

The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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TAKING CARE OF OUR OWN

Several years ago, we asked survivors what would have helped most after the death of their firefighters. Many felt that their loved one's fire department wanted to help them, but did not know what to do in the face of such an overwhelming event. Survivors told us that by helping departments know what to do, we would also help survivors.

As a result, the Foundation worked with survivors and members of the fire service to create *Taking Care of Our Own*®, a one-day training program to help senior fire officers know how to handle line-of-duty deaths. Each class is co-facilitated by a fire chief, a mental health

professional, and a fire service survivor—those who know firsthand about the loss of a firefighter.

The class is presented in locations around the country, and we invite survivors who live in the local area to attend. In this issue, two survivors write about their experiences.



By Cathy DeFlumere

wife of Al "Foxy" DeFlumere, Blauvelt Volunteer Fire Company, New York, 1996

My husband died on our 11th wedding anniversary, October 26, 1996. He was doing what he was trained to do in his 31 years with the fire company—leading his family to safety after a fire broke out in our home. He helped me and our 8 and 4-year-old sons out, but he had to go back and rescue our 6-year old. Unfortunately, both Foxy and our son Matthew were overcome by smoke and were found in each other's arms. The journey through the past eight years has been tough, but I am so thankful for my involvement with the Foundation. They do truly "take care of our own."

I participated in a *Taking Care of Our Own*® workshop this fall, and I was asked to say a few words. It was very hard for me to share this story, as it is not what most firefighters want to hear. In the beginning, the department was wonderful to me and my sons. They helped with a beautiful funeral and processing the paperwork related to my husband's death. They held a

Memorial service on the one-year anniversary, with a dedication of a beautiful portrait of my husband. But grieving does not stop at one year or two years. Emotional and practical support is still helpful to the family. When I asked for help, for the first time since my husband's death, no one showed. I was very hurt and angry.

Since participating in the workshop I have been able to let go of the anger, but I urge all firefighters to "embrace" the family of the loved one who has died, not only immediately after the death, but as time goes by. Come and mow the lawn. Plow the driveway. Bring the kids to the firehouse every now and then. Invite the family to family firehouse activities. Participating with *Taking Care of Our Own*® has helped me come to terms with my feelings about how I have been treated. I want firefighters to know that families continue to need support months and years down the road.

Tammy Himes

daughter of Chuck Key, USDA Forest Service, contract pilot, Colorado, 1998

My Dad was a wonderful man with a smile that could melt ice, beautiful eyes and an infectious laugh. Retired from the U.S. Air Force after 22 years, he flew air tankers for Neptune Aviation under contract with the Forest Service. He spent his adult life protecting our nation, our wild lands, and the lives and property of people he never met. On June 27, 1998, his air tanker crashed while fighting a fire in New Mexico, killing both pilots.

Many things need to be done when a firefighter dies in the line of duty. It can be overwhelming and confusing, especially when the firefighter is a contract employee. When Tanker 08 was lost, the Forest Service had no definitive plan in place for handling such an event. As a result, my Mom and the other pilot's wife heard about the crash on the TV news. The Honor Guard at Dad's service was from the Air Force. No one mentioned the option of having a fire service honor guard or other fire service traditions. We had no formal contact with any fire service agency until the National Memorial Weekend in October 1999. We were definitely on our own.

Last year I was asked to participate with *Taking Care of Our Own*®. My fellow team members and I have shared our experiences, both good and bad. And we've been able to drive home our message: *Investing time and energy in developing a well thought out plan before it's needed is essential for helping families and coworkers in the event of a line-of-duty death.* Participants walk away with a deeper understanding of the needs of survivors and with tools to help them create protocols and plans. As a result, their agencies will be better prepared to provide support, should they ever have to deal with the loss of one of their own.

Participating in the class has also been a valuable experience for me. The support of the other team members and the compassion of those who take the training are truly touching. It's gratifying to have a chance to make something positive come out of the worst experience of my life. I believe that we are achieving our goal—taking care of our own—one presentation at a time.

Since 2001, the Federal wildland community has worked very hard to sponsor training to make sure its families are taken care of. The Foundation will hold two sessions of Taking Care of Our Own® for Federal and state wildland personnel in late February in Idaho.

Are you interested in attending a Taking Care of Our Own® class? Check the 2005 schedule on our Web site to see if we are coming to your area, or contact Mary Ellis at (301) 447-1370 or mellis@firehero.org for more information.

We want to hear from you about... the healing presence of pets.



Each year, we ask families of those being honored during the Memorial Weekend to send in written tributes to their firefighters. And every year, many tributes mention beloved pets. Some of you have told us how the presence of companion animals helped you or a member of your family through the dark days after the loss of your loved one. If you have a story about a special animal in your life, we'd like to hear from you. Send your stories and photos ("real" photos, not scanned, please!) to:

The Journey • National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

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