

As a Colorado Springs firefighter, PJ Langmaid works to save lives and property in the city he has chosen to serve.

As a member of the Black Forest Fire Rescue Protection District board of directors, his goal is the same for the community he has chosen as his home.

When Langmaid was a youth growing up in Boston, he worked in construction; surrounded by a crew made up of firefighters. That, he figures, sparked his interest in becoming a firefighter himself.

"Interestingly, all those guys suggested I not get into the profession because of the number of firefighters that were dying in the line of duty during their careers," Langmaid said. So he said he waited quite a while before becoming a volunteer EMT and then a volunteer firefighter.

Those volunteer years were spent in Wyoming. He asked the chief of the department where he was volunteering to recommend a place in the Rockies to pursue a career in firefighting, and the instant reply was the Colorado Springs Fire Department, headed then by Manny Navarro.

"Manny had a phenomenal reputation," Langmaid said. So it was off to Colorado Springs, where he has been a firefighter for 14 years.

He bought a house in Black Forest in 2008, attracted by the trees and the distance from the city. But he lost that home in the Black Forest fire five years ago. He was off-duty that day and fought in vain to save his home, risking his life in the process.

It was a trauma that, on top of other life-threatening situations he has faced as a firefighter, eventually led to a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder.

"That was a pretty rough time," he said; Langmaid struggled to describe that time: "I just had felt that something serious was wrong internally."

His father was a police officer; looking back, he can see how the stresses of that job affected his dad and the family. It's the same for firefighters: A 2016 report by the International Association of Fire Fighters found firefighters and paramedics experience PTSD at rates similar to combat veterans.

"It's a topic that needs to be addressed," Langmaid said. "It's probably going to be the big issue in the firehouses."

Asked if the loss of his home gave him a new appreciation of what fire victims go through, he said, "Being a 'victim' is a choice, a mindset. All people have stressors and struggles in life, we all suffer losses, but we get to choose how we allow that to affect us. What I will say is that the amount of immediate stress and grief placed upon those individuals and families is incomprehensible to anyone who has not experienced that. ... So yeah, I'd say this experience has certainly given me a perspective of what those folks go through."

Langmaid has since rebuilt, but it took much longer than he first figured. And it involved help from a surprising source. Despite his experience in construction, he had reached a low point, lacking the additional labor needed to move forward, when he was connected with a Mennonite church in Kansas that was looking for a community project. Church volunteers provided the labor to get the walls up.

"Many people no longer believe in God and they can come up with all kinds of 'logical' explanations and reasons for random coincidental occurrences. Based on my experiences in the last four years, I have no other explanation than divine providence," he said.

Langmaid was elected to the five-person Black Forest Fire Rescue Protection District Board in May 2014, the year after the fire. He was on the board during a tumultuous time, with public disagreements between Sheriff Terry Maketa and Black Forest Fire Chief Bob Harvey over the handling of the fire and Harvey's departure from the post in summer 2014. At one point, Harvey said he had resigned but later he filed a lawsuit alleging wrongful termination.

Today, Bryan Jack is Black Forest's fire chief and "the level of professionalism is at an all-time high," Langmaid said. But that doesn't mean there aren't issues.

"Like every other public safety agency, it is a struggle to fund the operations of the department," Langmaid said. "The salaries and benefits are not sufficient to keep "talented and professional quality employees," he said. As a result of that and other pressures, such as "rapid and explosive growth" in the community, the district will be seeking voter approval this fall for a mill levy increase. The district, which covers about 50 square miles, currently serves about 10,000 residents.

Langmaid recently became chairman of the board. It's a role that, for him, comes with a the buck-stops-here attitude.

"As the chairman, it is ultimately my responsibility for any failures of the board," he said. "If we don't communicate a need to the public sufficiently, then that is on me for not ensuring we have been effective."