

Rip Esselstyn:

Today, I want to share an open letter that I've written to first responders across the globe. As we all know, today is September 11th, a day that none of us will forget. And as we wind down season two of the Plant-Strong podcast, which is dedicated to those with the heart of a hero, it just makes sense to honor all of you emergency first responders who serve on the front lines whenever any of us call for help. And I'm sure that each and every one of us remembers exactly where we were on 9/11.

Rip Esselstyn:

I was at Fire Station 1, and we were doing a big station cleanup when we were all called to the kitchen, and on the kitchen TV, we watched in absolute dismay and horror as the second airplane hit the South Tower, about 10, 15 minutes after the American Airlines flight hit the first tower. And then we huddled around that TV and watched in disbelief as over the course of the next hour and a half both the towers crumbled and fell to the ground. And little did we know that 343 firefighters were going to lose their lives, 72 police officers, and well over 2,500 civilians. And I can remember walking around for the next several weeks in a state of numbness and not, in any way, shape or form understanding exactly what had happened.

Rip Esselstyn:

But on this day, every year, we want to think of you, you first responders and the sacrifice that you make for others. And lately with what's going on right now in California with the wild land fires, it's a testament to how every day you guys and you gals are always put to the test and you never know what's around the corner.

Rip Esselstyn:

Looking ahead for a second, next week, you're going to hear a very candid conversation that I had with three of New York City's bravest firefighters as we close out the season. And you're going to learn from these everyday heroes who are stepping out of the current paleo and keto culture and making waves by doing something as simple and yet profound as deciding to put plants at the end of their fork, instead of animal products and animal byproducts and the the kickback that they are getting at their firehouses.

Rip Esselstyn:

I also want to remind you all that the number one cause of in the line of duty deaths for firefighters is heart disease. It's not smoke inhalation. It's not fire. It's not accidents on the way to emergency scenes. It is heart attacks, and I want you to think about that for a second, because in a job that faces risk and potential harm on every call, isn't it crazy that it's the effects of the standard American diet that are more dangerous to these everyday heroes than anything else?

Rip Esselstyn:

And I think that the irony is that as you guys and gals are answering the call to any of us who need to be rescued, ultimately, it's you that are in the midst right now of an internal fight against chronic western disease. That with many of you is starting to ravage you at a cellular and molecular level. And you are currently, you're living in a culture that is doing almost nothing to make the healthy choice the easy choice.

Rip Esselstyn:

In fact, I would argue it's just the opposite. They are doing everything in their power to call you out when you try and make the healthy choice. To ridicule you, to berate you, to harass you. And because that's the case, you have to have some serious convictions that what you're doing is the right choice. It's the healthy choice. And as we all know, it checks every box when it comes to being healthy for yourself, healthy for the planet and the smart, ethical choice with the animals.

Rip Esselstyn:

But instead, you're trying to rise above and what you're fire fighting brothers and sisters are trying to do is they're trying to pull you back down into the pit of indulgent and unhealthy food. That's what they're trying to do. And when you're in the firefighter culture, the bond is so intense because you are going on these amazing, sometimes harrowing, horrific, exciting 911 calls and so the bonds that happen between you are intense. And then on top of that, you're also living together, typically for 24 hours or 48 hours at a time in the firehouse.

Rip Esselstyn:

So this truly is your second family, and eating almost becomes a rite of passage at the firehouse where you sit down together at the dinner table, at the breakfast table, at the lunch table. You break bread and you celebrate the calls you've made. You have therapy over the calls you've made and you try and figure it all out together as a family. But the irony is that after years of eating this way, this standard American diet starts to take its toll. And we all come out of the fire Academy in the best shapes of our lives, and then slowly but surely, year after year, most firefighters' health starts to take a serious nose dive, and it's little wonder.

Rip Esselstyn:

You live in this toxic food culture where the unhealthy choice is the easy choice. You're also being pressured to eat this way. It's almost this let's see who can eat the most of this unhealthy food mentality. And so I would say each year in the fire department, on average, most firefighters gain between five to 10 pounds. And so you have these firefighters that were once at the top of their game when they came out of the fire academy, who are now hypertensive. They have hypercholesterolemia, prediabetes, and all these things are starting to stack and add up. And I want you to know that it's like this in firehouses across the globe and even in Austin, Texas. And that's how we all got started, in fact, at Fire Station 2 in 2003.

Rip Esselstyn:

So let me just give you a little history of how that transpired and how that went down. So I joined the Austin Fire Department in 1997, September of 1997. Before that, I had been a professional triathlete for 10 years, gallivanting all across the globe, swimming, biking, and running. And at some point, I decided it was time for me to get a real job, and that's when I was fortunate enough to get on with the Austin Fire Department.

Rip Esselstyn:

I came out after six months of the fire academy. Four months was fire suppression school, and two months was getting our EMT certifications. I came out to Fire Station 1, which is in the heart of Downtown Austin. It is the Animal House of the fire stations. There's two engines, a fire truck and an EMS unit. So at any given point in time, there's 14 to 17 firefighters and EMS personnel. I was also part of the water rescue team there, which was great.

Rip Esselstyn:

But after four and a half years of the tone going off incessantly between midnight and 7:00 AM, it was time for a change. And so myself and Josh and JR and Scott, we actually all went over to Fire Station 2, on the C-shift. And Station 2, it's nestled right next to the University of Texas campus. It's called a one horse station. There's just the one engine there and it's a 1936 two door firehouse with the fire pole, and the variety of calls that we made there was really fantastic. And one night we were sitting out on the porch and we had this little bet to see who was the healthiest of all of us, and we decided that whoever had the highest cholesterol was definitely out of the running.

Rip Esselstyn:

So we drove the unit down, we got tested, we all got pricked, and JR had the highest cholesterol at 344 milligrams per deciliter. And as you all know, that is astronomically high. It puts him in a whole nother category when it comes to elevated cholesterol. And we came to find out that he had a horrendous family history of men in his family dying before the age of 51 from heart attacks. And so in an act of solidarity, JR, myself, Scotty, Josh, and Derek, we all decided that we would start eating the way I had been eating, Plant-Strong. And we started with lunches and then we moved from lunches to dinners and then lunches and dinners to breakfast, and then lunches, dinners, breakfast, and then lunch again.

Rip Esselstyn:

And the reason I say that is because we work a 24 hour shift. We come in at noon and then we get off at noon the next day. So we're at 24 on, 48 off. And so we started by making these healthy wraps. We call them the almighty healthy Engine 2 wrap, and it was a whole grain wrap. And inside it, we put brown rice, black beans, bell peppers, sauteed mushrooms. And then on top of it, we would put either a green salsa verde, a red salsa or a red marinara sauce. And that was usually our go-to lunch every shift.

Rip Esselstyn:

And then for dinners, we started making pizzas. We would roll our own whole grain crust, and then on top of that, we'd do either barbecue sauce or spinach hummus or a red marinara. And on top of that, we'd do sun dried tomatoes and roasted corn and black beans, broccoli, spinach, onions, mushrooms. We'd do fajitas, and instead of doing beef fajitas, we would do butter squash fajitas. We would do Tempeh or tofu or portobello mushroom with all the fixings, onions, bell peppers, salsa, guacamole on corn tortillas.

Rip Esselstyn:

We would make our own burgers made from black beans and beets and brown rice on a whole grain bun with sauteed onions and caramelized mushrooms. And we would do our own ice cream made from, instead of Blue Bell Ice Cream, we would freeze mangoes and blueberries and bananas and we'd put them in a blender and we'd make our own frozen sorbets. So it was delicious and we absolutely adored it. And for breakfast, we would do whole grain pancakes or we'd do steel cut oatmeal, migas españolas made from tofu. And we were loving it and it became a tradition for us to start eating this way.

Rip Esselstyn:

It filled us up, it made us feel fantastic, and it was dropped dead cheap. And so when you're eating and that's how you feel about it, there's nothing not to like about it, and so we didn't care what all the firehouses said. They ridiculed us, they made fun of us. They belittled us. And you know what we said?

We said, "Bring it on, do your worst, go for it, because you can't touch us. We love what we have and you're not taking it away." And they didn't, and in fact, these guys at the firehouse, they morphed from medical time bombs to healthy superheroes. And so what happened is there's this juxtaposition between what we were doing and the status quo.

Rip Esselstyn:

Most firefighters, especially in Texas, that's the land of beef, are eating lots of beef. But because we were bucking the trend and we did something as crazy as just bear down on plants, we got a lot of media attention. And so the New York Times did a front page article on the Metro section. CBS Sunday Morning did a segment on a bunch of firefighters eating a bunch of plants. NPR did as well. And we, again, I just can't tell you how much we loved and adored being different and bucking the trend and going against the status quo.

Rip Esselstyn:

And JR decided to do this, not only at the firehouse, but also at his house. And so 28 days later, JR went back to the lab and got tested and his cholesterol dropped from 344 to 196. So it dropped almost 150 points in less than a month and he dropped about 14 pounds. Felt fantastic, was sleeping better than ever, had no more gastrointestinal distress. So all good things. And after all the media caught wind of this, I was solicited to write a book about the escapades that we were having at Fire Station 2. And so at some point I decided, you know what? I'm going to write this book, I can do it, and I spent two years writing the book and I had all these pilot studies to show the efficacy of what happens when people eat this way.

Rip Esselstyn:

And the book came out in February of 2009. It immediately became a New York Times Bestseller for several weeks. And when you get that kind of attention, certain organizations and groups don't like it, and that's what happened with the Texas Beef Council. They caught wind of what was going on with the Engine 2 diet and they wrote a letter and sent a representative to every firehouse in Austin, Texas, all 42 firehouses. And they presented every firehouse with a letter that said, "In light of the Engine 2 diet book, we want to present you, America's heroes, with these gifts, and know that nobody should be deprived of red meat." And so they gave every firehouse a fully cooked beef brisket, a how to cook beef cookbook, 100 different recipes, all these posters that had different cuts of beef on it. A, I love beef apron, and all these barbecue barbecuing tools and lighters.

Rip Esselstyn:

And a couple days later, I got at least 50 phone calls from firefighters basically saying, "Hey, Rip, thanks for writing the book. We loved all the presents that we got from the Texas Beef Council. Write another book because we would love to get more presents."

Rip Esselstyn:

Well, I've since written three more books, but I actually retired from the fire department in 2009 after the success of the Engine 2 Diet and realizing that I could help a lot of people and save a lot more lives as a full-time crusader for the advancement of all things plant-based and something as simple as what we put at the end of our fork. And so I've written three more books. This is my full time occupation now. And since I've left the station, I now have gotten literally hundreds upon hundreds of letters and emails

from firefighters around the globe who are fighting back after prediabetes, after a heart attack and they're now turning plants in an effort to get a second chance.

Rip Esselstyn:

A second chance at not losing their job, the most prized job on the planet. A second chance at having their health, their number one asset given back to them. And I've seen countless numbers of men and women who have dedicated their lives to saving others, but they've neglected the most important person in the room, and that's themselves. Because they have either not been given this information or they've been drawn into the allure and the false promises of the keto and paleo, and the new kid on the block, the carnivore diets. And all this ridiculousness, it has to stop.

Rip Esselstyn:

It's time that we take a hard look at the science, and when you look at the science, you'll realize the only program that's going to slow down, halt, and reverse heart disease is whole food plant-based. The only program that is going to slow down, stop, and in many cases, reverse prostate cancer and breast cancer is whole food plant-based. The only program that has been shown to actually stop insulin resistance and reverse type 2 diabetes is whole food plant-based.

Rip Esselstyn:

Let's go with the science and let's not go with the bro science. And there's so much noise, there's so much distraction out there, and just know that it's all another fool's errand and it's going to end in a dead end and it's not going to be doing you or your health ultimately any favors. And it is my mission at Plant-Strong to educate and to empower people to take back their health. To get back in the driver's seat and to be your own hero.

Rip Esselstyn:

We want everyone to experience the benefits of living Plant-Strong and to learn you do not have to accept type 2 diabetes or high blood pressure or high cholesterol as your fate. Your genes don't mean jack squat. Each and every one of you can trump your genes with the power of Plant-Strong nutrition.

Rip Esselstyn:

In fact, we now know that you can turn off cancer promoting genes and turn on cancer preventing genes in as little as three months with a whole food plant-based diet. You can turn it around and I want you to know it's never ever too late. And of course, I want this for absolutely everyone, but today, I especially want this for you, my firefighting brothers and sisters.

Rip Esselstyn:

So my call to action to all first responders is to be brave, to be bold, to take the plunge. Don't wait until you're prediabetic or have chest pains to see the light, make the change by putting yourself first. It'll be worth it more than you ever dreamed possible, and this way you'll be able to rescue so many more people in your life, especially when you're the best, strongest and fittest version of you.

Rip Esselstyn:

And because today is September 11th, I want to share with you that late last year, I was in New York City, visiting members of the New York City Fire Department, including Joe Inga, who as you'll maybe

recall was the heart of season one of the Plant-Strong podcast. And he insisted that there was no way in the world that he could ever complete a triathlon, that it was something that he dreamed about, but nothing that he thought he could do.

Rip Esselstyn:

And so that was our challenge to Joe, to become not only Plant-Strong, but also to end the season by finishing a triathlon. And by goodness gracious, that's exactly what Joe did. And while I was in New York, Joe invited me to visit some other firefighters while I was there, and you're going to hear more of that conversation that I had with them at the New York City Fire Academy next week.

Rip Esselstyn:

Today, though, I want to share a special moment with you that I had with another firefighter. This is a Yonkers firefighter. He was featured on season one of the Plant-Strong podcast. He's also a Plant-Strong Ironman triathlete. His name is Kevin Duffy, and while I was there, he took me down to visit where the Twin Towers used to be and to see the 9/11 Memorial and the Freedom Tower, and it was much more powerful than I ever dreamed. The energy that was there, just the vibe that was there. And I absolutely knew that it was going to be moving to see the Memorial and to read the names of the close to 3,000 people that were etched in the memorial who lost their lives that day and to hear the water flowing over the fountain.

Rip Esselstyn:

But it was Kevin's personal 9/11 story that was by far the most moving, because both Kevin's father and his brother worked in the towers. And unfortunately, his brother was in one of the towers that day, and fortunately his father was delayed getting to work that day. But you're going to hear Kevin's story of that morning while he also gives me a tour of the memorial. And we're going to end with a few moments of the water running over the fountain on a day that none of us will ever forget.

Rip Esselstyn:

Is this the pool?

Kevin Duffy:

So these are the pools, these are the footprints of where the previous buildings stood.

Rip Esselstyn:

Wow. I've never been here.

Kevin Duffy:

No?

Rip Esselstyn:

No. No.

Kevin Duffy:

Oh, It's pretty amazing.

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Rip Esselstyn:

So when you say this is the footprint of where both of them, or is this just one of them right here?

Kevin Duffy:

No, this is one. There's an identical pool straight across that we can go check out.

Rip Esselstyn:

Wow.

Kevin Duffy:

So you'll see actually my brother's name is right here.

Rip Esselstyn:

Oh, man. How often do you come down here?

Kevin Duffy:

I usually come down about once a year if I'm in the area.

Rip Esselstyn:

And can you tell me again, your brother was in which tower?

Kevin Duffy:

He was in tower two, which is considered the South Tower. Tower one was the North Tower. He worked on, the company he worked for is Keefe, Bruyette & Woods. It was an investment bank firm, and they were on 88 and 89. So the second tower that was hit and they were hit and that was hit below where he was. It was hit more in the 50s and the 50s. It was the second tower hit, but it was the first one that fell. So the other one burned and stood longer, but was hit higher.

Kevin Duffy:

But, yeah, I was the last one to speak to him too, which is ... I got him on, the cell phone coverage back then, it got all jammed up everybody calling, and I call. I was in my dorm. I was in my townhouse in campus housing in college and was just on redial, redial. I was the last one to get through to him probably.

Rip Esselstyn:

Did you actually-

Kevin Duffy:

I spoke to him for about 30 seconds.

Rip Esselstyn:

Seriously?

Kevin Duffy:

Yeah, about-

Rip Esselstyn:

After the plane hit?

Kevin Duffy:

After the plane hit. So the first plane hit the other tower and he sent an email saying, "Something happened, that they said it was an explosion or they didn't know what it was, transformed or the building shook." And people started turning on the news. I was in class, so I saw the email later. And then when the second one hit, everyone started making phone calls. And he didn't say where he was or what he was doing, but I was the only one that got through to him, and the building came down probably 10 minutes later.

Rip Esselstyn:

Can you remember what you guys talked about in those 30 seconds?

Kevin Duffy:

Yeah. I was like, "Dude, what's up? What are you doing?" And you could just hear the panic in his voice and the commotion in the background. He was like, "I'm fine." He's like, "I don't know what's going on." And but he was like, "I'm good." He's like, "I can't talk right now. I got to go." And just hung up.

Rip Esselstyn:

Wow.

Kevin Duffy:

So it was a quick ten second conversation.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Well, how fortunate you got to connect one last time and hear his voice. And how much older was he than you?

Kevin Duffy:

He was four years older. He was 23 at the time. So he'd been out of college about a year and a half and just started working down on Wall Street. He worked for my father, actually. My dad was on the West Side Highway on his way to work. So he missed the whole thing.

Rip Esselstyn:

And do you know how many names are there?

Kevin Duffy:

There's, it's 20-

Rip Esselstyn:



It's close to three-

Kevin Duffy:

It's close to 3,000. I think it's 2,000, maybe 900 between the towers, the two planes ... The four planes, really, if you count Shanksville and the Pentagon and the people in the Pentagon. So they honor the plane and the Pentagon and everybody here, encompassing everyone in this memorial.

Kevin Duffy:

So it's cool to have you here though, because you've inspired me in my life as an adult. So I appreciate you coming down and it's cool to get to show you this.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah, this has-

Kevin Duffy:

Because you've been a big part of my life for the last four years and helping me find purpose and passion to live and be an athlete.

Rip Esselstyn:

Yeah. Well, thank you.

Kevin Duffy:

Because he was an athlete, he was. My older brother kicked my ass in everything, taught me, "Toughen up, run, workout, lift." He used to track what I was eating and how to be better.

Rip Esselstyn:

Was he tall and good looking like you?

Kevin Duffy:

He was good looking, but he didn't get as tall as me and my oldest brother, Brian. So I'm 6'2. My brother's 6'2. Chris was 5'9, 5'10 on a good day.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right, right.

Kevin Duffy:

And he hated that, that I sprouted up past him in high school.

Rip Esselstyn:

I bet.

Kevin Duffy:

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And he was so, he was the hardest working guy because he had the least gifted talents, but he made up for it in heart.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right. Well-

Kevin Duffy:

I think he would have been on-board with this whole movement too. He definitely would have been a big part of this lifestyle for sure and spreading the message and helping others.

Rip Esselstyn:

Well, thanks for bringing me down here. Thanks for sharing this with me, and we're all in this together. Yeah.

Kevin Duffy:

Yeah. I appreciate it. I appreciate you.

Rip Esselstyn:

Right back at you. Thank you.

Kevin Duffy:

Thank you.