

The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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How do you continue to parent your children after the sudden loss of your spouse? How can you fill the roles you used to share with another person? What

happens to the plans and dreams you had for the future? In this issue, survivors talk about their unexpected journeys in parenting.

By Linda Schulman

Wife of Marshall Slack Schulman (1998-NY)

My husband died on January 7, 1998. My three children and I were by his side. Although the doctors had informed me earlier in the day that his death was imminent, there was no way to prepare for that moment. We watched him slip from this world right before our eyes.

At that moment, my life changed forever. My children not only lost their father, but the mother they knew as well. I had instantly become both mother and father. I viewed my life in chapters, and the chapter that included raising my children with my husband had just ended. The days, weeks and months that followed were surreal. I was overwhelmed with my own pain and grief but knew that I had to find the strength and courage to guide my children. I became the disciplinarian, breadwinner, financial advisor, taxi driver, housekeeper, gardener, Mr. Fix-it. You name it, I did it. There were nights I just cried and prayed for strength. When I closed my bedroom door at night, I allowed myself to feel the pain I hid all day.

When the sun came up in the morning, I prepared myself to face the day once again. I went back to work full time, putting my youngest son in daycare. Time marched on.

All the things I thought I would share with my husband, I did alone. I would think back and remember our conversations about the children and use that as my guide. What gave me the biggest source of courage to move forward was realizing that if I could survive one of the worst moments in my life—watching him die—I could surely face whatever else I had to do. Whatever else needed to be done seemed to pale in comparison. I decided that if my children were healthy and happy, then I could manage everything else that I had to do.

This January will be nine years. It does not seem that long ago, but I have since bought three cars, changed jobs, sold our home, moved to another state, and gone back to graduate school. My younger son is learning how to drive, my older son is in college, and my daughter graduated from college and is now living on her own. I am proud of them and their accomplishments. We have leaned on each other and helped each other through the difficult times. We are a family.

What have I learned in nine years? I have learned that I am a survivor. The strength we yearn for is inside each of us. We just don't know it's there until we need it.

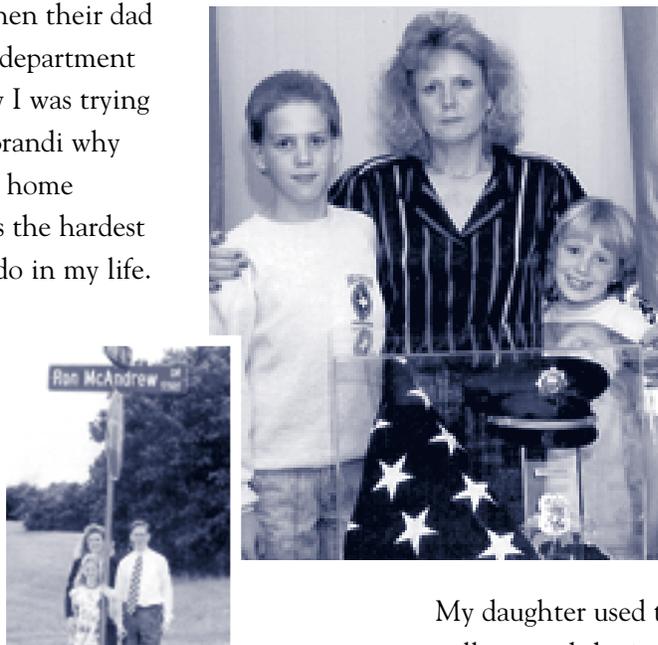
By Jacque McAndrew

Wife of Ronnie Michael McAndrew (1990-TX)

My husband collapsed while fighting a three-alarm fire and died of a heart attack brought on by smoke inhalation. He was only 42 years old. My children were seven and eleven when their dad died. He went to the fire department one day, and the next day I was trying to explain to Keith and Brandi why their dad was not coming home anymore. I think that was the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life.

It is still very painful after all these years to share my grief. I have never remarried. I was a full-time MOM. It seems like all I did was pray and cry. It hurt so bad. I had two small children to take care of, and I had a full-time job. There was no life insurance or mortgage insurance, and it took a year to receive benefits from the federal government. My evenings were

very busy with sports activities with both Keith and Brandi. Their dad was so involved in their lives. I wanted to keep that memory for them.



Some nights I was so tired I just cried myself to sleep. My children would wear their dad's uniform shirts and sleep in them to keep him close to them. They would crawl up in my bed and tell Mommy not to cry anymore, so I would go to the bathroom and get in the shower and scream and cry by myself. My mom helped me with the children, but there were no other family members close by. It was very hard.

My daughter used the government scholarship to go to college, and she just made me a grandma for the first time. My son is out of school and works as a leasing agent for an apartment complex. With the good Lord and a lot of faith, we have come a long way, and we are all going to be OK.

By Roberta Schuyler

Wife of John Schuyler (1995-PA)

When my husband died, my three daughters were 31, 29, and 26 years old. Johnny's death, being so sudden, was a shock to everyone. The oldest daughter was very angry with God for taking her father away from us. My middle daughter was in denial and, for a long time, would not even talk about him. She finally had closure when we attended the Memorial Weekend in Emmitsburg in 1996. The Weekend was so good for all of us.

My youngest daughter seemed to handle it the best. A week or two

after my husband's funeral, she came by the house when I was out, to get a bottle of her dad's favorite beer. She drove to the cemetery. At the grave, she opened the beer and gave a toast: "This one's for you, Dad." She proceeded to pour the beer on his grave. She told me later about what she had done, and I told her if it made her feel good it was okay.



I told my daughters it was alright to be angry, sad, or whatever they were feeling. Everyone must grieve in their own way. I told them I would be there for them, just as they were there for me.

By Renee Elkins

Wife of Daniel Elkins (2004-CA)

Parenting is difficult in most situations. When you lose your spouse, it feels like the weight of the world just fell upon your shoulders. My children were 24 and 20 at the time of my precious husband's death. If you are the parent of older children you know that the adult child relationship often changes to more of a friendship. My kids lost a friend as well as a father.

The worst part of the day that I found out about my husband's accident was having to tell my kids that their dad had been killed. Needless to say, they were devastated. They looked to me for some sense of comfort, peace, and logic. There was none.

My son immediately took on the role of oldest male and assisted in making funeral arrangements and other decisions that I needed help with. My daughter was just herself, missing her daddy and trying to be brave. My daughter stayed home from college for a semester, and together we walked through grief in a way that was heart breaking, yet helpful to each other. We cried, talked, and tried to support each other.

Just a few months after my husband's death, my father-in-law was diagnosed with lung cancer. We were immediately involved in taking care of him, making medical decisions, and trying to deal with our own grief at the same time. My son was working on his master's degree and Physician's Assistant certificate. He had to continue to take classes, participate in his rotations and try to take care of his family and a very ill grandfather. The pressure on all of us was overwhelming.

I wished at the time that Dan, my husband, was here to take care of his father. I wished he was here to listen to us, to talk to us, and to give us advice. I didn't have the energy to do what I wanted to do for my kids. I barely had what it took to make it through each day. In January 2005, my father-in-law died. We were exhausted, stressed, and yet felt such a peace because he was with the Lord and Dan and was relieved of his suffering.

As I look back, I am amazed at what our family has gone through, and we are still standing. We may never understand why Dan was taken so suddenly and so young, but we do have assurance that he is in heaven where there is no suffering, pain, or sadness. We share the belief that one day we will see him again. We miss Dan so very much. We probably always will. However, we have each other, we have the Lord, and we know that we can trust Him to comfort us and to get us through the times when we would have relied on Dan.

Be patient with each other as you grieve together. Allow for each person to express their grief as they need to. My son prefers to keep his feelings private; my daughter wants to talk a lot about hers. Learning to respect the way each of us grieves has been difficult at times. Pray for each other, support each other, and love each other. Try to give each other extra amounts of grace as the rolling waves of grief wash over your lives. Apologize often for harsh words, impatient looks, and the inability to fulfill every need. Spend as much time together as you can. Just being together can be a comfort.

Above all, be kind to yourself. It is so easy to put such high expectations on yourself. As a single parent, you cannot be yourself and your spouse. You can only do so much in a day. Don't be too proud to ask for help or to admit being depressed, tired, and "just done." Don't let busyness crowd out time for grieving. I sometimes just sat and stared for what seemed like hours at a time, just thinking and trying to process. Accept whatever you are offered as far as help goes. Someday that help may not be as available, and you will appreciate the times that you had it. Don't be afraid to let your children see you cry. They will look to you for how to grieve. They need to see that you are able to express your sadness when it comes.

This journey we are on is not a fun one. It is heartbreaking and can only be understood by those who have experienced it. I pray that you will find some peace and some comfort during this time in your life.

PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS' BENEFITS PROGRAM

Did You Know...

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Program provides benefits including death, education assistance, and disability to those eligible for the program. The PSOB Office at the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice is responsible for implementing the PSOB Program. Under the PSOB Act, benefits are available to the survivors of public safety officers found to have died as the direct and proximate result of a personal injury, as well as certain eligible heart attacks and strokes, sustained in the line of duty. As defined by Congress, a public safety officer is an individual serving a public agency in an official capacity, with or without compensation, as a law enforcement officer, firefighter, or member of a rescue squad or ambulance crew. The PSOB

benefit for eligible deaths and disabilities occurring in FY 2007 is \$295,194. In addition to reviewing and processing cases, the PSOB Office works with national public safety groups, educating agencies regarding the PSOB initiative and offering support to families and colleagues of America's fallen firefighters.



BJA Bureau of
Justice Assistance

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program

Toll-free
1-888-744-6513

By Ruby Staley

Mother of Gary Staley (2003-TX)

On June 16, 2006, my fire hero would have turned 37. Just thought I would tell you what we do to celebrate his life. Gary's dad and I and his 12-year-old daughter go to the cemetery and put fresh flowers on his grave and tie a happy birthday balloon



to the flowers. Then, we write messages to Gary and send them off on helium balloons. His daughter, Courtney, always tells us that hers is going up faster than ours. She likes to think that her dad reaches out to get hers first. Hers always goes the highest!

We want to hear from you...



Many people feel that their loved one is still "with them" in some way after death. Perhaps you have adopted your loved one's "words to live by" as your own or have found a way to work for a cause he or she found important. Maybe there is a special place that makes you feel closer to your loved one. Or maybe you have had vivid dreams or a sense of your loved one's presence. For many people, this feeling of continued connection is comforting.

If you would be willing to share some thoughts about your experiences, please send your story as a Word document, or in the body of an e-mail, to firehero@firehero.org. Or, if you don't do computers, send it to:

***The Journey* • National Fallen Firefighters Foundation**

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