



Broadcast Transcript

Broadcast: Search and Rescue with a Ground Zero Hero

Guest(s): Tom Bowen

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Dr. James Dobson: Hello, everyone. You're listening to Family Talk, a radio broadcasting ministry of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Dr. James Dobson and thank you for joining us for this program.

Roger Marsh: Welcome to Family Talk, the radio home of the James Dobson Family Institute. I'm Roger Marsh. Today, this 12th of September, we have a special program for you in honor of the 21st anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. You're about to hear Dr. Dobson interview a man who was on the ground and in the trenches at the World Trade Center in the weeks that followed the attack and was part of a team that evacuated and removed the fallen from the rubble of ground zero. It's a gripping account of the days and months after the 9/11 attacks, with a vivid illustration of honor and heroism.

Now, you might have noticed the topic of burn pits have been in the news lately, and the people who were exposed to ground zero experienced some of those same effects. Sadly, these heroes and innocent bystanders have increased rates of certain cancers and other health problems.

You'll hear that Dr. Dobson's guest today, Tom Bowen, is one of those individuals who has detrimentally affected by the toxins there. Tom has a testimony that is resonated with many people around the world. As a firefighter, he has mentioned assisted at the World Trade Center, following the 9/11 attacks, specifically working with the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue teams and the New York City Office of Emergency Management. Tom has raised millions of dollars for childhood cancer research and created an international campaign to help bring healthcare funding to those injured by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Tom has received several awards and commendations for his service to our country, including the National Distinguished Humanitarian award by the American Rescue Workers. He was also recognized by President George W. Bush for his service following 9/11. Tom and his wife, Jennifer, have six children and make their home in Huntington, West Virginia.

The interview you are about to hear was recorded in 2016. So please take the next 25 minutes of your day and listen to this important program in remembrance of that September day in 2001 and the men and women who lost

their lives then. Also for those who have sacrificed their lives to protect our land ever since that horrible attack.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, Tom, how many years were you a firefighter?

Tom Bowen: I served as a firefighter for about five years.

Dr. James Dobson: In New York?

Tom Bowen: No, in my home state of West Virginia. And then when the attacks happened in New York City on 9/11, I was called up to duty to help with the FEMA USR teams.

Dr. James Dobson: And the fire was long out and you were searching through debris. That was one of the assignments you had as a firefighter.

Tom Bowen: That's correct. So we were initially called in to help with the search and rescue operations. And in this first couple days, it became pretty clear very quickly that there wasn't anybody else to rescue. So our responsibility was to locate victims and do our very best to respectfully, reverently, bring them home to their families.

Dr. James Dobson: How long were you out there?

Tom Bowen: I served off and on for weeks at a time from September through May of 2002.

Dr. James Dobson: We hear that the smoke and the debris and everything affected people physically. Is that for real? And are there many people who have succumbed to that experience and have you suffered from it?

Tom Bowen: Yes. It's hard to verbalize what you see when we rolled into New York City, these first few days, the smoke and the fires. They burned for at least the first couple of months. Temperatures down deep in that pile were over 2000 degrees. And so you had extraordinary flames that were unseen deep down in that pit. The smoke and all of the material that had been crushed and melted and now burning was just vaporizing into the air.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, I'm learning things here, because I thought the fires were out, but actually they were not.

Tom Bowen: Oh no, they burned. They burned for quite a while down deep. And you got to realize, you see the World Trade Center and that ground level, it still went down another 70 feet or so where they had parking areas and shops and of course the subway and path station. So, all of that debris just packed deep down into those large pits and created just an inferno.

Dr. James Dobson: I told you I was probably there at the time that you were working in the field down there and trying to rescue people. There was a ramp that had been built at one end that allowed us to look down on what was going on and I was invited to be there. And well, you talk about an emotional scene, emotional moment for me. And yet you were down there right with the victims themselves. What did that do to you?

Tom Bowen: In the moment, your mind is so wrapped around the idea of the job at hand, the task at hand, that I think to deal with the heaviness...

Dr. James Dobson: You had to shut it out.

Tom Bowen: You had to shut it out. Absolutely. But there are points that I think everyone, all of us there and anybody that's human, something small would trigger and break your heart or weight heavy on your mind.

Dr. James Dobson: Did it make you angry?

Tom Bowen: Wow, this is going to be hard. Especially when you see what happened to the people, the victims there, you realize that's a guy just like me and you. Just like the folks listening right now. And they were minding their own business. They were doing their job. They were Americans doing what Americans do best and without any provocation, they were killed in this most horrific way. And when you saw what happened to them, yes, you're angry, very angry. But again, tyranny to the urgent, at the moment, the urgent was we had... The most urgent pressing matter was we've got to get these people home. We need to honor them and we need to love their families by bringing these folks back to their families.

Dr. James Dobson: Talk about what being at ground zero did to you physically.

Tom Bowen: Oh. Physically, early on, about a month actually into the recovery effort, we were on a recovery where we found a number of firemen and civilians in a stairwell case. And it was a very moving time because we hadn't found anybody for a while, had been several days, maybe even a week at that point. And to see these firemen and these civilians all together in this stairwell, you realized this was the great sacrifice right there in front of you. These people gave their lives to try to help these others.

And so it was very moving. It was very difficult. During that particular recovery, I fell into that stairwell shaft and it was a rough situation. It was a rough fall. Crushed my wrists and injured my back. Then over the months that kind of followed, the debris and the material in the air took a toll on my lungs. And most recently in the last few years had to have a large portion of my right lung removed. There were lesions they identified in my brain. And there are thousands of folks who are dealing with health related issues because of the exposures there.

It's not the kind of thing when you go into that situation that you're expecting. But at the same time, if we had to do it over again, we would go back because that's what's expected. That's what's required.

Dr. James Dobson: You don't say that lightly. You mean that?

Tom Bowen: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: If you had to do it again, you would.

Tom Bowen: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: What kind of guy are you to put yourself through that? What are you made out of that sent you into that horrific environment?

Tom Bowen: I think for me, I love people. I think the particular strengths and gifts that God has given me is to love people in that way. It's no better, I'm no more important than any other man who has gifts and talents that he's using for kingdom business. It's just this happens to be the tools that God's given me to work with.

Dr. James Dobson: But you are a believer in Jesus Christ?

Tom Bowen: Absolutely. And that is the, it's the baseline, the bottom line, of the approach that I take, and going into ground zero, it wasn't just to recover people. It wasn't just to be there to aid with recovery efforts or clean-up efforts. But it was to where we could love on people and ministry to folks and share Christ and share hope. Of course, they didn't go in there with a Bible, beating people over the head and proselytizing, but it was through action, through listening to their stories and identifying with their stories and finding a way to connect Christ with that story. That's where the ministry really takes place.

Dr. James Dobson: Let me tell our listeners a couple of things about this that stirs an emotion deep within me. I don't know if the word anger in that context is the best word to use, but it is deeply disturbing to me. Let's put it that way. The money to provide medical care and even, I suppose, burial cost, for those of you who went into ground zero and were affected by the fumes and all that took place. Many of them, like you, have lost a lung or a portion of one. And the money was about to run out and the Congress had to reauthorize the money to take care of those people and didn't want to do it.

Tom Bowen: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And the amazing thing is the Democrats did and Republicans didn't because the Republicans are trying to lessen the expenditure of public money and it's got to start someplace. And so they thought that it ought to begin with those firefighters and rescue workers. That angered me because many of those Republicans and Democrats gave \$500 million to Planned Parenthood.

Tom Bowen: That's right.

Dr. James Dobson: And yet they start this effort to save money with these firefighters who have paid such a price to try to rescue and to serve the families that have suffered so much. That doesn't seem right to me.

Tom Bowen: It's not right.

Dr. James Dobson: And you went in there and fought it and got the money restored, along with other people. Didn't you?

Tom Bowen: A lot of good men and women came together and I worked very hard with them in pressuring and in showing Congress the need for this. This isn't the place to pick the battle with fiscal responsibility. There are so many other arenas, Planned Parenthood, and the list goes on, where we could exercise more fiscal accountability or smarts, if you will. To pick this and to allow folks to gradually die off, just because this is a financial battle we want to pick, was absurd. I mean, even here today, I mean, my voice is bad and my lungs are infected. Being in the studio was a challenge. We almost had to call it off. And the amount of debt...

Dr. James Dobson: You nearly canceled this trip?

Tom Bowen: Yes, absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: Because you couldn't talk.

Tom Bowen: Correct. And then the deep financial debt that we've already been put into is a family to deal with these issues, it was an insult to injury. And as I shared, we've talked offline about this. I have to really work hard at not allowing that to, that bitterness, to harden my heart. Because I know that even in this, even the this conversation about our healthcare or how I respond to that, there's an opportunity to show Jesus to those people around me who are hardhearted and struggling to understand. And I can't be in the best position to do that if I'm angry about it.

Dr. James Dobson: Well, let me tell our listeners the other source of angst. Maybe that's a better word than anger.

Tom Bowen: There you go.

Dr. James Dobson: And that is that some of the Muslims who planned that attack on America on 9/11 have not yet been tried. There were 3000 deaths right there on that scene. And then more than 2000 more at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania. That calls for some kind of accountability.

Tom Bowen: I think you're right, Dr. Dobson. And honestly, I think somehow or another, over the years, since 9/11, it's become politically incorrect to hold people accountable for things like that. And I don't know where that comes from. I don't know why. It is frustrating and I wish, and I know others wish more would be done to hold and bring those accountable to justice.

Dr. James Dobson: Instead, we're letting them go. Those that are in Guantanamo. Let's move on. You were involved in a March that was related to 9/11. Explain what it was.

Tom Bowen: We were able to bring several artifacts, if you will, from the World Trade Center disaster to my home state from New York City to be used in a permanent 9/11 memorial there.

Dr. James Dobson: In your home state?

Tom Bowen: West Virginia. So an impressive display to see how Americans came out. And we talk about, have we forgotten? And where are people when it comes to things like 9/11? Is it just something as a part of history now? But it was even with the political divisiveness and frustration and people pointing fingers at one another that's happening right now in our country, it was powerful to see us set that aside. And this was about a 14 hour long motorcade from New York City to Huntington, West Virginia, and all of the bridges and overpasses and long rest areas along the highways, you would see literally hundreds, and in cases, thousands of people lined on these bridges and overpasses with American flags, waving them, with sheets that they spray painted, "We will never forget," hanging down over the bridgeways.

To see a family. I remember this one minivan off a rest area. It was real near the interstate. And there was a little grassy slope towards the highway. And when we came by, you saw the mom and dad propping their children up really quickly. And the dad helping the child put his hand over his heart. Just to see that September 12th sense of American pride and respect again. We haven't forgotten. I think sometimes we just need a little reminder. And I think having those pieces of the World Trade Center driving by brought us together, even if it was just for a few hours. It was beautiful.

Dr. James Dobson: How is New York different now than before 9/11?

Tom Bowen: Well, New York is a very resilient place. And now if you go to ground zero, things have been built back up. And actually, that part of Manhattan is bustling with activity and energy. They've done a great job I think memorializing and honoring that day with the museum and the memorial. But they've also been done a great job not dwelling and focusing, but also growing the business and growing opportunities for people to get out. I notice they've got a great pathway, walkway, down by the Hudson, and it's nice to see people out.

Dr. James Dobson: That is something we must not allow to be forgotten.

Tom Bowen: Absolutely.

Dr. James Dobson: We can't do it. 3000 people. Think of how many people have been affected by the loss of a father or a son or a husband or a wife or a relative or a friend that died a horrendous death because of the wickedness of those who planned and deliberately brought that sadness to our country. I just appreciate you keeping it alive and what you did at the time of the tragedy and for months afterward, about what you continue to do today, as you just demonstrated.

Now, you brought a lot of things that are sitting in front of me. I wish we had video today. There's so many important things. One is a folded flag like you would do in the military. That was given to you by whom?

Tom Bowen: Well, when we would do recovery work at the World Trade Center, when we would find a firefighter or a police officer, EMS member from New York that died in a line of duty, the whole site would come to a stop. Everything would come just still, absolutely still. And everyone knew at that moment that we had found one of their own. And as we would pull that person out of the rubble, they would be draped with an American flag, this being one of them. And we would respectfully and reverently pull and bring them out of there. We'd always pause and say a prayer.

And on one particular recovery, the one where I was injured, one of the officers there with the fire department handed that to me. And I wish there was a way to convey that moment over the air, but it was one of the most powerful moments in the entire time I worked at the Trade center, but he presented that flag to me...

Dr. James Dobson: He being whom?

Tom Bowen: One of the officers of the fire department there in New York.

Dr. James Dobson: I thought you were going to mention George W. Bush.

Tom Bowen: Well, and President Bush actually later came in and officially presented it to me. And of course we've got the case over there where he put it in a case and signed it and expressed his gratitude for the service there at the World Trade Center. But it was a great honor to meet the president and have him express his gratitude.

Dr. James Dobson: Whatever people think of George W. Bush. And I knew him quite well. I still do. He was an honorable man and I can still see him standing on top of a van saying, "We hear you. The whole world hears you."

Tom Bowen: Yes.

Dr. James Dobson: And he brought hope and resolve to the American people.

Tom Bowen: I remember that day. And then I remember about a week later, him being, he was on the television and a few of us had taken a break from the pile. And we were at a little cafe called the Round the Clock Cafe and New Yorkers had all gathered around the television set that was in that cafe and a few of us rescue workers. And when he spoke, there was just this deafening silence. And he gave that powerful, "We will not tire. We will not falter. We will not fail. We are going to find these folks." And we knew it and we believed it. And I think at that time, that's the kind of leadership, that's the kind of leader that we needed. And there was a lot of fear and a lot of wonder. What's going to happen next?

Dr. James Dobson: Well, we really didn't know if we were going to be hit again in a day or two.

Tom Bowen: So it was an honor to meet him and to hear from him and a great man indeed.

Dr. James Dobson: Our time is gone. This has been very meaningful, Tom. And thank you for what you've done. Thank you for putting your life on the line. And even though you've paid a price for it physically, I know you feel the presence of the Lord in the memory of what you went there to do and that we honor you today.

Tom Bowen: Yeah, it was my honor. Thank you, sir.

Roger Marsh: You've been listening to Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk and Dr. Dobson's compelling interview with Tom Bowen. Tom served as a firefighter specializing in search and rescue, as well as search and recovery, who answered the call and assisted at the World Trade Center tower in Manhattan following the 9/11 attacks. He worked with the FEMA Urban Search and Rescue teams and the New York City Office of Emergency Management.

Now, if you'd like to listen again to the program in its entirety, maybe to go back and review a portion that you may have missed the first time, or if you'd like to share this program with others, visit drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. That's drjamesdobson.org/familytalk. And also, here's a suggestion. Go up to our Facebook page and share this program in honor of 9/11, because we can never forget what happened that dreadful day.

Before we go, I'd like to remind you that September is also National Suicide Prevention month. And here at Family Talk, we know that sometimes life can seem too dark to bear. But the fact is, there is help and there is hope. If you or someone you know is in a mental health crisis, you can call 988. 988 is the new National Suicide and Crisis lifeline. The lifeline provides free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you and your loved ones and best practices for professionals in the United States. And the lifeline is an operational 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Again, that national toll free number is 988 to reach a trained crisis worker who will listen to you, understand how your problem is affecting you, provide support and get you the help you need.

Well, thanks so much for listening to Family Talk today. We hope you'll join us again next time for another encouraging broadcast for you and your family. I'm Roger Marsh. And for all of us here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute, thanks so much for listening.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.

Dr. James Dobson: The Taj Mahal is one of the most beautiful and costly tombs ever built, but you know there's a fascinating legend around its beginnings. In 1629, when the favorite wife of Indian ruler, Shah Jahan, died, he ordered that magnificent tomb to be built as a memorial to her. The Shah placed his wife's casket in the middle of a parcel of land and construction of the temple literally began around it.

But several years into the venture, the Shah's grief for his wife kind of gave way to a passion for the project. One day, while he was surveying the site, he reportedly stumbled over a wooden box and he had some workers throw it out. It was months before he realized that his wife's casket had been destroyed. The original purpose for the memorial became lost in the details of construction.

Now, as legends go, this one may or may not be true, but its theme is a familiar one in the lives of people. How many of us set out to build these great dream castles, but we lose our focus along the way? We realize too late that it's relationships with our loved ones and our children that really matter. J. Paul Getty, one of the richest men of this century wrote, "I've never been given to envy, save for the envy I feel toward those people who have the ability to make a marriage work and endure happily. It's an art I've never been able to master." So while we're building our Taj Mahal's, let's not forget the purpose with which we began.

Roger Marsh: To get involved, go to drjamesdobson.org.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Hi, I'm Dr. Tim Clinton for the James Dobson Family Institute. Who inspires you on matters of faith, family, and culture? If you don't already get it, sign up for Dr. Dobson's monthly newsletter at drjamesdobson.org. Each month, you're going to receive insight and news that impacts your family and solid advice that you can trust. Whether it's wisdom for parents, tips for building a lasting marriage or discernment on issues your family may be facing, you're going to find direction, encouragement and more every month. Visit drjamesdobson.org and sign up for that monthly newsletter today. And again, that's drjamesdobson.org. You'll be glad you did.