



MENTAL HEALTH ADVOCATE

Tim Sears Overcomes Struggles to Build Stronger Families

BY JENN WOOLSON

Tim Sears grew up in a family of police officers, and like most cops' kids, he thought that would be his career path too. But when a neighbor who was a fire fighter invited him to the station, his career path took a left turn. At age 16, that same neighbor gave him his own bunker gear and a pair of used bunker boots—no small feat, since Sears wears a size 16 shoe. He graduated from volunteer fire fighter in high school, community college and while at Washington State University to his first full-time position with the Kirkland Fire Department (Local 2545) in 1992, where he stayed for 30 years.

It was a long and successful career, Sears says, but in 2018 “the wheels came off the bus.” He woke up in the firehouse panicked and in a cold sweat. “I didn’t know what was going on, and it got progressively worse,” he says. “I started having nightmares. Things were just not going well.”

They were going so “not well” that it started affecting his life at home, where he was so edgy and not himself that Lauri, his wife of 28 years, told him he needed to retire. Sears, of course, denied it. But after a few years of struggle, in 2021, he turned in his resignation.

He says, “I felt like everything was going 1,000 miles an hour in my mind, and I couldn’t calm it down, and I wasn’t sleeping. But I thought if I retired, maybe everything would go back to normal.” Spoiler alert: It didn’t.

During that time, Sears got a call from an organization called Stronger Families. The non-profit program was founded in 1988 to assist military personnel with communication, relationships and conflict resolution skills, and they wanted to expand its reach to first responders. And they wanted someone familiar with that world, someone like Sears, to lead the charge.

Although he was reluctant at first because he felt “broken” mentally, physically and spiritually, Sears eventually agreed to join Stronger Families. One of his first official acts was attending the 1st Responders Conference in Jacksonville, Fla., as a representative of the organization. Listening to attendees present about their experience with PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), Sears says he started bawling. At that same conference, he heard Matt Quackenbush, an expert in first responder PTSD, speak, and had the same reaction. The light bulb went on. “I think I have that,” he said to himself.

He wasn’t yet ready to admit his findings to anyone else, though, even Lauri. But he knew it was PTSD because everything Quackenbush was describing—the sweats, the dreams, the nightmares, the suicidal thoughts—were exactly what Sears was experiencing. So, what next?

“Well, I’m not going to call anybody,” he says. “Fire fighters don’t call people for help.” But shortly thereafter, when a fight with his wife came to a head, he spilled it all to her and she took him to a doctor. As Sears told his story, the doctor started crying. A military vet himself who suffers from PTSD, he knew the suffering Sears was enduring. Together, Tim and Lauri started learning all they could about the disorder, and he attended an intense six-week nighttime program with Deer Hollow treatment center as well as a week-long program in California with Mighty Oaks.

Is he cured? No. Is he better? Sometimes. Sears knows once you have PTSD, it doesn’t ever go away. You just have to learn how to manage it. But he now knows that most PTSD symptoms are normal reactions to abnormal experiences. And that knowledge helps.

That’s exactly what he wants to help other first responders do. Like him, he knows that many fire fighters, EMS, and law enforcement officers who are struggling with PTSD and other behavioral health concerns have a hard time admitting it and asking for help. Fortunately, he sees that issue and overall mental health awareness in the first responder world improving “one retirement at a time.”

Sears says the newer generations of fire fighters are much better educated about mental health, with many departments bringing in their own psychiatrists and mental health programming. With a lot of younger fire fighters moving into administration roles post-COVID, he believes this is the perfect time to bring mental wellness in as a norm.

Stronger Families

When first responders are struggling at home, they can’t be their best at work. Stronger Families exists to bring life-changing relationship skills to military, veteran, and first responder families so they can be strong and thrive.

The organization’s vision is for healthy marriages and stronger families in every first responder community: We believe our heroes in our communities sacrifice greatly. We are committed to helping protect what they value most—their family. A life of service comes with unique stressors that can greatly impact those who serve emotionally, mentally and relationally.

Stronger Families offers workshops, seminars and online resources to strengthen the families and departments of those who serve. That includes First Responder OXYGEN weekend retreats designed for police, fire, EMS and dispatcher couples to receive life-changing relationship skills, so they can be strong and thrive at home and at work. The retreat includes tools and opportunities for couples to connect with their partners, learn to better navigate their relationships and meet with counselors if they want. Stronger Families also offers Wellness Block Training for departments with 90-minute sessions to build skills in communication, conflict resolution, understanding differences, leading from strengths and navigating transitions.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE PROGRAM AT strongerfamilies.com.