

Announcer: Welcome to Hancock Conversations, an Allan Hancock College podcast. Join President Dr. Kevin G. Walthers and members of the Hancock community, as they explore the stories behind the people and places that make Allan Hancock College the unique hub for learning that it is today. You're sure to learn something new and even have a little fun along the way.

Kevin Walthers: Hello, and welcome to Hancock Conversations, the podcast for all things Allan Hancock College. Today we are talking public safety training at the Allan Hancock College Public Safety Training Center, and we have with us, our associate dean of public safety, Mitch McCann, Andy Densmore our faculty, fire academy coordinator and Robert Kovach, the Carpenteria-Summerland Battalion Chief, and a longtime instructor for the college going forward. So welcome, gentlemen. Thanks. Yeah, thank you. Good morning.

So let's start with the just kind of the overall Public Safety Training Center. We offer a variety of programs down there. We do law enforcement and fire academy, are kind of the ones that everybody knows about. But we also train correctional officers, we do Hazmat training, and we do EMT training down there. So Mitch is the associate dean. Tell us, you know, what's it like on a typical day down there?

Mitch McCann: Yeah, usually there's lots of activities going on here, but between the EMS (Emergency Medical Service), environmental health, fire, law enforcement, the custody programs that we have, there's always something going on. In addition, we also allow other agencies to use our facilities. So usually on a daily basis, there's people out at the EVOG (Emergency Vehicle Operations Course) track driving around, there's people working in the fire tower, or the fire bay. There's our EMS program, which they're doing different things, riding in the ambulance if they need to, or training in the classrooms. And then we utilize all the classrooms for all the inside work that all the programs do. So usually, you'll hear people marching around, shouting, walking around, running around, and driving all over the place, so every day is very entertaining.

KW: When you look at the other community colleges and training programs, how unique it is to have a place where law enforcement academies, and fire academies, and ambulance services can all practice on the same acreage?

MMC: You know, it's pretty amazing. I think we have about 80 acres here. And in the entire nation there may only be one or two other facilities that are similar to this. And especially for community colleges, this is pretty amazing that these students get real-life training. We have, you know, fire apparatus here, police cars, you name it. So they get all real-life training when they're going through here. And because we have all the programs in one place, fire recruits get to experience working with police recruits and the EMS recruits, so it's very realistic and really puts some head and shoulders above a lot of other places, as far as going out there in the streets.

KW: So Andy, you were at the previous training center, which was almost just as good, right?

Andy Densmore: Yeah, almost identical.

KW: [Laughing] So, for those who aren't aware, maybe tell a little bit of the difference in the kind of facility you were working in before you moved out there.

AD: For years and years, we were relegated to doing business out of a repurposed commercial structure office building, if you will, I think it was PG&E or some other utilities function, and we made use of the

offices, but as far as training grounds for our manipulative skills training, or anything that even resembled an official training site. We were lacking for, you know, for several years, up until we got this facility.

KW: So, when you were doing the training on the driving and things like that, you just had like, that little pad that's right there on College [Drive], is that correct? Did you guys go and use some other areas to help with any kind of work you're doing, when you had to go run hoses and drive a truck?

AD: Oh no, we took advantage of that big empty pad, that's all it was, was a big chunk of asphalt, and the rest of it was your imagination. We'd have to imagine surfaced streets and corners, and we'd have to imagine buildings and roads, and targets for directing our fire streams. It was basically just a great big asphalt pad, with nothing on it but us, and we had to just imagine the rest. I mean, we made do, we still did really well producing, you know, quality candidates, but this new facility is just an amazing leap for us, with regard to what we're able to do.

KW: Chief Kovach, you've got some experience here in the county. And maybe you can talk to us a little bit about the importance of the public safety training centers. Is it in regard, especially from your perspective, for training qualified firefighters to join the force?

Robert Kovach: Oh yeah, absolutely. So a couple things, we have had our recruit academies held there jointly with other agencies, like Santa Barbara County Fire and I forget what other agencies, where it's hosted right there at the training center. So we send our new hires, they have to go through, typically, eight to 12 weeks academy depending on the format, and that's on-site to train the guys up to prepare them to hit the floor running when they're ready to get moving. And then, anytime there's a graduate from that academy that's applying for our agency, we know, you know, that we're getting a high-level new recruit. We really target those guys in our new hire program, knowing they came out of that facility and the type of training they're receiving. And then lastly, there's constant ongoing fire classes that all of us tend to take, especially people looking to promote. They need a lot of different types of certifications and classes, typically hosted right there. So all the agencies, including the one I work for, we end up there for all those reasons. So it's the next one facility for everything I just described.

KW: Awesome. That's great. Well, Andy, you know, it's always exciting when we have the fire academy graduation. Talk a little bit about how you came up with the idea for doing a demonstration for the families, and how important that is to our families.

AD: To be honest with you, I'd like to say that it was my idea, but it wasn't. My eldest son is with Orange County Fire Authority, he's a captain down there. When he graduated from his fire academy down there, they had a facility similar to ours, just a lot of smaller, and they did basically the same thing. They ran their engines out in the field, they had some fires and did all that. And I thought you know, how dynamic was that? What a great close to a program and what a great opportunity to show the families, you know, what you've learned and how far you've come. It's just, just the visual is amazing. So it wasn't my idea, I stole it. But the nice part is, we have a facility now that will support that, and you know, we can do pretty much anything. And with this new building we're getting, it's going to be even more dynamic.

KW: With the new burn building we did, you know when the when the facility opened, there was that contractor problem with the live fire burn building, and it's taken us much longer than it should have,

probably, to get that rectified. But the way California construction law works is a little crazy, but that's gonna be a fantastic new addition.

So Mitch, talk a little bit about how important the training is for local agencies. Because I know a lot of your job is, faculty take care of our academies and we spend a lot of time making sure that our local partner agencies have access to some real world ongoing training there at the facility. Talk a little bit about what that means for the different departments around Santa Barbara County.

MMC: Yeah, really the thing about it here is that we actually have agencies from three counties come here, because of the outstanding facility that we have here. Ventura County, Santa Barbara County, and San Luis Obispo County all utilize our facility here and our equipment. It is, as we mentioned earlier, pretty state-of-the-art. And for a lot of these agencies, they would not be able to keep their off appearance, their firefighters, etc. up to the standards as required by the state without a facility like this. So, it's really critical. And I'm fortunate enough to get to go to a lot of the meetings where I get to talk with the chiefs of police, and fire chiefs, and the other agency heads and, without a doubt, they all are very complimentary of our staff here, our faculty here, in this facility, and I think it's really a crown jewel for the area. I've been fortunate enough to be in public safety for over 30, well over 30 years now. And this really is a very unique space, and we're really lucky to have it and privileged to have a place like this, where our agencies in this area can all work and train together.

KW: Chief Kovach, how often are you guys coming up to the facility to put some training in?

RK: So when we do a new hire, I'd say probably once a year, sometimes every two years, we contact surrounding agencies, and if it lines up to come to that facility based on timing and need with other agencies. So I'd say every two, three years it works out for us. Sometimes we stay down here in the south county because that's where the other agencies are, when we tie together with them. But on a continual basis, I know our firefighters are going up there to get the certifications I mentioned earlier that they need to move on their career, or to expand their skills. So that happens pretty much all the time.

KW: So all of you have way more than 30 years on public safety, and I'll start with you, Chief Kovach. Tell us a little bit about how the typical firefighter has changed as you've watched this over your career.

RK: Okay, so, you know, they definitely come in with a little bit more education than when I started 41 years ago, back then you just needed a high school education. I think now that's still a requirement, but most of the cadets that I see applying, coming from there, already have their upper level education for that. That has definitely changed. The other things I'm seeing, there's a lot more certification that agencies are looking for, not necessarily always requiring, but it does give them an upper hand, when they come in with a lot of the entry level certifications we need. A lot of cadets are already seeking out on their own or getting up at academy, versus when they get hired with us, we now have to send them out to go get those certifications because they are a requirement. The new cadets are already coming in with a lot of stuff we expect from them at the get-go. Over the years, that has been a little more demanding and increasing, and they're keeping up with that.

KW: So Andy, what are you seeing as you're looking at these fresh-faced young men and women who want to be firefighters?

AD: Well the program has really, really changed a lot. In 1978, when I started my program, my entire firefighting program was 240 hours, and that was all that was required by the state. And that's basically all that's required, just a little bit more than that by the state right now. Through our advisory committees, and research, and the stuff that Chief Kovach was alluding to, the needs of local agencies, we've increased what we deliver to our cadets. And so their experience here is a lot more than when I got in. And like Chief Kovach had said, I bet you 45 percent of the kids in my class right now have four-year degrees. Some of them already have their associate's, and some of them will be finishing up their associate's with our program. So the level of entry level candidate that the local agencies are getting, I mean, has in their training, the education, the background, the discipline, the attention to detail, everything that firefighters are looking for, has been increased over these years that Chief Kovach and I have been involved in the fire service, and it's largely due to the demands of the fire service itself. I mean, we've got change in technology, you've got changes in construction materials, the way things burn, the way things are built. All of this requires more training than we had to go through in the past, when everything was constructed of wood and cotton or just normal metals. Things have changed and our methods techniques and equipment has all changed. We're up to 640 hours, like Andy said, he started at about 240.

KW: So let's think about how, I mean I would have to think that one of the big changes that we've seen for firefighters is after 9/11, and what we saw happen there. What kind of changes did you see kind of come out of that, and not necessarily technical, but just in the mindset of what firefighters do, and how the community takes a look at those professionals?

AD: One of the big things, that's in there now, Kevin, is actually mandated by the state. Because of our experience with firefighters, is a Firefighter Wellness program and Cancer Awareness. 9/11 brought to the forefront several issues that we really hadn't faced before or acknowledged before, with the trauma that firefighters and police officers see was often resulting in suicides, alcoholism, drug abuse, you know, problems in the family. And now we're trying to get a handle on that early. It's actually part of our academy program, and the cancer awareness, the stuff that came out of the 9/11 fiasco, all those firefighters coming down with diseases that they never imagined, those are some recent changes. As far as the way the public looks at us, it's hot and cold. It depends on what's going on, like the fires that would happen in California today. Everybody's happy to see us, all the cities are saying, you know, 'We need more firefighters, we need more firefighters.' But as soon as everything dies down, they start looking at their budgets, they start doing risk management. And you know the reason that California's short on firefighters is because the way that a lot of this stuff is managed, they just, when the disasters hit they say, 'where's all our firefighters?' The fact is, this we've lost a lot of funding.

KW: I see that. So Mitch, kind of on a similar vein over on the law enforcement side, you've been a law enforcement officer since the mid-80s. I'm not going to make the Beverly Hills Cop jokes, but later I will. Talk about how you know law enforcement is changing, and in the type of cadets that we're looking for here in Santa Barbara County.

MMC: Yeah, very similar to Andy, we're very fortunate here that we've been ahead of the curve and doing training that ultimately gets put into place by the state. And I'll tell you, when I was a recruit, it certainly was much easier, much less was asked of you than now. Due to California's events we've had over the years, police officers have been asked to do more and more and more. Because of that, they get additional training. The training is intense and it's what they have to go through now. And, you

know, now it seems like in the last several years we've been worried about wellness for the officers and I'm really happy to see that, because in the old days, very similar to when Andy started, you either were tough and made it or you weren't tough enough and you had a mental illness, or you became alcoholic or other things. So, now we're trying to get ahead of the curve on that and keep people mentally well, and which I think also provides a better service for the community for when the officers are mentally healthy and things. So, as far as the kind of recruits that we're looking for now, it's a much different job. You really have to be able to take a lot of mental stress and strain from the public and people that you come in contact with. And also, we want people with a big heart, because in reality at the end of the day, it's a job of service and you want people that really do care about the community and care about the people they come in contact with to try to help them. So, for me and for our staff, and I know the local agencies up here, that's the kind of person we want. We don't really want, in the old days we used to call people the knuckle-dragger type of people. Okay, it's great that they're brawny and things, but we need people with the brains and with a heart.

KW: So, Chief Kovach, you're still on the job and as a leader, not just your own department but in the county, maybe you can help us with some of the things you're doing for, because I'm sure you have a lot of guys who are out on the wildfires right now and how's the department helping them deal with that kind of stress?

RK: So as Andy alluded to, you know, the mental health is in focus all the time. We do critical incident stress management anytime we sense it's needed. And we, you know, a lot of times we don't wait for them to come out, we kind of bring the people in, just to softly talk to them and some of the guys will actually request the support. And then within our county, we call it our operational area, we have a peer support group established. So those are firefighters that have been trained up and some mental health staff that all our folks can reach out to for any type of need, mostly in the mental health side. If they had a critical incident of stress, a lot of times these groups will come find you, just to check on you and check on your welfare. And all the agencies, including mine, we're really focused on that, and as soon as we have a major incident, which happens pretty often around us, we always reach out to that crew and assure they're going to be okay you know, mentally, physically, all the things you guys are talking about. And over the years we used to really jolt the guys with the station phone, 'Hey get up, there's a call, take off.' There's a really loud tone, threw you out of bed, made your heart shake. Now, it's more of a soft tone, more of a light hit on the heart. We're thinking about all those things to help the troops out.

KW: Great. Well I'm gonna tell my favorite public safety training story and give you guys a chance to think about something at the academies that you'd like to share, a favorite story from the academies. And my favorite story is not long after it opened, I was probably in my second year here, and it opened during my first year. We had a bike race out there, and somebody came from Lompoc schools and they were into bicycling, they were having this big bike race. And I came out and I knew, you know, the academy uses a lot of adjuncts, and I was brand new. And even today, I have a hard time matching names to faces and with the part time out there. Especially the firefighters, they all look alike. They've got big mustaches and they're all strong. So, but, I saw these two guys, I was wearing my Hancock jacket and I talked to them like I knew them, and we had a brief conversation and I asked if there's any training going on in the tower. And they said 'No, no, not while the race is going on.' So of course, I go up and decide I'm gonna walk up and watch the race from the top of the tower up there. And I get up there and some of the cadets are up there, and I introduce myself and tell them I'm the college president. And all of a sudden, Chief Densmore is on the radio. 'Hey, have you guys seen some guy in a blue jacket,

wandering around in the tower?' And the kids are like 'Yes sir, he's right here.' 'Well, do anybody have any idea who that guy is?' and I tell you what, Andy, that guy never had a bigger smile in his life when he got to tell you it was the college president. About that time Andy came bouncing over the ladder and big grin on his face, too. I'll never forget that day, that kid after however many weeks of being yelled at and cajoled and trained up to be a better firefighter, he got he got to feel like he put one back over on the chief. So that was a good day. I probably need to get out there more often, go up and down that seven flights of stairs, that'll probably get me back into shape.

AD: Yeah.

KW: Well, look, I want to go backwards, I'm gonna have Andy go last. But Chief Kovach, do you got a story or something you'd like to share that's something you find interesting about the academy?

RK: Well for me, you know, ever since I put the gold badge on, I haven't been too involved in being there teaching. But I truly miss it, because being there around the enthusiasm, being around the motivation, and the sharpness of those cadets, I didn't realize how sharp they kept me. You know, you don't realize how well you know a topic until you have to teach it. And now being away because of the position I'm in, I just don't have the time. I really miss being around that group. And I didn't realize how much they meant to me and how much they kept me on my toes. I think that's the main issue for me.

AD: Chief Kovach, Bob, you also came through our program, right?

RK: I did, I graduated in 1981, class number 10.

AD: Yeah, there are several firefighters statewide, not just firefighters, but chief officers that have come through this program.

KW: That's correct. That's correct. So, and what I tell folks is that well over half of our local firefighters came through the academy, for the cities and counties.

MMC: Same on the law enforcement side. Our sheriff of San Luis Obispo County was a Hancock graduate, a number of our chiefs of police in both counties, so it's really impressive.

KW: Well, so Mitch, while you're there, why don't you talk a little bit about something that's a good story you'd like to tell about the academy.

MMC: Okay, yeah, very similar to the other chief is that at my level, you tend to be a warrior, you want everything to go good, you want to think ahead of the curve. So some of my favorite things that I do, love the energy around here, where we're on the tail end of our careers and things and all these kids are out here and they're just at the beginning and they're so excited about the future, and you can't help but be impacted by the positive energy. But what I really like, and I'm so impressed with here, again I'm the designated warrior for the place because I want to make sure everybody is safe. We're doing some very dangerous training, all around here and the fact that we keep these men and women safe on a daily basis, that's something that makes me feel really good that what we do out here and with all these things we have going on, and our faculty, our staff really do a great job keeping all of our equipment up to speed. And the story that I want to tell is that it's great that we have faculty that teach things and it's good that we have students, but we wouldn't be able to be successful without the people on the ground, staff, people that are here that work so hard every day to make this place spectacular. From Craig, our janitor, who keeps this place sparkling, to all the people that help things go around. For me,

that's the part I like, keeping it safe. We have fantastic facilities and we're doing a good job making the future of public safety great.

KW: Yeah, I agree that, you know, it literally takes a village out there, and we really didn't even talk about the impact of COVID-19, and I guess we should at least make mention of the remarkable efforts that have gone into making sure that we can have people being trained for such important roles and important responsibilities in the future, and still manage around the virus in the end. I've been out there a few times, and it's impressive to see people really taking the virus seriously and they wear their masks, and they make sure they're distant when they can be, and when they can't be they take the precautions. And it's a commendation for you, Mitch, and the faculty and staff that we've been able to continue to manage, because certainly we're going to need public safety officers in all of those areas, as we come out of the pandemic. So congratulations, and thanks for doing that.

MM: Yeah, thank you. Yeah, that's one of the fascinating things is that because COVID took everybody by surprise, we actually have to make up new procedures, policies, things that we're going to do to keep our staff, and our students, and faculty involved. While the rest of the state, I think has trained half the number of public safety officers as they normally do. We've been able to keep ours running pretty much at full strength, thanks to our procedures, so thanks to the people who work here.

KW: So Andy, I want to wrap up with you because you're retiring, after, remind me how long you've been here?

AD: I've been with the academy program for three years, but I've been running it for almost 12.

KW: So, longtime person here in the community. You know, the staff wanted me to ask where your favorite vacation spot is. I said I already know that for Andy, it's at the bottom of an ocean somewhere.

AD: My favorite vacation spot is Bermuda.

KW: So, you know, I've adopted you and you said you stole the idea for the demonstration. Well, I always give you credit as well for your mantra for the academy that we'll keep, even as you retire, that 'You won't rise to the occasion, you will default to your level of training.' And I'd like you just to explain a little bit about what that means and why that's such an important thought for you, and it's something you share every year, when the cadets graduate.

AD: Well Kevin, it is hard to explain, but it's trying to instill the importance of staying current with your skills, you know firefighting, just like in police work, has several perishable skills. If you don't use them, you lose them. And, your level of training doesn't stop when you leave the academy, it carries on throughout your fire service career. Chief Kovach can tell you, he's constantly sending his guys out to stay at the top of their game. So the level of training is so important in what we do, and I've tried to instill in these kids when they come here, that I don't care what you see on TV or what somebody tells you, you're gonna come into instances, this career has an incredibly dark side to it. And it gets darker when you come across a fight or something that you're not trained to handle. So, one of the biggest things we try to get into these kid's heads, is that you need to constantly seek more and more opportunities to train, because you need to reduce those instances when you're caught at a loss for something to do. So your level of training is absolutely one of the most important things when you're talking about dealing with the stuff that you're going to see in the street. So, to think that you're miraculously going to develop some skill you never had, or strength you never had, or an ability you

never had, to solve that problem, it's just not going to happen. You're going to end up going back to your highest level of training and hoping that that's going to carry you through the day. That was a long answer.

KW: No, that's a perfect answer and, you know, it's, I still remember the first day I heard you say that. And I remember thinking, you know, that's not just something for firefighters and police officers that's really for all of us. And you may not believe it but that's a phrase we use a lot when I'm talking with our leadership team on campus and, you know, how do we get prepared, and how do we plan for the worst case scenario, and it's really your words have been an inspiration that have done to help the college navigate the COVID-19 crisis, because we haven't made knee-jerk reactions, or we haven't had to scramble to understand how we can make things work. We've really thought through a lot of these things, because we wanted to be prepared in eventuality for the worst case. So your legacy extends well beyond what you have in the fire academy there. And we're grateful, grateful for your service and for the hundreds and hundreds of cadets that you've turned out into our community.

AD: Thank you for that. You know, Mitch mentioned our facility and we keep talking about our facility, but really all our facility does is give our amazing instructors the opportunity to teach them to their fullest potential. And it's like Mitch said, it's the staff that makes that happen. You know, I'll take responsibility for what goes wrong here, but the credit goes to the staff, for what goes right.

KW: That's right, that's right. It's a great team and it's been impressive to watch it grow. And really, to watch the types of cadets that we have out there, really start to reflect our community and I think in the long term, we're going to have such a good corps of professionals in those areas, that the community will really be honored by the work that you guys have done and the foundation you've laid.

So as we wrap up, I just, you know, I want to mention one thing that I always say at the academy graduations. I'm fortunate. My job allows me the ability to come and say a few words to the families and the cadets when they graduate, and one thing I always tell the families is the core of what a community college does is create public servants. And I say that unabashedly and without any hesitation, that public service is still a rewarding and critical part of our infrastructure. Whether we're creating emergency medical service professionals, or correctional officers, or police officers, or firefighters, or nurses and medical assistants and dental assistants. You know what I always say is, on your worst day, when the police roll up, when the fire department rolls up, when that ambulance rolls up, you should hope that whoever gets out of that vehicle is an Allan Hancock College graduate, because you know that they've been properly trained and the legacy that you guys are leaving is so important to our community. And I can't thank you guys enough. And Andy, congratulations on retiring. The legacy will continue. As we continue on. Well, we'll look forward to seeing you around the campus as a guy wearing a couple flip flops and your hair long.

AD: That'd be me.

KW: Alright. Well, thank you guys for joining us and we'll wrap up here and remind folks that this has been Hancock Conversations, the podcast for all things Allan Hancock College. We've been joined by the professionals from our public safety training facility, and local Robert Kovach from the Carpenteria-Summerland Battalion Chief, Mitch McCann, our associate dean of public safety, and Andy Densmore, about to become a faculty member emeritus here at Allan Hancock College. So, thank you all, and we look forward to seeing you on the next episode of Hancock Conversations.