FEMA when the FEMA Region 2 office was moved back into the World Trade Center. It was an emotional event for everyone involved and I felt a duty to support my team, ensuring they were okay and providing flexibility in their work environments when needed. The lesson from 9/11 is not just about the tragedy but about resilience and the ability to come back stronger.

You love to travel! Where was the last place you visited for fun? What was the experience like? Did you bring home any good stories or try new foods?

The last place I visited for fun was Hungary, where I spent two weeks visiting my wife's family which made the experience even more enriching. Budapest is a paradise for foodies like myself, so I thoroughly enjoyed indulging in the local cuisine. The quality of Hungarian wine was also a delightful discovery. One of the highlights of the trip was visiting the thermal spas, which are an integral part of Hungarian culture. It was amazing to see people of all ages come together for this experience. I highly recommend the Rudas Baths in Budapest which date back to the 14th century. Featuring a central pool in a large stone room outlined by four smaller pools each at a different temperature, they were incredibly relaxing and seemed to melt away all my troubles!

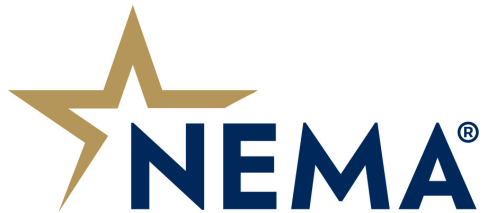
Overall, the trip was a perfect blend of culinary delights and rejuvenation. The combination of delicious food, excellent wine, and the therapeutic thermal spas made it an unforgettable experience and I returned home with a deeper appreciation for Hungarian culture and some wonderful stories to share!

"It is probably a pity that every citizen of each state cannot visit all the others, to see the differences, to learn what we have in common, and come back with a richer, fuller understanding of

America – in all its beauty, in all its dignity, in all its strength, in support of moral principles."

– Dwight D. Eisenhower

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