



Western Edition Episode 6
"The West on Fire: Incarceration and Firefighting"
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(MUSIC – HIGHWAY DOWN)

BILL DEVERELL: Hi, I'm Bill Deverell, and this is *Western Edition*, season one: "The West on Fire." Incarcerated people in California play a critical role in fighting wildfires. They battle blazes just like professional firefighters. They use chainsaws to cut fire lines around properties, clear brush and branches, fill sandbags, and many other tasks. People who are deemed low-risk can serve out their sentences at minimum-security conservation fire camps. The state pays these workers just a few dollars a day. Yet they make up about a third of the state's total firefighting force.

BRANDON SMITH: Being from Los Angeles, being from Altadena, the mountains are in my backyard. And I never knew about becoming a wildland firefighter until I was incarcerated.

DEVERELL: This is Brandon Smith. He's the co-founder and director of The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program, or FFRP for short. It's a group that helps formerly incarcerated people like himself, who spent time in fire camps, find work once they get out.

SMITH: When I was first approached to being in fire camp, I said, 'no.' I remember being a child. My mom asked me, like, 'what do you want to do in life?' I said, 'I don't know what I want to do in life, but I don't want to be a firefighter.' I remember watching the movies, the *Backdraft* movie, as a child and being so terrified of fires. While I was incarcerated, I felt like I failed my community. I felt like I failed my family. I felt like I failed everybody around me. And just the

stigmas around that were so, so, so, so heavy on me. And then when I got this opportunity to go to fire camp, even though I first said 'no,' I chose it as an opportunity for me to test to see if there were other options and ways to go move forward, if there were ways to go, like improve my life. I remember going out and them putting a chainsaw in my hands for the first time. And like, oh, well, so I can like do forest thinning and I can cut down trees and I can help out. I remember doing search and rescues, filling out sandbags, all those kinds of things slowly but surely builds up my confidence – number one, in an aspect that I can contribute to the community. I can contribute to the state of California, to be a support or be an asset. But then also, that I can hop into this role that I was uncomfortable with and challenge myself and do better and be better. One of the things about my life now is that I use my experience in fire camp to always improve myself. Like, there was something that you said that you couldn't do or thought that you didn't want to do, then you grew to love it. And now you out here excelling in that opportunity. It was situations like that that really helped to hone in and drive who I am today.

DEVERELL: Brandon's remarkable story of transformation and redemption is not unique among formerly incarcerated firefighters. Alongside the hardship and struggle, many find a renewed sense of purpose on the front lines of fighting fire. That's been the experience of Michelle Garcia. She works at the Ventura Training Center, a firefighter training and certification program in Ventura County. There, she's a program coordinator with ARC, the Anti-Recidivism Coalition, which works to find careers for people who've spent time in prison.

MICHELLE GARCIA: We service previously incarcerated men who have left the CDCR incarcerated firefighting, whether it was at a firehouse or institution or a fire camp, which was the wildland firefighting, right? And so these men have done anywhere from 18 months to 20 years inside the system. So when they come out, you can imagine the obstacles that they face, right? It could be as simple as needing to obtain a driver's license to losing everything and coming home to absolutely nothing, you know? And so rebuilding credit, buying a home. So it's just, it's a huge range of, of skills that we offer. It's an amazing program. It's 18 months long. So a lot happens in someone's life in 18 months. And, you know, it's not just about earning the fire certificates here with, you know, with Cal Fire. It is about getting these certificates, but it's about preparing you for a career in fire service, healing that past trauma that we've had in our lives that led us to prison, and addressing some deep, dark secrets that a lot of people haven't addressed inside.

DEVERELL: Okay. So you are a skilled administrator who obviously knows this program very well. And your job I'm sure is to juggle all kinds of balls in the air in terms of administrating the

program, but you have your own life story that speaks directly to these issues. Can I ask you to share some of your own life story in this regard?

GARCIA: Yes, absolutely. In 2006, I was sentenced to 10 years and four months to prison for embezzlement. And, I, the last 18 months of my prison sentence, I served as an incarcerated firefighter in Malibu. So, if any of your listeners are familiar with Malibu, California, it's pretty cool for me to say I paroled from Malibu, California, because not very many people can say that. And there's usually a little hair toss when I say it. I spent a couple of years fighting fires as an incarcerated female firefighter. And, so I come here, once again, with that lived experience, you know, of not just incarceration but of being on that side of the fence, you know, the only thing I, I always tell these guys, the only difference between me and them is I had zero desire to make this a living in my life. That was way too hard for work for me to, to do as a career, like a hell to the no, like it just was not my thing. And the other is, we cut better line because we're women and we just, we work harder out on the fire line than they do. But, you know, other than that, I've been in their boots literally, you know, and I know what it takes. I know that, that digging deep feeling where you just cannot lift another muscle in your body. Your feet are burning. You know, your head is just like exhausted. You're you feel like just torn up, you know, but you keep going. And, and, and I think that that's a service in the fire industry that people don't know, you know, it has to be experienced.

DEVERELL: Did you ever in your wildest dreams as a young girl growing up in Southern California, imagine this kind of life for yourself?

GARCIA: Oh, not even remotely close. I never imagined my life being worth any value as a little girl. So to, to find the best thing that ever happened to me because of hardship and going to prison, I would've never ever guessed, you know? Yeah. I find my spiritual base many ways, but you know, there's a story in the *Bible* about Sarah laughing and when, you know, God tells her the plans. I think like, I think my middle name should be Sarah cause if I would've known and heard this story, I would have just laughed at you. I would have never, ever imagined my life turning out like this, that all the good in my life today is from all the bad.

DEVERELL: Right. So I have a question about the population you serve – so these are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated men. Do you find that they often talk about their interest in firefighting? In other words, are these men who wanted to be firefighters or is that, is it a revelation that they can be trained and certified as firefighters and that this comes to them maybe in surprise?

GARCIA: I think it's a little of all the above, honestly. There's something that happens to you when you're in fire camp, even those that didn't necessarily see themselves as firefighters. But something happens when you're out there. You know you find that quality in yourself that you were looking at, like who doesn't look at a fireman and see them as heroes, right? And, you know, you start working underneath a hero and after some time you start to build up those same ethics as that hero. And then all of a sudden, you're looking in the mirror and you think, 'wow, I could be a hero within myself.' And so it, like, they relate that line of work with their healing. And so I think whether it's being incarcerated or being in the free world, it's just like, you like that feeling of giving back to your community, that living amends. It does something magical inside. So, I think that some of them found it inside. And then I think other ones just enjoyed it inside and enjoyed the work, but never had the hope that they could do it in the free world because before Ventura Training Center, there was never an avenue for these men. And, and so it's like all of a sudden when they hear about this program or, you know, just last fire season, how many times the incarcerated crews would see Ventura Training Center and it's like, 'oh my God, you were one of us, how did you do this?' You know? And, and so it just, you know, no pun intended, but the fire ignites inside them.

(MUSIC – ENVIRONMENTAL CHILDREN OF THE FUTURE)

DEVERELL: Brandon Smith had a similar experience. After being released from prison and from fire camp, he spent a year and a half trying to get hired as a firefighter. Because of his criminal record, he was turned away, time and again. He was finally hired by the U.S. Forest Service. And he went on to found The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program with Royal Ramey. They'd both led chainsaw crews at Bautista Conservation Camp in Hemet, California.

SMITH: And we always used to talk about how we can improve ourselves to ensure the safety and the betterment of the rest of the crew members. Those conversations transitioned to like, 'hey, hey bro, just so you know, I actually want to do this. I like this work. I'm trying to figure out how to do this when I come home.' And he says, 'oh, well, hey, you know what? I've been thinking about that as well. I want to do this as well when I come home.' And so, I paroled in May of 2014. He paroled in August of 2014. And we spent this time trying to figure it out like, and facing so many 'no's. And once we finally got the opportunity to go do this work, literally speaking, our first fire, it was the Lake Fire in Big Bear, California, we are sitting there with our chainsaws working as professional firefighters. I'm so happy and blessed because I finally made it; he's so happy and blessed because he finally made it. And next thing you know, we hear to our right, is, 'Hey, Brandon. Hey, Royal.' Wait, wait, wait, wait, who's calling us? How do you know who we are? And it's the same crews that we were formerly incarcerated with two years prior. And it's like, how do we sit in this situation knowing that we spent a year and a half, two

years to like hop into this space and these folks are going to come home and try to go hop through that same process. So FFRP started first and foremost what we call “navigating the maze.” Like, how can we be a support system so that people who come home from fire camp can go through this same process that we went through? Once people come home, we help them out with resume supports. We help to link them up to other re-entry services, whether you need housing, need an immediate job, whether you need to go get your driver's license. And then also what we have is a career training program. And our career training program is very unique because we provide paid on-the-job training for folks coming home from camp. And so, with us, you spend two to three days in class getting certified – in some instances recertified – as a firefighter. And then we also do in-field work, providing forest thinning, defensible space, fire prevention, and now even fire suppression work for people, land stewards who need that work. And so FFRP, we feel like we meet at the intersection of environmental and criminal justice needs where on one level, formerly incarcerated people deserve the opportunity to obtain gainful employment within this work. And then also, homeowners and land stewards who don't have the capacity or the finances or the opportunity to prevent wildfires or lessen the severity of wildfires, we provide, like, on-demand work right there to go help them out.

DEVERELL: Michelle Garcia says that the Ventura Training Center emphasizes not just physical training but the emotional and even spiritual development of formerly incarcerated trainees.

GARCIA: We are fortunate enough to have some amazing leadership from Cal Fire that is on our, you know, on our grounds here and boots on the ground in daily interactions with these men. And they're second chance believers, right? And they also are very familiar with, we all make mistakes, whether you've been in prison or not, right? And so they see the humanization in our cadets. And so, yeah, it is something that is pretty magical here that it's the first time that they'd been connected to somebody with leadership qualities that understands those important concepts of the spiritual concept, the healing, the forgiveness, right? The service.

DEVERELL: Right.

GARCIA: And it's foreign to a lot of people. I came in it thinking, you know, knowing dang well, what's needed to change a life, you know, from my own experience. But, I have been like stretched beyond even my imagination here as staff. So, it's called VTC, right? So Ventura Training Center, but my nickname for VTC has been “Ventura Transformation Center.” It really is all about the transformation. We have succeeded, far succeeded anybody's expectations, even the ones that believed in it. But a lot of our local officials didn't believe in this, we had to fight for it. You know, and one of my favorite stories about that was in 2018, we were in

Camarillo City Hall, you know, trying to prove a point of the value of a second chance. A year later, there was a fire in Thousand Oaks, the same county, and those same people that we're saying, 'this sounds like a wonderful program, but not here in our area' were all of a sudden singing the praises of these men who saved homes in, in Thousand Oaks. You know.

DEVERELL: Exactly.

GARCIA: You know, so all of a sudden we went from 'not here' to, 'yes, please come here.'

DEVERELL: Brandon Smith says one positive outcome of programs like his is that it's adding to the diversity of California's firefighting forces.

SMITH: As a professional firefighter, no knock to my sisters and my brothers, but like firefighting is predominantly a white male dominated industry. Right?

DEVERELL: Yeah.

SMITH: And then, when you talk about fire camps or the people incarcerated, you're talking about the majority people of color. You're talking about women. And so where we stand in FFRP is in helping out people who have been incarcerated in fire camp. We are inherently increasing the amount of women within the fire service; we are inherently increasing the amount of people of color. We are increasing the people from urban or underprivileged communities into this space. And we see it as a blessing, so that we can all come together and create a solution to the challenges that we face as Californians.

DEVERELL: Exactly. Right. And Godspeed to you for that work. I have to ask you, we, we've interviewed a formerly incarcerated woman who is a firefighter. And she repeated something I'd heard kind of in the weeds that women cut better line than men.

SMITH: I would agree.

DEVERELL: How do you explain that? I'm fascinated by that.

SMITH: There, there's a lot of fire intricacies around that. But, you know, women are dedicated people and a lot of times in this male dominated society, we undervalue the strengths that women have. Oftentimes we hear in these spaces, you know, 'there's a physical capacity that's different between men and women. There are mental challenges that are different between men and women.' And, first of all, I don't believe any of that is true. And secondly, if that was

true, then I believe that that actually favors like the women because they put in stronger work out here. Like, they're committed to getting this done.

DEVERELL: Amazing.

SMITH: Within FFRP, one of our tenets is to increase the amount of women within the fire service. That's why, you know, we make sure that like at least 25% of folks who hop into our annual career training program are women. And then also one of the things that we believe is in investing in women, in investing in, in communities of color, that this has the opportunity to transform communities.

(MUSIC – PALE AND TROUBLED RACE)

DEVERELL: Jaime Lowe is a journalist and author whose new book is called *Breathing Fire: Female Inmate Firefighters on the Front Lines of California's Wildfires*. She's also heard the claim that women incarcerated firefighters cut better fire lines than men.

JAIME LOWE: Absolutely. I spoke with many foremen and captains and all of, I should mention all of the people who are supervising female crews were men, which is its own issue, I think. But they, every single one of them said that female crews cut better than male crews, that it was more exacting. So part of cutting a line is that you want to remove all fire fuel, like, so its branches, its roots, its anything. And they just, they said across the boards that it would be clean to bare mineral soil when there were a female crews on there. And so I think that that is 100% an accurate claim. And also there was so a lot of pride in that. And that, it's really important to know. And I think that's something also that we can learn from, in terms of municipal crews, hot shot crews, you know: there's a real barrier to be a female firefighter. And part of that is that it's a militaristic atmosphere that's long been dominated by white men. And I think that there needs to be other approaches for how, like we need more firefighters and it can't be so intimidating and so impossible to be a woman within that field. And one of the things that is really notable is these all-female crews really work together. And there was something about being able to be on the same level and kind of know what the mission was and do it, that really there was a lot of positive elements to that, I think.

DEVERELL: Jaime became interested in the work of women incarcerated firefighters after reading a brief article in the *Los Angeles Times*.

LOWE: I think it was under 500 words and it described a woman who was incarcerated, who died fighting the fire. And she was part of this incarcerated firefighter program. And it, there

were two things that really struck me about it. One was that I, as a lifelong Californian, could not believe I had no idea that this program existed, that there were people in prison who were fighting wildfires and that sometimes made up 30% of the crews fighting fires. And the other part of it was really personal. And it was that this woman, Shawna Lynn Jones was 22. Just, you know, a few weeks away from her release date and that they really only talked about who she was in relationship to her crime, but also in like two sentences or less. And so you, there was no way to know who she was as a person. And I just, I really wanted to know what her life was like before she was incarcerated, what she went through while she was in county jail, what it was like for her family. You know, what it was like for the crew around her who was there when she died.

DEVERELL: Jaime spent the next several years pursuing those questions.

LOWE: Because I think that one of the missions of mass incarceration is to really separate people from society to break families, to really make it difficult to understand what is happening on the other side of that wall. So it's definitely a challenge. And I think that with this particular story, I wrote to Shawna Lynn Jones's mom, and she was, you know, generous enough to, to sit down and speak with me. And when she had lost her daughter just a couple months before and we sort of started there. And over the course of five years, I've spoken to her and seen her many times. And, you know, I've gotten to know her and I've gotten to know Shawna through her experience with Shawna. The other side of that, as I wrote to the communications directors at the California corrections department, so CDCR, basically said I could go and visit the camps and interview any of the incarcerated women who were willing to talk to me. So I went to the training center at CIW and I went to all three of the female camps at the time. And that was the beginning, was being able to meet the women in the camps and sort of see what they're doing and get a sense of what the program was like. And then separately, try and understand and piece together what Shawna's life was like through Diana.

DEVERELL: Yeah. It's very, very moving. And the conversations we've been fortunate to have with formerly incarcerated firefighters talk, they talk often about a kind of spiritual solace of accomplishing this extraordinarily difficult - physical and otherwise - challenge of becoming a firefighter. Do you see a kind of spiritual through-line here amongst the women that you were fortunate enough to speak with?

LOWE: I do. And I, I think it's nuanced and complicated, and I think that it's something that also attracted me to this story, which is that almost all the women I spoke to felt a sense of purpose and accomplishment, and also challenge in that they were working with people – their crew – that weren't necessarily people that they would know that they would be, you know, having to

work with. However, that was always undercut by the reality that while they were tasked with being firefighters and saving California, this state in peril, you know, facing climate catastrophe, they were always prisoners. They were always treated as prisoners. They were always, you know, monitored by corrections officers. And if they did something wrong, they knew that their sentence would be extended. And so there was this positive side to it but it was always coupled with a very dark reality, which it's very, very hard. It's probably one of the hardest jobs right now to be a firefighter, both physically, mentally, and spiritually. And then to do that while you're carrying the emotional burden of being a prisoner. It just seems impossible to me. It doesn't seem like it's a good idea for anyone. So there are both sides to that.

DEVERELL: Why do they do it? What's your sense?

LOWE: Well, there are a lot of reasons to do it, and I think the foundational one is that state prisons and county jails are horrific in so many ways. They are exposed to predatory behavior, to violence, to, you know, I was speaking with somebody who's incarcerated just the other day and she mentioned that her cell had been flooded by, you know, the whole block was flooded for four days with sewage. And it was up to their knees and there, you know, nobody could come and fix it because it was over the weekend. And there is like food that's covered in mold and like mouse droppings, like the conditions are inhumane. And that to me is a spiritual crisis. And I think that there is an option to go to fire camp where you're actually immersed in nature. There are these small facilities that have no fences. There's no barbed wire. The food is slightly better. You get to go out on the line and sort of be amongst trees and a natural setting rather than, you know, in these prisons and jails. And I think that that's one motivating factor. And that's a really big one. And I think that, you know, they also, another woman described her kid visiting her in state prison and that there was a plexiglass wall between them and the closest they could come to touch was sort of pressing their hands up against this plexiglass wall. And that when she was at camp, they could hug. You can rent a cabin for over a night and your families can stay. You can barbecue. It almost feels like a camp rather than that somebody is in prison.

(MUSIC – KNOW JUST WHAT TO DO)

DEVERELL: A new California law, AB 2147, aims to make it easier for formerly incarcerated firefighters to find work when they get out. California Governor Gavin Newsom signed the bill last year at a press event held amid the charred landscape left by the North Complex Fire burning in Butte County.

CLIP OF GAVIN NEWSOM SIGNING AB 2147 (VOICEOVER): I brought this piece of legislation, appropriately I thought, here today that will give these future firefighters and emergency personnel a chance by getting them an opportunity to expunge their records, giving them a chance to get a certificate, getting a chance potentially to get a career ladder coming out of prison. So let me sign that and I'll answer any questions."

DEVERELL: The state firefighters union opposed that law. They argue that just because an incarcerated person spent time at a fire camp doesn't mean they're rehabilitated or that their time in the camp prepared them for municipal firefighting. Brandon Smith says AB 2147 has cleared some hurdles for formerly incarcerated firefighters. But far more of the people involved in his group have not had luck expunging their records.

SMITH: As it stands right now, the law is based on an individual judge in an individual county. And it's up to their discretion. There are no statewide, countywide standards on how the law is implemented. It's up to the judge at that day when they see you, if they have deemed you've been rehabilitated. I'm not here to talk politics, but if you go hop into more of the liberal areas of the state, then we see more successes. If you go hop into the more conservative areas of the state, then you find more failures. It depends on how the judge woke up in the morning, what that judge feels rehabilitation is like. And so, while I appreciate these laws and these thought processes, it's my belief that these laws and thought processes come from let's just say like on a 10,000-foot level or like a level, a little bit removed from those actually putting in this work.

DEVERELL: AB 2147 is certainly just a first step. While judges can deny a petition to expunge someone's records, that person can then file again, either in the jurisdiction where they were originally convicted or in the place where they currently live. Hopefully, this will help remove some of those hurdles to finding work. The writer Jaime Lowe says incarcerated firefighters uniquely understand the challenges we all face in living with fire.

LOWE: I think sometimes humanity thinks of fire as something that they can outrun or somehow it won't affect them. But I think it's very hard to emotionally and intellectually understand what fire really feels like. And I think that all of these women have experienced it. They've all been right there having to run into the fire rather than run away from it. And they know they've felt their feet, you know, blistering and on, and like, so hot from having to march through these areas.

DEVERELL: Your writing and your approach to all this is realistic and your, your eyes are wide open to the immense challenges, but there is a strain of optimism in here, isn't there?

LOWE: I think that if there's optimism it's that I heard it in the women's voices when they would sometimes talk about their experiences at camp because there were always positive sides to it. And there was always sort of a memory of having gone through this program together that felt like, you know, earned camaraderie and it felt really important to them. And that optimism, I feel like was true when I would interview almost all of the people that I talked with. I don't think that it wasn't without many, many, many negative sides and hurdles. And I think that that's actually where it's a complicated program and one that, while I was reporting about it, it really surprised me that there were many positive feelings that were evoked. And there was a certain amount of transformation that clearly took place. But I think that having it be linked to the prison system is really complicated and not actually effective in many ways. And that the prison system doesn't actually even track any data about how effective the program is in terms of recidivism, in terms of, these are all anecdotal stories that it's a really quote unquote good program from them. They don't actually, you know, have any data to back that up.

DEVERELL: For formerly incarcerated firefighters like Brandon Smith of The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program, the future may be in private firefighting forces, ones that hearken back to the nation's past.

SMITH: This year, FFRP was approved to operate our own private fire department. And we are doing that through a 20-person hand crew. That crew is called the Buffaloes. The Buffaloes are in homage to the Buffalo Soldiers.

DEVERELL: Right on.

SMITH: You know, the Buffalo Soldiers, a group of brothers who worked for the Army in various capacities in the past. There is a fire called the Great Fire of 1910. And I, and I really appreciate this story because the Buffalo Soldiers, when people think of the Buffalo Soldiers, they just think of like Black folks in, on horses who like fight wars and, and all kinds of stuff like that. But one of the things we also did was work as firefighters. So in the Great Fire of 1910, the Buffalo Soldiers went to the Midwest, I believe Ohio. And within this fire, at first, the whole community said, 'Hey, we don't want these folks to go and be on this fire. Like who are these folks, these Black folks out here on this fire line? Like, no, no, no, no, no.' But then come to find out that these folks, utilizing the techniques that they learned and built within themselves in the military, ended up saving this whole town from a fire and it completely transformed what that community thought about people of color and folks that did not look like them, think like them, or act like them. And also what the Buffalo Soldiers did within the Great Fire of 1910 was helped to institute what we call the ICS system, the Incident Command System, which is like how all Americans operate in emergencies. It's a military style. And so, in terming ourselves, the

Buffaloes, one of the biggest things is we want to go out here and be that face of truth, duty, integrity, respect, to go be able to transform people's thoughts about what things should be to what things could be. Taking a group of marginalized people that you would throw away, even though we have great solutions or opportunities to go support in these challenges, being here, showing up as public servants in the midst of that adversity. And how can we go continue to go support and thrive and go help you? And so, yes, we have our crew out here, the Buffalo Soldiers, 20-person hand crew; we are available, dispatch to fires. Recently came back from the Caldor Fire, recently dispatched to the [KNP] complex in the Sierras. And so we are here. And what we're trying to do is pay homage to a group of people who were real trailblazers, where, in the face of adversity, where like, you may not like, or appreciate what I'm doing, but like once we save your house, your home, your community, you're going to understand what we talking about.

(MUSIC – BRANDING!)

DEVERELL: That was Brandon Smith from The Forestry and Fire Recruitment Program. Thanks also to Michelle Garcia, program coordinator with the Anti-Recidivism Coalition working at the Ventura Training Center. And to Jaime Lowe, author of *Breathing Fire*. I'm Bill Deverell. Next time on *Western Edition*, what it takes to be a fire lookout.

PROMO CLIP FROM THE NEXT EPISODE (VOICEOVER PHILIP CONNORS): You know there are places where there's mining activity that kicks up dust. Sometimes that can be mistaken for smoke. There's a phenomenon called the water dog where mist rises off of ridges and out of canyons after a hard rain and it can look very much like smoke.

DEVERELL: *Western Edition* is produced by Avishay Artsy, Katie Dunham, Elizabeth Logan, and Jessica Kim. Our music was written and recorded by I See Hawks in L.A. *Western Edition* is a production of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West. Please rate, review and subscribe to the show, and share it with a friend. Thank you, and be well.

(MUSIC)