SERVING THOSE WHO SERVE

By Molly Nance

Just days after 9/11, Kirby Saunders (ELP2501) and two friends drove from Virginia to New York City, determined to help however they could. Saunders was 19, a volunteer firefighter and emergency medical technician. Within hours of arriving, he was at Ground Zero, clearing debris, fighting lingering fires, and working alongside first responders from across the country.

On the third day, exhausted after hours on the pile, Saunders stepped away for a short break. Sitting alone on a curb along Vesey Street with a banana and a bottle of water, two Air Force pararescuemen (PJs) approached and asked if they could sit beside him.

Saunders had admired Air Force PJs since he was 14, reading about their rescue missions and hoping one day to become one himself. Meeting them amid the devastation of Ground Zero felt extremely significant.

"I just remember that being a pivotal, life-changing moment," Saunders said. "I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be."

More than two decades later, that sense of purpose continues to shape Saunders' work as director of Orange County Emergency Services in North Carolina. It also shaped what he brought home from the Center for Homeland Defense and Security's Executive Leaders Program (ELP).

There was one presentation in particular that grabbed his attention.

The presenter was Josh Goldberg, co-author of *Struggle Well* and co-founder of the Boulder Crest Foundation's Struggle Well program. He introduced to the classroom a different way of thinking about mental health and wellness. Drawing on research about post-traumatic growth, Goldberg argued that struggle is inevitable, especially in emergency services. Rather than trying to avoid it, people can learn to move through it with purpose.

"I had never heard of Struggle Well until ELP," Saunders said. "But it resonated with me because we'd been talking about wellness for years."

Throughout his career, Saunders said conversations around first responder wellness focused on preventing trauma or helping people once they reached a crisis. Struggle Well offered another perspective.



KIRBY SAUNDERS
Director of Emergency Services, Orange County, North Carolina
ELP2501

"The struggle is unavoidable," Saunders said. "How do we prepare people to struggle well?"

The idea matched what he had observed over nearly three decades in emergency services. Traumatic calls are only one source of stress: there are other factors—financial pressures, divorce, caring for aging parents, and even everyday life—which often weigh just as heavily on first responders.

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What resonated most with Saunders was the Struggle Well program's emphasis on purpose.

"The program helps us take that rearview look and put it in the front windshield," he said. "Every time I've been through struggle in my life, I've learned something from it. I've grown from it. How do we look at future struggles with optimism and a growth mindset?"

One of Struggle Well's guiding principles is, "In order to serve well, we must first be well." Saunders was determined to carry out that mission to his jurisdiction.

After returning from ELP, Saunders contacted the Boulder Crest Foundation about bringing Struggle Well to Orange County. The foundation connected him with North Carolina's regional director, who helped Saunders organize the county's first five-day Struggle Well program.

Saunders invited participants from



Kirby Saunders at Ground Zero on Sept 13, 2001, second from left.

law enforcement, fire, EMS, 9-1-1 communications and the North Carolina Responder Assistance Initiative; he did this to create a cross-disciplinary class of 12 first responders from across the region. Afterwards, the participants repeatedly described the experience as "life-changing."

Orange County is now planning another session, while working to train local guides and integrate the program into employee onboarding.

As of August August 28, 2026, the North Carolina 911 Board unanimously approved Struggle Well as an authorized course for expenditure of 911 fund. This will make the training more accessible to agencies across North Carolina.

For Saunders, the effort reflects another lesson reinforced during ELP.

"The homeland security mission requires a regional approach," he said. "None of us can do this alone."

The experience has reshaped how he thinks about leadership, and investing in people.

"I think we have to grow leaders," he said. "If we expect people to solve increasingly complex problems, we have to invest in developing them. Because if they're not well, asking them to do more is just going to compound the challenge."

Today, whether preparing first responders, developing future leaders, or helping neighboring communities strengthen their own agencies, Saunders still measures success by that same calling he recognized more than two decades ago at Ground Zero: this is where he is meant to be. ■