

# The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

MAY 2009 ISSUE 30

*“I get by with a little help from my friends.”*

-John Lennon

*“A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words.” -Unknown*

**G**rief is not a journey to be traveled alone. We need family, friends, helpers, guides, kindhearted strangers, and others who have “been there” to help us through. Survivors sometimes find that the people who provide the most comfort and help are not those they would have expected.

Often we feel a special bond and sense of shared loss

with others who were close to the person who died. But sometimes, close friends and family do not know how to help or may be too consumed by their own emotions to provide support. New friends and acquaintances, especially those who have known grief themselves, may step forward and offer much-needed compassion and understanding. Wherever we find it, friendship and kindness are essential to surviving grief.

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**By Carol Ransdell**

*Mother of Mark Ransdell (2003-OR)*

**W**hen the tragedy occurs, everyone comes from near and far to offer help. Flowers, food, cards, and people flowed through the house for days as we dealt with my firefighter son’s death. Don’t get me wrong – I think this kind of support is great, appreciated, and needed by the family.

However, then comes the time when almost everyone leaves and you are jolted back to the reality of finding your own way down an unwanted path. That is when you need real friends. For me, different friends filled different and unique roles of support.

One of my friends is my “walking friend.” We have walked almost everyday for over a dozen years now. Walking quickly and watching the seasons change over and over, we notice each new flower on our route and know every crack in the road. Mostly we talk about everything, but sometimes we are quiet in our own space. She is the friend who acknowledges the “days” with me –

holidays, anniversary days, birthdays, and “just because I miss him” days. Many times it took an effort for me to leave the house, but she was waiting, so I had to go.

Another friend is half of a couple we have known for many years. My husband and I go on trips with them, we play cards together, and we SHOP! Shopping can be a great stress reliever even if not buying anything. These activities helped keep the mind in contact with the real world, especially through the first years. Countless card games made me concentrate on something other than me. This friend has been there for anything I need or if I just want to vent. I try not to overwhelm her, but I know she will listen.

Groups of friends, such as the Compassionate Friends, NFFF, and the Wildland Firefighter Foundation have helped me immensely with my loss. We have the commonality of hurting beyond description; yet we are able to talk, listen, and even laugh with each other.

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**Carol Ransdell** *(continued)*

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Often, we find our personal weird thoughts have been in the thoughts of someone else, too. It gives us the hope of sanity as we continue the never ending journey. A mom who recently lost her firefighter son commented that seeing us still walking around after five years gave her hope that she could also survive. We get together at different times, but the trust we feel with each other

helps us until we meet again. And if needed, we are just a phone call away.

I realize just how much help my friends have provided me since the beginning. I encourage others to take a look around and realize they too have real friends willing to help them through the tough times. Although I am very thankful for my friends, it still hurts like !#%! to bury your child.

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**By the wife of a 1990 fallen firefighter**

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*Name withheld upon request*

**I** lost my husband eighteen years ago. I still miss him and wish he was still here. He missed seeing our children's graduations, marriages, and grandchildren. He would be so proud of all three.

When there are big decisions to be made, like buying a furnace, a car, repairs, and upkeep to the house, I miss him even more because he took care of all those things. I have done my best, but have made some big mistakes. Hopefully, I have learned from them and won't repeat them in the future.

I retired nine years ago when I turned sixty-five. Retirement has been good for me. I volunteer at the local library, visit my children (they visit me, too), and take a big trip every few years. Church activities are a big part of my life. I go to Bible study and am active in Women's Fellowship. To earn money, we put on dinners and make pies for the Firemen's Field Days. I am also an active member of the Order of the Eastern Star.

I live in the country with my labradoodle, Teddy, who is a lot of company. He lets me know when someone is parking or just walking by the house. He lets them know that he is with me, too. He travels with me whenever possible and is a good companion.

My friends have changed. A newly-widowed woman seems to be suspect of "man hunting," which is far from the truth for me. We widows have gathered together for support and friendship. I have become good friends with four other women in my community. Most Sundays and sometimes during the week, we go out to dinner together. We do our own things, but when one of us is in need, the others are right there.

I mow my own lawn in the summer and shovel snow in the winter. I can't complain. Life isn't perfect, but it isn't bad either. I think I will always have days or moments of feeling lonely or being depressed, but life goes on, and so do we.

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**By DeAnna Schutte**

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*Wife of Bernie Schutte (2002-NE)*

**T**he day my husband, Bernie, died, changed my life forever and always. Word of his tragic death spread quickly in our small town. I had hardly hung up from informing my son and daughter when the doorbell rang and a good friend handed me a frozen ham, frozen cinnamon rolls, a plastic bag of toilet paper, tissues, paper towels and other basic items that she said were really needed when her family had lost a loved one recently. That was just the beginning.

People brought all kinds of food, as the telephone rang continuously with other friends asking what they could

do to help out. When we returned home from making funeral arrangements, we found containers of all kinds of prepared food lined up on the front doorstep, down onto the sidewalk, on the side deck, and on the patio. Thank goodness the weather had turned cold; we stored food on the deck in plastic coolers because my fridge and freezers were all full.

For weeks and months, as I ran errands around town, people would stop me on the street or in the post office, always considerately asking how I was doing, with advice to be sure to eat "right" and rest and take care of

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myself. Then another would stop, and another, until I soon learned a quick trip downtown could now take two hours or more. The outpouring of concern and love and genuine caring was beyond anything I had expected.

My two sisters and I have normally stayed in close touch with each other, but never as close as after Bernie died.

At first, it seemed as if they took turns calling me each evening just to visit (read: listen to my voice to see if I sounded "OK" or not). I later learned it was just coincidence, or so they said.

My son, Mike, and my daughter, Michelle, who both live a few hours away, seemed to do the same thing, but our conversations usually turned into crying sessions, just needing to share our sorrow while we were separated by the miles. These calls were healing, and we needed them to help each other through the bad days. Eventually, we progressed to the "remember when" sessions. Bernie was somewhat a practical joker and loved to tease, and that brought us some much needed laughter, along with some tears, both of which were healing.

Mike and Michelle and their families all come home to stay with me on weekends when their busy schedules will allow it, and I go to visit them, too. We enjoy these precious times so very much. Although it goes unsaid, I know we all feel the loss of Bernie's presence so very much, and that still hurts tremendously.

My involvement with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has provided me with the very special friends I've met in the subsequent years. Some of us stay in touch by email, and others I only see occasionally, but I think of them often and send a prayer for their continued healing their way. I look forward to many more years of involvement with these wonderful people and truly



DeAnna (2<sup>nd</sup> from right) with some of her "new" friends

necessary organization. I feel honored, humbled and very lucky to be able to participate, to possibly assist or comfort others as they have me, and to call so many talented, warm, loving people my friends.

Without my "old" friends and neighbors,

my family, the firefighters here in Palisade and the surrounding small towns, and my newfound friends from the past several years, I would probably be in a corner somewhere, babbling to myself uncontrollably, being attended to by people in white clothes.

Instead, thanks so much to everyone for my complete and total support system, which I do lean on quite often. My progress down this long, dark shadowy valley of grief and death has become a lot lighter and easier to walk since I have so many kind, loving souls to walk beside me, with me, or perhaps leading the way, helping to support me as I try to support them. Thank You, God, for my wonderful family and great friends.

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**By Tina Hauk**

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*Wife of Brian Thomas Hauk (1997-IL)*

**T**he evening firefighters came to my door to tell me Brian had died is something I will never forget. That first year was so difficult, and so many times I thought I would just die being without Brian. One day I received a packet from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation inviting me and my family to Emmitsburg. Brian had always wanted to visit Emmitsburg; never, ever did I think I would be there honoring his memory and

seeing his name on one of those plaques. That Memorial Weekend, I finally found my true "firefighter family." Since 1998, I have been a permanent fixture for the Foundation. I owe them so much, as they helped give me my life back.

In 2001, the Foundation asked if I would contact a woman from Ohio who had lost her husband in 2000 and was not planning to attend the Memorial Weekend. I

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**Tina Hauk** (continued)

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gave her a call. I was so nervous, not knowing exactly how to start the conversation. I felt her hurt in my heart. I remember telling her, “You just have to come.” I said, “I cannot explain why, but you will leave the Weekend with a better feeling than when you arrived.”

Sharon and I decided to meet in Indianapolis, halfway between our homes, prior to the Memorial Weekend, our first “Cracker Barrel run.” I was scared to death! I had never done anything like this—going off to meet a stranger by myself! It was so wonderful

meeting her and her best friend, Sue. Okay, at first Sharon may have scared me a little bit (those of you who know her ornery side know exactly what I am talking about!), but I soon found out she is one of the most wonderful, outgoing, thoughtful and kind people I had met.

I was at the Memorial Weekend that year when Sharon’s husband, Lee, was honored, and I made a vow to make Sharon feel as comfortable that weekend as I could. That Sunday, I was even there at 5:30 a.m. to save her and her group seats close to where the president was to speak – it was so cold that morning, I was frozen!

Since I have become close friends with Sharon, she has become someone very dear in my heart. Sharon worked very hard, from the beginning to the end, in helping the Hometown Heroes Act get passed and refused to give up when the Department of Justice would not pay out benefits to many families who were entitled to receive them. This is



*Tina Hauk & Sharon Purdy*

beyond commendable. Her beloved Lee died in the line of duty in 2000 from a heart attack, and Sharon received zero benefits. She didn’t want other families to have that same fate. That project was her heart.

Sharon has found her calling at the Foundation. Since 2001, she has been involved in so many other projects, helping make things better for fellow survivors, fire chiefs, fire department personnel, and EMS (Sharon is a paramedic herself). She is a proud member of the Foundation’s Speakers Bureau and receives many requests from

departments all over the country to speak on behalf of the Foundation. She is working on a project to help further educate coroners regarding line-of-duty deaths/benefits. She never gives up thinking of ways to make things better for survivors. The only rule I have made with Sharon is, if her head gets too big from all the attention from her great work and ideas, she and I will have a “chat,” and I’ll bring her back down to earth!

I have met many survivors that I care so much about. There are some that touch your life for a short time and some that leave a mark in your heart permanently. With Sharon, I have made a lifetime friend, and I am so blessed. We make frequent Cracker Barrel runs each year just to sit, catch up on things in person, and drink lots of sweet tea! She is a wonderful and caring friend and a great person.

Thank you, Sharon, for all you do. I love you like a sister, Friend.

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**By Jessica Higgins**

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*Daughter of Kevin Seaburg (1997–NY)*

**E**very girl dreams about her wedding day with all the traditions, including having her father escort her down the aisle and the father daughter dance at the reception. A day of love, laughter, and sharing, as two become one. When I got engaged two years ago, I was beaming with joy. As time passed and the planning of our big day got underway, I was reminded of that void in my heart—Daddy was not going to walk me down the

aisle, nor would we have our special dance at the reception. I struggled with how I was going to make it through the happiest day of my life without my dad.

I hung tightly onto my



*Jessica and Shawn*

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## Jessica Higgins (continued)

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memories of him; and because of his everlasting spirit, I proudly walked down the aisle with my Godfather (Dad's best friend). Embedded in my bouquet was a charm with a picture of my dad that was given to me by my Godfather. So, although Daddy could not physically be with me, he was with me in spirit.

We announced at our reception that we were going to have a Dollar Dance in memory of my dad, and all the money would be



Jessica with her Godfather, Donald Otten

donated to the National Fallen Firefighters

Foundation. It was a beautiful tribute to a small town hero, especially when his fellow firefighters stood in line to dance with me. With pride and honor, I am pleased to donate \$500 to the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation in memory of my dad and hero, Kevin Seaburg (Selkirk Fire Co. #3).

*Jessica Seaburg and Shawn Higgins were married on September 27, 2008. Congratulations to Jessica and Shawn, with wishes for a long, happy life together.*

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## America's Camp

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*"It was my sons' first time away from home, and it was a wonderful experience for them. The staff was awesome. The boys still bring up things that happened at camp as if it were yesterday. It is such a spot of sunshine and happiness in their lives!"*

**A**merica's Camp was created for children who lost a parent or sibling in the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and also for children or siblings of law enforcement officers and firefighters lost at any time in the line of duty. The camp was founded by an experienced group of camp directors, working with the board of the Twin Towers Fund. Through their efforts, the America's Camp Foundation was created, and the entire camp session – including coach bus transportation – is offered at no cost to eligible families.

At a beautiful lakeside site in the Berkshire Mountains of western Massachusetts, each day brings new opportunities to have fun and make friends. Under the care of a talented, energetic staff, campers participate in an elective program that offers team and individual sports, arts & crafts, pool and lake activities, and special offerings such as archery and dance. There are also exciting evening programs, special events, and trips to

local attractions. All the while, there is a support system of trained personnel in the background, easily accessible on an as-needed basis. According to parents, this balance of fun and support makes America's Camp unique.

This weeklong, sleep-away camp is once again being offered to boys and girls entering 2nd through 10th grades. The 2009 session will run from Tuesday, August 18, to Tuesday, August 25. The camp's enrollment has grown in the past five summers from just under 80 to over 250. Over 85% of campers return each summer.

We hope you will consider taking advantage of this wonderful opportunity for your child. For more information about the camp and enrollment, please call 1-800-548-6295, e-mail us at [info@americascamp.org](mailto:info@americascamp.org), or visit [www.americascamp.org](http://www.americascamp.org).

Sincerely,  
**Beth Griffin**  
Coordinator, America's Camp

*"Upon her return, my daughter was happy and relaxed. Having the opportunity to spend time with other children who have gone through the same loss as her makes her feel accepted. At the same time, she is not singled out as a child who lost a parent."*

## Bereavement Camps

**M**any local hospices and other non-profit organizations offer bereavement camps for school-age children. Usually, these are available at no cost or minimal cost to local children who have experienced the death of a parent, sibling, or other close relative or friend.

Bereavement camps provide a unique opportunity for

children to meet others who have had similar experiences. Sometimes, camp can be a significant turning point in a child's grief journey. If America's Camp is too far for you to travel, or if you would like help finding a bereavement camp in your local area, we can help. Please contact Jenny Woodall at the Foundation at [jwoodall@firehero.org](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org) or (301) 447-7691.

## Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program (PSOB)

### PSOB Frequently Asked Question...

**W**ould a recruit in the fire academy be eligible for PSOB death benefits if they were killed during training exercises? An individual is considered a public safety officer if they meet the definition of that term according to the PSOB regulations. In cases in which a recruit dies while participating in training in a fire academy, it would have to be shown that he or she already had the authority to engage in fire suppression activities. Should these requirements be satisfied, eligibility for PSOB benefits could apply if the other criteria in the PSOB Act and regulations are met.

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Program provides death, disability, and education benefits to those eligible for the program.



**BJA** Bureau of  
Justice Assistance

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program  
Toll-free: 1-888-744-6513

## We want to hear from you...



Why is it so hard for us to ask for and accept help after the death of loved one? Even in the depth of grief, in the darkest hour, most people find it very difficult to seek out help. We may be fearful of inconveniencing other people, too proud or too embarrassed to lean on others, or afraid of appearing weak. But we need additional support during times of grieving. If you would like to, please share your

thoughts on this topic and some insights and encouragement for other survivors.

Please send a Word document or e-mail to Jenny at [jwoodall@firehero.org](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org). If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

**National Fallen Firefighters Foundation**  
The Journey  
PO Drawer 498  
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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