

The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

JUNE 2006 ISSUE 15

It's that time of year again, when preparation for the upcoming Memorial Weekend begins in earnest. We are working with hotels, bus companies, musicians, caterers, grief specialists, and members of the fire service, as we prepare for families of America's fallen firefighters to gather in Emmitsburg in October.

If your loved one is being honored this year, we understand that the thick stacks of Memorial Weekend papers we sent may have been overwhelming. Some of you may still have those papers and may still be deciding whether or not you will attend. Maybe you already decided against it and threw out the whole package. Or maybe you sent the forms in, but still wonder what to expect or dread yet another reminder of your loss.

To help prepare you for the Weekend, we asked survivors who have attended in past years to share

their reflections about what it was like for them. We hope their words may help you decide, allow you to relax a little, or even help you to look forward to October. If you have not registered, it's not too late. Get in touch with us, and we'll help you fill out the forms or put you in contact with another survivor who can answer your questions.

If your loved one was honored in a previous year, we invite you to attend, too. The participation of our "returning" families has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. We have volunteer opportunities and special events for returning survivors. You will have opportunities to renew old connections and meet new friends.

Survivors tell us again and again that they leave the Memorial Weekend feeling better than when they arrived. We hope you'll be with us in Emmitsburg in October.

By Pat Stonaker

Daughter of Richard Liddy (1994-NJ)

My father was a volunteer fireman for over 40 years, and the firehouse was my family's second home. Although he was 66 years old and had a history of heart disease, Dad was a vibrant, active man and was installing a post and rail fence in his backyard the weekend prior to his death.

Dad knew it was time to relinquish the reins to the younger firefighters, but once a fireman always a fireman. At a fully engulfed house fire, he was pulling hose to the front of the house when he dropped to the ground. Although his fellow firefighters were able to restore his heartbeat, his brain had suffered irreversible damage,

and we were forced to remove him from life support after six days in the hospital. My mother, my three sisters, and I were to embark on a journey that would take us to places that we never would have imagined.

Dad's funeral was overwhelming and awe-inspiring. His casket was placed on his favorite fire truck and brought through the middle of town, surrounded by his fellow firemen. As the funeral progressed, I began to experience a confusing feeling of guilt. At first I shook the feeling off, but as the day wore on, the feeling crept back. Citizens along the funeral route were saluting my father. Fireman after fireman stood at attention, and

continued inside

By Pat Stonaker *(continued from cover)*

people I had never seen before were stopping their busy lives to pay respect to a man they had never met. I was dumbfounded. I thought to myself, Dad could have died in the backyard, digging postholes for the fence, and no one would have thought twice about him. Why, just because he died at a fire, was he being honored as a hero? Heroes run into burning buildings to rescue children and throw their bodies over fellow firemen to selflessly sacrifice themselves. Isn't that what a hero is?

Throughout the days and months that followed the funeral, my feelings of guilt and confusion grew. I couldn't talk to my family about how I felt. They thought of my father as the hero. I felt like a traitor.

My mother, three sisters, and I decided to attend the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend in October 1995, when my father was honored. Honestly, I dreaded the event. I was only attending for my mother. More honoring for my father, whose death, to me, wasn't in the same league as the firemen who had died traumatically, suddenly, and prematurely.

My sisters and I were assigned to the same small group session. I listened to their stories and felt worse and worse. Then a woman from Chicago told her story. I don't remember the woman's name, and I've never seen her again, but I remember her story. Our fathers were very similar. Her father died of a heart attack at a house fire. Her father had devoted 40 some odd years to the fire department. Listening to this woman talk about her Dad, the commitment he had to the fire service, the effect he had on the younger firemen, the friendships he developed over the years, and the honor he held for his fellow firemen, made me ponder my own father's impact on his community. He was all those things and more. She was right. My father did deserve the funeral that he received. I listened to her story and the guilt

slowly began to fade. You see, she taught me that my father didn't die a hero.... he lived a hero.

I came home from the Memorial Weekend thinking completely differently, and my thoughts returned to that group session often. I learned some very valuable lessons in Emmitsburg that year. I learned that, as much as my family felt alone and isolated when we were struggling with my father's death, there are families all over the country who are struggling with the same issues. I had always known that the fire service was a group of honorable men and women, but I never realized how far reaching, supportive, underestimated, compassionate and inspiring firefighters truly are. I

learned that people are people. Whether you live in California or New Jersey, whether your loved one was a wildland firefighter, a paid city firefighter or a rural volunteer firefighter, each one is a hero who took time out of his or her life to help another human being in need. Most

importantly, I learned that listening to other people who have had similar experiences to yours really does help. I truly believe that I never would have gotten over my guilt if it weren't for that young woman from Chicago. Bless her, wherever she is.

Attending the Memorial Weekend is like attending a family homecoming. There is a bond that is formed with people who have shared a similar experience. Empathy and understanding are rampant. The knowing look in an eye, the hand on another's shoulder, or the nod of a head when an experience is shared, is enough to make you understand that you truly are not alone. I have returned to volunteer at the Memorial Weekend for the last six years. I have met extraordinary people from all over the country. These people have become dear friends to me, and they know a side of me that few people know.



By Vickie White

Wife of Hairold Junior Strode (2001-TN)

I can remember when I went to the memorial I was scared to death. I was shy, had never been that far from home and my children, and was afraid of all the bad memories. But I am so glad I went. The best part to me was the small group meeting--actually getting to talk to others that really understood what you were going through and still are.

The memorial was an overwhelming tribute to each individual fallen firefighter and their loved ones.



I left the memorial feeling like they truly love and miss Hairold almost as much as I do. When I got home I always thought of all the ones I met and thanked God for such a blessing the whole memorial had been to me. I only wish my two boys could have gone with me. I really believe it would have helped them to deal with their Daddy's death better.

Everyone should have a chance to be a part of something so loving and kind.

By Marilyn Warren

Mother of Ron and Timmy "T3" Warren (1980 & 1997-NY)



What were some of your fears and concerns before you attended the Weekend when your son was honored?

I think our biggest concern was my husband, Tim's, health at the time. Not knowing the area and just how we were going to get from one place to another without getting lost. Luckily, our son's fire chief was close by all weekend, so that problem was well under control.

Talk a little about your experience.

The experience was wonderful. Both of our sons died in the line of duty as firefighters. To have them honored by their country was wonderful, and I shall never forget when we were given the rose and the flag and told Tim would always be a hero. Ron died in 1980 [before there was a national monument or an annual memorial service]. The ceremony in 1998 honored Timmy, but in our hearts they were both being honored.

Which parts of the Weekend were most helpful to you?

The service in the chapel was magnificent and the most heartwarming part. Then to have his name spoken when we went to the front to receive the rose and flag outdoors.

How did you feel at the end of the Weekend?

We were always proud of Ronald and Timmy. We were just a little more proud that they had been acknowledged for their sacrifice by people who didn't know them and, more importantly, their country.

What suggestions do you have for someone attending for the first time?

Don't laugh at this one...bring all kinds of clothes! I understand that the year our son was honored was the coldest Memorial Weekend you have ever had (and wet!), and I thought we were going to freeze to death.

What would you say to a survivor who is not sure whether to attend the Memorial Weekend?

By all means, attend this Memorial Weekend. It is an honor bestowed on your lost loved one by people who chose the same occupations that your loved one died doing. Do not hesitate to attend.

By John Collins

Father of Brian Collins (1999-TX)

My wife, Marie, and I first attended the Memorial Weekend about 20 months after our son died in a church fire. We attended primarily because we wanted to be present as Brian's memory was honored. Frankly, we were "memorial event" exhausted. I had been diagnosed and was on medication for severe clinical depression, and so we made a mini-vacation out of the days surrounding the weekend.

Arriving a little early on a brisk Saturday morning, we were grateful for the tent and warm beverages that we were directed to upon entering the grounds. Then, seeing so many persons wearing the name badge around the neck, the realization finally sank home. We were

not alone in our grief and loss. Having been hesitant at first, we did attend the small group sessions for parents.



We were able to listen as other mothers and fathers spoke of their own experience, knowing we all shared a common bond and understood the feelings and grief of the other.

The Memorial Weekend has become a significant marker in our memory. I personally find myself leaving after a Weekend with rejuvenated emotional energy and an awareness of having associated with some of the greatest people alive today.

Dads, look me up this October, and we can take time to share, laugh, cry, and hug. Moms, Marie will be close by and is a wonderful listener with a loving heart.

By Melissa Scrabis

Sister-in-law of Thomas DeAngelis (2004-PA)

The Memorial Weekend is not the place you want to be invited, because it means you lost someone, but it is well worth the trip. My sister and three nephews went, knowing that it would be a very

emotional weekend. Without hesitation, 14 family members went along with her, plus several firemen from my brother-in-law's volunteer fire company. I felt a sense of pride for my sister and her boys as they heard

Tommy's name and memory being honored. It is a great tribute to all our nation's fallen firefighters. I am glad my children and my nephews were able to be a part of it all. My children still talk about it, and it is something that we will all remember.



Friends have asked how it went, what was it like, etc. I could not really put into words what it was like to be there and feel all the emotions I felt. All I could say was that if I could bottle all the good, the kindness for others, the love, the camaraderie, and yes, even the laughter and smiles from that one weekend and spread it around the world, the world would be an even better place.

By Marlene Moore

Mother of Jared Moore (2004-KS)

We had decided to attend the Memorial Weekend early on, and its timing could not have been more of a blessing. We left a couple of weeks after the end of a very difficult and disappointing trial related to our son's death. We had lost faith in so much and felt so betrayed.

We chose to spend my husband's vacation time driving to and from the Memorial. The relief we felt getting away from Kansas became replaced with fear

and dread the closer we got to Maryland. Our mental state was so fragile and shaken by the trial. Could we go through the emotions of the Memorial Weekend? Honestly, if our way had not been paid, we would never have planned to go. The Foundation's paying our way said to us that our presence was wanted. Someone else also felt our son's death mattered and that HE was important! We knew we needed Jared to be honored more than we feared the pain of our emotions.

The small group sessions were part of our healing process. It was a comfort to be with people who were going through the same thing you were. No one is uncomfortable because you cry, no one is afraid to ask, "How did you lose your son?" No one has to avoid you because they are uncomfortable about your loss. Not

being able to say goodbye to Jared is one of the hardest things I struggle with. Friends and family repeatedly tell me, "Jared knew you loved him," but that doesn't help. I wanted to be there to hold his hand and to tell him

one more time. None of the other mothers in my small group had the chance to say good-bye either. We all felt the same pain.

Even though my son rarely speaks of his brother or his death, he said he was very glad he went to the Memorial Weekend. Knowing it helped his heart heal comforts us.

Both of our kids have chosen to return this fall with us. Jared's fellow firefighters who attended have repeatedly told us how much it meant to them as well.

I know at times it is difficult to feel like you can go through another memorial service and focus on the death of your loved one again, but the healing of seeing them being honored and sharing your story with others who genuinely care, is well worth the risk. When your loved one is first lost, everyone is there telling you they are sorry, it's unimaginable, it's tragic. The world seems to stop. But then everyone else's world resumes, and yours doesn't. During the Weekend, it helped us tremendously to feel the support of the entire firefighter community and to know there are people who respect the fact that our son made the ultimate sacrifice.



By Roger Nadeau

Brother of Gerald Nadeau (2002-MA)

When we found out about the weekend for our "fallen hero" our whole family got excited about attending to honor Gerry. We drove to Emmitsburg in a caravan of four vehicles, with 16 family members.

We left for the weekend not knowing what to expect, and it was an awesome tribute to all our fallen firefighters. The Foundation took care of everything, from the Friday we arrived to the Sunday we left. What would I say to people

who are apprehensive about going? Participate! Don't stay home and say, "I should have gone." Take advantage of this weekend, which is for you and your loved one.

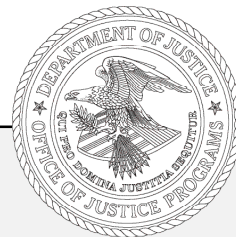


PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS' BENEFITS PROGRAM

Did You Know...

The Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Program at the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs' Bureau of Justice Assistance provides death benefits for the following categories of public safety officers:

- State and local law enforcement officers and firefighters for deaths resulting from injuries occurring on or after September 29, 1976.
- Federal law enforcement officers and firefighters for deaths resulting from injuries occurring on or after October 12, 1984.
- Members of federal, state, and local public rescue squads and ambulance crews for deaths occurring on or after October 15, 1986.
- Federal Emergency Management Agency personnel and state, local, and tribal emergency management and civil defense agency employees for deaths occurring on or after October 30, 2000.



BJA **Bureau of Justice Assistance**
Office of Justice Programs ■ U.S. Department of Justice

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program

Toll-free
1-888-744-6513

E-mail
http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/grant/psob/psob_main.html

PSOB Online
<https://www.psob.gov>

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Program is a unique partnership effort of the U.S. Department of Justice; local, state, and federal public safety agencies; and national organizations to provide death, education, and disability benefits to those eligible for the Program. PSOB helps establish the value communities place on the contributions of those who are willing to serve their communities in potentially dangerous circumstances, and offers peace of mind to men and women seeking careers in public safety.

We want to hear from you...



Sometimes, going on with your life after the death of a loved one can feel like betrayal. On the one hand, you know that your loved one would want you to live a happy life. On the other, events that are signs of progress and healing can feel very bittersweet. Whether you are celebrating a family event, dating or planning to remarry, selling the house, visiting the cemetery less, or just something simple like beginning to laugh again, you may be hit with conflicting feelings. If you have thoughts and insights about the emotional process of "moving on," please write and share your story. Send essays, stories, poems, and photos, by August 1, to:

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