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FBI Agent Speaks to Liberty Students

April 01, 2009 ¦ Teresa Dunham

Starting out as a New York City school principal isn't a shabby proving ground for a future FBI agent.

At least that was the case for retired FBI special agent Ed Sulzbach, who patrolled the school hallways before making his way to the streets as a trained FBI agent in 1972. He worked undercover with a notorious biker gang, followed foreign spies, performed psychological profiling and was awarded one of the FBI's first medals of valor for saving a colleague's life when a drug investigation turned into a shooting spree in the mid-1970s.

Liberty University's Criminal Justice Club and the Helms School of Government welcomed Sulzbach as a guest speaker in the Arthur S. DeMoss Learning Center on Thursday, Feb. 26. The speech drew 108 students.

With 24 years of FBI experience under his belt, Sulzbach told them stories that were heroic and heartbreaking, mixed with some laughter.

"It's a unique kind of family," Sulzbach said of the FBI.

As he phrased it, most work environments have a "jerk quotient" — but the FBI's quotient was very low. He recalled many wonderful memories with the Bureau, but he said being a psychological profiler was the most painful part of his experience.

"Some of those crime scenes live with me to these days. You become haunted by those ghosts,"

he said.

Yet, he was comforted by the fact that he could help bring criminals who performed horrible acts such as pedophilia, rape and murder to justice. To do that, he had to seem like he sympathized with them.

“You become a bit of a thespian,” he said.

Nowadays, his hair is white; he leans on a cane because of a stroke, and he doesn’t know what the duties of FBI agents working abroad in Iraq and Afghanistan fully entail. He still watches some FBI and crime shows on television — and the one he thinks is most accurate is “Criminal Minds” – but his own stories are more insightful than any television drama. Here are a few of his personal anecdotes.

The Medal of Valor

Sulzbach will never forget the events that led to his medal of valor.

Gearing up to arrest a career criminal, three FBI agents occupied the criminal’s empty apartment. Next door, two FBI agents — including Sulzbach — and a detective waited as backups. For nearly 12 hours, they lingered until their lookouts told them that they had company. They could hear the criminal’s footsteps, the sound of his key unlocking the apartment door and the agents yelling for him to freeze.

“He immediately drew his pistol and started shooting at them,” said Sulzbach, who moved in as a backup along with the other men next door.

Sulzbach and his partner responded with 12-gauge shotguns. They hit the criminal three times, killing him. Sulzbach then looked around to make sure his partner was OK — and he was fine, but the detective had fled next door. When Sulzbach found him, he had shoulder and leg wounds that were pumping out blood.

“I shouted for them to get a medic here, and I ran into the room and was able to pull my belt off and put a tourniquet on his upper leg … and then apply pressure to a point on his neck that cut off the flow to the shoulder wound to keep him from bleeding out until the medics got there,” he said. “And they did get there, and they were able to save his life.” Hours later, someone noticed that Sulzbach was limping, and his pants leg was covered with blood. He’d been hit, too, but it wasn’t as serious.

Not long ago, he found out that his wife didn’t tell their children he’d been shot. His youngest girl, now a special education teacher, recently told him that she remembered him being hurt.

“At that time she’d heard from her siblings that I’d hurt myself playing volleyball [at the state police headquarters where I used to work out],” he said. “And she said she felt very sorry for me because she knew I loved to play volleyball with the state troopers, and Mommy would never let [me] do it again.”

Crime Scenes

Sulzbach often had to keep his emotions in check when he approached a crime scene, but one scene still haunts him today. “A little girl [was brutalized and killed] … and left nude in a field — 12 years old. … The medical examiner opened the hand, and I remember vividly watching the little fingers unfold like petals on a flower, and there in the palm was chewing gum,” he said.

Fortunately, Sulzbach said, the FBI was able to find the man who committed the crime.

In the late 1980s, Sulzbach became so traumatized by what he’d seen that he went to the FBI Academy in Quantico to teach for a while. When his ghosts subsided, he went back to the streets as a profiler.

The Unexpected Friend

“Amazingly, things come out of assignments that you don’t expect,” Sulzbach said.

For him, one of the most unexpected things was a friendship. He was on an applicant case at the time — checking on the background of someone applying to work for the FBI — in a part of Richmond, Va., that was considered dangerous.

“I knocked on this door,” he said, banging his cane three times for emphasis. “And this little old lady answered the door and looked at me, and she said, ‘What are you doing here child? ... This is a very dangerous neighborhood!’”

“I’m an FBI agent, and I have a gun,” he told her.

“Get in this house!” she said.

He sat down as the elderly lady made him a cup of coffee.

“She was delightful. We hit it off, and I had everything that I needed to know,” he said. “And then, every time I was in that neighborhood, if I had some extra time, I’d stop by and see how she was doing. She’d make coffee, and we’d sit in the kitchen again for a few minutes.”

This went on for several years, until one day he went to her house and knocked on the door — and a young man answered. The young man said, “You’re Mama’s FBI man, aren’t you? She always talked about you. You were her personal FBI agent.” She’d passed away a couple weeks earlier.

Sulzbach reflected, “How many happy moments I’d had with that lady, and how much happiness I guess I brought to her … I was her personal FBI guy, and it all came out of an applicant case.”

Liberty University’s Criminal Justice Club and the Helms School of Government would like to thank Ed Sulzbach for his time and his wonderful stories.