

# TWO MORE CHAINS



Fall 2017 ▲ Vol. 7 Issue 3 ▲ Produced and distributed quarterly by the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

## Leaving the Fireline

By Travis Dotson

**W**hat is this issue of *Two More Chains* about? What is its theme? Is it: “*This could happen to you?*” Is it: “*What happens when your job is taken away?*” Is it: Wally Ochoa is an incredible human being and we should all endeavor to emulate his wisdom and resilience? The answer, of course, is yes. Our theme in this issue is all of these important pieces—and more.

We originally set out to focus on “Identity” in the wildland fire service. We wanted to talk specifically about those of us who go “all in.” You know what we mean, when you start to “be the job.” When “firefighter” is *who you are* rather than *what you do*. What are the benefits and consequences of that view of the world? And how is it that we promote or dissuade that scenario? What’s more, is that really what we want from our workforce?

What happens when you are “all in” and suddenly get the boot, whether through mandatory retirement, freak accident, family demands, or any other “involuntary separation”? That was the route we set out on. But we couldn’t do it. It’s too big. We quickly realized that we don’t have all the answers.

Next, as we poked around for a “One of Our Own” candidate for this Fall Issue of *Two More Chains* we heard more and more about Wally Ochoa. Wally’s story soon became our overall focus—it’s just that powerful. Wally’s story doesn’t touch on all those topics that we originally set out to tackle, but it touches on a few of them. And Wally’s story provides you with a good backdrop for related discussion questions and reflection. Most importantly, it’s an opportunity to get to know an amazing human who is not only “one of us” but one of those people who defines what we strive to be.

Wally’s story begins on page 4. As you read it, let it take you where it takes you. On the way, ask yourself hard questions about who *you* are, what *you* do, what risks *you* take—and what those risks are worth.



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### PODCAST: Identity Eggs & The Fire Basket

If you’re all in, how will you get out?



<https://wildfirelessons.podbean.com/e/the-importance-of-identity/>

### BLOG: Self-Extrication

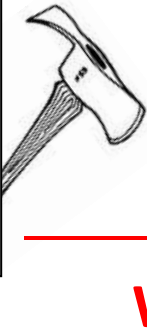
When we “choose” to leave the fireline.



<https://wildfirelessons.wordpress.com/2017/12/07/self-extrication>

This Podcast episode and Blog Post are both part of this *Two More Chains*. Each of these pieces are essential elements of our multifaceted look at this complex issue.

**Please Read the Blog Post.**  
**Please Listen to the Podcast.**



# GROUND TRUTHS

By Travis Dotson  
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## What Makes You Matter?

**F**or this piece, I set out to do my garden variety axe grinding session. It's usually pretty easy for me to put a quick edge on my axe de jour and proceed to swing with unveiled malice in the general direction of the unsuspecting target: tradition, ignorance, hypocrisy, well-intentioned managers and IMTs . . . I've lashed out at them all.

For this particular word slinging session, I had planned to swing at those buried in the firefighter persona—those whose identity has grown roots around their belt buckle.

I loaded up to spit venom and fury at the rather regular phenomenon of intentionally entangling what we do with who we are—wrapping identity around our personalized version of "wildland firefighter."

Got a crew logo tattoo? Check your work email on the weekend? Spend time at the station on your precious two days off? Struggling with forced retirement? I planned to smash you with senseless sarcasm and aimless animosity. I set out to attack the over-attached because it's an easy target and it's socially acceptable to do so. It's also a windmill I personally know the inner workings of.

Is this target related to identity? Yes . . . *and*. There is always *and*. Identity *and* belonging. Belonging *and* worthiness. Worthiness *and* community. All of that *and* more. Always more. No clean lines. Everything is connected.

### Our Addiction is Understandable

I set out to attack. But I couldn't. All because of that *and*. Those tattoos and weekend emails are but a symptom.

What if we momentarily viewed wildland fire and all that comes with it as a drug?

Comradery, adrenalin, travel, excitement, belonging, meaning, service, self-worth, money, health insurance, security . . . These are all "good" things. When asked what keeps us coming back, these are the reasons we cite. The "addiction" is understandable.

We blend all these good things together into a soothing concoction that can keep us high for decades. Some of us



have a very healthy relationship with this drug. Kind of like those freaks who have only ONE cup of coffee each morning. Plenty of people put in a season or two on the fireline and walk away without hesitation. Some folks get hooked for a while and then move on to healthier lives or other drugs.

Some of us are completely strung out.

I know, this is a rough comparison and it might make a few folks roll their eyes or shake their heads. It might even make a few folks mad. Nobody wants to listen to their dealer preach about the dangers of

addiction. If you don't like what I'm saying you're probably just more sophisticated than me. You're in possession of a much higher intellect and capable of understanding fire culture in a more nuanced fashion. Or, you could be a straight-up junkie.

Obviously, we all sit somewhere on the complex spectrum of awareness related to how much we need or don't need this work to satisfy certain aspects of our persona. Not all of us are conscious of the level to which this vocation feeds our

self-worth. Some of us just like getting paid to ride four-wheelers and cut down trees.

But to a lot of us, it's more than that. How much more?

Is your relationship with fire "healthy"? Be careful of the temptation to count yourself in the "healthy" category. Nobody wants to be an addict, abuser, or victim—and we are all very capable of lying to ourselves.

### Dirt Bag Intimacy

On the surface, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with wrapping one's identity around fire. It's actually pretty hard *not* to get what you do tangled-up with who you are, especially if it involves the intensity and bonding that's so abundant on the fire ground. Shared hardship is high value stuff. It will leave a mark on your heart. All that good stuff makes us feel like we matter.

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**What if we momentarily viewed wildland fire and all that comes with it as a drug?**

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Let me remind you that when I talk about addiction here, I'm not talking about the actual performance of the job. We don't suffer withdrawal symptoms from pulling hose or chopping roots. I'm talking about the indescribable magic we pretend not to notice in each other's eyes. I'm talking about the stuff we try so hard to express at 3 a.m. while hovering around the coals of the chaos, whether that chaos was a burn show gone bad or the season-ending crew party (pretty much the same thing).

I'm talking about the dirt bag intimacy that can never be verbalized in clear text because our language is limited to action-filled anecdotes of previous communal suffer-sessions. This is how we say: "You matter to me; I matter to you."

This is community. This is tribe. This is belonging. Humans are biologically programmed to thrive using this evolutionary advantage:

*"We have a strong instinct to belong to small groups defined by clear purpose and understanding—"tribes." This tribal connection has been largely lost in modern society, but regaining it may be the key to our psychological survival."*

["Tribe" – Sebastian Junger](#)

That's a dumb thing to throw rocks at.

### **Is the Fireline the Only Place You Matter?**

So how to proceed?

**1. Acknowledgement.** What so many of us are "addicted" to is not the work or even the "identity." It's the connection and community essential to human health. This complicates the inevitable separation, whether it's the Golden Boot at 57, all that leads to and follows a night in jail, a tree to the head mid-career, the pursuit of a sustainable relationship, the birth of a child, or the complicated weight of fireline trauma. Any of these, or the myriad of other circumstances leading to an unanticipated or unwanted extraction from the fireline, tend to set us outside the precious circle of belonging.

- *What part do you play in keeping that circle open?*
- *How prepared are you for your inevitable separation?*

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***What so many of us are "addicted" to is not the work or even the "identity." It's the connection and community essential to human health.***

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**2. Diversify.** I have heard it's important not to keep all your eggs in one basket. I think that means don't keep all of your life savings under the mattress (in case one of your old hotshot buddies stops by on the way to Vegas—we all know that dude). Are all your belonging/worthiness/community eggs in one basket? Is the fireline the only place you matter?

- *Be intentional about investing in other communities. Some people go to church, some people volunteer, some people chase big animals or big waves with people that value their contribution. What you build may never be as intensely satisfying as the heyday of the crew. But as one wise old hotshot supt. is fond of saying: "Something is better than nothing."*

### **Get to Know Yourself**

This business of identity, belonging, and community is very serious. It has everything to do with what makes us feel like we matter. Mattering matters. There are many paths to mattering. From your path, you can no doubt see someone traveling a different path. Don't throw rocks at them.

We are community, let's be a supportive one. Let's not shoot our wounded. If you see someone struggling with an impending separation, whether retirement or the noble pursuit of a saner life schedule, be kind. Acknowledge the enormity of the exit and what goes with it.

When you see someone going all in, lining up the tattoo appointment or repeated day-off station visits, honor what those actions signify. Maybe make a note to broach the topic of diversifying one's identity investment in the name of resilience. After all, none of us know when our

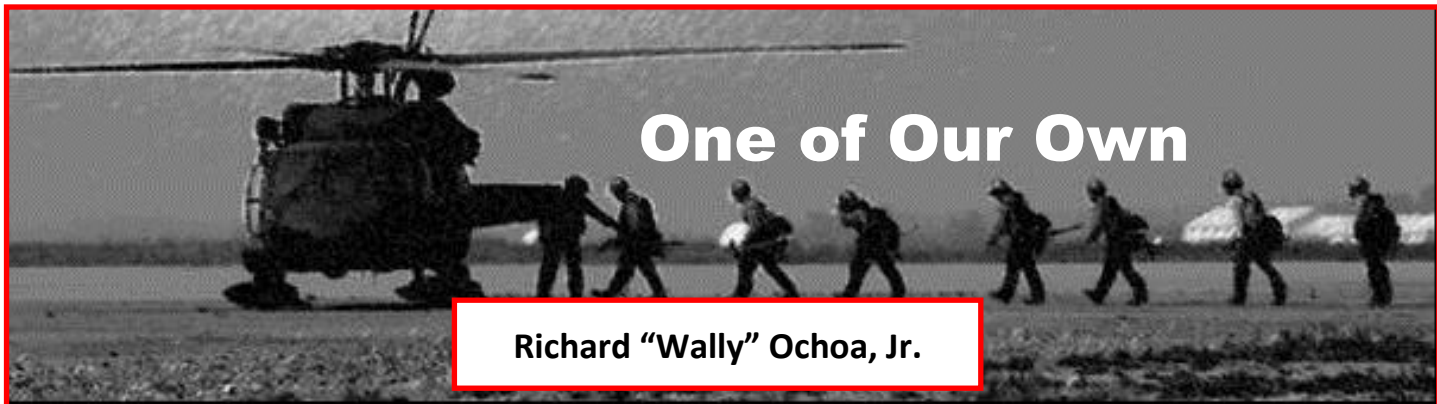
name will show up on the emergency demob list.

Take a hard look at your relationship with being a firefighter. How much of your identity have you invested? Get to know yourself, dig in there and find out what makes you tic. What matters to you? What makes you matter? Where else can you contribute and commune?

To find out you have to dig deep. But that's not a problem. You have plenty of experience digging.

Get dirty, Tool-Swingers.





**Richard "Wally" Ochoa, Jr.**

## ***Navigating a New Reality***

**By Bre` Orcasitas and Paul Keller**

It was the Winema Interagency Hotshot Crew's first shift on the Freezeout Ridge Fire in the Hells Canyon Wilderness in Idaho during September of 2014.

The crew's longtime Lead Sawyer, Richard "Wally" Ochoa, Jr., was hiking with his swamper through a creek drainage to get to their work site. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, the crew's Superintendent sees a 45-foot tall lodgepole pine start to fall. The only thing he has time to do is shout out: "Heads Up Wall!"

Wally spins toward the tree, tucks his head and raises his arms.

That almost 14-inch DBH snag smashes into Wally's arms and hardhat like a hammer hitting a nail, slamming him into the ground and knocking him unconscious. His injuries are extensive, severe, and life threatening.

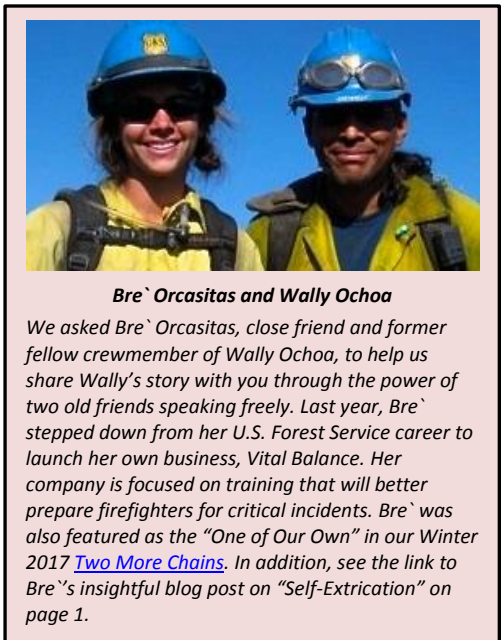
"I just remember heading up the hill," Wally says. "I remember looking back at my swamper to tell him to grab the Dolmar. That's all I remember."

This is the story of what happens next. It is a story of how a single moment on the fireline can change everything. It is a story that, while it is painful to talk about, for your benefit, Wally Ochoa wants to share with you.

You should also know that the reason why this is a difficult subject for Wally isn't due to ego or pride, but because the last thing he wants to do is burden others with how he feels. As we told Wally, and we're sure you'll agree, it is an honor—not a burden—to hear and to know the lessons of Wally's insightful and important story.



**While this is a story that is painful for Wally to talk about, for your benefit, Wally wants to share it with you.**



***Bre` Orcasitas and Wally Ochoa***

*We asked Bre` Orcasitas, close friend and former fellow crewmember of Wally Ochoa, to help us share Wally's story with you through the power of two old friends speaking freely. Last year, Bre` stepped down from her U.S. Forest Service career to launch her own business, Vital Balance. Her company is focused on training that will better prepare firefighters for critical incidents. Bre` was also featured as the "One of Our Own" in our Winter 2017 [Two More Chains](#). In addition, see the link to Bre`'s insightful blog post on "Self-Extraction" on page 1.*

### **Against All Odds**

When Wally's life-altering injury happened to him, he had been a member of the Winema Hotshots, based on the Fremont-Winema National Forest in Oregon, for 19 years. He had been the crew's Lead Sawyer for 18 of those 19 years. One of his personal goals was to complete his 20th season with the crew, and maybe get some bonus years after that.

Anyone who has spent even one season on a hotshot crew can recognize that 18 years as Lead Sawyer is a monumental accomplishment. What's more, being placed as Wally's swamper for the season was a point of pride because trying to keep up with him was universally known to be the toughest job on the crew.

Wally—known for his tremendous work ethic, promoting and excelling in teamwork, and his positive efforts to help motivate and mentor others—had beaten the odds before.

Like in 2002, the day before the crew was to start for the fire season, Wally ended up in the hospital combating a brain aneurism—a bulging, weak area in the wall of an artery that supplies blood to Wally's brain.

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The crew was informed that Wally may not survive—that Wally could die. And if he survived, he wouldn't ever be able to work on fires again.

Wally survived. And, despite all odds, by the end of that same fire season, this super resilient firefighter was back where he belonged, *with the crew*.

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***“I call all the firefighters out there—whether they’re contractors, hotshots, engines, or type 2 crews—we’re all family out there doing a job.”***

**Wally Ochoa**

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At first, Wally was quieter and more reserved than he had been before his aneurism. Then, after a few days, Wally was asked to fell his first tree. As soon as it hit the ground the crew heard Wally holler out.

*“Woo-Hooo! I’m back, baby!”*

From that point forward, this firefighter was back in business. Although, now, after the brain aneurism, Wally needed to wear glasses. And there was the bigger struggle of trying to find words that seemed to regularly escape him. And, even worse was the ongoing frustration of reading. Here’s how Wally describes its degree of difficulty for him: “It almost takes an act of Congress just to read the newspaper!”

#### **It’s More Than a Job**

Wally explains that one of the most important things in his life was the camaraderie that he shared with his hotshot crew brothers and sisters out on the line.

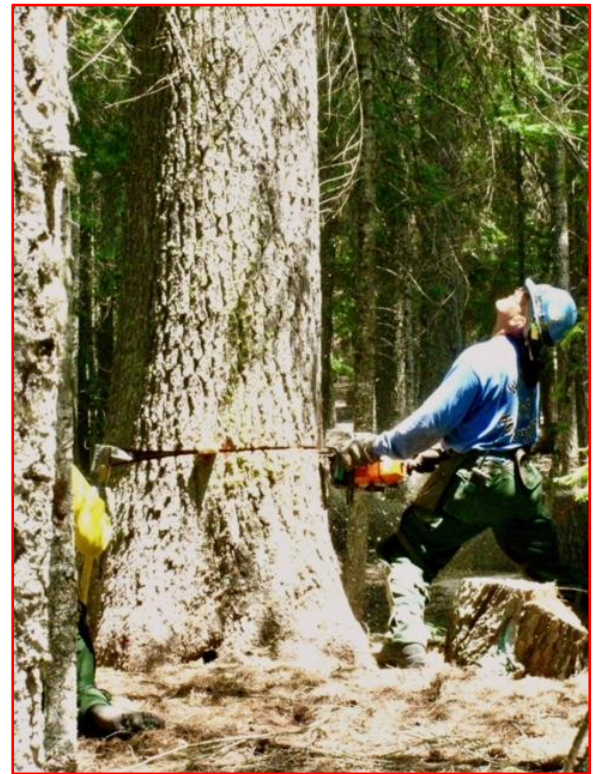
“Being a hotshot makes you proud of who you are and what you do,” Wally says.

“During that time with Winema, I loved it. That’s why I kept going back, because of the integrity and the ability, and because we were just one big family. I always looked at it like that. Those are all my brothers and sisters out there and we have to watch out for each other. We’re not there to impress. We’re not there to make ourselves look good. We’re just there to do our job.” Wally didn’t go unnoticed among the greater fire community. He was always out there, cresting the ridgelines, saw on his shoulder, year after year. He became the guy that other hotshot sawyers emulated, the guy they wanted to be when they “grew up.”

Wally continues, “It’s more than just a job, it’s an adventure. You see so much country that you’d never otherwise see in your life. I call all the firefighters out there—whether they’re contractors, hotshots, engines, or type 2 crews—we’re all family out there doing a job.”



**Wally with his son, Alex Plascencia, who was a fellow crewmember with his dad on the Winema Hotshot Crew. Wally’s daughter, Lorena Ochoa, who is an engine crewmember, has likewise followed her father’s firefighting footsteps.**



**Wally had been the Winema IHC’s Lead Sawyer for 18 years and had been on the crew for 19 years. Prior to the 2014 Freezeout Ridge Fire, one of Wally’s personal goals was to complete his 20th season with the crew, and maybe get some bonus years after that.**

“I have my family, my wife and my son and daughters, and my grandbabies. They are all so important to my life. But I also have another family, my fire family. That’s what it was all about.”

In addition, Wally has the unique circumstance of having a son (Alex Plascencia who was a fellow crewmember on Winema IHC) and a daughter (Lorena Ochoa, an engine crewmember) who have followed their father in his firefighting footsteps. Wally explains “my wife had a lot to handle having her husband, her son, and one of our daughters fighting fire. It was hard for her.”

That life-threatening incident on the 2014 Freezeout Ridge Fire saddled Wally with a ton of injuries, including severe head, brain, and facial trauma, two broken arms, as well as serious neck and shoulder damage, all of which required several surgeries.

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**Because of Wally's severe injuries from the tree strike on the Freezeout Ridge Fire, he has lost his ability to taste. "I used to love regular coffee," he says. "Now, I'll have to do a triple shot so I can taste it."**

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"After the accident, I had it in my mind that I was going to go back to work," Wally, always the strong optimist, recalls. [Click here to see the FLA that focuses on Wally's injury incident: [Freezeout Ridge Fire Facilitated Learning Analysis.](#)] "At that time the doctor had me taking fourteen different prescriptions. Then once they lessened my prescriptions down to seven I began to notice that my right arm was really hurting. My lifting ability was going away. Just doing easy stuff was really hard."

Then came even more bad news. A CT scan revealed that Wally had also torn his rotator cuff during the accident but he wasn't able to feel it due to the excessive medications. That's when Wally started to realize that he probably wouldn't be able to go out with the crew the following season (2015). But that didn't stop him from thinking—maybe—he could return in 2016.

"It got really hard for me," Wally remembers, "because I started going into the reality that I'm probably done."

#### **A Long List of Physical Injuries**

Today, a legacy of physical injuries still plague Wally.

He says that he likes to tell people that he would gladly trade the upper portion of his body. "My bottom part is really OK," Wally says. "I still try to hike, I work out as best I can, I use my elliptical machine. But the pain will set in and it's jarring to my neck and shoulders. Then I start to hurt and ache."

The Freezeout Ridge Fire incident also yanked out Wally's thumb. "They had to push it back in and put pins in it to keep it in place. Today I try to do pushups. But I can't do them on my hands like I used to. Because of what happened, I now have to hold them in a fist."

Back when the accident happened, to help reconstruct his face, metal plates were inserted. Now, whenever Wally is out in the cold, the metal in his face promotes severe headaches. On top of all that, the trouble Wally had with reading and finding his words (from the aneurism) have only been made worse by the significant head trauma from Wally's Freezeout Ridge Fire injuries, along with the additional hardship of now having

short-term memory problems.

Wally admits that he overdoes it around the house from time to time and will end up hurting himself. His wife tells him: "You need to start slowing yourself down." To which he replies: "How are you going to slow down a hotshot?" Wally likes to joke that "you can take a hotshot off the fireline, but you can't take the hotshot out the person."

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### ***With Wally's mountain of physical injuries came the mental and emotional frustrations associated with being a physically active person trapped in a broken body.***

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Wally also lost his ability to taste and smell. "It's probably 50-50," he says. "There are times that I can taste things, and there are times I can't. I used to love regular coffee. Now, I'll have to do a triple shot just so I can taste it."

Beyond his inability to taste or smell, the medications have adversely affected his eating habits. "I used to love eating breakfast. Breakfast was the highlight of my day. But, like today, I didn't even bother to eat breakfast because I don't feel hungry and I can't taste it anyway."

#### **Reality Sets In**

With Wally's mountain of physical injuries came the mental and emotional frustrations associated with being a physically active person trapped in a broken body.

Once Wally realized that due to his physical injuries he probably wouldn't be returning to his crew, he confides that depression started to set in. Wally said that both his wife and his doctor saw the symptoms of this depression.

At that time, he had been sent to an intensive rehabilitation facility in the Portland area—250 miles from home—to focus on his brain trauma and physical therapy simultaneously. "I was there for three months doing therapy, including speech and memory therapy," Wally says. He remembers how a brain specialist, who had a clear understanding of what life on the hotshot crew entailed—16-hour shifts, tons of OT, etc. etc.—told him that he "was done."

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“When she told me that, it was like, I don’t know, it’s hard to explain,” Wally says. He points out that for the two years after his accident, right up until the spring of 2016, he fully intended to beat the odds and rejoin his crew. “So when she told me that I couldn’t go back, it was like a huge slap in the face.” Wally explains how the inability to go back to work takes away your sense of purpose. “So that’s when my depression really set in. It got really hard for me.”

Starting in 2015, Wally was seeing a trauma counselor once a month. “I thought I was doing OK. So I stopped going to him until February of this year.” Wally confides that his wife saw that he was falling back into his depression.

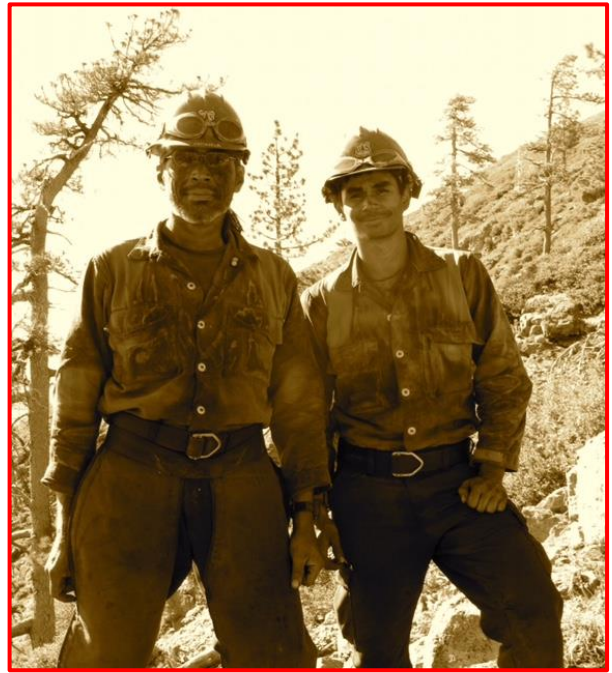
“I would go into my bedroom and just sit there by myself,” Wally says. “It’s really bad when your family, your son and daughters, or your grandbabies come in to see you and you don’t even want to see them. You just want to get away. You just want to go to your room.”

Wally explains that the rehab from his extensive injuries is an ongoing process.

“I still have my ups and downs in trying to get better. I still have to go up and see my counselor to talk and release some of my frustration. There’s a lot of times when I want to talk to people here, but I don’t want to take up their time.”

#### **Standing at the Edge of Darkness**

In the midst of dealing with his own depression regarding his physical injuries, chronic pain, the inability to get back on the fireline, and the stress of dealing with OWCP, Wally says he felt hesitant to share his frustrations with others because he “didn’t want to be a burden” on people.



Wally with his son Alex on a fire.

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**For the two years after his accident, right up until the spring of 2016, Wally fully intended to beat the odds and rejoin his crew. “So when she (his brain specialist) told me that I couldn’t go back, it was like a huge slap in the face,” Wally says. “That’s when my depression really set in. It got really hard for me.”**

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At the same time, he would hear about other fellow firefighters who had taken their lives by suicide.

“People would call me and let me know that, ‘Hey, Wally, did you hear about so and so, he committed suicide.’ I’ve heard that a few times now.”

Wally says he can understand how someone might get to that hopeless reality.

“It was really frustrating and really hard for me at that time. I got to the point where I was saying to myself that I wish that tree just took me out. Then at least my family is taken care of. I even started thinking: ‘Man, my pickup is paid for. It won’t take much just to go out on a road where it’s high and just drive off; have an accident.’”



Wally explains that it was his two families who saved him. “I think the one thing that really helped me from doing anything or even thinking really hard about it (suicide) was that I had my grandbabies and I have my wife and I have my son and my daughters. And—as much as the thought was there—I wouldn’t want to do that to them.”

Wally’s other family helped him prevail during those dark times, too.

“And also having my fire brothers and sisters out there. I knew I couldn’t do that to them, either,” Wally assures. “So the next best thing, just go to therapy and start working it out.”

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### Giving Back to the Greater Good

Wally recalls his major positive turning point last spring.

“My son Alex told me, ‘Dad, this all happened for a reason.’ He said I was blessed that I didn’t move on ‘upstairs’. He explained how the reason why I survived was so I could now go out and help teach others.”

That’s when the light bulb came on. Wally realized that it was time to take his post-accident reality “to another level.”

Wally recalls how he felt when he first went to give a talk at the Tupper Guard Station on the Umatilla National Forest.

“I had written everything down on paper about what I was going to say,” Wally remembers. “But once I got up there and starting talking, I just started letting go. I started talking like I’m doing now. I never even looked at my written notes because everything was coming from my heart. Everything about how it (the accident) affected my life. In doing so, I realized how important it is to let it all out.”

Next, Wally says, “after I was done and I was driving home I started thinking: ‘Gosh, I feel really good. It’s time to let go. It’s time to move on’.”

“So that’s how I started going out and talking and volunteering my time to help ensure that other people can be safe. It helps me to feel a sense of purpose again. I realized that time goes on and I’m going to be a part of that time and I’m going to start helping other firefighters.”

Wally continues, “I really like giving these talks, I really do. I think it’s important to let others know about what happened to me as a tool—so that it doesn’t happen to anybody else.”

“Wally is now showing all of the younger folks how to continue being you,” points out Travis Dotson, Analyst with Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center. “How to continue being a hotshot even when circumstances change.”

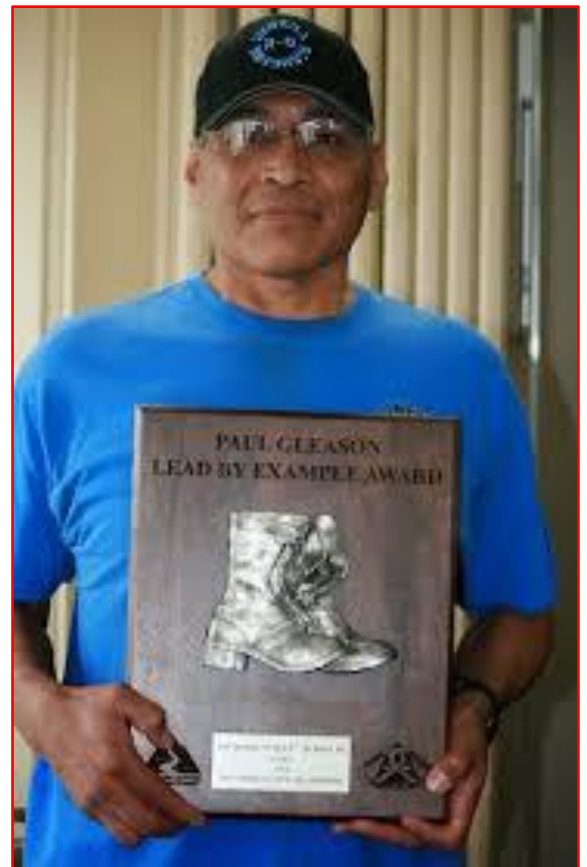
### The Paul Gleason Award

During the first day of Winema Hotshot Crew training in 2015, Wally’s son asked him to come up to the station. Wally’s wife was going, too. “I asked him what was going on and he said I was going to be given something.”

Wally says he didn’t think that much about it, until he saw all the people who were there. “And then they brought in cameras and videos,” he recalls, “and that’s when I saw it, the Paul Gleason Award, and I was like, ‘Oh my goodness’.”

Dave Lilly, Winema IHC’s Superintendent, presented Wally with the Paul Gleason Award plaque. “He handed it to me and, for me at that time, it was very heavy. My shoulders were still out of it. I had just had the braces taken off my arms. So it was very hard standing there holding that plaque while the pictures were being taken.”

Even so, Wally lightened the official proceedings with some humor.



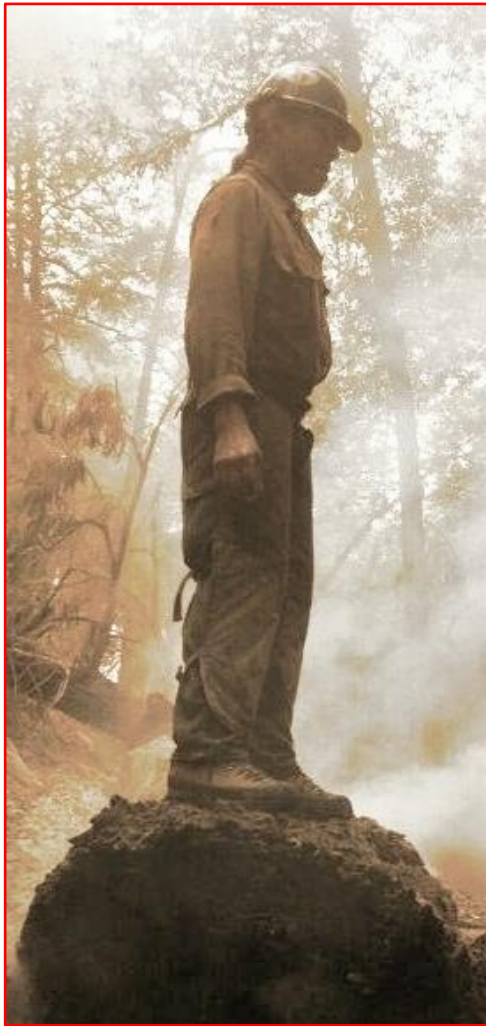
“I said this is a heck of a deal, you got to get your head smashed just to get the Paul Gleason Award.” He was quickly reassured that the paperwork for this award was in the works long before his injury occurred.

An excerpt from Wally’s Paul Gleason Award citation:

*“You are being recognized for your attention to duty, your dedication to the principles of integrity, and the respect that you give to all those you meet. Regardless of authority or title, you have tirelessly mentored others and built quality teams. As a leader by choice, you have earned the trust and respect of those around you. Your tireless efforts to motivate others, demonstrate a quality work ethic, and maintain a positive attitude in spite of life-altering situations have been an inspiration to previous firefighters and a legacy for leaders of the future to follow.”*

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### **Fire Was a Huge Part of My Life**

When you ask Wally what he misses most about being on the hotshot crew, he answers: “Just being out on the fire. Going out on fires with the crew and spiking out. I love spiking out, drinking cowboy coffee, waking up in the morning with the crew.”

Of course, Wally has plenty of fire memories. Like the time when Lance Honda, the Superintendent of the Prineville Interagency Hotshot Crew, swamped for him. “We were working near Prineville and I had ran two of my swamper out. So I was out there cutting and swamping by myself when Lance came up and said: *‘I’ll swamp you’* and I thought, *‘Oh, man, I better not mess up!’*”

Or the time Wally dropped and lost his Fitbit during a slow mop-up day on a fire in Washington. The Fitbit was grey in color—exactly like the ash ground in which they were working. A bunch of folks starting gridding for it with absolutely no luck. Then Wally realized he could see the Fitbit’s activity on his phone—and it was moving!

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**Wally recalls how during Christmas last year his son invited him to come in and watch the Winema Hotshot Crew video. “About part way through it,” Wally admits, “I had to get up and walk out—because I miss that. I really do. That was my life.”**

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“The signal was strong,” Wally remembers. “We knew that this is where the Fitbit was, but we still couldn’t find it.” Next thing they know, a squirrel runs up with the Fitbit in its mouth and drops it right in front of a firefighter who had sat down to eat his lunch. “I think that squirrel must have taken the Fitbit up into the tree above us while we were all

searching around for it,” Wally chuckles. “Only on a fire.”

Today, even though Wally might not be able to go out and make new fireline memories, he’s got 19 years’ worth to reminisce about.

“But now the past two years,” he reminds us, “I’m here on the computer. I always look and see where the crew is.”

He recalls how during Christmas last year his son invited him to come in and watch the Winema Hotshot Crew video. “About part way through it,” Wally admits, “I had to get up and walk out—because I miss that. I really do. That was my life.”

### **Support of Two Families**

After three years Wally was finally approved for receiving his Social Security disability benefits thanks to the tireless efforts of his family members. They have fought and struggled through the complex forms and paperwork to ensure that Wally receives the appropriate benefits following his accident. And even still, Wally explains, “I have to go in and see the doctor once a month so I can continue to get my workman’s comp. And the vocational rehab people have come in and done a lot of questioning.”

It’s all part of Wally’s new reality, which he faces with the same strength and stamina that he exhibited out on the fireline.

And he continues to have the support of his two families. His family-family and his fire-family.

When asked if Wally feels like the fire family has kept him in their circle he replies, “A fellow crewmember recently told me that in their hearts I will always be part of the crew. That made me feel good to hear that. The crew has told me that anytime I want to come in, anytime I want to talk, to just stop by. That’s what family is—that’s what it’s all about. And that’s what makes me feel so good.”

# Your **FEEDBACK**

*This page features unsolicited input from our readers. The independent content on this page does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Two More Chains staff.*



## **Effectively Communicating with Particular Audiences**

I just read the Summer Issue of *Two More Chains* while taking a quick break from an assignment for my health and social behavior class. This assignment was based on how to communicate with particular audiences effectively to not only get them to change their attitudes but to change their health behaviors. I also had to look at many of the personal, interpersonal, and societal barriers to changing health behaviors.

I could not have read a more relevant article, Travis Dotson's "Fruit We Can Reach – and the Tricky Transition from Bad Ass to Dumb Ass" during my break.

I want to thank you for your perspective and writing on these issues and topics in fire. I really appreciated the approach taken, especially with regards to using language relevant to your target audience.

**Molly West**  
Firefighter/Graduate Student

## **An Opportunity for Productive Conversations**

I want to say thanks to Travis Dotson for providing (again—and, as usual) an excellent opportunity to have some open and very productive conversations based around his latest couple of articles in *Two More Chains*.

It's always a pleasure to read Travis' work—matter of fact, honest, and hilariously well written.

**Kevin Chargois**, Captain, Engine 338  
Front County Ranger District  
San Bernardino National Forest

[Please Provide Us with Your Input  
on this Issue of \*Two More Chains\*  
\[bit.ly/2mcfeedback\]\(https://bit.ly/2mcfeedback\)](#)

## **Same Issues in City Fire Department**

I just wrapped up reading the summer issue of *Two More Chains* and wanted to share how informing and entertaining it is.

After two seasons with the Pike Hotshots in 1993 and 1994, I moved over to the City of Colorado Springs Fire Department. I have fond memories of my time on the Pike, and Travis Dotson's article about risk taking, health, and "low hanging fruit" resonates for me.

We confront the same issues in our city department. Must go with being part of a bureaucracy, working w/gung-ho folks and strong cultures!

Please keep up the terrific work and pushing for change.

**Jess C. Kruckeberg**, Battalion Chief  
City of Colorado Springs Fire Department

## **Mindfulness Meditation**

In reference to Travis Dotson's "Ground Truths" column in the [Summer Issue](#) of *Two More Chains* about the bias of experience—right on.

Another antidote was raised by Ted Putnam in a WFSTAR RT-130 several years ago: mindfulness meditation. Predictably, perhaps, not many firefighters took him up on it. I was one who did, and a goal of mindfulness is to combat the very attachments that Dotson writes about.

Mindfulness can be enhanced/achieved without meditation practice, but in my experience it's the most direct route. Over the past five years the American society in general has become more accepting of, and even enthusiastic about, mindfulness meditation.

Perhaps it's time for Putnam to give it another push—perhaps in your pages.

**Peter Leschak**, Natural Resources Forestry Fire Technician,  
Suppression and Training  
Minnesota Department of Natural Resources – Division of Forestry  
Side Lake, Minnesota

## **More Likely to Die from Heart Attacks**

I am in the Wildland Firefighter Apprentice Program. I enjoy your Lessons Learned Center's website, including *Two More Chains*, and all your informational articles, lessons learned, etc., very much. You provide a great resource.

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There is a topic that I would like to see more information on. That's the fact that, while we love staying "fit," it may be making us more likely to die from heart attacks.

We all know that wildland firefighters have an extremely high rate of heart attacks. (For example, last week we had someone go down during the Pack Test.) But have in-depth studies been done as to WHY?

There are some obvious reasons, including stress and a physically demanding job. In addition, we now have studies showing that people who participate in high-impact cardio (think marathon runners, cross-fitters, etc.) have a high rate of heart attacks due to scarring of the heart muscle.

While we preach exercise and being "fire fit," we are also damaging our hearts when we take it too far. Additionally, most of us don't go in and get our hearts specifically tested before we start being firefighters. There are many heart-related issues due to defects and genetics that can make a person more likely to die from sudden cardiac arrest. Even so, we don't demand that people entering this career get scanned and tested for these conditions.

Firefighters die every year during the Pack Test, during PT, or out in the field. We don't focus on how this can be prevented. We eat a ton of meat, many firefighters chew or smoke, drink heavily during their off-time, don't get tested for cardiovascular diseases, and stress themselves physically—even when not responding to an incident.

All of these activities and conditions factor into heart health. We need to, as a community, be more cognizant of what we are actually doing to our bodies. We need to start changing the way we look at our health. We need to start embracing a culture of health and prevention, as well as on-the-job safety.

**Amanda Bonesteel**, Forestry Technician  
Wildland Firefighter Apprentice Program  
Huron-Manistee National Forest  
Baldwin, Michigan

*[Editor's Note: We thanked Amanda for her insights on this significant subject and sent her a link to the [2014 Summer Issue of Two More Chains "Do You PT?"](#) that addresses many of her points. We also forwarded her this YouTube "Firefighter Health, Fitness and Welfare" video playlist: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL990CA6A05EDD44E6>. Thank you for continuing the conversation, Amanda!]*

### Getting Fire Science Research to the Boots-on-the-Ground

In the "One of Our Own" feature in our *Two More Chains Summer Issue* we presented Ted Adams, Assistant Supervisor on the Hells Canyon Wildland Fire Module, Payette National Forest. This article, entitled "Bridging the Gap Between Research and the Field," focused on whether or not fire science research is being applied to decision-making on the fire line. After reading the article, Coleen Haskell, Communications Director for the Joint Fire Science Program (JFSP), contacted us. She asked if she could continue the conversation that we started with Ted. We said, please do. We are featuring Coleen's follow-up piece for you in a special Blog Post:

<https://wildfirelessons.wordpress.com/2017/12/08/continuing-the-conversation-getting-fire-science-research-to-the-boots-on-the-ground/>

*Two More Chains*, published quarterly by the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center, is dedicated to sharing information with wildland firefighters. For story tips, questions, or comments, please contact: Paul Keller, [prkeller@fs.fed.us](mailto:prkeller@fs.fed.us), 503-622-4861.

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Thank You !