

Inside Citywide Podcast Transcript Episode 10

Michael Santos: You are listening to the Inside Citywide Podcast brought to you by the New York City Department of Citywide Administrative Services. Inside Citywide provides you with a behind the scenes look at some of the work we do to serve the people of New York City.

Nick Benson: Welcome to Inside Citywide. I'm Nick Benson. I'm the executive director of communications and public affairs at D C A S. And I'm joined, as always, by my colleague Belinda French.

Belinda French: Hi, I'm Belinda French, and I'm the diversity and E E O officer for the DCAS.

Nick Benson: Today we're joined by Zach Iscol, commissioner of New York City Emergency Management. Commissioner Iscol is a crisis tested leader who has led settings ranging from combat operations in Iraq to the front lines of the COVID 19 pandemic and Hurricane Sandy here in New York. His experience includes building a pioneering nonprofit mental health care provider, leading one of the premier military journalism outlets, and serving as a strong advocate for immigrants in underserved communities.

Nick Benson: A proud veteran of the United States Marine Corps, Commissioner Iscol, served two tours in Iraq and on other assignments throughout Africa and the Middle East. During his second tour of duty, he led a combined unit of U.S. Marines and Iraq soldiers and some of the heaviest fighting of the Iraq war. During the second battle of Fallujah, he was awarded a Bronze Star for Valor for his service. Appointed by Mayor Eric Adams in 2022,

Nick Benson: Commissioner Iscol leads the agency responsible for coordinating citywide emergency planning and response. He earned a bachelor's degree in government from Cornell University. I'm pleased to welcome the New York City Emergency Management Commissioner Zack Iscol. Thanks for joining us, Commissioner.

Zach Iscol: It's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Nick Benson: So, let's begin where your story begins. Tell us about your upbringing. I understand you were born here in New York City, and you grew up in Westchester County.

Zach Iscol: Yep, I grew up in Pound Ridge, New York. Pretty normal childhood. My mom was an educator. My dad was a businessman. I was always surrounded by a lot of family, in particular sort of other generations and so I grew up with a lot of grandparents that had served in World War II. And that was my childhood. In a nutshell, yeah.

Nick Benson: Did you play any sports?

Zach Iscol: I did. I was not very good at sports growing up, so I, I played football a little bit. I played soccer, I played ice hockey, ran track, did a whole bunch of sports.

Nick Benson: You were definitely ready for the military; you were physically fit.

Zach Iscol: So, I well, I got cut from in high school. I got cut from the J.V. hockey team. And the story is sort of famous at my high school that I actually got put back on the team because the team showed up at my coach's house and protested, actually went on strike, and insisted that I get back, put back on the team.

Zach Iscol: So, I got put back on the team and I just rode the bench for the rest of the year. When I showed up at Cornell, I went to Cornell University, I had a football coach there. I played lightweight football. So lightweight football is a varsity sport. It's for people who are smaller in stature. So, it used to be 150 pounds before the game.

Zach Iscol: I think now it's like 185. When I played it was 165. So, you'd weigh in on Wednesdays. Games are Fridays and my football coach was a marine officer in Vietnam. He was recipient of the Silver Star, Purple Heart, and he really sort of encouraged me to join the Marine Corps. And I knew growing up that I always wanted to join the military.

Zach Iscol: I grew up around a lot of survivors, World War Two veterans. And so, I just didn't know what that would look like. And when I met Coach Cullen, he became a huge mentor and role model in my life, and that sort of sent me in the direction of the Marines.

Belinda French: A common thread throughout your life seems to be a deep commitment to public service. You served in the military, as you said. You worked in the nonprofit sector. You've run for public office and now you lead New York City Emergency Management. What inspired your interest in public service?

Zach Iscol: It was my mom. You know, it's that simple. You know, my mom was a teacher and educator. She was always committed to finding ways of making the world a better place. I lost her last year, but she got to see me take on this role. And it was really her being a role model and seeing the way that she wanted to live in the world, seeing the impact she wanted to have, and being inspired by that.

Belinda French: Even though your mom is not here physically, she is an angel with you and watching you every step.

Zach Iscol: And we are not going to get emotional on this podcast

Belinda French: Oh, I'm good for that!

Nick Benson: So, as Belinda mentioned, you've had a dedication to public service, but one of the earliest steps in your public service journey was your time serving in the U.S. Marine Corps. So, thanks for your service, number one. But I know you enlisted after graduating from Cornell. What made you want to go in that direction and to serve your country?

Zach Iscol: Yeah, so, you know, I grew up in a culture of public service. And, you know, I grew up with stories from my Papa Lou, who, you know, fought under Patton at the Battle of the Bulge of my grandparents who were on ships in the Pacific. My dad came from a Gold Star family. His uncle was killed in World War Two when his bomber was shot down.

Zach Iscol: His father worked for the City of New York. He worked for the Department of Sanitation at the age of 41, volunteered to go off to World War Two. And worked in city government, you know, when they would take over cities like Amsterdam, he'd help run those cities. And so, it was sort of growing up with those stories that inspired me to want to join the military myself.

Zach Iscol: And then I actually joined the Marine Corps while I was in college so that the Marine Corps has a program for officers called Platoon Leaders Course, where you go to officer candidate school over the summer so you can do it in one 10-week session, and you can do it in two six-week sessions after your sophomore year and after your junior.

Zach Iscol: And that's what I did. And then I graduated and was commissioned on August 11th, 2001.

Nick Benson: Yeah, those stories from veterans are so impactful. Both my grandparents, they served in World War Two, my grandpa served in World War two, one was in Okinawa. And I can't even imagine.

Zach Iscol: That was a good one to miss.

Nick Benson: Yeah. So, when I ran the New York City Marathon a few years ago, a lot of people would write something on their arm or would write a note to kind of to get them going when they were having a tough time in the race. And to me it was like I just wrote the word Okinawa.

Zach Iscol: Really?

Nick Benson: I just remembered like, if my grandpa can get through that, this is easy.

Zach Iscol: It's amazing. My wife's grandfather was in Okinawa.

Nick Benson: Oh, wow.

Zach Iscol: Yeah.

Belinda French: So, I actually want to pick up on something you said, Commissioner. The date you were commissioned caught my attention. August 11th, 2001, just one month before our world changed in such profound ways. I can't imagine the emotions you felt on September 11th. Not just feeling what all of us were feeling on that horrible day, but also knowing that you were going to be called upon to keep our country safe.

Belinda French: How was that for you? What was that like?

Zach Iscol: I mean, first off, I wasn't in New York City, so I was actually outside the city on 9/11. I was in Canada, but I had a lot of friends that were in the city. My family was in the city. My parents had moved back into the city. And so, like so many, you know, I was initially just worried about loved ones and, you know, and was sort of trying to get back to New York.

Zach Iscol: And I remember coming back to the city a few days after 9/11 and, you know, the city just felt different, you know, I mean, you saw sort of these bands of firefighters and police officers walking around, many of them coming from funerals. There was this respect we had for these public servants and for the sacrifice they had made.

Zach Iscol: There was a sense of community, and people forget there was also that anthrax scare right after 9/11. And so, the city sort of felt on edge. But also, there was like this pride of being a New Yorker and there was this sort of sense of coming together. I remember riding the train up to watch the Yankees play with my dad and just the camaraderie at Yankee Stadium, you know?

Zach Iscol: And so, for me, it felt like I was part of that story at that time. You know, I was a second lieutenant. I was waiting to go off to make my next sort of evolution in training before taking over a platoon. And, you know, I felt, you know, there was the shock and the sadness. But there was also this sense of togetherness that we had as a city.

Belinda French: Right.

Nick Benson: So, you ended up serving two tours in Iraq. What were some of the leadership and life lessons you learned from that experience? And what was it like to be in a situation where I can only imagine you experienced both the best and the worst elements of human nature?

Zach Iscol: Yes. So, you know, I was very fortunate. I had some amazing mentors and commanding officers in the Marine Corps, folks like, you know, Colonel Willie Buell, Colonel Pete Petronzio, they sort of literally come from a lineage where I was really sort of taught that your job as a leader is to take care of your people.

Zach Iscol: I had a mentor at the Marine Corps Infantry Officer Course, which is one of the most difficult courses in the Marine Corps. And it's we've just done this really long hike. It was the 81-kilometer hike. So, you're carrying hundreds of pounds of gear. You're doing it. And the way they set it up is sort of funny, like it's there's a distance and you don't know how far you're hiking, and you don't know how fast you're supposed to be going.

Zach Iscol: So, there is some sort of standard. You don't know if you're supposed to get there in 4 hours or in 5 hours. You just have to go, and you have no idea what the standard is or how long you're going to be going for. And so, we get to the end of this evolution. And one of the instructors was a guy named Captain John Maloney, and he was later killed in Iraq.

Zach Iscol: And in 2005, left behind a wife and two kids who are now college age. I think one of them actually is graduating from college soon. And he pulled all of us aside. We were exhausted and we'd been hiking all night with all this heavy gear and equipment and mortar systems which are not light. And he asked the same question.

Zach Iscol: He said, "What's more important? Your Marines or the mission? And we all knew at this point in time it was August of 2002. This was almost a year later. And we all knew we were going off to war and we knew that we'd have to make these decisions about what was more important, the mission that we were given or the lives of our Marines.

Zach Iscol: And so, us lieutenants, you know, we argued, we debated. Some of us thought that we don't decide the mission. We're given the mission. It's our job to just accomplish it. Others thought sometimes you're given a mission that's not that important, and maybe you don't risk the lives of your Marines on that type of mission. And then one of us asked Captain Maloney what he thought.

Zach Iscol: And he just said, you know, "I think you take care of your Marines, and they take care of the mission" and that sort of you know, at emergency management, I walked into an environment where that was sort of my ethos. But what's sort of remarkable is that's the ethos of most of the executives that are there, most of the management that's there already.

Zach Iscol: It's in the bones of that organization. And, you know, it's great to see that extension of sort of leadership and service that I saw in the Marine Corps is just so visceral and real here in New York City as well.

Nick Benson: Yeah, you really do see that throughout city government, that people are very mission driven. It's really inspiring to work with people.

Zach Iscol: Yeah. And look, when I when I took this job, you know, back in February, I was new to city service. I did not know if I was walking into, you know, and no offense to people that work at the DMV, love the DMV, but I didn't know if I was walking into the stereotypical DMV government office or if I was going to be walking to something else.

Zach Iscol: And I will tell you, I've been blown away by the caliber and quality of people, not just in emergency management that I've just had the opportunity to work with across the board. And I think it's you know, I feel this all the time that whether you're going out to respond to a fire, whether it's a water main break, whether it's some flooding out in the Rockaways or something that we're doing around immigration.

Zach Iscol: Right. With the migrants coming to New York City, that sense of togetherness and this, I don't know how to describe it. It's like a *je ne sais quoi*. There's like this this this sense of something bigger than ourselves that that existed after 9/11. I feel it in city service. I feel it amongst the amazing public service servants who I get to interact with on a daily basis.

Belinda French: I actually want to mention or commend you on something. Following your time serving in Iraq, you successfully advocated for an Iraqi translator who worked with you to be brought to the United States by Mr. Khalid Abood al-Khafaji, and I understand and why this was so commendable is because there was a bounty placed on him for aiding American soldiers like yourself.

Belinda French: Could you tell us a little bit about Mr. Khafaji, how you met him, and what compelled you to advocate on his behalf?

Zach Iscol: Yes. So, if you want to picture what Abood looks like, Abood looks like Geppetto in Pinocchio. He was this short, older man, olive skin, you know, pepper gray hair, kind, had a mustache, eyes that sparkled, Abood was remarkable. And, you know, he was had a wicked sense of humor. He must have been, I think, 60 years old.

Zach Iscol: And he would keep up on Marines through long patrols, 120-degree heat and in 30-degree heat in Al Anbar Province in 2004. And he first started working with the military because when the army rolled into his town south of Baghdad, he spoke a little bit of English and local captain or lieutenant, whoever it was, you know, started talking to him and said that they needed a translator.

Zach Iscol: And Abood ran away and brought back a carpenter. And he didn't know that, you know, he thought they were asking for a carpenter. He started working with the Marines, with the Army. Then the Marines found his way out to Anbar Province and got assigned to my unit. I was leading a group of Iraqi soldiers and U.S. Marines. I had about 40 U.S. Marines.

Zach Iscol: I had two jobs at the time. I was a platoon commander with 40 Marines. I was also the XO of a company with 240 Marines. So, I had sort of two jobs at the same time. And then with the Marines, we were embedded in Iraqi companies. So, we also had about 250 Iraqi soldiers. And, you know, you can't do your job in that environment if you don't speak the language.

Zach Iscol: And Abood didn't just translate, but he helped us. He was our eyes and ears. He sort of helped us interact with local population. Remarkably, my platoon was never attacked in the town that we lived in. We were often attacked outside that town. But I really believe to this day those relationships at Abood enabled us to develop saved the lives of my Marines.

Zach Iscol: I mean, there were days where I stood on top of an IED that somebody decided not to set off, and I believe it's because of the relationship Abood had enabled us to establish. And he was remarkable. You know, the first time I met with him in a group of sheikhs, he starts talking and he's talking and talking and talking.

Zach Iscol: And I finally I was 24 years old. He's 60 years old. I'm like, Abood, it's my job to sort of talk. And he says, all right. And then there's silence. And it's like, well, how come nobody is talking? And he said, well, they're waiting for you to finish the blessing to start the meeting. And I said, But I don't know the blessing.

Zach Iscol: And he said, do you want me to finish the blessing? I was like, ha ha ha. You sort of get a little sense of humility right away.

Nick Benson: Point taken.

Zach Iscol: He became like a second father to me. He has four amazing daughters, but two of his daughters, Abeer and Shima are actually in the NYPD right now. One is at the fifth Precinct, the other is in the legal department.

Zach Iscol: They're amazing. We lost Abood to cancer in 2011, but I was able to be by his side in his last moments. And, you know, when he reached out to me and said that his family had been threatened, some insurgents had left a severed dog's head on his door and said that your family's going to be next. I said, get to Jordan and then started working and, you know, ended up testifying before the United States Senate on active duty to help establish and expand something called the Special Immigrant visa.

Zach Iscol: It's now helped, I think, over 100,000 translators and families come to the United States from Afghanistan and Iraq. And so, he was sort of one of the first to be able to come over. But, you know, there's been a lot more who have benefited now from that program. And I think it's also just an important point that, you know, when we leave a place like Afghanistan, leave a place like Iraq, there are a lot of people who served alongside us.

Zach Iscol: You know, Abood wore the Marine Corps uniform in combat, and that means something. And I think we as Americans have to honor our commitment and obligation and responsibility to care for those that served alongside us.

Belinda French: Agreed.

Nick Benson: So, after that, your time in the military, you started several nonprofits to serve the veterans community, and one I know was called Headstrong, which helps provide mental health care to veterans. Why was this work so important to you, and what have you learned from your experience with this work?

Zach Iscol: Yeah, so when I when I got home, you know, I bet 2010, 2011, I started losing a lot of Marines to suicide. And I didn't know the first thing about mental health. I just knew that we needed to do something about it. And my battalion commander, a guy named Colonel Willie Buell, was stationed in New York City for about a year.

Zach Iscol: He was stationed at the Council on Foreign Relations doing an executive program there. And so, we went out for burgers and beer one night on the Upper East Side. And about a few days earlier, we had a really bad suicide in the battalion. A former sergeant, remarkable war hero, legend in the battalion, came home, kissed his wife and kids at the dinner table, went upstairs and they heard a gunshot.

Zach Iscol: And, you know, I think maybe this was like our 10th, 12th, 13th suicide in the battalion at this point. And to put this in perspective, I was in one of the hardest hit battalions of the Iraq war. We lost 33 Marines in Fallujah. Over half our battalion, 576 Marines were wounded during those three weeks of high intensity combat. And we've now lost 57 to suicide.

Zach Iscol: So, at this time, we're at like our 12th or 13th, 14th, I don't remember the exact number, but Colonel Buell, who I would still follow anywhere to this day, just said to me, we need to do something. And I was fortunate that I had a good family friend, a woman named Dr. Ann Beeder, who was at Weill Cornell Medical Center, professor of psychiatry.

Zach Iscol: So, I reached out to her. We grab breakfast and put together a program initially at Cornell to start treating veterans here in New York City. And so, we did that for a couple of years, and it proved very effective. And after a few years, we realized the folks that were getting treatment were actually getting better. And we then decided to expand Headstrong.

Zach Iscol: It's now in 48 states around the country. The organization is taking care of about 1500 veterans every week, so it's grown immensely. But I think one of the things that I really learned is I learned a lot about PTSD and trauma and that PTSD is something that's really treatable if you get the right help and the right treatment.

Zach Iscol: PTSD is sort of a survival mechanism. It's the inability to turn off the fight or flight response, which is something that's not bad when your life is in danger. Right. If you're getting chased, you know, by a woolly mammoth or a saber tooth tiger, you want to be in a fight or flight mode. If you're in Iraq getting shot at, you want to be in a fight or flight mode if you're in a dangerous situation, right?

Zach Iscol: You want to be in fight or flight mode. The problem is when you can't turn that off. And the fact is, is that with the right type of help, the right type of treatment, you can learn to develop sort of the regulatory mechanisms internally in your body to then control fight or flight. And you think about the symptoms of PTSD, restlessness, anxiety, sleeplessness, hyper vigilance.

Zach Iscol: Those are all symptoms. Those are all things that is your body preparing to react to fight or flight. What you need to do is to be able to regulate that, be able to turn that off, and the right types of treatment can enable you to do that. And so, we learned through Headstrong that that's actually something that's very effective and possible.

Zach Iscol: And I think one of the things that's also been interesting over time is seeing how that work has then reduced the stigma around mental health and that we have a lot more veterans and others who are now willing to get the help that they need.

Nick Benson: Yeah, that's what I was going to bring up next is I imagine stigma is one of the biggest challenges. You know, at a certain point there might be folks who think, oh, this is a sign of weakness, to acknowledge that I have a challenge that I have to confront. What have you found? How have you found that that some veterans how do you get them in the door to get them on that pathway to treatment?

Zach Iscol: So, it varies, you know, and the only thing that we required at Headstrong was that somebody be willing to take that step. Sometimes it's a veteran who's been in their shoes saying, "look, I've been there, I promise if you get the right help, you can get better." This is not a lifelong sentence. I think a lot of folks come into this thinking that they're going to be like this forever, not knowing that they can be treated.

Zach Iscol: They can get back to the best version of themselves. Some of it's just leading by example, right? I still see a therapist very regularly. I talk to somebody and knowing that there is that that's a sign of strength. It's not a sign of weakness, right? Like I go to the gym every morning, right? To improve my physical health.

Zach Iscol: I talk to a therapist to improve my mental health. Like these are just sort of it's two of the same thing. And so, part of it is just setting the example as well and being able to talk about these things. And I think also just, you know, coming out of COVID, there's been a massive normalization around mental health.

Zach Iscol: When we first started this program, I don't know, I guess just 12, 13 years ago, nobody wanted to talk about mental health. Therapists were largely underutilized. Now, like, good luck trying to find a therapist that has a time slot, right? You know, there's huge demand for mental health. A lot more people are seeking it. A lot more people see the value in it, which is a good thing.

Zach Iscol: We also need a lot more therapists out there, right? So that's something else we have to solve for.

Belinda French: Absolutely. So, I want to talk about New York City Emergency Management. A year as the commissioner. Please tell our listeners about the agency's role in city government as well as your vision for the agency.

Zach Iscol: Yeah. So first off, I love this agency. The people that work there are remarkable. And so, our mission is pretty simple. Our mission is to serve New Yorkers before, during and after emergencies. So, before what does that mean? It means making sure we're helping New Yorkers prepare, making sure that they're ready, making sure that they have the information that they need.

Zach Iscol: I encourage everybody listening to this to sign up for Notify NYC. You can go to NYC dot gov backslash, notify NYC. That's our public notification messaging system. You can sign up, give your zip code, give your neighborhood, get the real time information you need to be prepared. On the preparedness front, we also are running a number of programs around community engagement.

Zach Iscol: We have a program called Strengthening Communities where we are building community-based organization and networks around the city. We have 16 in place. We just launched another 21, and then we'll be opening up the third cohort soon. And so, we train these networks, we provide them some grant funding in order to help make sure that their communities are prepared.

Zach Iscol: They build emergency plans. We tap into them, like, for example, with Winter Storm Elliot, some of these networks out in the Rockaways did some digital canvassing, some phone banking. Afterwards, they'll help us with damage assessments, helping make sure people have the resources they need to recover. So that's sort of a lot of the work that we do in community engagement on the preparation and readiness front to make sure people have the information.

Zach Iscol: And we also do a lot of we have a volunteer organization or CERT program and then we do Ready New York, where we do presentations around the city to make sure New Yorkers again have the information they need to be prepared. We then respond. So, we respond to emergencies around the city. When you sort of look at the history of the agency, we were founded in 1996, really out of frustration that Mayor Giuliani, who was the mayor at that time, had that he would wake up in the morning, he would learn about events in the city on the news.

Zach Iscol: He'd show up at a scene, nobody would be in charge. So, we started the Office of Emergency Management to help him sort of monitor what was going on in the city 24 seven and then go to manage things that were actually happening. So today we have Watch Command where we monitor everything around the city. 24 seven. When something is significant enough, we will deploy a responder, what we call a C I C, a citywide incident coordinator.

Zach Iscol: They can go out and their job is to make sure that we're bringing to bear all of the city's resources to solve a problem. So if you think of like if there's a three alarm fire and you have 40 families that are displaced, that C I C will start working with the Red Cross, with Department of Buildings, God forbid the chief medical examiner and others to make sure the MTA to provide busses that people can get warm in if it's cold, but they'll bring all those resources together to make sure we're serving those people that have been displaced and helping them figure out what's next.

Zach Iscol: And we do that for emergencies small and emergencies that are much larger. And then we also do a lot of work on mitigation, on planning to, you know,

around climate resiliency, around infrastructure development to sort of help prevent future emergencies from being as bad as it could be. Right. So, to help make them not as bad as those types of efforts.

Zach Iscol: So that's a lot of the work that we do. You know, for me, my vision for the agency is, number one, I want the agency to be the best place in the world to work. When people do show up at emergency management and when they leave, they go on to the next step in their career. They retire.

Zach Iscol: They look back on their time there as a time that they felt supported, that they were doing critically important work and were really of service. And that was it was one of those moments that you sort of look back on with real fondness and love for the time and the impact that you had there. That's number one.

Zach Iscol: Number two, you know, I want us to see seeing us to do a better job of reaching hard to reach communities. You know, 47% of New Yorkers English is not a first language. You look at something like notify N Y C. That's something we're working very hard on. Notify N Y C is available in 14 languages, including American Sign Language, over a million subscribers.

Zach Iscol: Almost every single one of those subscribers is an English speaker. We need to be doing a better job of reaching non-English speaking New Yorkers to make sure they have the information that they need and then really making sure that we're staying ahead of the curve and that, you know, we are on top of future emergencies, that we are making sure that we're prepared for them and that we're mitigating the effects.

Nick Benson: So, every day you're dealing with emergencies, but in your first year in this role, is there something that you would say has been the toughest challenge that you've faced, or is there something you're particularly proud of that you've accomplished so far?

Zach Iscol: I mean, there's no end, you know, I mean, there's so much I mean, I look at the work that we've done around, you know, the immigrants coming to New York City, the asylum seeker crisis. Right. I think about how this city has really stepped up and fulfilled an obligation that nobody else in this country has done.

Zach Iscol: I'm very proud to be part of this administration when it comes to this. I mean, you think, you know, over 41,000 people have passed through our shelter system or in our shelter system. We've seen, I think, 12, 13,000 people that we've welcomed at the at the Port Authority coming off of busses. And some of those moments I've had with asylum seekers, you know, these are folks who are, you know, legally seeking asylum.

Zach Iscol: They have due process, the right to due process. You hear about their journey coming from places like Venezuela, going through the jungle, rivers, urban terrain, deserts, mountains. I don't know how they make that journey, how some of them are doing it with young children and the number of borders that they've crossed. And then some of them were here the first time somebody said welcome was when they got off the bus at the Port Authority and maybe it was somebody wearing a city uniform, maybe it was a volunteer, maybe it was somebody from emergency management, maybe it was a volunteer from City Hall.

Zach Iscol: We had, I think, something like over a hundred people from City Hall just volunteer to work with us at Port Authority to welcome people off of busses. But just the way that this city has stepped up and look, you know, we need help. That's true. We need help from the state. We need help from the federal government.

Zach Iscol: But I'm very proud of the way the city has come together on this. But there's also like little moments, you know, we had this terrible fire uptown, we had to open up a service center to help the families, you know, give the families a place to stay while we are waiting to place them into shelters with the Red Cross.

Zach Iscol: And I looked down and the vice principal at this school wasn't wearing shoes. And I was like, where are your shoes? She'd given her shoes to one of the victims of the fire. She's off her own feet. You know, earlier that morning, the guy that ran the bodega up the street from the fire, was giving out free coffee to all the first responders and everybody working at the fire.

Zach Iscol: And so I think, you know, sometimes work on big things, you know, But I think one of things I love about city government, one of things I love about emergency management is you also get to just see the impact of your work firsthand and you really

get to see the best in people, even during some of the worst moments, but you get to see it brings out the best in people in the way that New Yorkers step up to serve each other.

Belinda French: You know, speaking about challenges, our agencies have worked in close partnership to provide humanitarian relief to Ukraine. And, you know, together we donated hospital beds, emergency food rations, water and just so much more to the Ukrainian government. Given your own experience as a veteran, what has it been like to know that your work is helping the people on the ground in the Ukraine who are just, you know, they're courageously defending their freedom?

Zach Iscol: Yeah, it's meaningful and it's meaningful that we could be a part of it. You know, I will not. I mean, look, there's been a lot of phone calls where I've had to call your commissioner, Dawn Pinnock, and they're like, you know, hey, she always picks up the phone. It doesn't matter what time of day it is. And she always just says, "What do you need?"

Zach Iscol: And we got it. You know, whether it was donations to Ukraine, whether it was you know, we had some water issues in the fall at the Riis Houses. Right. We were, you know, sending water out of our warehouses, Dawn just stepped up. And, you know, DCAS is here to help. What do you need? Right. We will get it.

Zach Iscol: We'll get this, too. You opened up the warehouse facility on a weekend, it was a long weekend and she just makes it happen. And so, it's you know, it's good to know New Yorkers are stepping up. And I will never forget when we were sending off the first group of trailers, the mayor said, you know, "when bombs fall in Ukraine, we feel them here in New York" because it's such an international city.

Zach Iscol: Right. You know, we have a vibrant Ukrainian community here. And so, it's you know, when you're a New Yorker and it's not just about what we're doing for the people of Ukraine. We're doing this for New Yorkers because so many Ukrainians are New Yorkers.

Belinda French: Absolutely.

Nick Benson: So, most of our conversation has focused on some pretty heavy stuff. But I'd also like listeners to get a better sense of Zack Iscol the person. So, what are some of your interests outside of work?

Zach Iscol: I have five interests outside of work.

Nick Benson: Exactly five?

Zach Iscol: Exactly five. The first one is my wife, Meredith. Nobody knows what she's doing with me. She is way too kind, way too beautiful, way too hardworking, way too successful. But she's everything to me. And then we have four amazing children, Eloise, my stepdaughter, who is perfect. We are very, very lucky to have a 17-year-old daughter who is doesn't give us any of the teenage nonsense.

Zach Iscol: And then we have three little ones, an eight-year-old boy, seven-year-old girl, and an almost four-year-old boy. And as the eight-year-old boy who is a wonderful boy, but he can get into a little bit of trouble. But when he does, he always reminds me that the reason he does is because he has my genes and that the reason Eloise doesn't ever get into is because she does not have my genes.

Zach Iscol: So, he loves throwing that one out there. But I you know; my life is pretty boring. I'm either with my children and my family. I'm at work.

Nick Benson: Not a lot of free time.

Zach Iscol: There's not a lot of free time. But I will say that the best piece of advice I got years ago was I had a chance to have a drink with a guy named Kip Fulks, who was at the time the CEO of Under Armour and it was must have been a little over eight years ago because Wolf had just been born.

Zach Iscol: My eight-year-old and, you know, Kip was giving me some advice on being a dad. And he said the one piece of advice I can get you, he said, I travel 150 days out of the year. I make it to Tubby time, 200 days out of the year to make it home to Tubby

time. And I think it's, you know, one of the sort of things that, you know, I talk about emergency management is, you know, family first always, you know, whether it's a loved one who is sick, whether you need to make it to a school recital, whether it's whatever it is, your mom's in town and need to go get dinner with her. Take that time because you do not necessarily get it back.

Belinda French: So, this is a question that I've pondered before, but if you could have dinner with any historic figure, who would it be and why?

Zach Iscol: What was your answer?

Belinda French: Maya Angelou.

Zach Iscol: Okay.

Belinda French: Because I have all of her books. And yeah, I idolized her. I met her and I cried when I met her, she looked at me like I was crazy. Yes. But yes, I would love to have dinner with her.

Zach Iscol: Amazing. Yeah. What's your answer, Nick?

Nick Benson: I would probably go with Abraham Lincoln. So many questions about how he held the country together. And he's a fascinating figure. And I think our best president.

Zach Iscol: Yeah. You know, I was going to go with Abraham Lincoln, but I think I there's so many you know, I mean, it's sort of like any historical figure. Who do you choose, you know, do you go with somebody from the ancient world, you know, and it just sort of out of curiosity, maybe a forgotten figure from history, right?

Zach Iscol: Somebody from, you know, somebody that did the cave paintings in France, you know, like why were they doing that? What were they inspired by? You know, somebody like, you know, Teddy Roosevelt, you know, getting a sense of just

where did all his energy come from? You know, the books he wrote, what it was like being police commissioner of New York City.

Zach Iscol: You know, So I think there's I don't know how I would choose exactly just one. I'm going to have a lot of dinners.

Nick Benson: It's too many to count. So, we have one final question for you. I don't know how much time you have given the demands of your job to read, but what's the best book you've ever read and why so?

Zach Iscol: This is also a hard one to answer. I think one of the books that in college, the book that really stuck with me was A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man by James Joyce. And there's a point in that book where he becomes an artist and it's even changed the voice. And he goes from the third person to the first person.

Zach Iscol: But there's a change in tone and it's like a famous sort of phrase. And similarly, there's a book called Barbarian Days by William Finnegan, who was a writer here in New York, and it's about him growing up surfing in California and Hawaii. And then he takes this epic surf trip around the world and he's surfing, and I surf. Now that I'm in emergency management, I can't surf.

Zach Iscol: Like, not a good look. If there's a coastal storm coming in New York City and the emergency management commissioner is out there surfing in the Rockaways. But, you know, he took this this epic trip around the around the world. And it was sort of in the late 60s, early 70s. He's traveling to places a lot of people haven't been. Surfing is sort of it's a thing, but it's not like an international thing the way it is now.

Zach Iscol: And towards the end of a surf trip, he ends up in South Africa and he has no money and he's sort of broke. He wants to continue surfing and continue this trip. And so, he takes a job in apartheid South Africa, teaching in one of the chancy towns. And for him it's a similar transition. Whereas for Joyce it was becoming an artist.

Zach Iscol: For him, it was leaving behind these barbarian days of being just a surfer traveling around the world where he really became a citizen. And he really sort of, you

know, started to become, you know, focus on work in South Africa. And so, becoming a writer and reporter, I think a reporter here in New York. But it was that transition and so and it's also just a beautifully written book and story.

Zach Iscol: So, I think I'm going to go with barbarian days.

Nick Benson: That's a good choice. So, Commissioner, this was a great conversation. We're so pleased to chat. Nothing but the best of luck and good wishes all in your continued work at Emergency Management. So, thanks for joining us today.

Zach Iscol: Thanks so much for having me. This has been great.

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