

By: Dan England

Something Good in the Neighborhood – First Responder Trauma Counselors



Ed Rupert was a young police officer in his 20s when, on Jan. 14, 1974—he remembers the exact date—he was involved in a shootout where more than 100 bullets were fired at him. It was the first time he couldn't shake the job when his shift ended.

The second came two years later, when he was part of a team tasked with recovering bodies from the devastating Big Thompson Canyon Flood that killed 144 people. After that job, he called a therapist, said he wasn't doing well and told him he didn't want to be seen near his office. He didn't want others to think he was crazy.

The guy told Ed to meet him at Johnson's Corner. Over coffee, he touched Ed's hand and told him it was going to be OK. Ed began bawling.

It always stuck with Ed how a gentle touch and a willing ear could help him feel like a normal human being again. Now he and his wife, Joanne, also a former first responder, have spent more than 20 years trying to do the same thing for others.

"Back in the day, if you weren't strong enough to deal with it, the thinking was you should just get out of it," Ed says. "We wanted to remove the stigma."

Creating a refuge

A well-worn truth is that frontline healthcare workers and first responders often experience the worst day of a person's life. The job takes a grim toll as a result: They are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty, and divorce rates are 80 percent, nearly twice the national average. Many others suffer from anxiety, depression or PTSD. First responders love the work, Joanne says, but many times they have no way to decompress once their shift ends.

"They can do the job," Joanne says. "It's 'How do you go from a shift and see the most horrible things to going home and hugging their kids?'"

Ed and Joanne have devoted their lives to offering that refuge. First responders were already seeking them out for help before their official start in 2005, as they respected their resumes. Ed worked in law enforcement, helped start the Larimer County Dive Rescue Team and spent more than 20 years as a fire chief. Joanne spent 30 years working and volunteering in fire departments, law enforcement and ambulance teams.

But beyond all those years of experience, Ed and Joanne were willing to listen with a kind of care and compassion that went against the first responders' mantra that they should bury what they see instead of talk about it.

Through the years, they've worked hard to get even more formal credentials. Joanne went to graduate school and got her master's degree in clinical psychology. Ed learned hypnotherapy in 2009 to help counter the effects of a neurological illness that, among other things, affected his speech. He got his master's degree in counseling psychology in 2021 at age 70. He's now a Ph.D. candidate.

Today the Ruperts have four full-time employees and 24 independent therapists who work for their two organizations. First Responder Trauma Counselors, their original organization, is sponsored by 34 public safety and frontline medical agencies, which means all the workers and their spouses of those agencies receive care for free.

At the end of 2022, they formed a separate nonprofit, First Responder Trauma Services, to cover the cost of caring for first responders in rural and underserved agencies who may not have the resources to pay for their employees' care. This includes the many volunteer fire departments that watch over rural areas in Northern Colorado.

Both organizations' number-one goal is to ensure that first responders and frontline medical workers don't have to pay for their services. Most of the money the Ruperts receive through sponsorships goes back into the organization. Joanne draws a small salary as the CEO and senior clinical director, and Ed, the COO, lives on his retirement income.

In 2024, the two mortgaged their Timnath home to purchase and open The CENTER in rural Windsor. The place looks like a rich grandmother's home, they say, instead of a trauma center. The cozy setting helps skeptical first responders eventually embrace therapy, even when many of them insist that's not why they're there when they walk in the door.

"We are trying to lower the bar and the barriers for them to come and see us," Joanne says.



The Bee Lodge at The CENTER

From counseling to ketamine

The Ruperts offer different ways to treat first responders who need it, some as easy as a hug, a kitchen table surrounded by peers chatting over coffee and a place to wash their bloody clothes after a bad service call before they head home.

There are many other, more complex methods, such as the use of a vibroacoustic bed—a “game changer,” Joanne says—that can calm a frazzled first responder in just a couple of hours. They have five certified therapy dogs, classes and guided sessions using treatments such as ketamine. They’re also creating a serenity garden, where first responders can work in the dirt or soak in the sun on their lunch breaks.

Clients can do beekeeping or just lay in the bee lodge a few steps from the front door and soak in the meditative buzz, which matches the calming effect of the vibroacoustic bed. The family of a Loveland paramedic who died by suicide in 2024 donated the money to build the lodge.

The CENTER offers different forms of relationship counseling as well. Couples can take group therapy, tend to the bees or learn how to bake sourdough together.

Ed and Joanne have always worked 24/7, only now it’s for other first responders and not the public. They will answer the phone in the middle of the night and call back if they hear someone hang up. They are certain this saves lives. They also have several vehicles to travel to first responders’ homes to save them in times of crisis. “This is a really unique service,” Joanne says. “At times we need to meet them where they are at.”

When first responders go out to face their chaotic world, Ed and Joanne expect, and hope, to see them back one day. “Our clients are never discharged,” Ed says. “They’re never done.”