

The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

JUNE 2004 ISSUE 5

SUCCESS STORIES

Many of you have told us that, after the death of your firefighter, you learned you were stronger than you ever realized. Losing a loved one is one of life's most painful, difficult events. Life as you knew it will never be the same and, in the beginning, just getting through each day can be an overwhelming task. And yet, many people go on to thrive and grow and lead full lives.

We are constantly inspired by your stories. We are touched by the courage and determination of our scholarship applicants as they pursue their dreams. We have shared the struggles of survivors working to change laws and practices in order to better protect firefighters. We are moved by the ways in which you have paid tribute to and remembered your firefighters. We have watched people find hope and friendship and reasons to smile again.

This issue features the stories of two survivors, a daughter from Illinois and a wife from Pennsylvania. Both women have been Foundation scholarship recipients, and one is a member of our Fire Service Survivors Network. Both have faced enormous challenges and achieved their own personal definition of success. We hope that you will find hope and inspiration in their stories, and that you might share your own success stories with us so we can share them with other fire service survivors.

How I Met Ian

by Nancy Rosario



My husband, Eric Casiano, was killed in the line of duty in May 1999. My world had revolved around him and our twin girls, who were 25 when Eric died. So after the funeral, there was a huge void. I married Eric at the age of 16, and through my adult life I had never been alone. This was a hard adjustment to make.

It took about a year or so, but slowly the pieces of my new life started to come together. I met a wonderful man named Sam, who was kind and gentle and helped me through tough times. One thing I had learned to do

during the grieving process was to listen to my inner feelings. This helped my healing process.

I had returned to work full time and had someone to share life with again. To the outside world, this would have looked as if my life was on a normal path again. But the little voice inside kept telling me there is something missing. I do believe in God and that there is a purpose to life, and I felt I was missing my purpose. I thought very hard about what it was I wanted to do. The greatest job I ever had was being a mom.

What happened next strengthened my belief in God and that this was my purpose in life. I had started surfing the Web for adoption agencies. So many had age and marriage requirements and were so expensive or you had to travel to the ends of the earth for children. Then on May 31, 2003, at about 5:00 a.m., I e-mailed an agency

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How I Met Ian

and got an e-mail back in 10 minutes. Now mind you, it was a holiday weekend at the crack of dawn! I returned this e-mail and got another right back. Hmm, I thought, this was either a great scam or my prayers had been answered.

Sam and I attended an adoption seminar the next weekend. We met a wonderful lawyer who had her own adoption agency right in my city. God had shown me the way, and now it was my choice. It took two months to go through all the federal, state, and city paperwork. To



make a long story short, on August 20, 2003, my son's birthmother personally handed my new son Ian Javier (the name Sam and I picked) to Sam and me. The match was a gift from God.

The little voice inside is quiet now. I truly have the greatest job: mom. But God also gave me one more gift. On May 7, 2004, I married the wonderful man who has given me life, love, and true happiness

again. Every day of my life I will thank God for my precious gifts of Ian and Sam.

Becoming a Physician Has Always Been My Dream

by Charlene Zimmerman

The path that I have taken to get to this point in my life has had many turns and has been filled with tragedy, but I have persevered.

I began my journey to medical school in a very traditional manner. I got accepted to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to study Biology and thought that I was well on my way to seeing my dream come true. In 1996, during my sophomore year of college, my father, Dale R. Zimmerman, a volunteer fire chief with Pecatonica Fire Protection District in Illinois, died as he saved the life of another man.

Everything changed when my father died. My world was turned upside down and nothing seemed normal anymore. I felt every emotion all at once. I could not imagine my life without my dad. I became very angry because I did not understand why my father was taken from me. Without him, my world did not seem to make any sense. I reached a point where I was not even sure that I wanted to return to school. However, my mother



was there to remind me of our family philosophy: If you start something, you have to finish it. My father instilled this in us with every project that we began. Knowing it was what he would want me to do, I returned to school, and life began to get back to normal.

During the last semester of my senior year, I received a telephone call telling me that my mother was being airlifted to the hospital as a result of injuries from a car

accident. Having been a fireman's daughter, I knew what that meant. I needed to get to her as soon as possible. The doctors informed me that my mother was in a coma and that the likelihood of her regaining consciousness was very small. I made the decision to quit school for the second time so I could be by my mother's side. At this point I felt completely lost and very alone. The entire experience did not seem real, and I had no idea what the future held for my family or me.

My mother's condition was very serious, and her physicians reminded me that I needed to prepare for the worst. I spent every day at the hospital sitting by my mom's side. I tried everything I could think of to bring her out of her coma. I read to her, showed her pictures from family photo albums, told her stories, played her favorite music, and lay in bed by her side. I thought that if there was any person that could bring her out of her coma, it would be me. Her injury was too severe, and she never woke up. After 7 months and 1 day, she was transferred to a nursing home.

I was torn with the idea of returning to the University of Illinois, which is three hours away. When my mother's condition stabilized, I made the decision to return to school. My decision to move away from my mother was not easy, but I knew that my parents would want me to complete my education. Knowing that they were with me, I headed back to the Urbana-Champaign campus in the spring of 1999 and graduated with University Honors, in the top 3% of my class.

After graduation, my family and my mother were my priority. When my mom was in the hospital, I promised her that I would be by her side until the end. When my mother passed away that December, I was right beside her, holding her in my arms. She was only 45 years old.



Once my life got settled, I began preparing for the medical school entrance exams and devoted my evenings to studying material that I had not seen for quite some time. In August 2003, I took the entrance exams. This spring I received notification that I got accepted at Rush Medical College. I will be starting medical school this fall.

Even though I have experienced two very devastating events in my life, I have achieved many successes due to my dedication, hard work, and perseverance. I have learned that I possess a great inner strength, which has allowed me to continue on with my life and accept and overcome the challenges that I have encountered.

I lost my parents when they were very young, and I value every minute that I shared with them. I have a great appreciation for life, and I will carry that message with me in medical school and as a physician. My goal is to provide my patients with the same quality care and compassion that my father provided as a fireman and chief, and the same type of care that my mother received during her hospital and nursing home stays.

When I look back at all that I have accomplished, I know that I could not have done any of this if it were not for my parents. It is the love that they had for me and the confidence that they had in me that allowed me to find the strength to get up each day and go forward with my life. My parents taught my brother and me through their words and their actions. Each day we saw our parents be honest, hard-working people, who wanted the best for their children, family and friends. My parents are still an intricate part of my life, and their ideals and values are what guide me today. It is their love that has given me the strength to follow my dream.

MORE SUCCESS STORIES

Congratulations to our survivors who have recently graduated and taken on new careers! We wish you much success in your new endeavors.



Kate Crow of Hanna City, Illinois, graduated summa cum laude from Bradley

University with a bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. A Foundation scholarship recipient, Kate is the stepdaughter of Assistant Chief Brian Hawk (1997).

I am absolutely thrilled to become a teacher, as I truly hope to fill my students with a sincere desire to learn.

April McGlothlin of El Paso, Texas, completed a bachelor's degree in Mathematics at the University of Texas at El Paso. This fall, she will begin teaching at the high school level while pursuing a master's degree

in Teaching Mathematics. A Foundation scholarship recipient,



April is the stepdaughter of Firefighter Victor Castillo (1998).

When you become a teacher, you take on so many roles, including the role of secondary parent. I want to keep learning better ways to help children fulfill their goals.

Steve Luecht of Northbrook, Illinois, recently became a full-time career firefighter with



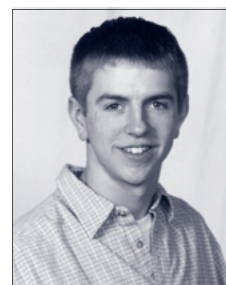
the Northbrook Fire Department. His father, Wayne Luecht (1999), served as Assistant Chief of the same department. Steve is now a certified Firefighter II and EMT-B and is certified

in Haz-Mat Operations. He plans to attend Paramedic School in 2005.

Steve plans a long career with the Northbrook Fire Department and thanks all those who gave so much to him and his family.

Brent Morrison of Malo, Washington, graduated from the Spokane County Region 9 Fire Academy. He has been a resident firefighter in

Spokane County since fall 2003 and is working toward an associate's degree in Fire Science Technology at Spokane Community College. A Foundation scholarship recipient, he is the son of Firefighter Dana Morrison (1995).



I believe that I will fulfill my goal of becoming a professional firefighter in a few short years. I know within my heart that my dad is extremely proud of me.

We want to hear from you!



Please share your success stories! What have you done that feels like a victory? Have you accomplished something that you never thought you could? Whether small or large, we want to share stories of hope with others who may still be struggling to find their way.

Send us your stories by e-mail or mail. Or, if you are more comfortable talking about your story instead of writing it, just give us a call and a member of our staff will contact you to conduct an informal interview by phone.

Please send your success stories or other suggestions to:

The Journey • National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

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