The Childhood Cancer Story Every Parent Needs To Hear | Marc Vermont | Ep. 125 Transcript

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Opening Story and Childhood Cancer Awareness

One minute you're on top of the world, next minute, you are told that your child has cancer. He would wake up screaming and then she would vomit. Also, when she was walking, she'd lose her balance.

So I go down to the hotel lobby. I get on the computer and I start researching. And the first thing that pops up is brain tumor. You're not just dealing with the battle of cancer, but you dealing the day-to-day battle just life.

Can't even hold your children. It's heartbreaking. Today, we have Chief Mark Vermont. All right. Mark is an assistant fire chief for Oakland Park Fire Rescue, a father and a man who turned loss into hope.

Through Kendra's Kisses Foundation, he makes sure no family fights childhood cancer alone. Emotionally doing your wife, what are you guys going through?

Initially, it's almost going to the steps of a grieving process. I learned this you can't control what's happening to you, but you could control how you react to it My wife and I came up with this idea.

Let's start a charity Let us name it after Kendra and go to the children hospitals in South Florida And let's find out if there's a mechanism for us to go ahead and donate money to The families then we had to come up With how are we gonna raise money and we meet this couple the guy's name is Jack bevel aqua and after he shared his story I shared my story about Kendera and our foundation because we could do a crack-up cancer event in south Florida give all the proceeds to Kendras kids which we got one coming up.

March 21st, it's at the Savoir Theater downtown Fort Lauderdale. It's called Crack Up Cancer. 100% of the proceeds go to Kendra's Kisses. We have four headliner comics.

Get your tickets, man. Welcome to another episode of a Healthy Point of View podcast. I'm your host, Sam Tahata. And as usual, we're bringing experts from all over the world to talk about health, wellness, beauty, and mindset.

Today's guest, he's local. You know, you guys see this fire department gear sitting right next to me. The 12 years that I did it, that was out on the road, there's guys out there that have done it for a hell of lot longer than I have.

and today we got one of those. Today's guest, we're gonna be talking about certain things, something that is gonna touch your heart.

Introducing Chief Mark Vermont and Kendra's Kisses

We're going to talk about Kendra's Kisses. It's a nonprofit organization that was put together from an experience that he had to go through. This experience will make you realize that life can change at a blink of an eye.

Even when you have everything going for you, you've have investments that you're working on, your working your education, we're doing all kinds of things to just better your life and better the life of your family.

And boom, it can just change at a blink of an eye. Today we have Chief Mark Vermont. All right. I like it. That was a heck of an intro. Thank you very much.

Hey, that's how we do it, man. Next time we'll have like a big fire siren. Yeah, I'm ready. I was looking for the slide pole when I came in, and I didn't see one.

Oh, yeah, it's in the back, the after hours pole. Well, thank you for having me here. It's an honor to be on your show. Absolutely, absolutely. So, you know, Welcome to begin with and you know first I want to start off before we get into everything we're going to talk about I Want people to get to know you as a person and?

You know what got you to where you're at today, so I'm gonna go way back though I don't want people really get know who you are. I wanna go back to like when you were five years old Like, what was your upbringing?

What led you to actually become a firefighter paramedic? You know, you obviously retired from one department. Now you're working as a chief in another department, Oakland Park Fire Rescue.

But let's go way back. Who is Mark Vermont? So, yeah, five years old. Funny, I can remember when I was five-years-old in my fifth birthday party. And they put the cake in front of me and they say, hey, close your eyes, make a wish, and blow out the candles.

And my wish was I wanted to be surrounded by women, right? And I wasn't specific, so that part came true. So I had two sisters, female dog. I get married, I have three girls.

The dog is another female. so I've been surrounded women. My wish when I was five years old came through. It was certainly surrounded my women you know.

But yeah, I was born in New York, ended up moving down here when I about four and a half years old. Grew up in Miramar, and it was a great upbringing.

It was great childhood, just like anybody else's childhood in the mid to late 70s. You're playing outside, you're running around, your drinking from the hose on the side of the house and stuff like that.

Yeah, it was great. And then I ended up, I went to Miramar High School and when I was in 10th grade, we were, went out with a friend of mine, a little, what do you call it?

Early Life in Miramar and Becoming a Firefighter

The arcade. Okay. We stopped to get gas right by the arcade, and it's a place called McSugars. I don't know if you remember, was on 595. It was actually when they were building I-595 and while I'm sitting on the car, waiting for the gas to be pumped, I hear a crash.

And right in front of me, a guy got run over by a car, pedestrian hit by vehicle. Now I'm 16 years old. I don't know anything what to do. and the guy is like barely breathing.

There was a piece of glass on the ground and I picked up the piece a glass and held it in front of his mouth because that's what I've seen in the movies, you know, to see if he was breathing and and a guy was breathin.

So I just kind of sat there and said, hey man, help is coming. You know I didn't know what to do. I don't even know how to take a pulse, nothing. And so at that moment is when I was like, man I got to learn what the do, if this ever happened again to me.

That's when kind a set my sites on medicine and getting into the field. And it wasn't paramedic right away. It was, I actually started right after high school.

Well, then I joined HOSA, right, which is a health occupation class in high-school. Okay. So I went through that. You learn, you start learning about some medicine.

Then I decided I was going to take some pre-med classes right. After highschool, so I started doing that, taking my chemistries, biologies and all that stuff.

And I needed a job. So I called up an ambulance company and I got hired with an Ambulance Company back then.

It was actually Randall Eastern down in Miami.

And so during that, I decided to take an undergraduate and went to EMT in order to work for the Amulance company. But while I was doing the ride times that you have to do, the field clinicals, uh, did them with Hallandale and the captain that was there, his name was Benny Sorge.

And he goes, Hey man, you're a big kid. You know, your six, four, 220 pounds at the time. And it goes. What do you want to be a doctor for? You're going to, uh, work until you were 70. Are you going be paying your bills?

He goes why don't you become a firefighter and you'll be retired by the. Time you are 50. I go, well, that sounds good. So I pretty much changed majors and that's when I decided to go into a paramedics.

And then they sent me to the fire academy and they hired me after I was done with the Fire Academy. And that's when I started in 1993. Wow. Amazing, man.

You know, so you were in Myanmar in the seventies. Yeah. So I mean, that was significantly different today. It was it was a lot differently. But there's like there was like a.

A lot of farmland out there. Right. Everything. Basically, west of Douglas Road was all just cows and horses and acreage, you know, and stuff like that.

And then, I-75 wasn't built yet. That's great. We used to go out there, we used go in the fields and collect bottles and go to the Circle K. It actually was called Little General at the time.

And we would take a shopping cart full of glass bottles and get like 10 bucks for turning in the bottles. And yeah, it was a lot different childhood. Segregation was over by then, but you still didn't have a lotta minorities.

Some of the minorities from West Park and Pembroke Park were bussed in, and there weren't aotta Latins either. because they just weren't in the area. They were all in Miami.

And then little by little, they started bettering themselves and moving to nicer neighborhoods, and Miramar was one of those neighborhoods. So the culture was just starting to change back then.

And they would smash through some stereotypes also. I had plenty of guys I was friends with that would go surfing. And we would take trips up to Port St.

Lucie and go go surfin' on the inlets. There was definitely nothing up that way. No, there's definitely nothin' up there. We never saw color or ethnicity or anything like that.

And me, myself, my mother's from Argentina, My father's in Belgium, and I'm also Jewish. But none of that mattered when you were growing up. You were either cool or you weren't cool.

That was it. It didn't matter what color your skin or your heritage or background. Nobody picked on anybody for any of the stuff. If you are not a nice person, then you're probably getting into a fight in the schoolyard.

But it wasn't because of any that. And it was really a close-knit group. My graduation class in Miramar was probably around 300 people. That's pretty small, right?

At the time. And maybe a little bit more, maybe 400. I don't know exactly. But I still talk to a large group of them. Still stay in touch with them So let me ask you this man that, you know, Miami was built after that.

So you were around doing like the cocaine cowboy. Oh yeah, yeah. You must have seen a lot of craziness happening here in South Florida. One of the things that stands out is growing up in Miramar, this Cuban family moves in right across the street from us.

And they had a big boat out front and I was probably, I don't know, eight, 10 years old. And the guy goes, hey, let me take you and your dad out on the boat.

We would go out the on boat, you know. It was like a 50 foot boat and we'd go and cruise around. And also one day, boom, they're gone. No boat, no house, the family's gone, never heard from them again.

Really? Come to find out, is they were moving some drugs and they got busted. On that boat? On the boat. Oh man. Yeah, so we saw a couple square grouper wash up and stuff like that.

So it was quite an experience back then. Yeah, yeah, man. Miami Vice days, you know, it's you watch all those documentaries and stuff. And it just like, Man, the people that lived here back then.

Yeah. It's like you had to you. You had. To know someone, You know. So yeah. Absolutely. Even the regular person was just, like potentially taking little opportunities, getting involved.

The whole man, people got to understand Mammy was built on all of that. Yeah, absolutely. And that was one of the things that they did is, you know, how am I going to turn this illegal drug money into something productive?

So there were a lot of construction companies that popped up and they really developed Brickle. I mean, I'm sure you've seen cocaine cowboys talk about it there and all these high rises and just really put Miami on the map for Out of something negative, they turned it into a positive.

They built up the city. Now, when you started working for the fire department, were those days kind of done? What were the years of that? So I started in 93 with Hallandale Beach and they were just kind a winding down.

I mean, we still saw… Were you seeing a lot of crime when your at the Fire Department? We saw crime, you know, in a certain section in Hallendale. the Northwest area.

There's a lot of, we used to call it the knife and gun club, and there's lot a drug dealings going on there, drug overdoses, a lotta shootings, stabbings, lotta stuff like that.

And probably until the late 90s, that was pretty, almost every shift, you're getting a shooting, stabbing, an overdose, it was crazy. And yeah, and then the shift in the 2000s, a lot of Russian and European started coming in and speculative, right?

Kendra's Diagnosis and the First Shock

I don't know what they were doing, but they we're driving some Lamborghinis and some Porsches. A lot Italian cars. Lot of high end stuff. And you see 20 year old kids driving Lamborghini's and like, How did you get that Bitcoin didn't exist back?

No Bitcoin and you know, I mean I'm sure that the Dow Jones is probably around three thousand four thousand points It was like so where are you making your money?

But in any case, yeah, it started it kind of did a shift and then by the mid-2000s it Started changing and really turning into development and investors like that Yeah So, all right, man, so we got to know you a little bit when you started at the fire department and everything.

Today's podcast is really about what you went through. You were already at fire the department, got married, started a family, and went to a certain event where your daughter got diagnosed with a brain tumor.

I want to go back to the time And I want you to be as detailed as possible so people can actually understand how life can change at a blink of an eye at the point in time that you actually found out about her being diagnosed with this brain tumor.

Yeah, so my daughter Kendra was born in 2003, our firstborn daughter. She wasborn March 21st, 2003. Everything was normal, right? You got a healthy, beautiful, blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl.

She was our first kid, so we're taking hundreds of pictures every day, and she was the center of our universe. And two and a half years later, in September of 2005, my wife and I decided to go on an Alaskan cruise.

And my mother-in-law, Tricia, she stayed with Kendra and she watched her. And so we fly out to Seattle, we get on the cruise. My wife was also three months pregnant, I believe, at the time, with our second daughter, right?

So we're on top of the world. I was taking some classes for my bachelor degree. I had just taken a battalion chief promotional exam at work, so I already was an officer.

Looking at getting promoted. We had invested in some property on the West Coast. Had that going on. Just found out we're having another baby. I'm like, yeah, life is going good, right?

Living the dream. Living a dream, everything is jamming, you know? And so I was like hey, let's go have a little vacation. We always wanted to go to Alaska, do an Alaskan cruise, see the whales and all kinds of stuff.

So we were on the cruise. Come back for the cruises. Back then you didn't have internet packages on a cruise so when you were in the boat you really disconnected.

So we get back and I call to check in with my mother-in-law, hey, how are things going? And she goes, well, everything's good. And I could hear it in her voice right away, you know, something's wrong.

She tells me that Kendra, every morning, she would wake up screaming and then she vomit. Then also when she was walking, She would lose her balance, so now she's two and a half.

Been walking for a while now, right? She'd walk and she'd go, whoa, and would catch herself. and then sometimes she would even fall down. So she takes her to the doctor, just a general physician, and they go, well, maybe she has vertigo.

And I say, that just doesn't sound right. What do I do? I go down to a hotel lobby, I get on the computer and I start researching, put in the signs and symptoms, the first thing that pops up is brain tumor.

So again, I don't know anything. I certainly don' tell my wife that, right? I didn't say anything, so when we get home, first thing I did was I took my daughter to Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital.

We'd go in, same thing, every morning. He'd wake up screaming, he would throw up, and then she would feel a little bit better, but she was still unsteady, wobbly on her feet.

And before the cruise, this was never happening? Nothing, nothing. Didn't suspect anything. Perfectly healthy, running, playing, everything. So we take her to Joe DiMaggio.

First thing that they do is they go, okay, we're gonna do a CT scan. And they did a ct scan, they come in the room, and they say to my wife and myself, can we talk to you outside?

And then bringing us in a little room. Right away, I'm like, not good, if nothing's wrong, you're telling you right in front, hey, nothing is wrong. So they tell us a tumor showed up on the CT scan, got a tumour on her brain, we don't know if it's cancerous or not, but we have to do surgery tomorrow morning.

And of course, you're hit with a sledgehammer, right? One minute you are on top of the world, next minute, your told that your child has Cancer, right?

You know it's cancer. Could be benign, could be malignant, you don't know. And so there's really no choice at that point. There's no time to get a second opinion, there is no to time send her to another hospital or anything like that

and you just go with it.

I remember just because in our profession, I pulled the surgeon aside And I kind of gave him a very pointed question. I said, she's going to live through this surgery or not?

And he goes, yes. Yes, She is in good hands. And and he put me at ease a little bit, at least at that moment. Yeah, that's cool. That that I could trust him.

Right. You know, I mean, because you're taking a two and a half year old girl and you are cutting into her head. A lot of delicate parts in there. So, you know I'm thinking she could come out of this paralyzed.

She could die on a table and all these things. So they did the surgery next morning and they confirmed that it was a malignant brain tumor called a medulloblastoma.

And then then we had to start preparing for what came next. How common is that type of brain tumor? So it's as far as childhood cancers, it is a common tumor.

It is. Right. And and before we started the podcast, we talked. You told me about, you know, genes that you have in your body that suppress tumors. So one of the things I did was I asked, once we got to St.

Jude, I ask the doctor, did my wife do something? Did she have a glass of wine without knowing what caused this? How do kids get cancer? And he goes, it could be a multitude of things, but it's nothing you guys did.

There is nothing your wife did, there's nothing you did. There's something you fed her. Nothing you didn't came out of that. And childhood cancer is different than, let's say, adult cancers.

You get lung cancer from smoking cigarettes. Or you get various causational cancers from different things you do in your life. With kids, It's actually a genetic malformation that that gene turns off and the cancer that is in everybody's body that was normally suppressed, vasectomies.

And it's not hereditary. It doesn't mean that anybody else in your family is going to get it. It's just a completely random thing when the child is developed that that occurs.

So there was nothing we could have done to prevent it or, you know, so they really put our mind at ease with that. So at this point in time, you know, when she's diagnosed with the cancer, is undergoing the surgery.

I mean, emotionally, your and your wife, what are you guys going through? Because there's a lot of the people go into a sense of depression, right? There's all the thoughts are going to your head.

You know families reaching out, some families not reaching up because they don't know how to handle it. So what was that feeling for you and your wife at that point in time?

Surgery, St. Jude, and the Treatment Journey

So it's a it is a tidal wave of feeling, you know, initially, It's almost like going through the steps of a grieving process, right? Initially you're angry, and then you go through all these different things, some guilt you think is something you did.

And then, you start getting into, okay, well, we could go one of two routes. We could either get depressed and get suicidal, but what's that going to do?

That does nothing. That's no good. So I said, okay, we're gonna do positive. We're going to stay positive and we are going do everything we can to overcome this, right?

And you can't just rely on the medical team. You really have to do your own research and you have learn

everything you about that. Do a lot of reading.

And you put those pieces together with your medical team and you question them every step of the way. And they probably hated me for it, right? Because these guys went to med school, you know, they did it.

They'd probably seen a thousand patients. But I'm still gonna question you every stepping away and make sure that you're doing the best for my child. I am sure some of doctors took that as like, hey, I'll be difficult.

But it's not that, because you want the best for your child. You want to best your family. So I would question them every step of the way. And especially with your knowledge and skill set of working in the fire department for so many years, seeing stuff, you're not the easiest guy to be on the other side for these doctors.

Right. A little bit of knowledge that we have as a paramedic. We have a little knowledge across the board. Every little thing We kind of put it all together and not to diminish us being paramedics, but we're not doctors, right?

But it gives us a little bit of knowledge and we have that mind frame to do the research and to learn and then to fully understand it. And it's stuff that you never want to in paramedicine or first responders, you're really not dealing with cancer a lot.

You may deal with some of the signs and symptoms of cancer. But we're not diagnosing cancer, we are not treating cancer we aren't doing any of that stuff.

So it was a lots to learn and my wife and I, I think we went home that night and we looked at each other and said it's you and me against the world now.

And we were going to make whatever decision comes our way with each other. And we're gonna agree behind closed doors, what's best for our child. Because then you start getting a lot of outside influence, right?

And you have to filter out everything and stay on track. We decided to approach this together, take the positive road. And that's why we're coming up on our 29th anniversary, being married, because we decided to do that and stay together.

You brought up that it was very similar to the grieving process. And for the listeners and viewers who don't really understand that, You know, that's when someone passes away.

You go through the screwing process, which includes, let's see if I remember, denial, anger, you start bargaining. Then you go to, so denial anger bargaining, and then you got through depression.

And then there's the acceptance. Man, I remembered that for a pair of minutes. That was good. I couldn't have rattled that off either. There you are. So, but you go through all of these stages, and in all reality, through your situation, you went through a lot of the stages.

What was it, do you guys have a spiritual belief, your and your wife? So I'm Jewish, my wife is, I think, Protestant, Before we even had kids and we got married, I got my parents saying, oh, you gotta have a Jewish wedding.

And then you got her parents say, well, we gotta do these Christian things. We talked and had some heart to hearts before we ever got marriage and said, You know what?

We don't necessarily need a religion to tell us to be good people. So we decided to have values. And a lot of the values align with religions, right? But we're gonna do the right thing.

We're going to raise our kids. And we can let our children choose if they want to follow a religion or not. So, we believe in God. I just don't believe the religious confinement of that.

And part of, that I could go into a whole nother podcast with my history. My father was in a concentration camp

during World War II. And he was in a concentration camp because of his beliefs, because he born Jewish and he followed that religion.

So I don't have to rehash that, everybody knows the history of that. And I was raised Jewish, and I bar mitzvahed. But I made the conscious decision before I even met my wife that I didn't want to be persecuted for something I believe in.

but I don't wanna hide it either. I just chose to be spiritual and believe in a higher power and just be a good person. And that's important, believing in some higher powers.

There's a lot of studies that have proved that, that people do a better, as long as you believe any higher powerful. So so my question with that is throughout this process of your daughter going through the surgery and you know going Through these treatments and stuff which we're gonna get into in a minute Did you guys tap in to the higher power?

Was that part of the process or was it more of you? Guys kind of question it. Well, there's a higher powers. I certainly questioned it absolutely You know, being in the field, I've run calls and I delivered babies from women that were crack addicts and, you know all kinds of drugs and the baby comes out and they're perfectly healthy.

And you question absolutely, what is the meaning of all this? Why is my beautiful daughter going through this, why does she have cancer? So yeah, that's part of the anger.

You get angry at God, let me tell you that. I wasn't a big prayer person, but every night before I went to bed I said a prayer. I'd say, look, I don't care what happens to me, to anybody else, just save this little girl's life.

And I would say a pray every day. Ultimately it didn't work. You also have to believe that everything happens for a reason. One of the things that brought me here to sit in front of you and tell everybody my story is that Kendra brought some awareness and we developed this foundation to bring some awareness to childhood cancer and to help people that are going through it that could be completely lost after diagnosis of that.

And you saw that, you know, fortunately for you, working in the fire department, we have a strong brotherhood, right? And, um, You were able to get certain support from the brother hood that most people don't have access to that.

And I, I want to talk about that. First, get into like some of the things that you had to experience with your wife, because you were currently still at St.

Jude's, right? And no, sorry, Joe DiMaggio. We're at Joe Dimaggio initially. And then Joe D'Amaggio wasn't able to really fully do the treatment on your daughter.

Right. So what happens from there? So she has the surgery, they remove the tumor and before they can start any chemotherapy, They have to test to see if the spinal fluid is clear of cancer cells, right?

So they do that with like a spinal tap or they, do a Spinal Tap. Okay. And they pull some cerebral spinal out, send it to the lab and it's about a week after the, the Surgery, Right?

so they pulled that. And they come back and they say, there's some cancer cells in the spinal fluid that we found. So it's not just a tumor now. The tumor, it was encapsulated, but there were, she had complications of that cancer in her spinal.

fluid. so essentially they pulled this aside. They said, look, we do conventional, We don't do any research here. and the conventional therapy is really not gonna be the best for her.

Again, I hit the research, right? I start searching, okay, what are my options here? So there's actually a website called clinicaltrials.org. And I stumbled upon it and I started looking through the clinical trials.

The clinical trial for medulloblastoma that had spread to the spinal fluid, there were three places in the world treating that and they were, it was a trial basis.

One was in Munich, Germany, one was Australia, and the other one at St. Jude in Memphis, Tennessee. So I find out that they we're opening up, you know, all of those trials have like windows where they open up and accept patients.

So I called them up right away. I talked to the doctors at Joe DiMaggio. They said, yeah, go for it. We'll write, send whatever we need to. There they're 100% supportive.

But I call them and I said look, we have another complication though. My wife is pregnant also. So wherever we go, I need make sure that she has prenatal care and everything.

so I talk to social workers at St. Jude. they get us set up. Within a week, i'm driving my wife's car to Memphis, and then they flew out, my wife and Kendra, out to to, Memphis Tennessee.

So they accepted us into the protocol. As soon as we get to St. Jude, they have to redo the scans to find out what's going on from their end. So they sent us to Le Bonheur Children's Hospital, which is not part of St.

Jude, but it's the children's hospital in Memphis. And we go there, they do a CT scan and they tell us the tumor re-grew. Said it has been 10 days. They said, yeah, this is an aggressive tumor.

So, They had to do second brain surgery. on Kendra once we got to Memphis before they could start. Now we're also in a crunch for time because these clinical trials close at a certain date.

Once they close, you can't be admitted into it. So she was able to get admitted in to the trial. They had the second surgery and they started her on the therapy at St.

Jude. So now this therapy gets started at St. Jude, you're in a whole other state. Yeah. So it's your wife is pregnant as well, which one of the things you mentioned is when a patient is undergoing these type of treatments, a pregnant woman can't get exposed to these things, right?

Right. You want to hold your child when they're They're sticking a needle in their head, they got a port for the chemotherapy and all that stuff. Well, that chemotherapy, as you're administering it, will come out through sweat or whatever.

Or if they vomit on you, it has chemotherapy. And if you are pregnant, then that can be absorbed into your body and that will pass the placental barrier and affect the on-board child.

So you can't expose them to that. So there was a lot of times when Kendra was getting therapy, my wife Christy couldn't even hold her, you know. Because I don't know how many people watching this right now know, but if you're going through chemotherapy, you were throwing up a lot.

I mean, we had to get rid of the couch in our house because there was so much vomit on it. So that's a real problem when they're actively getting the chemo.

You can't even hold your child. It's heartbreaking. Now, throughout this whole process, you know, what people got to realize is that, number one, life is still happening, right?

You still got a mortgage. You've still go car payments. There's other responsibilities that you have to take care of. What were some of those things that started affecting you in certain ways?

Because obviously, you guys are going up there, so you're probably not working your other job that was probably supplementing your income from the fire department.

You can barely even work at the Fire Department. Your wife is not work because she's with your daughter. That's a whole other level of stress on its own.

Yeah, so a lot of things we saw when we were at St. Jude was there was a whole lot And when you start talking to them, quite a few of them had their husbands or boyfriends or whatever they were at the time, just bail on them.

Hey, this is your kid. I want nothing to do with it. And they move on, right? So that's even more devastating for them some of the things we went through.

You're right. At the. Time I was teaching at Broward College, I. Was teaching paramedic school as a lead instructor for that. I did hospital clinicals, I taught, ACLS, taught at Miami Children's, did teaching all over.

So every day I was off shift at the fire department, teaching somewhere. And yeah, that was supplemental income. That's all part-time stuff. If you're not there, you are not getting paid.

At the fire department, I'm looking at a promotion, right? I was hoping to get it promoted to battalion chief. And now I am not even there. I got guys working for me so I could keep my job and keep getting a paycheck, you know.

Now one thing that the Fire Department did do for is they approved all of those shift exchanges that people wanted to do without a payback. So they had the union got a list of people.

and everybody signed up to take my shifts on a rotating basis so that I could be in Memphis. And how long they do that for? 11 months. 11 Months. Yep.

That's that brotherhood. Yeah, it's unbelievable. And then, so on top of that, It was just such a perfect storm of so many different things. In October of 2005 is when Hurricane Wilma came through.

If you were here during Hurricane Willma, is pretty devastating where people were out of electricity for 20 days, up to three weeks. So we're in the hospital in St.

Jude, and I'm talking to my neighbor on the phone. He goes, oh, your fence just blew away. Oh, there goes part of your roof. So he's telling me all these things that my house is getting battered.

And then again, going back to the brotherhood of the fire department, I had all the firefighters go to My house.

Brotherhood, Family Support, and Building the Foundation

They fixed my fence. they fixed My roof, they boarded up My House before the storm came and all that stuff. And they all did that and they're just doing whatever they can to help alleviate some of that pain.

Like I said, most people that are at St. Jude dealing with that, they don't have that network of people to come through and help take care of those things.

Man, it's, you know, not just dealing with the battle of the cancer, but you're dealing the day to day battle just life in general. So, one of things that you experience is all of these different action of kindness that occurred for you, right?

Which I would say, based off of hearing the story, prior to the podcast and understanding it is one of the reasons why the foundation was created. Right.

Tell us about the story of when you were driving up there in the car. Yeah. You know, that's another act of kindness, you know. Brotherhood. Absolutely.

So my friend Sharif and I took my wife's car and we we knew it was going to be a long term process. We knew we weren't going St. Jude for two weeks. And we figured out if they're going to fly my wife and Kendra out to St.

Jude, she needed to have a car. So my buddy and I got in the car and we drove it up on the weekend. And, uh, we get somewhere in Georgia or Alabama. I don't remember exactly where, but the AC cut out and this is in September.

It was still pretty hot out. Yeah. We go to rest away. on the afternoon on a Sunday and I go to, I don't know where to go, to get my car fixed, right?

So you've got an AC that goes out and you know, how do you, who do, you who to trust? You know? I get a reputable mechanic to fix it. So I said, well, let me stop by a fire station.

And I got to the firestation and the guy there was, his last name, or his first name was Curtis. And he was a captain with Memphis Fire. And I'm talking to him a little bit, and I tell him why we're there, right?

I told him I was firefighter back in South Florida. I said, I am looking for a good mechanic so I can get my AC fixed. He goes, go to this address. It was on Adams Street.

Go there tomorrow morning and they will take care of you. I said, okay, I'm thinking he's sending me to a buddy of his that's a mechanic, right? I drive down Adams Street and I go down and see a bunch of fire trucks and ambulances in a parking lot.

I pass it and go back the other way. And I finally pull in and say I am looking for this number on Adams street. And the guy goes, yeah, that's right here.

I go, is this the motor pool from Memphis Fire? He goes yeah. The guy says, who sent you here? I said Curtis did. And he goes oh yeah we'll take care of you man.

So they gave me their account number for the auto parts store. They told me they diagnosed the car, I got to the autoparts store, pick up the parts for a severely discounted amount.

I go back, the battalion chief, they have like a rank structure in their motor pool. The battalion chief gives me a ride back to the apartment that we were staying at in St.

Jude. And they fixed the car the next day. They call me up. the Battalion Chief comes out to pick me. Brings me back. You know, this is before Uber. So he brings me and they fix the for free.

Didn't charge me any. you let us know, we'll help you out. And that's really how the entire community in Memphis is. They know that St. Jude is there, and they know they have hundreds, if not thousands of patients there.

If you have a bracelet, you know the hospital bracelet? You don't pay to go to the zoo, the Memphis Zoo. You Don't Pay to Go to Graceland. you Don' Pay To Go To Sun Studios, to The Gibson Guitar Factory, all these things because they know you're dealing with the worst thing that can ever be dealt to you in your life, you know, childhood cancer.

And to try to give you and the child a little bit of normalcy, they want you to, when you're not in the hospital, to experience life. These kids, it's up to 18 years old, and especially the younger ones, that becomes their norm.

It's normal for them. to go to the Memphis Zoo, and then the next day they're getting needles stuck in them and they are getting chemotherapy and all that stuff.

And it just becomes their reality. To us it's heartbreaking, but to them they just being kids. It's just a different life for them. That's the whole community there.

We're not just talking about the St. Jude's Hospital. You're talking about outside of the hospital. You go to a restaurant and people, you know, I remember you telling me that you go the restaurant, and it's like your bill is covered, just like those people know.

We went to just a, it was like a TGI Fridays, we're sitting at the table and you start getting into normalcy also, then you don't even think about it that your child is sitting there and she has no hair, right?

And then, when you get your bills after you finish eating, And they go, hey, your bill's been covered. And the waitress, they just say, yeah, this happens all the time, you know?

They don't want any recognition. They want you to know who it is. We took care of your Bill. So it's really amazing. What I wanted to do is I want to take some of that and pay it forward, so to speak.

That was one of the things that led us to creating that foundation also. Wow, yeah, so let's talk about that. And Kendra, how long did she last going through the treatments?

11 months, you said? So 11 month in St. Jude, and then I think she got released, they call it end of treatment. So the end to treatment was in December of 2017. I gotta get my timing right here.

December of 2006. Is that right? No, December 2005. No. I don't know. The timeline's messed up for me. It was 11 months of treatment and then she ended up passing away on May 3rd, 2007. So yeah, maybe it was December.

It was, December 2006. So it 11 months and then maybe another five months after that is when she ended up passing away, which happened to be two days after my now oldest daughter, uh, Layla, who was born in Memphis.

That's who my wife was pregnant with at the time. Laila was. Born in. Memphis, Tennessee. And, it. Was two. Days. After. Her. First. Birthday. Is when Kendra passed away.

So, you know, obviously throughout this journey you saw a lot of other mothers and families go through certain things that they didn't have the brotherhood at the fire department to give them support.

Heck, they don't even have their father to be able to support them. So at what point in time did you decide, you and your wife, where you guys said, do you know what?

Let's continue Kendra's impact that she had on you, guys, and be able to put this foundation together. So I heard of other foundations down here that were already established.

And most of the foundations that you hear about, they raise, you know, huge amounts of money and they donate it to research and the donate to the hospitals and all of that is needed.

I don't know what the number is now for St. Jude, but back then, they needed to raise a million dollars a day to operate the hospital. A million a dollars day.

That's astronomical, right? So, you have these huge corporations, these big fundraising entities and I said, well, I can't do that, let me start somewhere small.

And one of the things, people that didn't know what to do, they wanted to help in some way, They would donate money to us, right? So we got money donations and all this stuff.

And what we did was I just opened up an account and I put all the donations into that account. Then when Kendra finally passed away, we used some of that money for funeral expenses, for various things that came about with that.

You know, because who takes out life insurance for a child? Most people don't do that, right? Because it's the last thing you're expecting. So we had some expenses with that.

The good thing is St. Jude, you never get a bill from them. They bill the insurance, and if whatever insurance doesn't pay, they pay. That's why it takes a million dollars a day to run that hospital.

So you don't for a test, You don' pay for chemo, or you pay anything. Right? So it's really an amazing organization. After everything was kind of passed over, we still had some money left in an account.

And how do you figure out, oh, Sam gave me $100. Here's $ 100 back. You know, there's no way to do that. There's nowhere to track it. So I said, well, let me kind of pay it forward.

And that's a term. I didn't even know that was a time until the movie came out. But I say, but let do some good back. So my wife and I came up with this idea.

Let's start a charity. and let's go to the hospitals in South Florida, the children hospitals, and find out if there's a mechanism for us to get in touch with them and to go ahead and donate money to families, straight to their families.

Because there wasn't a whole lot of that. There's not a lot a foundations that just give you money. You know, there's Make-A-Wish. All these other great, great charities.

But there weren't whole a that you can say, hey, I can't make my mortgage payment. I need some money, you know. So that's where we start going. And I met with a doctor at Joe DiMaggio, and I don't remember the doctor's name, but we met briefly and he kinda gave me some pointers.

He said, look, believe it or not, there could be some fraud, right? People could take advantage of you, so you need to have some kind of vetting system.

And he suggested that we go through the social workers so you can verify that they are who they say they. Are that. They actually have a child going through treatments and stuff like that, so we created a.

A survey that We have on our website that you. Can go on, and if you're going. Through this, you, can fill out that survey and that's how we get it. And we create a board and the funny thing is.

You know, we have what's called details at work, right? So details are something that's outside of your normal day-to-day, and we had a dog track, a Hollywood dog-track, I think it's now called Mardi Gras Casino, but we a standing detail there.

Every night, somebody had to be there from like 4 p.m. until 2 a. m., 2 or 3 a Wasn't too busy. We had a nice little room. I ran my computer. And that's where I developed all of the paperwork and the applications and a 501c3 application and all the nonprofit stuff.

and I would sit there in my quiet little office, you know, in the medical room at the dog track. That's when I got a lot of stuff done to develop the foundation.

And once we got to that point, then we had to come up with, how are we gonna raise money? Obviously, the couple thousand dollars that we have left over is not gonna be substantial enough to run a foundation.

So then, we've had come with fundraising ideas. What did those look like back then? Back then while I was at St. Jude, one of their big events, fundraising events are 5Ks, half marathons and maratons.

I'm sure you can all see me. I am not built like a runner. But I decided to go out and say, hey, you know, let me do a 5k. And I did a couple 5ks and they were fun.

Just like anything else, we have a certain personality to get into the fire service and we want to be better at everything we do. So I ran a five K ago, I could do better than that.

So then I started training for the half marathons. Oh, nice. And I did three St. Jude half-marathones, and then did one in Las Vegas, then one at Disney.

Then we started the foundation and I said, well, let me do a 5K. Pretty simple. You get a track or an area to do 5k.

We did ours at Markham Park. Okay.

And we started that and it was pretty good for a while. You know, we had two, 300 runners. we paired up with some local running stores and shoe companies and stuff like that.

and we have a lot of support. and we had the 5Ks and those were good for about four or five years, six years even. And what then started trending is Spartan races and mud runs and zombie runs, and all these kind of glow runs.

and stuff like that. People started like every weekend, there were 15 things to do. So it's hard to compete with some of those big corporations that are running these big runs mudruns, all that stuff.

So what happened was we kept doing them, but we noticed that the attendance was slowly going down and that was our primary fundraiser, right? We would have one race a year and it pretty much sustained us for the year, giving out the grants to all the families that were applying.

And then you want me to go into how we got to this point, so then, My wife and I do a lot of cruises. That's like our favorite vacation. We enjoy the journey and we don't worry so much about the destinations, right?

So we like getting on these cruisers and just enjoying the food and disconnect a little bit. Just disconnect, you know, have some drinks, chill out, relax and and really get away from everything.

And you don' have to worry about you know, booking a hotel in this city and that scene and all that stuff, right? Make one booking, you're good to go.

So we're on a short little weekend or cruise out of Miami and we were having a couple of drinks and were at this one bar in the center of the ship.

Comedy Fundraiser and Kendra's Kisses Impact

And we meet this couple, and right, we start talking and the guy's name is Jack Bevilacqua. We start talkin' and come to find out he lost both of his parents to cancer, mom and his dad.

I don't remember the timeframe, but it was pretty close. So he decided to start a foundation of its own in Tampa. It was called Crack Up Cancer. And after he shared his story, I shared my story about Kendra and our foundation and some of the things.

He goes, what are you doing with 5K? He says, we could do a Crac Up cancer event in South Florida and give all the proceeds to Kendras Kisses. I go, wow, that sounds great.

So when we got back off the cruise, he invited us to his show in Tampa and we went over there and he pulled me up on stage and I'm not a man in front of the cameras or whatever.

But so I went up there, told a little bit of a story and how we met. And I saw the event that he put on and Let's do the event in South Florida. And we did our first show down here in 2021. Right after COVID.

We met before that, but COVID shut everything down. we actually had planned the even, and we had to cancel it because of COVID So we got our 1st one in 2020. Same place, Savoir Theater in downtown Fort Lauderdale.

And, uh, and it was a hit, you know, everybody came out that the comics were great. We had a great time. Amazing. Great venue. And that's how we met and that how, how do we transition from the 5k fundraisers to the comedy show.

The comedy. Which, um, we got one coming up. Yes. Right. So, so which, which we want everybody to know about this. What, what is it that it's coming? So March 21st, which actually happens to be, it would be Kendra's 23rd birthday.

Oh right, right. You did mention that earlier. So it's on her birthday, so we're having a little something special this year. My wife's gonna make some cake pops and some birthday cake and stuff like that.

And we gonna have a kind of birthday theme celebration, but it is March, 21, is at the Savoir Theater downtown Fort Lauderdale. It's called Crack Up Cancer.

And 100% of the proceeds go to Kendra's Kisses. We have four headliner comics. They're all amazing. Where do you find these comics? So Derek Richards is one of those comics, he's a national comic.

He used to be out of Las Vegas. I think he is out in Detroit now. So I met him through Jack in Tampa at one the shows over there. And he has a history of cancer also, he battled cancer himself.

He has book that talks about it. And when we met him, and I started to talk about our story, we just connected and we became friends. We've done more outside of the comedy shows, you know, We Talk and all this stuff.

So this year, he was at our first show, and this is our third show. So I asked him, because he's in the industry, can you book the other comics for us?

And he handpicked the three other three comics. Derek Richards is out headliner. And then he is able to line up Nathan Wallace. Lisa Correo and Carl Remy.

So it's an all star cast that we're going to have at our comedy show. It's going be a great time. And so March 21 support theater downtown Fort Lauderdale.

I'm sure you're gonna have a link for the for that. Oh, yeah. We're got to include all the links and everything. Yeah, I mean, it is going. To be excited and we are going bring a pretty good sized crew from the Liquid Vita team to support.

You know, we'll get some content out there as well, too, to really spread the word. Now the foundation, Kendra's Kisses Foundation, I want to talk about the impact that it's had.

You're talking about it being able to actually donate quite a bit of money. Yeah. So since our inception, which was pretty much the end of 2007 I think we were founded, we've given grants to families in the amount of over $100,000. So amazing.

Yeah, amazing, so and something like that makes a huge difference, you know, for families that are struggling. She forgot, man. You know right now there's a big movement happening called Make America Healthy.

Yep, I heard of it. It's great. And I'm a part of it, man. So, you know, I always like to bring stuff up on the podcast about it and related to what you've gone through and the foundation that you have.

What is something that people, often overlook when families are facing these type of illnesses? You know, we started talking about make America healthy again.

You healthy is not just physically healthy, but mentally healthy. Based off of what you've gone through, what is something that you can leave the listeners with when it comes to that?

So it's really you know you talk about the name of your podcast is a healthy point of view. Right. And you really have to make decisions not not that it would have changed anything that happened to Kendra.

But there are a lot of cancers that you can change the outcome. I mentioned it earlier, if you have a car, you want to put cheap oil and cheap gas in there?

Or do you want to take care of it, you know, and what you put in is what? You get out of a vehicle and really it's the same thing with your body What you Put in your, body is, what's you're, gonna get, out, of, it and if you feed it good

healthy stuff you make good decisions You're gonna feel better you have less aches and pains you gonna be clearer mind And it really just changes out your whole outlook and everything.

You're gonna be more pleasant. People are gonna like you. So it's really, it is more than just what you're eating. It really is a whole mindset. And affects every part of your life.

Makes you more positive. I said my life had chapters, right? And before I got married and before kids were born, we see a lot of stuff in the business, right?

You see shootings and stabbings and kids getting run over by cars and all kinds of. And you start to get a little pessimistic and have a negative outlook on life.

You might make some bad decisions where you have at work and you go home and hit the bottle and start drinking. It can really affect your mind and everything kind of ties into that.

The way you process things, what you're eating, drinking and the whole scope of it. So I was able to I like to say that my eyes kind of got open after the diagnosis.

And you start to realize that, hey, you only have one life. You only had one chance on this earth. And you want to make it last as long as possible. Absolutely.

And, and you wanna be as healthy as possibly so you can do the thing. So I can be there for my grandkids, you know, which I don't have any yet, but I'm sure in the future, in your future I may, um, But yeah, You know you don, want, to have a sickly exit.

You want a, an old saying I used to Live like James Bond, die like Jaymes Dean. I'm sure if you research those you'll understand it a little bit more, that quote.

But yeah, you wanna be here as long as possible. It's one take. So for the viewers and listeners, man, when it comes to the Kendris Kisses Foundation, where do you want to see this in the near future?

What type of further impact do Yeah, I mean I don't know if I could take it to the next level. I would probably at some point because you know I only have a few years left in the fire service.

My goal is to retire by the time I'm 59, you know? And one of my goals is do exactly that, live life, travel the world, just go everywhere, wherever I can.

I got a map in my bedroom with push pins on places I wanna be, places that I've been, two different color pins.

Health, Resilience, and Closing Advice

And that's one my goal, I want to go to Australia, Indonesia and all kinds of, to see the whole world and how it is. And so I'm not sure that I want to keep the foundation.

You know, I'll always have the Foundation, but I am not going to be in control of it. I may have a company come in and take that so that Kendra's name lives on and we continue to do a good mission of helping families and stuff like that.

So I would like to see that happen. Absolutely. still have a go, take what we've built, and maybe not necessarily expand it, but continue it. And maybe have somebody run the organization for us.

Because right now, it's really just my wife and me, And we have aboard, But it is all family. It can be tough. You know, It's a big process to put on one of these shows.

I mean, you got like 200 or something people, right? The theater holds 220 people. Our VIP tickets are almost sold

out. I think there's two tickets left for VIP.

But we have quite a few general admission left. We got about 65 general admissions tickets. And it's only less than two weeks away. Get your tickets, man.

Awesome. So we This is one of my favorite podcasters the diary of a CEO so we're gonna have a little fun here really quick Yeah, before we wrap up so you're going to go ahead and open that up and then you get to pull out a Random card you gonna read it.

You're Gonna answer it I Have no clue. What's gonna pop up on that card. We'll see if I need my glasses to read this or not How do you take care of you Yeah, so that's actually an easy one.

I have a work-life balance that I kind of subscribe to, right? When I'm at work, I give 100%. When i'm home, i give my family 100% and part of that is an understanding that i can take care of myself as well.

I play ice hockey. That's my hobby. So once a week, I'm on the ice. Still? Still. Yeah. Wow. I know it may not look like it. But yeah, so I played in a men's league, you know, beer league.

And we have a great time. The camaraderie is great. It's a release. You know my wife will tell me that, hey, You're starting to get angry. you got to go play hockey, get some of that energy out of you.

I try to get to the gym as much as possible. And my wife does the same. When she's not working, she is taking care of herself. She's going to gym. You know, active, staying busy.

We do stuff with the kids. Do stuff as a family. Throughout the year, we take a lot of vacations. So there's two things, there is family trips and there are vacations.

We vacation without the kids and then we have family trip together. That's with the kid. For a relationship, I think being married 29 years coming up in April, There's three things that you got to be on the same page with.

One of them is money. one of em is your sexual relationship with your wife. And the third one is how the kids are. You need to be on the same page with the kid.

Because if you're not, then there's tension between you and your wife. And one of the things we always say is we were friends before we husband and wife, and we maintain that even to this day.

That's amazing. I treat everybody in my family, not just my wife but I treated everybody with respect. And I expect the same, me, right? So I still open the door for my wife.

I Still treat her like she's my queen, you know, every day, I make her breakfast in bed on the weekends, and you have to feed that relationship. So that's how I take care of you, all those aspects.

That's a good response to that question. Yeah, that's really good. I love it. So chief man, if there's someone listening or viewing this podcast who really resonates with today's message, what is that one thing I would say this.

Take care of you. If you take care you everything else will fall into place. You know, regardless what you have to go through. Yeah, and that resiliency, right?

Whatever comes. I learned this is that you can only control yourself. you Can't control what's happening to you, but you could control how you react to it.

And that and That's resiliency. Driving here today, if you're sitting in traffic and somebody cuts you off, you like, oh, your honking a horn and you yelling at them and stuff like that.

That's not changing that guy's life, but you letting it change yours by how you reacting. So if just kind of bring it in,

say, well, that guys a jerk.

I'm going to carry on. Not affecting me like. that I refuse to let negativity into my life like and, and and make a constant conscious decision to keep your mind straight.

Absolutely. And Chief, as we wrap it up here, if people want to find you and the foundation, where can they find it? So our organization's website is called kendraskisses.org.

So that everything's on there. There's also a link to the show under events You can purchase tickets on their if you want to make a donation if want a volunteer for something Just reach out to me on that the the My email is on.

They're also Kendra's kisses at Bell south net So that's a good way to get a hold of me. And if there's anything we can do, there are also links on our website for other resources.

I spoke about clinicaltrials.org. That's on there. There's other foundations, other health and wellness links, on out website as well. Well, chief man, it was a pleasure having you on the podcast.

Thank you for having me. This was, uh, a message that I think a lot of people need to hear and feel it. And, um, thank you, man. Yeah, I appreciate it, Thank You.

Amazing. Guys, you heard chief Mark Vermont here. You know, life can change at a blink of an eye. but it's all about how you handle it. How you take care of yourself, how take what the universe has thrown to you and create further impact.

And that's exactly what him and his wife have done. Guys, make sure you follow, subscribe, like, comment, share, do all that stuff here. Get this message out there.

If you're local here in Fort Lauderdale, come into the comedy show. We'll see you for the next one.