

## Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program

### Did You Know...

**E**nacted 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 officers.



*“Death takes away. That’s all there is to it. But grief gives back. By experiencing it, we are not simply eroded by pain. Rather, we become larger human beings, more compassionate, more aware, more able to help others, more able to help ourselves.”*

- Candy Lightner -

*“One who has journeyed in a strange land cannot return unchanged.”*

- C.S. Lewis -

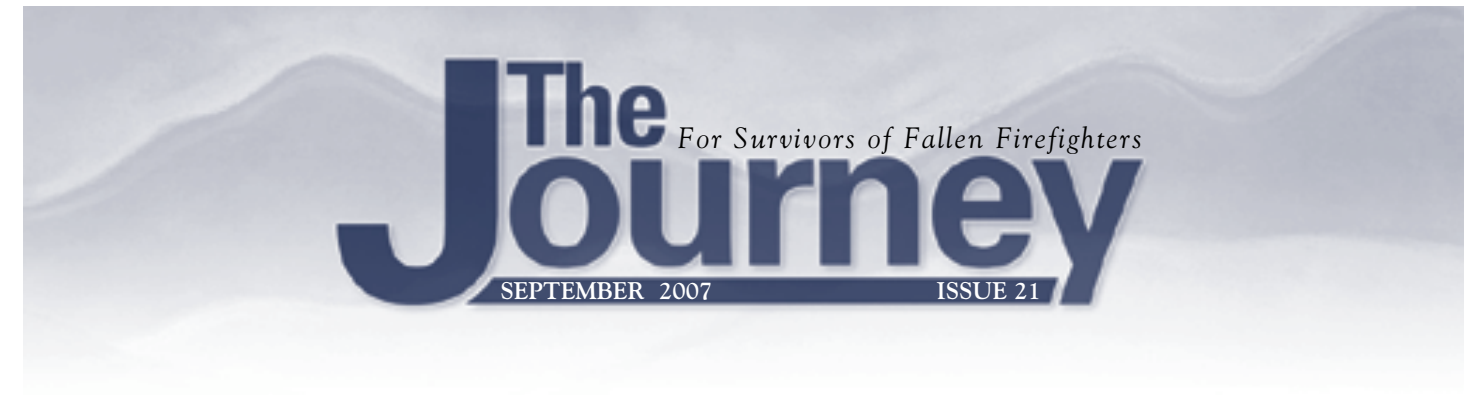
### We want to hear from you...



In past issues of The Journey, we have heard from spouses, children, parents, siblings, and friends of fallen firefighters about their experiences with loss. Each relationship is unique, and so is each loss. Often, different family members grieve very differently, and that can be an additional source of stress. Even in a family, people may feel they are grieving all alone. 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 [jwoodall@firehero.org](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org). Or, if you don't do computers, send it to:

*The Journey* • **National Fallen Firefighters Foundation**  
P.O. Drawer 498, Emmitsburg, MD 21727  
(301) 447-1365 [firehero@firehero.org](mailto:firehero@firehero.org)

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### What has grief taught you?

**L**essons you never wanted to learn. Skills you wish you didn't need. Wisdom you'd gladly give up if it meant having your loved one back again. Difficult lessons, painful lessons. Losing a loved one changes us in

ways we could never have imagined.

In this issue of The Journey, survivors share some of what they have learned the hard way.

### Where to begin...

*By Ladonna Buehne, Wife of Jerry Buehne (2005-MO)*

**A** new home, impending retirement in view, a quick kiss goodbye, I'll hook up the washer and dryer tonight, Honey--then a knock on the door—My whole life turned upside-down. That was my last morning I saw my husband alive.

“It doesn't look good,” was all that I was told on that ride to the emergency room. It doesn't look good was all he would say. My son's eyes said it all at the ER door--“Dad's gone, Mom.”

Jerry was going to a monthly chiefs' meeting--he never made it there. A man fleeing from the police hit Jerry head-on at 104 mph.

The next week is a blur as my two children and I went through the autopsy, the viewing, the funeral, and burial.

You love God, you hate God.

You'll be OK, I won't live through this pain.

I can take care of myself, I can't do this.

I sit and stare for hours without moving. I can't do this. I don't want to do this.

The cards, letters, phone calls, it seems to make it better. It seems to make it worse.

I must eat. I don't want to eat. Maybe a drink will help. It doesn't help.

I remember the good times and I cry. I remember the bad times and I cry.

The memorials are good, no they're bad. The dedications are good, no they're bad--I cry.

The pain I see in our children's eyes and grandchildren's eyes is unbearable.

A year and a half—finally the trial is over—the sentencing done. There is no victory as Jerry is still gone.

This is not what I planned. It was not supposed to be like this. Why, God, why?

In a few weeks, it will be two years.

The sewer backed up and the basement flooded, a kitchen fire on New Year's Day—I can handle this, no I can't. But I do.

Lean on family and friends for moral support. You'll get stronger they all say.

Two days ago on Valentine's Day as I passed the spot where Jerry died, a SUV merged in front of me as we stopped for a light. I looked at the license plate in front of me. It was a fire chief's plate: 1100. This was Jerry's number, and the new fire chief was in front of me.

I took this as Jerry saying, “Happy Valentine's Day, Honey.”

*continued inside*

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## Where to begin...

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*Jerry and Ladonna Buehne.*

This is how I live. I try to figure out what God's plan is for me. I'm waiting.

Each day my mind is open (sometimes closed) for any opportunity that might be the plan—God's plan.

So, so many people have helped me get this far I can't disappoint them, can I?

I take it day by day.

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## What has grief taught me?

*By Renee Elkins, Wife of Daniel Elkins (2004-CA)*

**W**here do I begin? Grief is the cruelest of teachers in many ways. What I have learned by going through the difficult process of grieving is life-changing and permanent. I have learned to take one day at a time, which sounds very cliché, but is absolutely true. I don't assume that my plans will ever be completed, because life can change in a moment.

I have learned to not make big deals out of small things. I have learned to appreciate the little things in life. I am not worried about the type of car, house, clothing, shoes I wear. I have learned that I have to let some things go. I can't work hard enough to complete my list each day, much less each week. The responsibility of taking care of life alone is overwhelming.

I have learned not to depend on others for everything. I can hang a shelf, clean the pool filter, check for a blown breaker, and bake a cake...all at the same time if I need to! I know when the hazardous waste drop-off is at the dump, I've been to the "boneyard," at the roofing supply store, and I learned that sealing tile isn't as bad as I thought it would be.

Death has also given me a new reality. The hose at the cemetery isn't long enough to reach to where I want it to go, so I must bring my own container to put water in the vase on my husband's gravesite. I have learned that when I am at my lowest point, God is still holding me up. When I don't want to go on, others want me to, and

encourage me to. I have learned the true meaning of friendship and have experienced the disappointment of broken promises and unfulfilled pledges of support.

I have learned that people don't know what to say, so they say nothing. I have learned it is better to say something honest and loving than to say nothing for fear of making oneself vulnerable or transparent. I have learned that people "move on" so quickly. They don't see that the grief over the loss of a spouse changes you, and when they see the changes, they often don't like them and pull away. They realize their own mortality. I have learned that the way people support those in grief isn't really different whether or not they believe in God. They all seem to be afraid and mask the obvious.

I have learned that being part of a couple is what seems comfortable to most, therefore when you no longer are part of a couple, you don't fit in. Others aren't comfortable with you not fitting in, so they leave you out. The invitations often slow down; then stop.

I have learned that there can still be blessings in life. Families can become closer and rely on each other in new ways. I have learned that laughter can be very refreshing. I have also learned that people make references to death all the time. They don't realize how much a part of their conversations mention something having to do with death and dying. Sometimes that feels like a knife cutting a fresh wound in my heart. "I could have died, I

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## What has grief taught me?

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was so embarrassed." "I died when he walked in the room." "The leaves died on the trees." "The battery died." Death makes people uncomfortable, so they make jokes and illogical references to it often.

I have learned that death rarely comes when we are ready for it, even if we think we have prepared ourselves. It can leave a hole so large in a heart and life that it seems like it will never be filled, but slowly over time the hole becomes less raw; it begins to heal. While it may never be one piece again, the mending can often give one a sense of newness that is such a mix of pain and anticipation that it makes no sense. I have learned to slowly trust this process, to embrace it, and to allow myself to feel the pain, grief, sorrow and occasional joys of life.

I have learned that depression really does hurt, and that

tears do cleanse, and that when you love deeply, you grieve deeply.

I have learned that grief is horrible, terrifying, and at the same time can give one such a sense of clarity in life. I have learned to be me, to be the person that I believe God created me to be. I have felt more anger and confusion in my state of grief than ever before, yet our culture does not allow that to be expressed after about a year. I have learned to live with that expectation and yet to express to those close to me who are interested in listening.

I have learned that I am able to do much more than I ever knew that I could do.

Death is a teacher of many things. It is up to me to accept the responsibility of being the student.

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## Patience. Persistence. Perseverance.

*By Cari Thornton, Wife of Scott A. Thornton(2005-MI)*

**M**y husband, Scott, has been gone more than two years now. To some, that amount of time may seem minimal. At times, it does to me as well. Yet in that two year timeframe, time has lagged on, yet days seem to pass with a rushed certainty of what tomorrow demands of me. A pretty strange concept, when you look at it logically.

At first, time seemed to hold no merit. Every day seemed endless and so painful that I couldn't imagine doing this every day for the rest of my life.

As time passed, and the very hard task set in of grieving not only my loss, but my children's as well, I learned patience--something my husband had limitless amounts of. Patience each moment of every day. Patience with the duties that faced me, and me alone. Patience with the expectations I put upon myself in daily life. And certainly patience with raising my two children.

I have attended many funerals in the past two years. Those of friends, and family, as well as a friend who is a firefighter taken by the silent killer, cancer. Going through these emotions over and over again developed in me a sense of persistence. The persistence to go on, to

heal, to encourage, to live as an example for others going through similar feelings and looking for a strength not found within themselves, yet not knowing where to search to find it. To be the example my husband always was in our times of trouble and need. No matter what life's circumstances dealt us, he always seemed to me to be the lifeline of strength, always getting us through the hardest tasks by just "hanging in there."

I've learned that life is always going to throw you the curve ball you just didn't see coming. There will be things that you just can't seem to muddle through, and days that you just don't want to deal with yet another issue. But if you are willing to remember these character traits, you can and will persevere through the hardest moments of your life. They will pass, the sun will shine again in your world, the hurts will begin to take on a different meaning and perspective, and you will survive.

So, when I think of Scott, the legacy he has left for me and our children, I see his character still living in each of us daily. And in my opinion, his presence will live on forever as we touch each other's lives with the care and compassion he was so recognized for.