

AN INTERVIEW WITH SGT. PAUL VELEZ

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REMEMBERING 1 OCTOBER

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH CENTER AT UNLV LIBRARIES

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS & ARCHIVE

This is Barbara Tabach and Paul Velez. How do you spell your last name, Paul?

V-E-L-E-Z.

Today is the 22nd of February. It's hard to believe. The month is sliding away.

It's flying. Time's flying.

We're doing this interview for the Remembering 1 October project. Explain to me a little bit about who you are and why I've asked you to be here.

I am a police officer here for UNLV in Police Services. I am here because I was called in that night to assist at the Thomas and Mack Center when they opened it up for evacuees out of the crime scene and they were putting people in the Thomas and Mack, and so I was called in to assist with that.

What were the sequence of events that occurred for you October first? Were you sound asleep in bed when the call came?

You know what? Murphy's law being what it is, I was off that day and I decided that night I was going to go to bed early because I was going to get a really good night's sleep. When my phone rang I was sound asleep. My boss was calling me to let me know what was going on. I picked up the phone, still half asleep, and I hear the two words that you never want to hear as a police officer at the university or at the university period, no matter what position you are here. I heard, "Active shooter." I immediately jumped out of bed and started getting dressed because I didn't even know the scenario. I just heard those two words and I just knew I was going to work.

In the meantime, getting dressed, getting into my car, I'm talking to my boss and he filled me in on what was going on. They were calling us in because of the proximity of the incident to the campus. I got here approximately half an hour later, grabbed some of my gear out of my locker, and headed over to the Thomas and Mack and just started assisting with that.

Who is your boss?

Lieutenant Stan Berry.

Was he on the scene already?

Yes, he got there right before I did, a couple of minutes before. He was already at the Thomas and Mack when I got there.

Can you describe for me what you saw when you arrived?

It was just people everywhere showing up to the Thomas and Mack because Las Vegas Metro had asked us if we could open it up so they could start moving—I think it was twelve to fifteen thousand people at that concert. They had asked us to open up the Thomas and Mack so they can put people in there while they tended to them and started getting either medical or started doing witness interviews or anything like that. They were bringing people. Some people were just walking up. Some people were coming off of buses. I just remember the looks on their faces. People were in shock. You could tell they were having a hard time processing what was going on, confusion, fear. They went from having a great time with friends and family to running for their lives. Some of them were injured. We didn't have any gunshot victims, but in the scramble to get away, people got trampled, people fell, whatever. Some people had jumped the fence, so they were cut up from the fence. We were just trying to see who needed medical and just trying to get them into a safe place to try to make them feel, *hey, you're safe now; we're good*. We had UNLV police and we had Metro police staged right at the entrance to show them, *hey, the police are here; you're going to be okay*.

You were like a beacon of safety.

Yes. We were just trying to pull them in, let them know they were going to be safe, get them food, get them water, get them medical attention. I know Psychological Services was notified

and they came out and they were starting to tend to people, talk to them, just see if they needed anything on that end.

Psychological Services, is that part of your department?

No. That's part of the Student Life. They work out of the Wellness Center, the CAPS Center they call it. Basically they are there to tend to students that need help. We all know some students tend to get overwhelmed by college life at times, especially during finals, so they tend to the students in that regard, but they really stepped up. They came in and just started tending to people that night.

How do you coordinate all that effort as a first responder?

Lots of phone calls and lots of contacts that you always have. We try to preplan for these things. We have plans in place, a contact list, who to get notified immediately. As soon as our chief got notified, we started making the phone calls, and that's how my boss contacted me. We start calling other heads of departments, so to speak, and they have their own notification system.

The phone tree, it still works.

Yes, exactly. Yes, it still works. Everybody with all this technology, basically you start making phone calls and text messages sometimes. But basically that's it; it's still the phone tree.

That was like an aha moment for me. I just remember phone trees when I was growing up; that that was part of (parents).

It's all preplanned. This one is going to notify this, this one is going to notify these people, and then it just branches out.

Did you feel like you all were organized and prepared through your training for this?

Yes, it worked pretty well. The initial impact of the situation, you process that as quickly as possible, and then your training and your experience kicks in and you start doing what you have

been instructed to do over the years. Yes, it worked pretty well.

What were you hearing from the people who were getting off—I assume these were regular RTC buses that were dropping people off and cars, people walking and all the different ways they got there.

The one thing that always stands out to me is people were looking for other people. They got separated. In that mad scramble to get away, a crowd just starts pouring out and you get separated. It was just people trying to find loved ones or friends or something like that. I remember a gentleman coming up to us and he had gotten separated from his wife and he was trying to contact her. But everybody is on their cell phone and I guess the system got overwhelmed with calls and he couldn't get through. I said, "Let's see what we can do. Just right now, come in." We brought him in and got him settled in.

People, they're not ready for things like that in life. You get up in the morning and you're having your coffee and who thinks, how am I going to get in touch with my wife when we have to run for our lives and we get separated? People were confused and trying to process it, and I just remember seeing him in that state. Then a little while later, he finally got in touch with his wife.

On his phone?

On his phone. He came up to me and he's like, "I have to get to my wife. She called." In that state of confusion, still he's like, "Well, am I allowed to leave?" And I'm like, "Of course you're allowed to leave." I took him and we brought him out. What was great that night was taxicabs and Uber and Lyft drivers just started showing up to the Thomas and Mack. We had staged them in an area. So I took him down and I said, "Just jump in a car and go. Don't worry about anything else." Metro was trying to get witness statements or trying to see, did anybody see anything? We

were trying to get some information while we were tending to them. It's still a crime and we're trying to get information. But I was like, "Don't worry, just go and get to your wife."

It's one of those things you see him in one emotional state and then another emotional state; you see that swing. It was a good swing, thank God. It was things like that; you see people processing emotions and grief and fear, not knowing what was going on and separated from loved ones. *Where are they? Are they okay?* It's visions like that that will stick with me, seeing those people.

I remember another girl. I saw her coming in and she had a skirt on. I said to her, "You might want to get that looked at." She said, "What looked at?" She was in such a state of shock that she didn't realize that when she had jumped over the fence, we found out, like the twist tie at the top, when she came down, it caught her in the leg and just cut her right up the back of her thigh.

That's a long gash you're describing right now.

Yes. Basically from the back of her knee up almost the length of the back of her hamstring. She didn't realize it. We all know when you scrape yourself, the pain sometimes. This was a pretty deep gash. We took her over to medical. People were in such states of shock, they didn't even realize they were that injured at times.

Is that part of your training is to realize that if a mass occurrence like this happens that most of the people you're going to be encountering are in shock?

Yes, yes, especially at that point. We were less than an hour out from the shooting, maybe a little bit over an hour, and it was still that panic, that hysteria that nobody had gotten any information yet. Nobody knew if it was one shooter or multiple. *Is this going to be a continuing situation? Is it a terrorist attack?* Everybody's in that state of panic at that time. People were, like I said,

confusion, fear.

How do you make the Thomas and Mack Center seem like a safe sanctuary?

Like I said earlier, we put on that show of force in the front with cars and officers in uniform so they could see us. Hopefully the uniform gave them that sense of security. *The cops are here; we're here to help.* We got them inside. The Thomas and Mack staff and crew were incredible that night. People showed up on their own when they heard what was going on and they heard that the Thomas and Mack was open. They just started immediately trying to get provisions for people, food, water. Then the people of the city stepped up and just started dropping off food and water. Like I said, the crew was great. It had gotten cold by like two in the morning. You know how the temperature is here; it's great in the daytime and as soon as the sun goes down, the temperature drops.

That desert dark cool.

Yes. It was like forty-five degrees and people were dressed for earlier, so people were in tank tops and stuff like that. I'm not sure who it was in the Thomas and Mack, but they had come up with the idea. They have these almost blankets that they put over the basketball court if they're going to put something on top of it. They just started handing them out to people. They were like, "Do us a favor. If people are going to leave, just try to get them back." We were like, "No problem, no problem." It was just that outpouring of people wanting to help. People stepped up to help these people.

Talk about the staging area for the Uber and Lyft and cab drivers. That's something that seems like should be relatively new for a situation because these services weren't available.

Did that happen spontaneously or is that part of the plan?

No, it just happened once the word got out that everybody was getting evacuated. I think we got

up to almost nine hundred people at one point in there. Uber drivers and Lyft drivers, they just started showing up. You make a quick assessment. *Hey, let's put them over here.* That wasn't me. I'm not going to take credit for that. I don't know who made that decision, but that's part of training. As they say, you make a plan and then the plan is useless after a while because you've got to start...

You react to what the possibilities are, I'm sure.

Exactly. The drivers just started showing up. "Hey, does anybody need a ride anywhere?" They just started staging them in a lot over here and we knew they were going to be here and we could just start directing people that way.

How long were you there?

I was there until about five thirty in the morning. I was there over six hours. Then they told me, "Go home, take a shower and come back."

You came back to Thomas and Mack?

Yes, I came right back to work. I was just on campus. Usually I'm not in uniform every day because I'm in the detective unit, but he wanted everybody in uniform and we were just out on campus to give again that show of force, to show the students and the staff, *police are here; we've got things under control now.* I just spent the day, a little time back at the Thomas and Mack, but I spent the rest of the day just walking around campus, just walking around people. "Hey, how is everybody?" Just letting them know we were there.

That's really good because we're talking about classes are going to be on; that's a Monday morning. Did you observe a different attitude or aura about the campus that day?

It was definitely a somber campus. It was relatively quiet because a lot of people just decided they weren't going to come to school that day or work or whatever. I don't blame them. But

definitely as I was walking around, you could tell it wasn't a typical Monday during the semester. We know we have thirty thousand students enrolled there. They love the Monday and Wednesday class, to get it out of the way, so we know Mondays and Tuesdays (sic) are very busy around here. That Monday I just remember it being very, very empty here. The people that did come in and the students, they looked apprehensive. But, again, I got a lot of hellos and friendly smiles as I was walking around the campus, so it made me feel good that people saw me and were happy.

Yes, that impresses I imagine. You've been here in Nevada since 2008.

Yes.

Did you come to work here with the campus police?

No. I just came to live. I actually grew up in New York City, born and raised, and I did twenty years with the New York City Police Department and was eligible for retirement. Taxes were going up in New York and I just decided that I'm young enough to go start somewhere else and start a change, so I decided to leave and I decided to come to Las Vegas. I just came here to live and then I found out about this job. I put in an application and I was lucky enough to be hired.

You were on the New York City Police force for twenty years, you said?

Yes.

What years was that?

Eighty-eight to 2008.

You saw a lot during those years.

Yes. As a matter of fact, in an interview I did after One October—I forget who it was with, what newspaper—they were like, "Is this a career-defining moment for you?" And I looked at him and I said, "No." He was like, "Really? This isn't?" I said, "No, I was at ground zero on 9/11. I was a

first responder on 9/11." When I described about the people and the looks, I was having flashbacks because that's exactly what I saw at 9/11. As a matter of fact, I said, "Unfortunately," when he asked me if it was a career-defining moment because I've been through this already.

I'm sure you thought you had left that behind.

Yes. Actually that was one of...I don't want to say one of the reasons I left, but it made it easier to leave because the city, even now, when I go back to visit down in the Wall Street area or you go down to the memorial down there, you still see the heavy police presence and you still see changes in the city that will be that way. There was pre-9/11 and post-9/11. Not that New York City was ever an innocent town; it's not like we went from Mayberry to... We've always had a heavy police presentation in certain parts of the area, certain venues and stuff like that, but it was decidedly different after 9/11 for a couple of years, so it was one of the things that made it easier to leave.

I'm still relatively new; I'm only here ten years in Vegas, but I'm sure people that have been here for a lot longer will have that feeling now of the pre-October One and post-October One. It's a life changing event. It's a city changing event. You'll see changes down on the Strip security-wise now because of this incident. You'll see policies and procedures in hotels change because of this incident. It's just one of those things that will cause a fundamental change in the way things operate of how it was. It used to be this way; from now on, it's this way.

I can't imagine. September Eleventh still, the magnitude of that is...

Yes. That will never go away in my mind. I still think about it every day.

I'm sure you lost friends.

Friends, yes. I was lucky enough not to lose family. At the time I had an uncle, cousins, and my brother was a New York City firefighter. We all figured out eventually—actually I saw my

brother right before we both went on, amazingly, because we staged out of Staten Island and then we had to go over to Manhattan on the ferry because the bridges were still closed. He went on the ferry right before me, amazingly. Out of all this chaos, I ran into my brother. I had cousins that are police officers. After everything calmed down, we all figured out we were all down there at the same time. We didn't see each other there. It could have been...I got lucky. [Knocking] My family got lucky. We could have lost a lot of people, but I lost a lot of friends. I knew a lot of people down there.

I'm really sorry for that. That's tragic. At the same time, I'm thankful and grateful that people like you that have that experience and calm were here for us. The sequence of these events, especially today as we sat here, a week ago the shooting in Parkland, Florida, the vocalness of the kids there in particular, how does that resonate with you when you see that kind of...?

You have to empathize with these people because they have a feeling that they've been let down. Society or their government has failed them. *How can this keep happening?* It's a complicated solution. You always get those knee jerk reactions; ban all guns or ban all this. It's not that simple. It's not that easy. There's more than one reason why this is happening. It's not simply just the guns or it's not simply just a mindset of society nowadays. I feel like it's a conglomeration of a lot of things. Like I said, you empathize with people's emotions and you empathize with them, but it's not a good idea to make long-lasting decisions while you're in such an emotional state. But you watch the news and you see these parents up there and your heart breaks. The kids are fifteen, sixteen years old; their lives didn't even start yet and now they're gone. I'd feel the same way if it happened to my kids.

You have kids?

Three, my step-kids, but I've known them now for twelve years.

They're your kids, yes.

Yes. The youngest just turned twenty-one yesterday, so I have known her since she's nine years old. I would feel the same way. *What's happening? Why are we not working on a solution?*

Going back, we were just talking about 9/11, and I saw that one father get up. He says,

"Nine-Eleven happened and we did things to make sure it never happened again. Why are we not doing it? Something has got to be done."

Especially through this project, we ask people. We have these conversations or listening to them, there is no easy fix—

No.

—from any perspective of this or any event like that. It's interesting, I went to the active shooter training. It was actually before the shooting in Florida. Sergeant Lutey. She came again yesterday, in fact. I just thought I'd go over and see how many people were in the training and it was a packed room; the attendance went up.

That's what happens now. I also do the training. I'm one of the presenters for active shooter. You see it happened after we had that shooting incident on campus last summer, when that road rage incident spilled on to campus and the shots were fired. After that our requests spiked because it actually happened. We sent out the emergency message; people got the text message on their phone, "Active shooter on campus. Shelter in place. Evacuate here." People started calling up and they were like, "Yes, we got the message. I didn't know what to do after that." A lot of people unfortunately, sometimes it takes that shock for them to start thinking, *we need to know what to do next time*. We started it and ever since then we've had pretty much a steady flow of requests to come in and do the training.

Here we are in the hallway in the library. In the room next door, could there theoretically be a student in there studying carrying a firearm?

Sure.

Would they have the right to do that?

No. State law says that you cannot carry a gun on campus unless you're a police officer. That being said, it's a law, great. If we catch you with a gun, you'll be arrested. Can it stop somebody that wants to bring a gun on campus? No, especially this campus. There's no walls; there's no fences; there's no borders; no moats I'd like. If I could, I'd build a nice high wall with a moat. It's an open campus for anybody to come on. If you want to bring a gun on here... You saw. You went through the training. You saw the video of the kid pulling all the guns out of his pants and his shirt?

Yes, what a demonstration. Twelve guns or something like that?

Yes, twelve guns. He came with just a big baggy shirt and a pair of baggy pants. That's the meaning behind that video to show. You see; our student population is this kid right here in this video. I always point out, what if he had a backpack on? What could he have in there? He pulled twelve guns out of his pants. That could happen here. We try to stay as vigilant as possible. The officers on patrol, we're always looking or at least trying to find. There's thirty thousand students. There's a couple of thousand faculty, staff and everything like that never mind people just coming on. You could have forty thousand people on this campus at one point. Who knows?

Post-October One did you increase the number of trainings for active shooter or increase your awareness of students? Does that impact change in any way?

We've had the requests, of course, for the training. As a police officer you're always trying to remain as vigilant as possible, but after something like that you get a little hypervigilant. It's a

natural human reaction. Now you're looking for certain things; you're looking for that backpack that might be overloaded or maybe a different type of backpack. Usually kids have a certain type of backpack, but now you might see somebody with maybe a longer backpack or a hiking pack. You'll be like, *why does he have that big of a pack on? What does he got in there?* You start looking for different things as opposed to just your normal criminal-type behavior you're looking for that we get here, the laptop thefts and stuff that you're looking for certain things. Now you're looking for other things. You're concentrating on, does he have a rifle in that bag? Like I said, you're looking at things a little bit differently.

I'm curious, as a police officer is your mind ever off duty in observations?

No. No. As a matter of fact, to this day it still drives my wife a little crazy. She's gotten used to it. We're married seven years now. I was the first cop she ever dated and then eventually married. She had to get used to me; when we go to dinner, I need the table in the back against the wall with me facing the door; when we go to the movies, I need to be in the last row closest to the exit. You're constantly thinking of, *I need to be observing everything and get away as quick as possible if I need to.* I'm the guy; everybody says the worst table in the restaurant is next to the door into the kitchen, and I'm like, I'll take it every time because I get to see what everybody's doing and if something happens I can get my family out the back door as quick as possible. It took her a while. She still rolls her eyes at times, but she's...I don't want to say accepted it, but gotten used to it. That's how you are when you're a police officer; you're always, constantly on alert.

I kind of go back to the kid question. It's been interesting through some of these interviews, and maybe because I've got grandchildren of the age where I'm more sensitive to that plus I'm working with students all the time here. How did they react, the younger kids in your

home, to the shooting on the Strip?

Right away they were worried about friends. *Did I have any friends that were there? Are they hurt? Did they get killed?* My youngest goes here, so she was worried when I got home that morning. She was like, "Is the campus okay? Did anything happen on the campus? Why did you have to go to work?" I had to explain to her, "No, nothing happened on campus." I had to tell her what happened because she was worried. She thought that the shooting got down to the campus and maybe people got shot on campus, so she was thinking about friends again.

They were very young at 9/11; the youngest was four when it happened and the oldest was twelve, a boy. They had a vague recollection of 9/11. They were still caught off guard. Like I said, they were young when 9/11 happened, so they don't have that sort of familiarity, for lack of a better term.

Innocence, loss of innocence.

Exactly. They were shocked because they go down to the Strip. We live here now, but we're still very touristy. My wife and I and the kids, we'll just go down to the Strip to hang out at times and walk the Strip and go to the Bellagio when they change the flower display and everything like that. We still love to do that. They were very worried. *What's it going to be like down there? Is it okay?* Like you've put it, they've lost a part of their innocence now. You drive by and everybody is still pointing at the venue. *That's where it happened.* You can just tell, even if somebody doesn't say anything, they're still looking over there. It's affecting them in that way. This is their home now and now this is something that will be fixed in their mind forever. It's one of those events. Going back, it's one of those events that you'll never be able to shake.

Did you feel compelled to go to the site to visit the site or any of the memorials or anything like that?

No. No, to tell you the truth. I did that in New York after 9/11 and I still make the pilgrimage, as I call it, when I go. I went back when they opened the museum and I went there. I went back to see the Freedom Tower when they opened that when I went home to visit; I didn't go back specifically for that. But I still go down there, almost because I feel like I'm a part of it, so I want to see what's going on down there. But here I guess I'm just...I don't want to say jaded, but maybe exhausted almost with stuff like that. I went to a lot of funerals after 9/11. It's almost like I've been there and I really don't want to go back again.

Yes, sort of a self-protective mechanism.

Yes.

That really leads me to another question. I assume there are services available for officers and campus police.

Yes.

I don't know if it's separate from the Metro police as far as if you need counseling or anything like that or just to talk this stuff out.

Yes, we have it available, the university itself.

Do you use the university services?

Psychological services was offered to us, all the time. They always tell us if we ever need to talk about anything, we can come in. I'm not at that point. I'm not that scarred.

But if you were a first-time person dealing with something of this magnitude, you might need to talk it out.

Yes, yes, yes. After 9/11 I didn't see any professional, but we had plenty of...I spoke to my priest and stuff like that, so that got me through a lot. Like I said, I went through this already. I handled it and processed it probably a lot better than other people. But, like I said, I did it; I did my job

that night; I did what I had to do; I tried to help as much as possible. But I don't want to go further than that anymore; I didn't want to go to the funerals. I tried to limit the news watching portion of it because I just didn't want to go through that again.

I don't blame you. Any other stories or observations that you'd like to share with me today?

After everything happened, just seeing how this city stepped up, the people here. Especially when I go back to New York or I tell people I'm from Vegas, you always hear that same thing about, "Oh, is Vegas really like a city?" Everybody thinks it's just the Strip. Nobody lives here; we just work on the Strip. Or you hear about how transient it is; people just come and go. It's human nature; you try to take the good with the bad and you look for the silver lining. I think it really showed the world, I hope, this is a real town. This is a city. People stepped up and banded together and did what they could to give comfort to the people that were affected. I saw it in New York after 9/11, because New York's got the reputation of we're all rude and pushy and nasty, some of it well deserved; I won't say it's not. But you saw the compassion come out. You saw the caring for other people's welfare. You saw people really step up here and that gave me a good feeling to see that; that we'll get through this.

I'm glad to hear you say that and I hope that you stay here.

I'm not going anywhere. I like it.

You're a young man. You could keep doing this for a little longer.

I'll be here for a while, yes. I'm not going anywhere. I like it here. I like the city. I love the university. Yes, I'll be here for a while.

Good. I feel safer knowing that.

Good. I'm glad you do. I'm glad you do. I'm doing my job then.

I really appreciate you participating in this project.

My pleasure.

It's helpful for all of us and will continue to be for people.

This is great. When I got the word about this, I called you right away because it is important. It started to dwindle down now because it's human condition; the farther you get away from it, you start to forget. But I was here on the tenth anniversary of 9/11 and word got out that I was there, so I became like a local celebrity. I got interviewed with Channel 3 and Channel 8. Every once in a while I'll get a thing, *hey, you want to talk about it?* At first I would be like...But I understand the importance of it. There's almost an obligation you feel to not let people forget. When I heard about this, I was like, I don't have a problem going over and talking about it, because you want people to remember. You don't want it to become just another day. That's why whenever somebody says, "Maybe they should make 9/11 a national holiday," I'm like, "No," because I don't want it to morph into the 9/11 White Sale at Macy's or something like that. We just had President's Day and what are people worried about? Are dishwashers on sale? I didn't want it to become that. I want it to stay what it was. I want One October to stay what it is. Whatever lessons people take out of it in whatever way, things change because of it. Let's keep that as the focus and not anything else.

That's really good. Thank you.

You're welcome.

[End of recorded interview]