

Episode 221: Brandon is a 911 dispatcher

What do heart attacks, car accidents, and murder usually have in common? Most of the time, when any of these things happen, someone calls 911.

It's one of the most reliable things we have – whenever there's any kind of emergency, here in the US, we know we can just pick up any phone and dial 911 and get help. Even if it's a phone that has no service.

This is an episode where I talk with someone who has an unusual job. My guest today is Brandon, and he's been a 911 dispatcher in Nashville, Tennessee for 25 years. After taking emergency calls for all that time, he's heard just about everything. And today we'll get the inside scoop on what this job is really like.

Also, a content warning – one of the things discussed during our conversation is when calls come in from people who are suicidal.

So please, enjoy my conversation with Brandon.

Scott

I've seen images of 911 dispatchers sitting at their desk and they have multiple monitors in front of them. How many actual monitors are you looking at when you're at work and what does each one of those tell you?

Brandon

It depends on what station I'm sitting at. Some stations I have are going to be more, some are less because I do both call taking and radio dispatching. On the call taker side, I don't have quite as many monitors to keep up with. So, when I'm sitting there, there's six. Then, at times, on some of the radio dispatch centers, that'll be 8. That's fluctuated over the years.

Scott

That's a lot of stuff to look at.

Brandon

Oh, yeah. It can be. Kind of move things around to where you pay attention to the most. But for the most part you have your computer dispatch software, which is where you read everything from the calls or, if you're taking the calls yourself, how you input the calls in the first place. From there, you have your phone system, which is a very intricate, detailed system, and then various other things like mapping, if you have unit statuses and things like that. Then, you have an admin computer where you can look up other things or check GPS locations on cell phones, things like that. There's a lot of different systems that we use.

Scott

So you're looking at all that stuff and you're trying to talk to the person who might be calling in a panic and get information from them. It sounds like multitasking would be a talent that's very valuable here.

Brandon

Yes, you absolutely have to be able to multitask. When most people think of a 911 dispatcher, they only think of the call-taking end of it. That's a huge part but, really, the more difficult part is the radio end of it, because you're having to give out the information about a call that's coming in. You also have, say, a police dispatcher— if you're on there, you have anywhere from 30 to sometimes 80-plus officers on your radio, all of them wanting some sort of information from you. They might want you to do a callback for more information from the caller themselves. So you've got the radio in one ear, you've got a phone in the other ear, and you're hearing people go from both sides of it and you're talking and typing all at the same time while monitoring all these different systems. So, yeah.

Scott

Yeah. I have trouble if I'm on the phone and my wife comes to my office door and asks me a question, so there's no way I could do this job. What's the training required to be a 911 dispatcher? How long does it take? Are there any previous education requirements? What's involved with that?

Brandon

It's different almost everywhere you go to, but I will say that it's changed a lot in the time that I've been there since I've been there for 25 years. When I started, we had, I believe, 6 weeks worth of in-class training. Then, from there, we had a single month on each one of the three shifts, so rotating shifts for three months. During that time, you would have a trainer with you kind of letting you know what to do, pointing out your mistakes, things like that, telling you how you could do better. After that, you were released on your own as a person who could take 911 calls. Then, shortly after that, you would go right back into training for the radio side of it. Then, you'd have a few weeks in training, learning how to dispatch on the radio. Then, another 3 month rotation and way further down the line, you do the same type of thing with the fire dispatch since we do both police and fire where we work at.

Now, as far as education goes, most places are going to only require either a high school or diploma or GED. But there are some places, Canada for instance, that actually require a specific college course for it. So it's different almost anywhere you go.

Scott

Is there actual licensing? Or are there continuing education requirements to renew your license or anything? Or is it just you on the job and you're continually learning?

Brandon

Again, it's kind of one of the things that depends on the agency. Some places, you get hired and you just keep working. A lot of agencies have started doing more of a continuous education, which can be good and bad. A lot of the information that's put out for— it's more of a broad stroke type thing. It's not necessarily directly involved with one specific agency. If it was, it would probably be a little bit more helpful. But it's kind of hard to do that too because each agency, most of them are pretty small. But in general, yes, there is some continuing education on the medical side and also on the police side too.

Scott

Yeah. And I know in general, you can speak primarily for your location, which is Nashville of course. What's the most misunderstood thing about this job?

Brandon

As far as the kind of most misunderstood part of the job, it's probably the amount of non-emergency calls that are taken, almost every dispatcher does. Every dispatch center does the same thing. They take emergency calls and non-emergency. A lot of times, people will call for almost anything you can think of. One of the ones that's sort of funny but also annoying, I'd say, once a week or more, someone will call and say something like, "I'm at the drive through and they gave me the wrong order, and I want the police out here to fix it." So things like that actually happen quite often. Or people just calling for a very non-emergency type call. It's not always people screaming. It's not always people getting shot or having a heart attack. It's, "I was in a parking lot and someone opened their door and it dinged my car and I want to police report about that."

Scott

Yeah, there's an administrative line in most agencies, right? That's where they would call for that.

Brandon

Exactly. Yes.

Scott

Do you ever get the impression that people think your job is actually easier than it really is?

Brandon

No. No, Never.

Scott

Everybody knows it's crazy and that's what it is.

Brandon

No. I mean, as far as the internet goes and the people that are on it— I think, one time, I saw on a YouTube channel that it doesn't matter how amazing or anything that anyone does is, there will always be someone out there that says, "Oh, it's not that big a deal." He said on this YouTube channel to the guy, "I could levitate right now out of my chair, three feet above it. And somebody says, "It's okay. He didn't even really go that high."

Scott

Right. Okay. I think it's funny when you do— I've seen you a couple of times at CrimeCon when you're speaking to a huge audience and you get volunteers come up on the stage and they take simulated 911 calls just to see how they respond or do they get the right information or do they just panic or whatever. I think that's a pretty good indication that— of course, they're just volunteers out of the audience - they haven't had any training - but man, it requires some quick thinking, for sure.

Brandon

Yeah. When I've done those in the past, the first time I did it was in Las Vegas, and I think that was in 2021 or 2022. The first time I had some people up there, I had kind of a script written out for actors to be the 911 callers, and then people would come up on stage and the only training they had for the most part would be what I told them during the session. I tell them the very specific things to get, you want to get into every call and you want to keep it brief and I essentially tried to boil down 3-plus months worth of training to about a 20 minute segment.

Scott

Yeah. And it's very clear. The whole point of that is to demonstrate how difficult the job is, but it's also very entertaining. It gets a lot of laughs. Are you going to do that again at CrimeCon this year?

Brandon

I believe so, yeah. We're still working out details of what we're doing but, yeah, I believe that's going to happen.

Scott

Okay. And that's in Denver. This is probably going to be the easiest interview I've ever done because I posted in my Facebook group asking people, "Hey, I'm going to interview a 911 dispatcher. What would you want to ask?" And they sent me a ton of questions.

Brandon

Oh good.

Scott

So, I'm just going to ask you some of the questions that they sent in, and here's one. This woman wrote clearly, the first question, "Is Brandon single?"

Brandon

Brandon is not currently single. We'll leave it quite there.

Scott

Just leave it at that. Okay. Alright.

Brandon

Yeah.

Scott

I can just feel the audience's disappointment as you say those words.

Brandon

I'm very sorry.

Scott

What's the most bizarre call you ever took?

Brandon

It really kind of depends on how you would take the word bizarre. Because I've been there for so long, I've had so many bizarre calls. I think maybe it could be lumped into more of a category type thing. The people that have mental illness, they call in and they will give some of the weirdest things that you will have ever heard accusations from - them saying that celebrities or politicians are stalking them or doing things to them. Sometimes, there are people that call in and they have genuine concerns - they believe that it's a genuine concern anyway - and I'll give you an example from one of them. There was a woman who called in and the police department had been out and talked to her several times, and there were clearly some mental health issues there, but she continually said that there were lights that were being shined through her window. It happened all the time. Of course, the police that went out there, they were like, "Okay. We're not seeing any lights that are coming through the window." Then, one time, they went out there and, while they were there, she started, saying, "Look, there they are!" It turned out that she was

in the flight path at the airport and an airplane was shining through the window as they were going through. So while she did have some mental health issues, not everything that she was saying was necessarily a mental health related thing.

Scott

How about the funniest call you ever took?

Brandon

Okay, so this one is a little bit more difficult. On this, I rarely ever laugh on the phone. When I do laugh, it's usually because the person is telling me something that's sort of funny on the phone. But as far as a call that didn't really necessarily originally merit laughter, I really had trouble holding the laughter in with this one.

Scott

Right. Because it's not professional, right? You don't want to laugh at callers.

Brandon

Exactly. And see, that's the thing with this call. It was a guy who had a genuine emergency. He had been sick for a long time, several days. I'll just kind of lay it out to you the way he laid it out to me. I got the address information for him. I get all the necessary stuff, and then I get to the medical part of it and I say something along the lines of, "Okay, what's going on with you?" And his immediate response was, "I can't stop pooping." And he just kind of elaborates from that. He said he had diarrhea and he has been vomiting for days on end. Then there was a slight pause and he said, "It's so bad that every time I cough, I poop every single time." And then he starts coughing on the phone with me.

Scott

Oh man. So you knew what was happening when he was coughing.

Brandon

I knew exactly what was happening when he started coughing. Just the way that he phrased it and then his own slight pause— there was no means for comedy there but I couldn't help myself. I just really had to sit back for a second and calm myself. But, like I said, I really felt bad for the guy because he did have a genuine concern. Something really bad was going on with him and I hate to laugh at anything like that, and I'm glad I wasn't on the phone with him.

Scott

Yeah. Do you have a quick mute button you can use?

Brandon

Yes. Yeah, we do. We do have those but, the time that it would've taken me to get over there, it was much easier for me to just try to hold it in. That was probably my funniest call. We talked a little bit about this before. Another dispatcher— this happened either really early on in my career or just before I started there. A guy called in and he started screaming that his house is on fire and the dispatcher said, "Okay, well, what's the address?" He goes, "On 17th Avenue." He goes, "Yes, I understand it's 17th Avenue, but what's the full address?" And he's got a lot of commotion going on in the background because there are flames shooting out of his house and coming out of the windows. It's a huge deal. And he says, "Well, it's 17th Avenue." And the dispatcher again says, "Sir, I got 17th Avenue. I understand that. I really need an address." And the caller says, "Look, just send the fire department up. 17th Avenue. I guarantee you, I'm the only motherfucker whose house is on fire right now."

Scott

That's pretty practical. You've been doing this for 25 years. How does this job affect your personal life?

Brandon

I don't know that it actually does necessarily in every realm, but the vast majority of the things that happen with me is, as I'm walking around anywhere, it seems like everybody's a suspect. I hear so much about crimes and things that randomly happen and just things like that. I try to put it out of my mind but, everywhere I go, I'm looking at that guy, he looks a little bit weird, or that woman there, is she stealing something? Or whatever. It's everywhere I go, I'm looking around and I guess I'm more observant than most people, just because I know what happens in the world, whereas most people don't. You'll see little snippets of it on the news, but you'll never hear about someone stealing from Walmart or someone that was randomly assaulted when they were in a bar drinking or something like that. You don't hear about that stuff on the news. You only hear about the big stuff. But all that stuff is happening. It's happened. It happens with pretty great frequency.

Scott

Right. And you are obviously uniquely aware of that because you hear about all of that stuff, and most of the rest of us are just like— yeah, there's probably stuff happening around us all the time. We're just oblivious to it because we don't see it and we're not aware of it like you are.

Brandon

Yeah, there are times that I'd really like to be more unobservant or just, I guess, be naive to what goes on in the world. That would be the best thing for me. I mean, in an actual emergency situation, it might not work out well for me if that was the case. But to live a normal day-to-day life, I would like for that to be the case, sometimes.

Scott

Do you take any kind of proactive action to protect your own mental health in dealing with this trauma all the time?

Brandon

I don't know if I would call it proactive but, for the most part, I do leave everything at work. I mean, it happened pretty early, I guess, that I was able to start doing that. That's probably the biggest thing almost any dispatcher will tell you - you just have to leave it at work. With the type of job this is, there usually isn't anything else passed either taking the call or being on the radio with a dispatch. Once you log out of your phone system, there's no additional work. You don't have to take something home with you and finish up or anything like that. You're done. So that makes it easy. Whereas a police officer or something like that, they may actually have something where they have to stay over work late to finish a report or have to type up an addendum the next day or anything. Plus, they have court later on. There's all kinds of other stuff. So, for a dispatcher, it's a little bit easier to just close it off at the end of the day.

Scott

What would you say, when people are calling 911, what's the most common mistake people make ?

Brandon

Not knowing their address. 100%.

Scott

That must be the obvious one because you answered that really quickly.

Brandon

Yeah. It's actually a two part type thing - the not knowing their address or not giving the address first. The very first thing that we ask - at some places like mine, we have a recorded greeting that's a standard - "911. What's the location of your emergency?" or "911, what's the address of your emergency?" That's the very first thing that they hear. Almost everyone starts telling a story about what's happening. That's great, and we do want to hear at least portions of that, but we want to know where to send help before, because with cell phones - or just the action, the incident, what's happening there - the call could drop and we wouldn't know where you are without you telling us exactly. We have some systems set up that can do GPS, things like that but, getting the address, especially if you're at home or if you're at a store or something like that, that's going to be the most important thing because, if we have that and the call gets cut off past that, we at least know where to go to.

Scott

But what's the primary process when the caller has no idea where they are like they're lost in the woods or something?

Brandon

Being lost in the woods is a very rare thing. It has happened before. Things have changed a lot in the time I've been there in that regard because, back when I started, it was the year 2000 and there were a lot of people who did not have cell phones. So now, kind of skipping forward, almost everybody has one. As long as you have your location services enabled, especially for 911, almost every agency has some sort of a system in place where we can at least triangulate with the closest cell phone towers where you are. That's with, if there's an abundance of cell phone towers, if you're out in the wilderness somewhere and you're up in the mountains or something like that, that GPS is going to be harder to pull up that way. It's not really even GPS because that would be using satellites. This is using cell phone towers, and you would have to have three in a decently closed location to where each one of them can pick up your signal. So if you're down in a deep valley or canyon or something like that, or if you're just behind a mountain, you might not be able to get that triangulated position.

Scott

Have you ever taken a call from a family member or someone you know? And if so, how did that change how you handled that call?

Brandon

Yes. I actually have. This was also pretty early on. I think I've been working there for maybe a year or two at this point when I got a call from my grandfather and had the same thing, "911, what's the address of your emergency?" He immediately recognized my voice and he said, "Brandon, granny's not doing well. We need an ambulance out here." For a split second, I was kind of in shock because I wasn't expecting to hear his voice. Then, after that, I just snapped myself back into it. I said, "Okay, just let me get the information." I started asking the questions and, immediately after that, I went and asked to log out because it was my grandmother. So, I drove over there to see if I could find them before the ambulance got there. Turned out that, on my way there, they had already been transported, so I just went to the hospital after that. It was kind of bad because— I mean, I say kind of bad. It was really bad because she actually got

transported to the hospital and three days later she died. So I actually took the call that sent her in the ambulance to go die in a hospital.

Scott

That kind of leads me to the next question someone else asked, "Have you ever taken a call from someone and you were the last voice they ever heard?"

Brandon

Yes, several times actually. Almost every time that would happen— I've said this on my show several times and just people asking in general, if you're going to be a 911 dispatcher for any length of time, suicide is a big thing. You're going to talk to a lot of people who are suicidal. The people who are just suicidal, they're having some mental health issues. They feel like they may want to hurt themselves or kill themselves, something like that. They usually actually don't do it. The people who call in and they say, "I'm going to kill myself." If they start with that, you can't change their mind. They've already made it up. They will usually follow that up with maybe a means of what they're doing, but they'll actually give you a location. It's almost always headed off with, "You can find me here at this location." Then they'll set the phone down or hang the phone up. I've been on the phone with— one that kind of sticks out with me as a woman that called in saying the exact same thing. She says, "I'm going to kill myself. I'm at this location. Tell my family, I'm sorry." And then the phone was set down and I heard a gunshot and that was it. Later on, in the call, I stayed on the phone call until police got there and I heard them say they found the female with a gunshot wound to the head.

Scott

You had to think about that one for a while.

Brandon

Yes, but no. That day, we were actually kind of short staffed and the 911 calls were still ringing. So immediately after that call, I took another one. I didn't take a break or anything. It was probably an hour or two after that when one of my supervisors— I guess she was looking through some of the active calls that we had and she came back and she was like, "Are you okay?" And I was like, "Yeah, I'm fine." I've had stuff like that before and it's just one of the things that I know just from being there that long that, as much as I wanted to, and I tried— I mean, you always try to talk them out of it or whatever, but those people, there is no talking them out of it. They're going to do it as much as you don't want them to. They're just flat out going to do it. There's no stopping them.

Scott

Okay. Let's switch it up a little bit. What would you say is your best moment on the job?

Brandon

I don't know if I have a number one best moment, but I'll kind of give you a kind of a general thing that I really enjoy. I really like helping catch criminals. So if there's a bank robbery or a shooting or a stabbing or something like that and the person's trying to make a getaway, or if there's a pursuit or something like that, I really like it when the police can go out there and catch the bad guys, essentially. That makes me feel pretty good when I can be a small part in something like that.

Scott

Yeah. I mean, you're playing a part in law enforcement, but yet you don't have to worry about getting injured or shot or anything.

Brandon

Well, not at the job anyway.

Scott

Right. That's true. Yeah.

Brandon

I know what happens outside the job so, like I said before, I'm constantly looking around.

Scott

I'm sure you've done this. Have you talked to someone through a baby delivery?

Brandon

Yeah, a few times. None here recently though - I've been kind of surprised about that. It was really weird too. The first couple times that I did that- I think it was actually the first three times I did that. I was a trainer and we had just learned all our medical stuff. When I started out there, I was a police-only dispatcher. Then, a couple years in, they consolidated the EMS and the fire department with ours. So we're kind of a one-stop shop. You call 911, we're going to get somebody out to you. It doesn't matter. So when they trained us on the medical side, I was currently a trainer and I was training people on the phones to take phone calls. I had never taken one myself, but I was familiar enough with the protocols and software that we were using that I could help them guide through it. So the first three times that I did that, I didn't actually take the call, I was just helping someone else do it and I'd never done it before myself.

Scott

There's a lot of TV shows that are kind of 911-oriented. Do you ever watch shows like that and kind of critique the dispatchers because it's like the Hollywood version of 911 and it's not really accurate?

Brandon

I will give a secret. I've never seen a 911 show. Well, no, actually, I take that back. There was a show that was on there for a little bit where they were playing- I think it was either real or reenacted real 911 calls. That was a more decent show. Now, the kind of fictional made up ones- I've never watched any of those except for there was actually a movie I think - it may have Halle Berry in it. I did watch that and that was very inaccurate. Let's just say that. They could have done a lot of things differently.

Scott

But worth watching just because Halle Berry's in it, right?

Brandon

I'll agree, yeah. Yeah, I'll agree with that.

Scott

Have you ever seen another dispatcher kind of lose their cool, or even rage quit because of a call?

Brandon

Losing their cool, yes. As far as rage quits, I'd have to think back because we've had so many people come and go. The turnover rate - this or any other type of first responder type job - is

really high and there's a lot of different reasons for it. But a straight up rage quit? I can't really say that there's been anybody that I've seen just straight up stand up and walk out. I've seen close to it before - as a filling trainer for someone else's training. Usually, the three month rotation I was talking about, you're usually sat with someone for the entire month and they take their days off, the shift, everything. But just like anybody at any job, they can be out sick or have a vacation day scheduled. So if another trainer doesn't currently have a trainee, you might go and fill in for a day or two with their trainee. I sat with someone and it was their first night on the second shift. That's typically our busiest shift and we were really short handed then. So.

Scott

And what time is that second shift?

Brandon

Back then, it was 2.30 in the afternoon till 11 at night. Just to kind of give you an idea of what the— I won't say the majority of the calls. The majority of the worst calls during that time are usually domestic violence things. It's someone's husband or boyfriend that's been at work all day. He comes home, he has a few drinks, and then, the argument starts up and then the fists start flying, things like that. That actually happens a lot more than people think and it's really unfortunate. During that time frame, that's when it's most prevalent. There have been times where I've been on the phone just thinking to myself on that shift while working that shift, I took so many of those calls, almost sometimes one right after the other, I almost wanted to answer the phone, "911. What did your husband do to you?" I mean, it's really, really bad because there's so many of them like that.

But going back to the person that I was talking about - this trainee - it was her first night on that shift. She'd only been on one other shift before and just the amount of calls, the call volume, hearing all those domestic situations, she just broke down crying and she asked if we could get up and go talk somewhere. I said, "Yeah, that's fine." So we get up and walk outside. At the time, I was a smoker, so I walked outside and lit a cigarette and she did the same. I was like, "So what's going on?" She's like, "I don't know. This is, just really a lot." And she's crying the whole time. She's talking about this. And I said, "Yeah, it is." But at the same time, this is very normal. This is every single night. This is not something out of the ordinary at all. So, if this is something that you're not really okay with— it does get better. You start to not think so much about it. But if this is too much on you, this might not be the right place for you to be at." She kind of thanked me for talking to me about it. We stayed out for a little bit longer. She went and finished her shift and she never came back. So it's not quite just standing up, throwing her headset down and running out, but it was pretty close to it.

Scott

This job includes shift work, maybe some overnights. You've got time away from your family. You're dealing with trauma and impacts to your own mental health, but you've been doing this for 25 years. Is there a secret to longevity as a 911 dispatcher?

Brandon

I don't know if it'd really be a secret. I mean, there are a lot of people that start and quit pretty quickly. They'd realize it's just not the job for them for a variety of reasons. The people that you see that have been there for a long time, they almost always have the same kind of temperament to them. They're really calm and cool. In big situations, they know how to think their way through it. Nothing is necessarily too much for them. I mean, we're still human, so there are times where we take hits and say things like that and you'll think about something. But for the most part, those domestic calls, like I was talking about, they're routine for us. A lot of

people might say something like, "Oh, they're not being very compassionate with them." No, this is actually the most efficient way to get things done, to get the help started as quickly as possible. So once you get to that point where everything is just— if you go into surgery, you want to, someone who's been there that's done it for a long time and they don't even have to reference anything or look anything up. They just know exactly what cut to make exactly, what to fuse together. It's just second nature to them. That's kind of how it is with me.

So as far as me staying there as long as I have, I think part of it is just simply I know how to do the job. I'm pretty sure I do the job decently well, and I can handle it. I think that's one of the bigger things - just finding people that can actually handle it.

Scott

How does it work when there's a mass casualty and you've got dozens or hundreds of people calling in? Do the calls just get rerouted to a nearby agency? And if you miss one of them, do you call them back? How do you handle that?

Brandon

The really big mass casualty things, that's so few and far between. It's rare that this will happen. Our agency and a lot of other agencies kind of live by the same standard. Anything over four patients is considered a mass casualty incident, but it's a very small one. Now, you can have hundreds of people that will call in about something - also kind of small, you'd never guess. This is another thing kind of misunderstood. If there's, say, a fire on the side of the interstate, like a brush fire or a vehicle on fire, and there are literally hundreds, if not thousands of cars that are driving by it. The vast majority of them are probably going to call 911. So we'll get call after call about the same thing over and over again. The first couple of calls we take, we get all the details, but it gets so backed up sometimes with that because it's going to be possibly a several minutes long response for a firetruck to get out there and start pouring water on it. The entire time, people are calling in for the same thing, but during that several minute time, we also have other calls coming in.

So if you know your grandmother's having a diabetic issue or if you know a bank's getting robbed or something like that, those are mixed in with all those hundreds of calls coming in about that one relatively small fire on the side of the interstate.

Scott

And you can't just answer the phone like, "911, are you calling about the bush fire?" Or do you ever do that?

Brandon

No, I actually do. I'll make sure that it's the same thing that people are talking about because we've actually had a couple different times where there've been more than one fire on the side of the interstate where there's brush fire.

Scott

Oh, that's got to be confusing at the start.

Brandon

Yeah, exactly. We'll have several people calling and, sometimes, it takes time to put two and two together. But yeah, there's been a time we had somebody there for a while. He was, like, an arsonist, I guess, that was deliberately setting fire on the side of the interstate. I don't know if he was throwing something out or what it was, but Interstate 40 in Nashville, we had on one side of

town— I think it was, like, 5 or 6 separate grass fires on the side of the interstate over the course of several miles. So it ended up being a big deal for that anyway.

Scott

Have you ever taken a call from a celebrity?

Brandon

No, actually I've not taken one personally.

Scott

And you've got some there in Nashville because it's the music city. So some celebrities live there, right?

Brandon

Oh yeah. Absolutely. Usually, those people have assistance and they'll have them call 911 for whatever they have going on. Another thing a lot of people don't think about. If you have a burglar alarm, you have someone kicking your front door or something like that, the alarm company is going to call us to dispatch police. There's been a few times where I've taken calls for celebrities' houses. We'll go out there and, the vast majority of the time, those are false calls. It could be they'll have a sensor on their window or something like that can detect a glass break and the slightest amount of movement's going to set it off. If a big truck drives by or something like that, just the sound can flex the window enough to where it'll trip that alarm. So taking a few of those. But no, never talked to a celebrity - I can recall that anyway.

It's hard for me to remember a call from last week, but the very first month that I was taking calls as a trainee, I remember several from that. One of them that sticks out— when I tell people about it, it's usually pretty shocking. I'm on midnight shift, it's probably 3-4 o'clock in the morning. She calls and she says, "Well, there's this guy and he has been knocking on my door for several minutes. He's kind of beating on the door." I was like, "Is he trying to break in?" She says, "No, I don't think he's trying to break in, but he won't stop knocking on the door." And she's kind of at an odd angle. She tries to look out the window to see who it is. She can't really see. Also, she doesn't necessarily want to full-on open the window to see who this random person is. Then, she says, "Oh, he's walking back out to his car." And then she says, "He's going in the trunk." And then she says, "He's got something in his hand. He just got out of the trunk and now he's walking around my house and I can't see him anymore." And the phone goes silent there for a second. At this point, this is kind of a mixture of a suspicious person and prowler type situation because we can't really tell what this person's doing.

Then, from nowhere, she starts kind of not necessarily screaming, but in a muted tone because she doesn't want to alert the person, "They're setting my house on fire!" The person, the suspect, was there knocking on the window or knocking on the door. Then, he walks back out to his car, he gets a backpack out of the car that has a gas can in it. When he starts walking around the house, he's actually dousing her entire house with gasoline and then he lit it up with her inside of it. Me, in any situation, even when I was a trainee, I knew that I was stuck in a weird position with this. You can't leave someone inside of a burning house, but you also can't send them outside to where this person is out there that's likely trying to cause her harm. So, with this, I'm stuck in a weird spot. Luckily, for her sake, the person goes and gets in the car and drives off, speeds away. Immediately, when that happened, I said, "Get out of the house. Just run out of the house." And she does. When she gets outside, she sees the car and she says, "I know who it is now." And she tells me that the person that did this was a former coworker of

hers that she got in a workplace dispute with, and that person got fired. So this person was willing to light her house on fire, possibly with her in and over a workplace dispute.

Scott

Unbelievable.

Brandon

Yeah, and that's just one of a few that I've recalled from kind of early on in my career.

Scott

I can see why you'd remember something like that.

Brandon

Yeah.

Scott

We're going to talk about a recent call that you took, and we're going to play it now, but for the listeners, I want to say this ahead of time - huge content warning on this one. If you have kids in the car, you will not want them to hear this. In fact, many adults will probably not want to hear this. This is a woman in distress, like she's being tortured or sexually assaulted. Brandon, you took the call and, obviously, you're just trying to get the address. I'm going to have all kinds of questions about this, but this call is 3.5 minutes long. We're going to play the whole thing because, as of right now, this caller has not been identified or found, and this just happened. As we record this, it just happened a few days ago. I'm going to have a few questions but, first, let's hear this call. Again, big content warning ahead of this.

Brandon

Yeah, if I can actually add on your content warning - me being a 911 dispatcher and also with the podcast that I have - I play really, really hard calls. Also, in the 25 years I've been there, I've heard the worst of the worst, and this call made me sit up straight. This is probably one of the worst calls I've ever taken. It's really bad. So yes, the content warning. If you cannot take things like that, skip ahead or turn it off. It's really bad.

Scott

Fast forward about 3.5 minutes if you do not want to hear this

Automated Voice

Friday, May 30th, 2025. 1332 and 30 seconds.

Brandon

911. What's the address of your emergency?

Caller

(Screaming in background)

Brandon

Hello?

Caller

(Screaming in background)

Brandon

Hello?

Caller

(Screaming in background)

Brandon

Hello? What's the address there?

Caller

(Screaming in background)

Brandon

What's the address there?

Caller

(Screaming in background)

Brandon

Tell me what the address is there

Caller

(Sobbing loudly in background)

Brandon

Ma'am. Try to tell me what the address is there.

Caller

(Sobbing loudly in background)

Brandon

Ma'am, I want to send you some help, but you have to tell me where you're at.

Caller

(Sobbing loudly in background, with repeated thudding sound)

Brandon

Hello?

Caller

(Moaning in anguish)

Brandon

Hello.

Caller

(Sobbing & moaning in anguish)

Brandon

Hello.

Caller

(Screaming inaudibly in background)

Brandon

Hello.

Caller

(Sobbing)

Scott

I have heard a lot of traumatic audio and I've seen things on the internet but, wow, hearing this woman in panic and distress, it's incredibly difficult. How is it that you can't identify where she was calling from?

Brandon

There are a lot of problems with this one. A lot of people don't know this. If you have an old cell phone, one that you haven't traded in or maybe it's just an old relic or something like that, every phone can still call 911 even if there's no service still with it. So, if it's completely disconnected, you can't get on the internet, you can't make a regular phone call, you can still call 911. That's what happened with this one. We call them 911 phones because when you normally see a caller ID, you'll see an area code first, and then it'll be followed by the actual phone number. These disconnected phones don't have a phone number associated with them anymore. So they generated kind of a random phone number when it calls 911, but it always has the prefix, the area code, as 911. And so as soon as you see 911 in the area code, you know that it's a disconnected cell phone. Most of the time when we have something like this, it's someone who's given a child a phone to play with, and they've mistakenly dialed 911, something like that. But being that this is a phone that could be literally any age old, it could be an old Nokia phone or a flip phone or anything like that, location services might not be that good either. Also, you can't call them back because there's no phone number associated with it. With this particular call, the entire time that this is going on, I'm asking for the address.

I'm constantly trying to update the first few times— we have a system called Phase Two, and that's the triangulation system that I was talking about with older phones like that. It's not always accurate. When we first got Phase Two, the first time that we had it, they told us that it's slightly accurate, it's going to get you in the area, but just kind of think of it in the realm of maybe the size of a couple football fields. That's how accurate the GPS is. Each time that this is happening, you can refresh this every 30 seconds or so. Every time I was doing that, it was moving— I've listened to it a couple times, but I've not really gotten too deep into listening to it with, like, really good speakers or anything. This is just through my headset at work. I couldn't tell. I don't think that she was in a car. I'm reasonably sure of that. So I think that the GPS, how it was moving around, I just think that its accuracy was just not that good.

Like I said, we couldn't call the person back. There's no way to trace the number. It's no longer associated with an account. The closest we could get was— it might have once been a Google number or it could have been recycled. It could have been an old phone number that was recycled as a Google number. We did find that phone number out and then we tried calling it, and it went straight to a kind of a generic voicemail that had no way to leave anything at all. So there was no way to contact this person, no way to find out an accurate address. The police went out to the area, just kind of a generalized area to see if they could see or hear anything, and nothing was able to be found. So we, at this point, really, kind of have exhausted all measures that we can to try to find out who this person is.

One of the main reasons that I gave this call to Scott to play is that we're hoping that someone somewhere in that area may have heard something or making— I know it's extreme as it is and as difficult as it is. Maybe they know from the screams who that voice is. And if you do, I'm imploring you, please call our local police. If you just know the person out of state, call someone, we need to find this person. We don't know if they're safe, if they had something happening to them. We need ears. We need more ears right now and knowledge. So, really, a lot of times, I don't really get too invested in a call just because this woman seemed like she's genuinely one of the worst distressed that I've ever heard while I've been there and we can't find her. It kind of sat with me and I want to find this woman. I want to make sure that she gets some sort of help.

Scott

How small of an area have you narrowed it down to where this call probably came from?

Brandon

If the accuracy is anywhere close to what it could be, I'm thinking probably in the realm of 4-5 square blocks, because that's how much this moved. And, to give you an idea, this was in what we call the Wedgewood Houston area of Nashville. It's just north of Wedgewood, just east of I65. So anywhere in that area. I'm not sure that's even accurate just because of how much it was jumping around. It could be completely on the other side of town because, typically, unless you're in a car and actually moving somewhere, the GPS doesn't change that much for it to change as much as it did on this call. I think that the accuracy is probably actually really, really low.

Scott

Well, hopefully, someone has some ideas. As you and I both know, the chances are pretty slim.

Brandon

Yeah. Like I said, at least at this point, I've got some other people looking into it as well. I'm hoping that there's something that can be done past this but, at the moment, we have exhausted all means. There's nothing else that we can do, as far as my knowledge anyway. So that's why I wanted to play this and, I'll end up playing it on my show too, more than likely.

Scott

And if there is more information or this call gets resolved or it gets figured out, we'll have you back on and give an update on that.

Brandon

Yeah. Yeah. I really want to have a good update. I'd really like that.

Scott

We're all hoping for that. If someone's hearing this and they're maybe considering just a whole career change, they want to be a 911 dispatcher, what should they do first if they're thinking about that as a career?

Brandon

The first thing is, make sure that you have all the basic requirements. Like I said before, usually, you have something that says you have to have a high school diploma or GED, some sort of equivalency, something like that. You also, most of the time, have to have no criminal record. If it's a small misdemeanor - and it again depends on the agency - sometimes, they won't even

allow that. If you have a felony, it's definitely a no go. A lot of times, things like DUIs— but you'll have to contact whatever agency you're thinking of. If you have any type of convictions like that. But past that, really think about it. Is this something that you think you can do? Listening to that last call, could you be on the phone with somebody like that? Do you think you'll be able to take that and go home and leave it at work? And also, are you good with general things on the computers like typing? Can you multitask? Say, if you have 4 or 5 kids, can you pay attention to all of them at the same time? Just little things like that.

But if you think you can do all those, I would try to look locally first to wherever you're at, to see if your agency is hiring because you probably have at least some level of knowledge of the street system there, which is a huge thing. And if you want to find someplace else, if you're thinking about moving, check with that location. Most agencies are probably hiring.

Scott

Sometimes, with police agencies, they will have, like, citizen ride-alongs. So you can kind of shadow a cop for a shift just to kind of get a feel for it. Do you do anything? Is there anything like that with dispatching?

Brandon

Again, it kind of depends on the agency. With mine, we've done that in the past. We've not done so much of it here recently. We don't really have that many requests to do it either. In that case, I'd say, again, call the non-emergency number and ask if there's some sort of an administration line or some sort of a public information officer, someone like that. They can say if they do that in the first place. And if so, if they can schedule it for you.

Scott

You have a podcast called Music City 911. Tell us about that.

Brandon

So I started that probably— I guess it was in December of 2019. Me and another guy that I used to work with, that was the guy that actually took the call from the fire incident that I was talking about a little while ago. He was actually dispatcher for 40 years before he retired. We decided just to make a show like that and we started off. It was the two of us. The way that kind of worked at first was we didn't really have a direction for the show. He actually had some prior actual radio experience and I think he was thinking, "We'll do something like that." I mean, it was fun. It was kind of informative. We played some calls, we talked about what happened. We talked about our own incident that we had in the past. And then, any kind of police type news, anything like that, we'd talk about that. I'm sure you can probably relate to this, after a few episodes, he really started to see how much work goes into a podcast and I think that he thought it was going to be more in the radio realm where you sit down for an hour and then you're done.

Scott

Everybody else does all the work.

Brandon

Yeah, exactly. And I'm like, "No, this is it." I mean, when you're spending 7, 8, 10 hours after doing edits and things like that, or researching for the next episode or anything, once you add in the research for the upcoming episode, that can push it to 20, 30, 40 hours sometimes. He was retired from 911 and I think that he wanted to just be retired, period. So, he stepped aside from the show and I had a few other people that I work with or other guests on the show. After a

while, it just kind of moved more towards me being a solo podcaster. I've sort of, to a degree, taken on a true crime element to it, which, I mean, that's a lot of times what it is, like your typical true crime show. I'll make an admission here, I rarely listen to any other true crime shows. I'll do it like if I have a friend or someone like— I've got a lot of friends in the true crime genre - like, really good friends. I actually met you through something similar. So, I'll listen to shows on occasion but, between my work that I do actually at dispatch and then coming home and doing hours and hours worth of work on my own podcast, I have true crime all the time. So I'm not always wanting to listen to true crime.

Scott

Yeah. Your spare time, you need to be watching kitten videos or something, right?

Brandon

Yeah. I like kitten videos. They're usually pretty funny.

(Laughter)

Brandon

But yeah, in the show, I play real 911 calls. I'll talk about the instance. Depending on what it is, I might talk about how the dispatcher did. But I don't just play 911 calls. I play police body-worn camera, and I'll talk about pursuits. Not everything is crime related on there either. There was an incident, I don't know, about three or four years ago - I guess it was now - where someone got attacked by a tiger. I'll talk about stuff like that.

Scott

And I remember that you could hear that guy screaming, right?

Brandon

Yeah, exactly.

Scott

And he stuck his hand in the cage or something.

Brandon

Yeah, I don't like saying this about 911 callers or victims or anything like that, but he was not a smart guy. You don't do stuff like that. This kind of bleeds over with one of the other things that I've talked about on my show before. Actually, I think that you're in a kind of northern piece of Florida, somewhere around there, or?

Scott

I'm in the Tampa Bay area. It's central Florida on the Gulf Coast.

Brandon

Okay. Yeah. I can't remember exactly where this was. I'm getting this mixed up. It might have been up, maybe, in the Okeechobee area. There was a guy who was doing alligator tours. Again, I can't recall. It could have been further south in the Everglades. But regardless, he was doing alligator tours and we found this kind of a secret he has been doing for a while, that he would like to feed the alligators and they'd like to sometimes crawl up on the airboats. He'd give them a little piece of chicken or something like that. Sometimes, he says, "Sometimes you got to coax." So he goes down and he starts tapping the water and, at that point, an alligator would come up and the people that are on the tour, they'd be able to see it.

Well, he did that one time and without warning, the alligator jumped up and bit his arm off. Same type of thing I guess with the guy with the whole tiger incident. My very lengthy and very in-depth advice I gave my listeners at this point for the alligator thing is don't fuck with alligators. Plain and simple. Just don't do that. I'll leave that for lions and tigers and bears, all those. Just leave the wild animals alone. They're wild for a reason.

Scott

Yes. Leave them alone, yeah. I remember that was on your show and didn't somebody make a T-shirt or something with that phrase on it or something?

Brandon

Yeah, I think, initially, it's been so long, I think someone either made, like, a photo or maybe a T-shirt or something like that. Then, afterwards, I was like, "Okay, I'll run with this." I actually made some of my own product line doing that and I've got a couple little other spinoff things that are just phrases for my shows. But, in general, that's probably one of the most popular - don't fuck with alligators.

Scott

It's kind of a fun thing because it's a little obscure, but if you're out wearing a shirt like that and somebody sees it and they know what it means now, oh wow. We both listen to the same podcast and there's a connection there. It's kind of cool.

Brandon

Oh yeah, absolutely.

Scott

Brandon, I appreciate you coming on. I've got one final question. I'm just looking for a rough number here, but how many times has someone heard your podcast and said, "Brandon, your voice is amazing"?

Brandon

I'd say maybe three or four.

Scott

Oh, come on. I know. It's way more than that.

Brandon

Yeah. I don't know. I kind of wish I would've kept count over the years. But, believe it or not, before this, I never thought I had a good voice. It took a lot of people telling me that I have a good voice. When I'm editing back— I'm kind of nearing the point where I'm not doing this anymore but, every once in a while, I'll catch myself doing this where almost everybody says, "Oh, I hate hearing myself on a recording" or whatever like that. And I'm still, to a degree, the same way. I've gotten past it a little bit but, yeah, I still don't like the way my voice sounds sometimes.

Scott

Yeah. Well, it sounds great, so don't change anything. Okay?

Brandon

Well, thank you.

Scott

All right, Brandon, I appreciate you coming on. What an interesting job you have and I appreciate you sharing it with us.

Brandon

Oh, yeah, you all are welcome.

Scott

I've known Brandon for years and the way he comes across in our conversation, and on his podcast, is exactly how he is. Very down to earth, just a great guy. I would definitely count on him in an emergency.

You can see pictures of Brandon, and get a full transcript of this episode, at WhatWasThatLike.com/221.

Do you consider yourself to be kind of weird? I know, it's kind of an odd question. But in our private Facebook group, that's what we do – we ask odd questions. And the question for this week is – what makes you weird? I'm weird in some ways, but I'm also kind of proud to be a little weird. Come on over and tell us what it is that puts YOU in the "weird" category. WhatWasThatLike.com/facebook

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And now, how about if we hear a Listener Story? I always put the Listener Story at the end of each episode. These are just 5-10 minute stories, and each one is sent in by a listener. If you want to tell your story, just record it on your phone and email it to me at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

This week's story needs a content warning – it's from a mom whose son tried to commit suicide.

Stay safe, and we'll see you next time.

(Listener Story)

I am recording this to tell you the story about when my son tried to commit suicide by hanging himself. This was a few years ago during the whole COVID pandemic, but everything started before that already. He was always a very emotional child, went through an identity crisis like a lot of young teenagers do. At first, he was dealing with depression and anxiety. Then he believed that he was gay, which was not a problem for us at all. We never gave him any kind of indication that we were upset or anything in that nature. From there, it went to him believing he may be non-binary also, no problem at all. It ended up turning back to him being heterosexual. So he went through this entire, "I'm trying to find myself." With that, his emotional health just went down the hill. He was very depressed. He was very anxious. He was very emotional at all times. My then husband, his father could not deal with that very well. He's a very typical military guy that believes, "Okay, if something's tough, you just suck it up and you keep going." This type of attitude just did not work for our son. So there was a lot of back and forth and them two getting into arguments and me trying to kind of be the buffer in between.

My ex-husband traveled a lot, so he was on and off when he was at home. The arguments would be worse because he just couldn't understand our son's need for compassion. So our son was in therapy at the time, it was virtual therapy. I remember, one day, after therapy, his therapist called me and she said, "We have to lock up all of the medication in the house because he has expressed that he has a wish of committing suicide and he had a plan by taking a lot of medication that we had in the house." So I immediately found a lock, locked everything up. My husband at the time got very upset. He thought it was just him trying to act out. So we got into a big fight, which then caused our son to be really upset because he felt like he was the reason for us fighting and it was just this big blow up.

I ended up calling my therapist as well who encouraged me to take him to Sheppard Pratt right away, which is a psychiatric clinic here in the Baltimore area. So I did take him there. He spent a few days in the clinic, was eventually released, and then it was all right for, I want to say, about six months, maybe a little bit less. That first round had happened during summer breaks, so he didn't miss any school then. But fast forward to the big incident, school had started again. My ex-husband was traveling and I had an argument with our son about something that I don't even remember. It was nothing big. It was, I don't know, maybe about cleaning his room or something.

He went upstairs and he was in his room and, all of a sudden, I heard a really loud bang and then just silence. At first, I was waiting and I kind of listened to hear if I heard anything else, but I heard nothing. So, I went upstairs and opened his door and he was sitting motionless on his bed. I asked him what he just did, if he was throwing something or what just happened, and he wouldn't respond to me. Then, I asked again, "Please tell me what just happened." And he wouldn't respond to me. Then, I looked past him and I saw that his curtain rod was ripped out of the wall. My first thought was, "Did you do this?" Thinking that he was angry and had pulled it out of the wall. At that moment, it hit me because I saw a string that he had pulled out of his sweater, out of his hoodie, wrapped around that curtain rod. That's when I realized he had tried to hang himself. Thank God, that rod came out of the wall rather than him actually succeeding in hanging himself on this curtain rod.

I started shaking. I didn't even know what to do at that moment. I hugged him. I talked to him and he begged me not to take him back to the clinic and I really didn't know what to do. My husband or ex-husband was in Italy at the time. I was by myself and I just heard him begging me not to take him back to the hospital. So I told him we would sleep on it. I called every resource that I could reach and everybody told me that I'm going to have to take him back to the clinic. This was just too serious. So I did take him back to the clinic the next morning, basically had to drag him to the car. He was kicking and screaming, and I felt like the worst mom. But I knew he needed that help and I was just not equipped to help him alone.

When we got to the hospital, the doctor that was in the office to admit people - he was actually the same one that admitted him the first time - he did not want to admit him, so I had to beg him to admit our son because I was afraid to take him back home. He just said that he doesn't want kids to think that anytime they act out, they get to go to the hospital. So here I was sitting with a child that already didn't want to come, being told by the doctor, "Why are you trying to admit him?" Thankfully, I stood my ground and I had him admitted feeling absolutely horrible because now my son saw that I was the one making him stay. But this time he stayed, I want to say about 10 days this time around. In that time, they were able to adjust his medication, put him on a new medication, and since then, thank goodness he has been doing much better. It was the right medication that I put him on. We have him on the right dosage now.

He is like a different child. This is definitely something I will never forget. And anytime he is in any way even just the slightest bit depressed or upset, I still worry to this day that something could happen. I think that will be in me for the rest of my days, but I'm just so thankful that I stood my ground and had him admitted to the hospital and that he was willing to work on himself and that we made it through it and are doing so much better now. For anybody else going through this, I can only recommend looking for help. Even if the first resource says they can't help you or it just doesn't feel right, keep reaching out to others. Reach out to other parents that you may know that went through something similar. Listen to your gut.