



The Weber Foundation of Helping Hands Inc.

P.O. Box 863, Melrose, MA 02176

"The Weber Foundation of Helping Hands" Grants \$9,000 to NYFD Engine Company 217 Family Fund.

Matt Lucas



Engine Co. 217 in Brooklyn is a small firehouse in a tough part of "Bed Stuy" Brooklyn on Dekalb Avenue. The house sits alone on the street surrounded by the local housing projects and bordered by their parking lot on one side and a deserted lot on the other. The building looks as if it used to have neighbors that were of similar stature, but today it stands alone. The wall adjoining the Parking lot is covered in Graffiti, and by the appearance of several layers of paint, it looks to be an ongoing battle with the neighborhood "artists". On the inside of Engine Company 217, the atmosphere is much different. Its obvious that this is not a wealthy house, but the men of this station are very proud of what they have. The walls are lined with pegs on which hang the protective gear that is their uniform. The floor has their boots and pants neatly lined up in a most interesting fashion. The pants are rolled down all the way to the boots, making it a simple process for a fireman to step into the boots and pull up the pants in one quick motion. I smelled something cooking coming from the Kitchen and was met from the back room by the House dog named "DA". He was obviously well fed but his back legs had seen better days and he walked with a limp. This was a neighborhood dog that they had found and adopted over 8 years ago who appeared to be mixed breed with Mastiff heritage. I was quickly cautioned not to scratch him behind the ears if I like my hand and I heeded their advice.



I was brought to the back room of the house in the common area and was offered coffee from everyone who was there. I passed on the coffee but said yes to a cold water. We talked for some time about what has happened since 9/11 and I found out many things. First was that they found the body of Fireman Coakely? and were going that evening to speak to his father. It took a few days to identify him but they were relieved to be able to give his family closure. I didn't ask if they had ever found Fireman Leavy? or Lt. Phelan?, but asked about their families. Lt. Phelan left behind his wife and four children. I asked how the holidays had gone for them and they indicated that they had done what they could for the kids, and that his wife was totally immersing herself in their lives. She was being strong for them and was keeping herself occupied by doing as much as she could for them. The Father's of Fireman and Leavy and Coakley weren't holding up as well. They were both retired and took great pride in their sons and what they were doing. Losing them was a terrible shock to their systems and something that they weren't dealing with too well. I could tell that it wasn't going to be an easy task for them to go and speak with Coakley's Father that night. I asked about other support that they have received in the wake of the tragedy. They said that a town in Alaska had sent them some money and that a Firehouse in California had done so as well. The total amounts were only a few thousand dollars. They also spoke about a local school associated with a church that really moved them. A bunch of the children made paintings for them and brought them over with a big ham. A priest had come along with the children and delivered an envelope with money he had collected from the parish. Inside was a \$100 dollar bill. Getting a check for \$9,000 from the Weber Foundation made a tremendous impact on this Firehouse. I told them how people from all across the country had looked for something a way to help in any way they can, and how the Weber Foundation had been the way for them to do so. They were visibly moved by the generosity of everyone across the country. They asked how I had found them and I told them the story. I had initially volunteered on this project because the firehouse across the street from My girlfriend in NYC had lost 7 men in the tragedy. Every day we saw the candles burning and the flowers stacked in front of the house. I had the opportunity to speak to Elizabeth Weber of the Weber Foundation and she asked me to identify a firehouse that lost members, and one that would be impacted by a donation. I spoke to the men across the street, and they indicated that their fundraising had been going very well and they had already raised several hundred thousand dollar for their fund. Being in a nice neighborhood, many of the businesses near by had written generous checks. They told me that if I had a check that I should put it in an envelope and leave it with one of the guys on duty. Seeing how that sounded, they then suggested that I find a house in Brooklyn that wasn't in such a nice neighborhood and really needed our money. This advice went along with what my gut was telling me and Elizabeth had instructed. I

called HQ and they gave me four possible Companies in Brooklyn that were affected. Lt. Thomas McGoeff of 217 happened to be the first one who picked up the phone and my choice was made.

Even getting this check to them had its own difficulties. Engine Co. 217 didn't have many donations after 9/11 and didn't even have a Tax ID number set up. Fireman Mark Bartiletti had to do some serious negotiating with the NYS tax department to get that done on short notice. He finally found a woman with a sympathetic ear who saved him weeks of time and pages and pages of paperwork. She even issued him a number over the phone so that he could get the ball moving faster. Mark and I were back and forth on the phone about a dozen times setting up our final meeting. But it all worked out. They now have a substantial fund available to take care of the needs of the families of their lost brothers.

Recently there was some more news that was another blow to Engine Co. 217. Asbestos Contamination. The NY Daily News reported in an article on December 21st about the abnormally high Asbestos level on two Brooklyn based rigs (fire trucks). Ladder 131 and Engine 217 had the highest level of Asbestos contamination of any rigs in the NYFD. The highest level of contamination on a rig that they have been riding on for more than three months. The highest level of contamination on a rig that has been parked in the firehouse round the clock when it wasn't on a call. If you have never been inside a firehouse with this set up, picture parking your car in your living room, 20 feet from your kitchen. Who knows what damage has already been done? They currently had a loaner rig as the other one was being decontaminated. And this one had a tendency to leak more oil than it retained.

After taking a few pictures inside the firehouse, we said our goodbyes and went back into the parking lot where my truck was parked. They had given me a few hats and T-Shirts, which happened to be ordered from a printer who was also a Market America Distributor. I wanted to take a few more pictures of the outside of the house and I was startled with the sounds of an alarm going off and the front door opening. They had a fire call and in no time flat the men of Engine 217 were out the door on their loaner rig, racing into the cold December night to meet unknown danger. As I watched them go the thought occurred to me while we had done a good thing by giving them this much, that we needed to raise more money . . .