

Season 8, Episode 3 – Responsible Stewardship with Benny Braden, Jr.

Joey - Hey, everyone. We are live on the Overland Podcast. My name is Joey. They call me the Professor sometimes. Most of the time. Actually, all the time. And I'm here with my co-host and personal mechanic, Tony from Bats Off-Road. Tony, good to see you. Good to see you, buddy. How are you? I see the Jeep behind you. How's it going? How's the death wobble?

Tony - It's... I don't know, making some improvements, but it's not cured. I'm going to have to do a pretty significant upgrade, I think.

Joey - So, it's not like, is it still death wobble? Is it like coma wobble now? Is it better?

Tony - Yeah, it's a little bit better. I mean, so the last trip of coming back from that snow trip two weeks ago with Benji and Caleb, I had a pretty good, pretty significant instance there where it was wobbling really bad. And when I got home, I kind of started thinking, you know, my steering wheel was crooked, you know, after, I think after being in the ditch, that little stretch there, I think I threw the, threw it out of alignment. So, I took it and had it aligned the other day and they straightened the steering wheel. So, it seems to be doing a little bit better, but it's not cured.

Joey - Oh yeah. I know it's not cured. At least you don't have just one Jeep issue. That's what I always say.

Tony - Yeah. Well, you know, I did figure out, the other day what my electrical issue is on my wife's Jeep. Yeah. Well, that's good. Yeah. Got the, got the loose ground fixed.

Joey - So, we'll talk about that again in another two weeks and see what's going on. Yeah. Oh, I hope everybody's having a wonderful week and enjoying the cold. The snow is gone, and it is just cold. Well, the snow is gone for us, but if you're down in the Gulf, holy cow, a hundred years of not having any snow, and y'all are getting pounded right now. I hope you're enjoying that. I've been seeing pictures of people on Facebook and Instagram down there in Mississippi, Houston, all the way over to Florida. Destin, Pensacola, all over. Outrageous. And we were talking earlier about the – we know somebody that's hiking the Florida Trail right now too, and I don't know how far north he is, but I hope he packs some warm clothes because if not, I know it's a little out of – out of season for the snow in Florida, but

Tony - Hey, I'm pretty sure most of his outfit, his, pack out right now consists of shorts. So, I guarantee its shorts and t-shirts and that's kind of what you expect when you're in Florida too.

Joey - Yep. But, my goodness, it's getting, it was getting to the point this weekend where my heater couldn't keep up. I was having to, you know, we set it on 70 and it would get up to like and it would just be working itself to death. And we had all the, all the doors open underneath the cabinets and water running. And it was just outright bitter cold. But hey, today was the first time in eleven years working at a school that I actually took a heater outside and stood by the heater. I did not leave the heater. I had heated gloves. I had my face covered. I'd have to pull my face shield down and drink my coffee.

Tony - Well, you've lost all that insulation.

Joey - Well, I'll tell you what, there's skinny problems. There are fat problems and there's also skinny problems.

Tony - Yes, there is.

Joey - So, I had on layer after layer after layer after layer. And my wife got me these heated gloves and they are absolutely to die for. I love them. You punch this button and it heats up. But she knows how much that I get on my phone and I text and stuff. So, she got me the ones that don't have thumbs. And it's amazing when everything is heated but one little thing. And that one little thing can like drive you insane is how cold it is. My thumbs. It took like till ten o'clock today before I could feel my thumbs. It was just unreal.

But anyway, hey, I'm excited about our guest this evening as we do this live recording of this show. So, if you're watching or listening, you might want to be. thinking of some questions because I really want to pick this guy's brain. He just looks like he's got story after story after story. We may be ahead of midnight. Who knows? But we have with us here Benny Braden Jr. Benny, thank you for coming on the show. I am so excited to have you here.

Benny - Yes, sir. Thank you for having me.

Joey - Well, you can find him on Instagram personally @therealbennybraden and also see what's going on with his organization he founded called Responsible Stewardship. So, before we get into Responsible Stewardship, I want to. I want to get to know you a little bit better.

Benny - Sure.

Joey - We've only talked a couple times via message, and this is our first face-to-face. And although we're hundreds of miles away, this is about as best as we can do right now. But you're from East Tennessee, right? Born and raised.

Benny - I am. Born and raised. Still there. I'm still here. I... I grew up in a house that was roughly seven miles from the hospital I was born in. And I live roughly six to seven miles from the house I grew up in. And this is the first house I ever bought.

Joey - Are you in the what they call the Appalachians?

Benny - You could sort of call it that. I'm in the East Tennessee Valley. I'm on the west side of the East Tennessee Valley. So much so that in in twenty minutes I can be in the central time zone, which is right at the edge of the Cumberland Plateau. Yeah, so I'm right there on I-40 where I-40 drops off. Now I'm the first little town you come to called Harriman. I'm just outside of that town.

Joey - I've been over there quite a few times. That part of Tennessee is huge for motorcycles. It is. We would go over there and ride the tail of the dragon and do the Cherahola Skyway. That's a little bit west of you, but that kind of starts where everybody would go.

Benny - Yeah. Actually, that's a little bit east of me. I'm in Rome county so that would be in Blunt county uh and we got Loudon in between us but there's an of another little I forget what they call it the Devil's Triangle, yeah.

Joey - Yeah, I think that's around a prison or something.

Benny - Yeah, it goes through Anderson County, Morgan County, that deal. That goes up a mountain that my family was from. And so right off of that road is Braden's flat. And that's where the blood gets really thick. That's where they manufacture Braden's at right there.

Joey - Well, I'll tell you, I had a, my motorcycle broke down over there one year. and we were just out in the middle of nowhere just east of Tellico Plains. We were just sitting here I might I mean on this little two-lane highway this little story of mine and on this little two-lane highway and a buddy of mine stopped while the rest of the guys went and got a trailer. These people from up the hill they had this little uh just little log cabin and they were like hey y'all need some help? I was like well we're waiting on a we're waiting on somebody to bring the trailer back. And they said, come on up. We got dinner cooked. You can come on in here. And I mean, just the nicest people. And we walk into their house, and this guy was a machete and hatchet collector. And there was machetes and hatchets everywhere. And all of a sudden, I had this feeling like, these people are going to kill me. But, I mean, they were just the nicest people. It was a very cool experience.

Benny - Yeah, that Devil's Triangle is where I learned how to drive a straight shift. And way back then, we had a lot of coal mines, so there was a lot of coal trucks on that windy little road. So, half the time they were in your lane. You know, so that was kind of a learning experience. It was a trial by fire, I guess.

Joey - Well, I read where you spent a lot of time as a kid on your grandparents' farm. And that's where you cultivated your love for the outdoors. Is that true?

Benny - It is. They lived right on the edge of the Cumberland Plateau. And, you know, we had all these rock outcrops everywhere. cliffs and us cousins, I was the oldest out of all of our cousins And so we'd make all these little things like little club areas. We'd call them Lookout. Lookout one, two, three, four. We didn't have much of a vocabulary back then, but we did know the word Lookout. And so, on a good low humidity day, which is rare in the summertime for Tennessee, you could see the Appalachians. You could see all the way across the East Tennessee Valley. Which is really cool. But yeah. A lot of fond memories of growing up on that mountain and hearing that wind blow in the wintertime.

Joey - Yeah. Did you ever run into anybody that had a steel head out there in the woods or somebody hunting ginseng? There's been a lot of TV shows created out there, Tennessee people now.

Benny - My grandfather on my mom's side who lived at the foot of Winrock Mountain where they do all the off-road stuff. You guys are probably well aware of Winrock. Oh, yeah, Winrock, yeah. So that's the other half of my family. They lived at the very foot of it. It used to be an old cold temple there, and they lived behind it. I remember so many times going up on that mountain. you didn't have to pay to go up there. Then my dad worked coal mines up there. My other granddad was up there on the coal mines. And so, we all just, I remember going up there so many times. It was really crazy. That's what it is now. But, um, but my granddad on my mom's side, he used to hunt ginseng all the time. And I remember going to their place and he'd have a, a pan of it drying out in, in the stove, you know, that's so moonshine stills. I knew, I knew quite a few people over on new river who had moonshine stills.

Joey - That's so interesting. So interesting. I find the history of that fascinating. Of course, you were kind of on the other side of the law. You were a volunteer firefighter, rescue diver, EMT. What got you into public service?

Benny - I came across the wreck. It had just happened. In fact, the car was on its top and still moving. and I came around the corner so it had just happened I thought someone had laid it there and the wind was blowing my brain just wasn't computing what I was seeing and the closer I got to it I seen that people were still in it so I got out and of course I had no idea what to do and I had just moved here and um so I'd reached out to a cousin of mine who was with the local fire department And started volunteering and that just grew in from doing just the volunteer fire department to joining my local rescue squad and becoming an EMT and then being a rescue diver and then teaching vehicle extrication to really all the departments in the county at that time. So yeah, it kind of escalated quickly. And then I started teaching swift water rescue for the Tennessee Association of Rescue Squads, which governs every rescue squad in every county in the state of Tennessee. And so, we taught with them for quite a few, over ten years, and basically law enforcement, EMS, fire, anybody, we taught them how to do flood-type rescues safely. And so that was interesting. And then you're also on a statewide water rescue team as part of that. And a lot of fond memories, you know, doing that kind of stuff. But also, a lot of things you wish you could forget at the same time.

Joey - I'm with you. I'm right there. I'm a police officer full-time. I don't know if you know that.

Benny - I didn't know that.

Joey - I'm a police officer full-time. I've been doing those twelve years. I worked with Arkansas Department of Correction before then. I've been a volunteer fireman and been in public service for a while now. I told my wife, I said, I can't wait to visit with Benny because we have a lot in common. When I read about... about what you experienced and what you had to go through, and you started to experience some post-traumatic stress, and that's when you turned later in life back to the outdoors. And you stated to one of the people that you talked to that the outdoors was a way to let you clean off your desk. What did you mean by this?

Benny - Yeah, shortly... Shortly after I had gotten completely out of the first responder field, I had my own traumatic experience, and it set a lot of things in motion. Because until then, you know how it is. We're from the age of out of sight, out of mind, right? And so also suck it up, man up, whatever the thing was at the time. And so, you didn't talk about it. You just put it away and left. and think it's okay and I had my own traumatic experience and that released the damn of all that and it came rushing in and it's just like going through a you know slide show of everything just over and over and over. It was a few rough years for sure but I got connected with Reboot Recovery, a nonprofit out of middle Tennessee that offers, healing trauma courses for military and first responder and their spouses for free. And so, I started going through their course and I've been through it ten different times. Going for refreshers because, you know, the longest I've gone without an episode has been six sixteen hundred plus days and then I had an episode and it was a good one too. So, it's one of those things that helped me realize that this is probably something I'm never going to be able to shake but I should be taking care of myself and be doing like what I need to be doing. Keep doing these courses because it's good refresher good it took me not it took me eight times to go through it Completely. And what I mean by that is like on day, it's like a twelve-week course. You meet once a week.

So, let's say court day one. You might get into the first paragraph and something hits too close to home. Then your brain is like locked in and they're still going on with the rest of the day with the rest of the class. you're still back on page one, paragraph one. And you don't hear a single word what's going on because your mind is just dealing with what's there. And, you know, it goes on and goes on. And then

you go through the next course, the next cycle. And you go through that first class and you make it to paragraph two or three. And you're like, hey, is this a new curriculum? Like, no, we've been doing this forever. And so, it's just like, I didn't hear none of that. And that was the common theme throughout the whole thing. But yeah, I took a 17-year break from being a first responder. I'm sort of, I'm back rolling with the departments I used to roll with and then some, but in a different capacity. I've come back and now I do photography for all the departments in my county. And I do that as a way of volunteering. This is my way of giving back.

So, I basically take photos on scene. I send it to all the departments that are on scene. They use them however they want to use them, on their social media, whatever. And so, a lot of the departments are volunteer and they're nonprofits. So, if people don't know you're out doing anything, they're not going to donate. And so that's the prime reason of what I'm doing. And plus, I want to share what these men and women are doing because a lot of people don't understand what volunteer firemen have to do. They think they don't do very much. They have to go through the same training that paid departments get to do, that have to do, but they don't get paid. And they do it so their community can be better and safer and stronger. And so, I just want to share that story. I shared a story with, you know, you know, I do the EMS every once in a while, and then getting connected with different law enforcement. And one of the things I do, too. that I don't share on my social media typically is I do funerals for first responders. And when I take those images, that is just for the family and for the department. That's it. If they post something, I'll share it. But outside that, you'll never see it. But I do that as a way to honor that first responder and their family and the sacrifice that they made.

I've shot four or five funerals in the last two months. A couple for City of Oak Ridge Police Department, one for the TNC Highway Patrol, and one for Blount County Rescue Squad and then Chattanooga Fire Department. So those are tough. Those are really tough because you're seeing... you're seeing people grieve and people hurt. And then not only are you capturing that, but when you come home and you have to edit those photos and you relive it once again. And so that, those are extremely difficult. And it's one of the reasons why I'm getting back in the reboot just to keep that okay. And just cause you're witnessing so much grief, you know, but it's how I serve. And, and that's, that's important to me.

Joey - Now when you got back out in the outdoors you got into hiking. Not just normal hiking. You hit it with ground running - FKT's. You set two in a year and I looked this up because I had never heard of the great smoky mountain nine hundred miler. I wanted to know what this was. It's the most efficient route to cover all the trails in Great Smoky Mountain National Park, roughly 950 miles with 200,000 feet of elevation. I got that off the I got that off the website. Your first attempt at an FKT. You started in December. Now, for me, the mountains in December, it had to have been cold. But we talked about this earlier. Normally, your winters there aren't that cold. you completed it in 78 days.

Benny - Yeah, it was December 31st. We're going to catch the last sunrise of 2016. It was right after the Smokies fires. And so, it was nine degrees on Mount Leconte that morning. And so, I did my routes and then, you know, I'm just trying to hike as much as I can hike. Working three days a week, hiking four days a week. And then I get halfway into this thing and someone mentions FKT. So, I had to ask, what is that?

Tony - Yeah. What is that? I had no idea.

Joey - It was fastest known time.

Benny - And so I learned a little bit about it. And the lady who currently had the record and tried reaching out to her, couldn't get a hold of her. She was a little older than I am and didn't do a lot of social media at the time. I started just doing it I mean I was already on track to beat the record that she had and it really wasn't a thing in the smokies you know at that point but I started picking up so much traction and so many people started paying attention. I did it in 78 days 944 miles and it got so much attention. I couldn't go the local tv stations were all over. I had tv interviews I had I couldn't go to grocery store without someone stopping me and wanted to talk to me. People want to learn more about it but I was embarrassed about it because it did not look what a FKT is supposed to look like. I was working three days a week. You're not supposed to be doing that in an FKT. Right. So, the following fall, I came back to do it again. And this time I stayed in the woods. And I brought that mileage down to 924. And my days, I brought those down to 43 days.

The interesting story how I made my routes more efficient. The Park had already opened up more trails from the fire that were closed before and so I basically used my routes with the park map and used a software that a friend of mine had got. He worked over at one of the government plants was able a lot of municipalities will use them to map their garbage routes to make efficient. Basically, it showed where I was hiking too much and how I could reroute to trim that mileage up. And that's what I did. So, since mine, we've had... one other guy to beat my time. I held my record for three years. He came in during COVID and beat it by a few miles. And then two more friends came in and they did it as a tandem. Nancy East and Chris Ford, two good friends of mine. And they came in and did it as a tandem, which is really tough. And they beat it. They beat the Tom record. I think they did in 27 or 28 days. But their mileage record was still more than mine. My route. I still hold the mileage record. They hold the time record, which is pretty wild.

Joey - But you're one of the only two people that's ever done it in the calendar year twice.

Benny - I'm the only person that's ever done it twice.

Joey - Oh. Only person that's ever done it twice in one calendar year.

Tony - On purpose.

Benny - In any time frame, I'm the only one that's done it twice.

Tony - That's done... The FKT twice.

Benny - Yeah. There's a lot of them that's done a lot of like Sharon Spazia, the first person who had the record, I think she's like ten or twelve or thirteen, you know, maps. That's what they call them when you do one. And so, but she only did one FKT. Mine was both of my maps were FKT maps and I did them both in the same year.

Joey - That blows my mind. And if you're listening, if you don't know any major trail out there, you can go to the FKT website and it will list the people who are holding the records. And it will talk about the people who have done the records. And when you look on... the FKT for this Great Smoky Mountain, it talks about you at the very first part of it. And it talks about how you did it twice in the calendar year and how you did it. You were the very first one to do it like that. So, it's interesting.

Tony - Hang on. What was it? 924?

Joey – 924.3 miles in 43 days. And that's over 200,000 feet of elevation gain. That's every trail in great smoky mountain national park.

Tony - that is a lot and I started that map out doing for the first week because my foot was hurting so bad by the middle and end, I was having to do like some crazy, stupid stuff just to make up time. And, you know, weather's turning bad. You know, having to hike and rain and wind is blowing sideways. Snow, you name it. It's just having to deal with road closures in the park because the Great Smoky Mountain National Park loves to close roads without any notice. And so, it made it difficult. You know, if I could go back and redo it, I wouldn't.

Tony - You wouldn't.

Benny - Oh Lord. No, no. I mean, altogether I've done about 9000 miles, close to 9000 miles, all over the world and stuff like that. But, those two FKTs, you're pushing through a lot of pain. You're pushing your body through things it shouldn't be pushing through. And, you know, probably some of the issues I deal with today are from that. So it makes you wonder, was it worth it? At the end of the day, it was just hiking at the end of the day I did the FKT's just the first one to see if I could do it sounded fun you know and I'm competitive and then the second one was out of pure embarrassment. So, yeah, I peer pressured myself the second time to do it to make it look like something that it's supposed to look like

Tony - What kind of wildlife did you experience during that?

Benny - You know, I didn't see much wildlife. I'm sure much wildlife seen me. I've seen one bear each map that I did. But I'm sure a lot more bears seen me. I ran into more hogs than I did anything. Had a few hog encounters that were a little sketchy.

Tony - Yeah. Them things are crazy.

Benny - They are mean. I come around a corner too fast. One was standing right there and that hair on that thing just went straight up. I'm looking for trees to climb and there's nothing near me that I can climb. I just eased up and tried not to make direct eye contact, even though I'm keeping my eye on it. And it finally snorted and went off with twenty or thirty other hogs that was with it. But those will get your attention. And fortunately, the time of year that I did it, I didn't have to deal with snakes or bees or anything like that.

Tony - Ticks or chiggers?

Benny - None of that stuff. Worst nightmares on trails are if it's in the late fall or in the fall, you deal with the yellow jackets that are buried in the ground next to the trails. Sometimes some snakes, rattlesnakes, things like that. But outside that, you don't have to. There's really not anything else other than A hog. I don't really look at bears as a threat. I mean, you do what you're supposed to do with your food.

Tony - I got into some yellow jackets one time. I guess it was south of Pigeon Forge. What's that... There's kind of a historical place there. It's a big loop.

Joey - Cades Cove.

Tony - Cades Cove. Yeah. Did that hike back to the waterfall. And we met a couple coming back, and they said, man, there's a yellow jacket nest right in the middle of the trail, just a little way up there. Of course, we didn't really see it until we were – Yeah. And then we, we were able to run by it, and we're

fine. But on the way back, uh, as I was running past it, I got one, uh, pinched him between my thigh and my calf when I was running. Right in the back of the leg.

Benny - I'll tell you this. I'll tell you a funny story really quick. Me and a buddy of mine used to go by stick, had a blog, six blog, all that really big in the ultra-light backpacking way back in the day. And, Him and I were doing a section on the Appalachian Trail. I think the section just above Hot Springs, maybe. We're hiking along, and he's in front of me, maybe about twenty yards, thirty yards. I see him stop. I see him looking down, straight down. I see him grab his pole. Before I could say no, he stabs it. It's a yellow jackets nest in the middle of the trail. And coming out of it. So, he is curious if it was alive. It was alive. And so, they come bowling out. He takes off running. Now I have to go off trail around this thing. And, man, that was just such a wild experience. I was laughing. I was mad, but I was laughing because we survived it, you know. And it's kind of one of those things you see happening in slow motion. It's like, oh, man. Oh, God.

Joey - Well, you've done some pretty cool hikes. You did a coast to coast in Scotland. You said earlier while we were off air that you did part of the John Muir Trail. What are some of the highlights back when you were hitting the trails pretty hard? What was some of your favorites?

Benny - I've done, you know, doing the coast to coast across Scotland was really beautiful. I could do Scotland every year. I've made it three quarters of the way across Scotland the second time before hurting my foot. and then the last time I went to Scotland we just hit like the six highest peaks or some of those which was pretty cool I was still dealing with a very severe injury and on that hike was whenever I decided not to ever hike again. I was like done which I've kind of coming back off that a little bit, but it was rough. My pain level was like twelve on the scale and I don't I don't I don't have I feel like I have a very high pain tolerance. I used to get kidney stones a lot. I wouldn't know I had them until it was time to go use the bathroom. Man, I was crying with it. I was in so much pain. I took a hard fall on that trip. The rest of the crew, they're up in front of me almost a hundred yards away. Nobody has a clue I've bit the dust and I landed hard on some rocks and I'm just lying there just taking an internal inventory of what's hurt what's not. I'm feeling sorry for myself and all that good stuff but that was a rough one.

I really hate going on group hikes now because of that hike. Just a dynamic. I was hurt and ended up hiking by myself. I flew halfway across the world to go on a group hike to hike by myself. It was more of a pity party for me, but I was doing the best I could with what I had and just decided it's probably time to hang up hang up the trail runners you know. But yeah, Scotland is amazing I can do it every year

Tony - how long is that trail?

Benny – It's not a particular trail, we would just do routes across. And Scotland, they have the right to roam that. So, I mean, you can go across anybody's property. You know, you can camp and all that. You just can't be so close to their home. And you got to respect the property as you go across it. And which is amazing. Here in the United States, you go across somebody's property, you're going to get shot. And so, it's because people don't respect other people's property. But, you know, we would go through the highlands. We'd get all these little villages. And every village... has a hostel and every hostel is above a pub. So basically, you're pub to pub to pub to pub. It's really cool.

I remember one time we in Edinburgh, we stopped and had some scotch and some beers at a pub that was built in sixteen thirty something, 1635 or something. And it's just there's something about over

there this just hits differently yeah you can ride a train or bus anywhere you want to go in the country and it's just so beautiful...Yeah, Scotland's cool.

I did a group hike a few years ago in Turkey. We did 90 miles along the coast of the Black Sea in Turkey and ended in Istanbul, which was an amazing experience. People there, every little village we went into, people were bringing us food, buying us food. They were the first to say hello in their in their language and um you know we'd come across these people and they would be making tea they'd have like these kettle things and they'd make tea and they'd make us tea right on the spot. And with our group, we all bought food, but we shared all of our food. So, you got to eat a mixture of a lot of different things. So, we would have, we'd throw these potatoes into the fire and let them cook and just cut all the burnt off of the outside. And then we'd have all this smoked meat that we'd hang over the fire. Well, it was six Frenchmen, three Americans, and one Bulgarian. and the one from Bulgaria he carried a jar of moonshine made out of apricots that his grandfather made so we passed that around one night so I got to taste test that. It was really cool it was a cool experience. Definitely makes you look at humanity a lot different. I wasn't thrilled with Istanbul. It wasn't like what we were dealing with in the villages.

I've done the John Muir trail twice here in the states. Probably one of my favorite trails. I typically like to hike it in the summertime. I like doing it in August. Less mosquitoes. But basically, would do it northbound. So, I would go from my Corsi Meadows up to Whitney and then over to Yosemite and out at Happy Isle. And surrounded by granite. It's just so beautiful. You got all these lakes, which are ponds to us, but they come out there. So, every day you can jump in and take you a bath and knock off all the dirt and sweat. Yeah. And really cool experience.

The Benton Mackay Trail here in the south, it runs along with the AT for the first four hundred miles. It's pretty cool. The Bartram Trail is a nice hidden secret. It's not a secret. It's a nice little trail edge of the North Carolina, South Carolina border all the way up to tie into the AT there at Chitoo Gap or something like that. And Man, just so many different trails. Did some trails up in Alaska whenever we were up there to help film a documentary that never made it to air. Then, of course, you know, you can't forget Highline.

Highline was pretty cool. That was a good filming project. That's where I learned how to use a camera a little bit, you know. Our camera guy had an issue, so they turned around and handed me the camera, and I learned several of my images are in that film.

Joey - Well, if you scroll through your Instagram, you get a plethora of pictures that you'd like to take. Anything from old boats in Scotland to police, fire. And then you've got one that we used to advertise for the, that was one of my favorite ones. That's why I chose that one. But you've got an English chocolate lab called Hoss that you say that you're training to be a PTS service dog. How does he help you?

Benny - He is going to be trained to smell my cortisol levels. And so, whenever my cortisol levels get too high, meaning I'm being anxious or anxiety, he's to get my attention and basically divert my attention from whatever is bothering me. I think he's kind of catching picking up on it because there's a few times I'll get just a little bit anxious and he'll he watches me a lot. I got him put up in the kennel right now or he'd be walking around making a bunch of noise. He watches me. He goes into every room I go in. I can't go to the bathroom without him. I guess I need supervision. But if I'm sitting on the couch or something, he'll just plop his paw on me. You know, he's got those big old paws and he's still growing.

He's like a seventeen-month-old, sixty-pound pup, you know. So, he still has a lot of puppy in him. And so, he gets too excited when he sees other people. He sees other dogs because he thinks everybody's there to play. Trying to train him whenever his best is on, that it's time to work. When his vest is off, he can do whatever he wants to do but it's very tough um the organization I'm going through is called CAD train a dog save a warrior and so they have a division where they do first responders. They train me because I'm help training Hoss. The trainers training me in the house. It can get overwhelming for me to do some of that sometimes. Cause he's still like too excited that the trainers in the room, you know? And so that stresses me out. And so, it's just one of those things that we're, we're navigating that. And, it's, he's been doing good though without the distractions, Man, he's spot on. He follows command, does really good. Loves to travel. I've taken him out to Arizona to visit my buddy Nick and his wife Jessica and out to Tyler, Texas to visit my son. He likes to travel. Yeah, he does pretty good.

Joey - So getting out into nature. It's amazing how this progressed, in your life. You go through post-traumatic stress; you get outside and then you see how the land's being treated. And so, you went out on your own, started doing cleanups and actually helped a nonprofit called Save Our Smokies. And then that was I guess that was geared to a very specific area and you saw something that a much bigger need. And it says you created a movement called Responsible Stewardship in 2021. What did you see? What kind of need did you see that needed to be done?

Benny - Well, you know. Getting outdoors, you're basically trying to walk off the trauma, right? Just trying to clear your head, silence the noise that's going on. To answer your question from earlier, that's roughly whenever I say I'm cleaning off my desk, I imagine there's a desk in my head and it's piled up just like, if you could see my desk, you'd understand, piled up with everything. And you take one of those images out of it and you process that in order to move on and be able to file it where it needs to go because everything is just a jumbled mess. And the way the brain works with trauma, it'll cut out sections of time that are traumatizing to you. Sometimes it takes more than what it needs to. And so that's where the memory loss comes in. And I'll run into people that I don't remember, and I might have served with them for years or maybe childhood friends that I don't remember. But it helps me process some of that. And sometimes I'll get some of that memory back, like something will trigger memory. And I'm like, holy cow, I can't believe I don't even remember this person. We did all this, you know, all that together.

But while out hiking in 2020, I actually took made a quick stop in at Max Patch. and I was out in Asheville doing a tv show with some friends. I stopped there to camp overnight and University of Tennessee was having a frat party and about three hundred of their closest friends so they're rowdy closest friends and so there's a non-stop party all night long. But whenever I was there, I found a big pile of trash next to where I was camping at. Because I wasn't up on top, I was down on the lower shelf. And then later, the next day, I took a walk around and just I loaded up my truck with the truckload of trash from what I was finding. And so, from that point on, for nine weeks, I drove all the way to Maxpatch, which was two and a half hours one way. Spent several hours cleaning up. And then another two and a half hours back and I'd have a truckload of trash. And so, I did that over and over and over all the way until the end of October. College kids don't like cold very much, so it pretty much slowed down to a stop.

Tony - Wasn't as fun then, huh?

Benny - Yeah. I was making a bunch of noise, you know, on social media, as I always did. And other people were, too. The Carolina Mountain Club was doing a phenomenal job advocating for the US Forest

Service to step in and do something about this place. These kids were taking fence posts that the mountain club had put in place to protect an area and they were burning them. They were burning anything they'd get their hands on them. And they were leaving tents, they were leaving sleeping bags, they were leaving everything behind.

And so, all that just after at the end of October, I seen that winding down and a friend of mine, Jerry Willis in Knoxville was doing the same thing in the Smokies. And so, he had made a post about it. So, I reached out to him and we both decided to join forces. And we did our first cleanup in early November of 2020. We only cleaned up a mile of roadway in the park. And we had a half a truckload of trash just from that short distance. And one of the pull-offs, we stopped that to clean up. And I stepped out of the truck. I stepped in a pile of human poop. People don't, you know, go to the bathroom where they need to. And in the park, in the wintertime, late fall to early spring, they'll close most of the bathrooms in the park because seasonal employees clean those. And so, they close them. since the seasonal employees are sent home, they don't assign it to anybody else or they don't ask for extra funding from Friends of Smokies or however that dynamic is going. It doesn't work because we have seen, we have recovered that stuff in streams and ditches. parking lot after parking lot after parking lot. We've documented it. And we've been advocating for the park to keep those bathrooms open because it's a year-round park. And therefore, people are still going to go. And hopefully one of these days that'll change.

But yeah, help Jay get SOS up and running. The first year, he focused on all the legal stuff. I mean, I can tell you the legal stuff to run a nonprofit is insanely crazy. I can't imagine. I organized our cleanups. I made our logo. You can see the logo right there behind me. So, I designed our logo. And if you look on the inside of the SOS logo, it says responsible stewardship. And it was nothing but a tagline at that point. But I was basically learning. you know, that savor smokies, learning how to like organize cleanups, deal with government entities, you know, doing all this stuff. And, um, the, the following year in 2021, we organized the largest cleanup ever held in the park. SOS did. And we partnered with a lot of different organizations. So, we had over two hundred volunteers spread out over the whole park, which covers two different states. And in three hours, I think we removed like 4,000 pounds of trash throughout the whole park. And that that was just parking lots, pull offs and overlooks. That was not roadside. That's a lot of trash from just those areas and we would get in there once a month and be cleaning up and steal in our first year by the end of 2021 we had moved 10,000 pounds in a single year just from those areas.

I decided I felt like I could take this and do something bigger with it. And a lot of people felt the same way. So, we started the movement of Responsible Stewardship and by we had gained enough support to form a nonprofit. And since then, we've created partnerships with the Tennessee Valley Authority. We do a lot of lake cleanups here on Watts Bar Lake. And we've created partnerships with our county, with the Tennessee State Park System, Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Forest Service. National Park Service, because we've partnered on some of the cleanups in the Smokies since, because I'm no longer with the Save Our Smokies. But we've also done some cleanups in Cumberland Gap National Historical Park. And I mean, we've done Forest Service cleanups in Montana, California. Tennessee, North Carolina. Forest Service has been really good to work with. And it's all volunteer run. Just like Save Our Smokies, every single person's a volunteer. I'm a volunteer. I don't get paid nothing. We just held our elections, and so they voted me back in as volunteer. El Presidente and this will be my last term as president if I can have my way and because I want to see it grow and I want new blood in there. I want new ideas and that's how you get things to grow. Our vice president is Mackenzie Smith from out in Utah, a phenomenal steward. She does an amazing job. She's also a of our team leaders and I think I'm hoping that she'll

make a good president when my time has come in two years. But until then we're still going to be cleaning up and trying to do what we can for our public lands and just try to spread the word and just make people more aware.

What makes responsible stewardship different than Leave No Trace? Because, we get that a lot. We get a lot of comparisons. I bet. There is no comparison. Leave No Trace is, you know, they pay all their CEOs and everything else. We don't get paid. We're all volunteers. You pay for some of the Leave No Trace programs. You don't pay for any of our programs. All of our stuff is always free. Leave No Trace is about leaving it like you found it. Pack in what you pack out. That's what Leave No Trace is about. Don't disturb anything. Pack in what you pack out. For us, we're about leaving it better. We're about making a positive impact. Leave No Trace is about leaving a neutral impact, which is great. If everybody did that, I could sleep in. I wouldn't have to do nothing. There'd be no use for us. I hope everyone practices Leave No Trace. But until then, we got to have some people practicing Responsible Stewardship and following some of our ethics that we use. And, you know, we're all out here together and the more people we can get to do some of this stuff, the less work we have to do you know the many hands make light work.

We have to have to credit a lot of stuff that what we do um one of our board members Brian Bell from Richmond. Virginia. He runs a non-profit called Keep Virginia Cozy so we've adopted a lot of his stuff and he's really guided us along the way and help get our footing, not only with Save Our Smokies, but with RS. And he's been very influential in our success and how we do some things.

Joey - Well, I love what you're doing. And, you know, I've followed Responsible Stewardship for several years now. And I love the stats that are actually on the website. www.ResponsibleStewardship.org. I've got that scrolling across the bottom. I invite you to go look at that. There's a whole lot of information on there, a lot of free information. But since 2022, since you have become a nonprofit, you have removed 314,658 pounds of trash. And that's growing pretty much each and every day. You've organized countless cleanups. You've removed thousands of pounds of tires. And it's just amazing what you've done. And I love how you gave a comparison about Leave No Trace. Leave No Trace is pretty much just about principles, but you are actually doing something. And that's what I love.

Benny - Yeah, we're action-based. It's all about getting your hands dirty and doing the work because you lead by example.

Joey - What do you hope to see in 2025 with Responsible Stewardship?

Benny - Oh, I hope. I hope to see our program grow. New team leaders, new ambassadors all across the United States. I love to see people sharing what they're doing. And one of the things that we do, if you find an area that you want to clean up, but you don't have, the knowledge of how to do it, how do I do this? How do I pay for this? We help you through that step. If you need gloves, we'll send you gloves. If you need bags, we'll send you bags. You know, we try to support financially and with education, anybody that wants to do a cleanup in their area across the United States, we want to support that. And we want to remove the boundary of it's too expensive. Like it's going to cost me too much to dispose of it because my state requires me to pay so much for disposal and I can't afford that. We won't take care of that. We'll help pay for that.

Joey - So, what can people do to get involved and make a difference?

Benny - They can just simply find places in their community that are a little bit trashed up and start cleaning it up. If they don't know how to, we'll help teach them. If they need materials, supplies, we'll provide it. And our gloves that we send out are reusable gloves. So, they just wash them afterwards and use them again. And we'll teach them how to partner with local businesses to help support their efforts. And who knows, they might decide to start a nonprofit as well and go up into that area where they might decide to be a team leader and lead cleanups in their area. And we support that one hundred percent. You know, they got to rent a dumpster if they've got to do whatever it is. You know, we figure out how to do that and help fund it and all that stuff. At the end of the day, we want to see you active in your community. Only your community is going to be better if you get involved. You can't wait for someone else to do it because you'll never get done but that's our goal is to see our team leaders grow. We got team leaders across the country we've had people picking up trash from Patagonia and Taiwan and Scotland and just all across the us. I want to see that grow and expand and just people wanting to take back their community, you know, because here in the South, we have a problem with illegal dump sites.

That's what we focus on the most here because it has the biggest impact, negative impact on our water quality and everything else. So, we try to eliminate those. And a lot of times it's two, three thousand pounds of trash at a time. And we're having to load up trailers, trucks, everything else. And A lot of times when we find places like that, we can contact our local county government and they'll take that trash at no extra cost. We document it, show them where we found it.

And we weigh everything because we weigh everything that we pick up because we want an accurate number to share. If you look at Keep America Beautiful, nothing against them, but it's twenty pounds a bag, you know, and for us. we have rarely picked up a bag that was twenty pounds. Most of your bags are under twenty pounds. Some of them are a little more than twenty pounds. But we want an accurate number to share. Because I don't want to mislead nobody in this deal. As long as we can keep this thing all volunteer and all that, that's what we want to do. Because if you're If you're wanting to donate to RS, then you'd like to know that your donation money is going to go to what you want it to go for, not to pad a salary or whatever. There are no salaries paid here. You know, I don't even reimburse myself gas money. You know, that's my donation. And so, for me, it's I want to see that money turn around and be used for something make something used for what's supposed to be used for. We have been looking at getting a boat, but we haven't settled on that yet.

Joey - Well, I want to encourage everybody out there to visit the website. There are places on there where you can join a cleanup. There are places on there where you can get involved. They have educational material if you want to, and you can also contact them if you have questions or anything about... They'll be glad to help you and work with you and get you involved in that. I love... I love this because even in the overland community with those who are vehicle-based travel, we have dealt with this for years. Every campsite we go to is littered with trash. All the forest roads are littered with trash. And, it's one of those things that you just, you have to take the initiative out there. Instead of griping about it, do something about it. It's, you have to, and that's how you make a difference. Griping about it won't do any good. Posting about it on Facebook won't do any good. because the people who are doing it, they're not your Facebook friends so just get out there and do something about it and that's why I wanted to get on here because we can all learn from each other the smarter we are the more educated we are and the more educated we are we're motivated and if we're motivated we do things to make the world a better place For us and the next generation.

Benny - Whether you're doing overland or whether you're hiking or whether your mountain biking or whatever the outdoor sport that you're doing, if you're not taking care of that land that you're enjoying, you're just using it. You're not doing anything to take care of it. If you do nothing to take care of it, how long is it going to be around for you? If a lot of people out there are abusing it, how long is U.S. Forest Service, BLM, whoever, how long are they going to keep that area open to you? We see BLM land being shut down across the country right now, and same for U.S. Forest Service, because the land's being mistreated.

Joey - Yeah, they're so understaffed, they can't keep up with it.

Benny - And it's a slippery slope, because here we are, if we don't use it, it gets taken away. And then they end up farming it out or letting a corporation take it or selling it off or whatever. So, if we don't use it, it gets taken away. If we abuse it, it gets taken away. Those public lands are meant to be used, but used responsibly. So, it's important for us when we're out there to encourage one another to be responsible, you know, Carry out your trash. You see something on the side of the trail or whatever, stop, pick it up, carry your trash bag and haul it out.

I can't tell you how many hikes I've done where I've hauled out trash. I mean, when we were doing the Big Bear event in California, I carried a drive shaft to an ATV. I saw that. And a logging chain, ten miles. Golly. That wasn't fun. I wish I had that chain, though. But yeah, it's one of those things if you see it. If you see it, it becomes your responsibility. Yeah. If you pass it up, then you've neglected your responsibility.

But we haven't put some events on our event calendar yet. I want to try to get on there and get some events put up there. But some things to keep in mind. The first weekend in June and the first weekend in October, we have a free campout at Fall Creek Falls State Park, Middle Tennessee. You guys should join us. We're in the group campout area. It's open to all of our volunteers and anybody who wants to learn more about us. Basically, we hang out, enjoy the park. We do a cleanup on Saturday that lasts a few hours, and then you can enjoy the park however you want the rest of the weekend. It's our way and the park's way of saying thank you for coming out and volunteering. But those are some public events that, you know, all of our events are public and always family-friendly and pet-friendly. You said Fall Creek Fall State Park? Fall Creek Fall State Park. In my opinion, it is the best state park in Tennessee. It is home of the tallest waterfall east of Mississippi. Beautiful Park. Very well run. Managed really good. We've recovered some illegal dump sites on property on the outer boundaries. And so sometimes we'll go and scour the outer boundary just to make sure there's nothing there. Sometimes we'll do a hike to the bottom of the Big Falls and pull out forty pounds of trash just from the bottom of the falls. We'll do whatever. But the park, that is our home state park. That is the park we call home. They take good care of us. We try to take really good care of them. And in 2025, you're probably going to see some information about Responsible Stewardship and how you can get involved in the park and all the kiosks in that park. So that's going to be really cool to see. But yeah, we have events like that and of course the big bear event.

We partnered with Highlander USA on that deal in the summertime so we'll be out there doing what we can and of course we typically do the race to trace challenge in October where we give free prizes based on the amount of trash that you pick up. Sadly, this past October didn't go very well because we had a hurricane that nearly walked out western North Carolina and northeast Tennessee so we diverted our attention to helping our neighbors and just focused on that and just basically step you know put the

challenge on hold but we're going to do smaller challenges throughout the year and all that but um We couldn't be focused on this one thing when we have people in our community hurting. And so, we organized flood relief cleanups in Hot Springs, Marshall, Irwin, a lot of towns along the AT. And I got to do some search and rescue stuff up there, too, days prior to doing some of that with my rescue department. But it was an eye-opener. It looked like a tsunami.

Joey - Yeah, I'm sure. It was outrageous. Wow. Well, Benny, thank you so much for coming on here with us and joining us. I'm honored to meet you and honored to know you're doing great work. And we have much respect for you and responsible stewardship. The Podcast will be available for everyone on all podcast platforms. Thank you for our sponsors who make sure this show happens and everyone who supports us by listening and participating. I hope you all get outside. Have a wonderful week. And enjoy yourself and find a place and leave it better than you found it. Get involved. Don't just sit back and watch others make a difference. You make a difference. And I hope you have a wonderful week. Benny, thank you so much. We appreciate you. Tony, hope you have an awesome rest of your week and hope nothing else breaks down before.

Tony - Hey, you too, buddy.

Joey - Hey, everybody. Have a wonderful week. This has been us. We're out. Look out for number one. Don't step in number two. See Ya.