

The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

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“Making the decision to have a child is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.”

~Elizabeth Stone

When a child dies, at any age, parents come face to face with their deepest fear. As parents, our job is to protect our children, keep them from harm's way, and make everything better. Even when our “babies” are grown and gone from home, that instinct to protect them remains strong.

When an adult son or daughter dies, parents often struggle with guilt and remorse over not being able to protect that child. They may think, “I should have been able to save him.” or even, “I wish it had been me.” In the fire service, where so many families serve together, those feelings are sometimes magnified. Parents may regret that they inspired or encouraged their child to join the fire service, a role that put them in harm's way.

Our children represent our hopes and our future. We do

not expect or want to outlive them. When a child dies, it can be hard to feel a sense of hope and joy again. Many parents wonder if it is even possible to survive after the death of a child. The pain is very deep, very primal, and for most people it does not ever go away completely. As one mom described it, “I don't think any parent ever really gets over the death of a child. We just learn to live with it. It becomes part of us. The hurt gets muted somehow, processed and tucked into a corner. It surfaces at the oddest times and feels like yesterday even though it's seven years ago, and then recedes again until the next time.”

In this issue of *The Journey* parents talk about their struggles with despair after the death of a child and how they have found ways to keep living with meaning and hope for the future.

By Carol Ransdell

mother of Mark Ransdell (2003-OR)

I am so very sorry for your loss. Having a child die is the most heartbreaking event a parent will endure, and unfortunately you now belong to this group. There is no easy or quick way to work through this excruciating pain—each person must find his own path through the maze of grief.

When my son died, my world, as I knew it, fell apart from the inside out. I often felt as though I was surrounded and held together with a thin glass shell. I moved carefully and rigidly guarded my being, because I knew if anyone scratched or poked a hole in this



shell my whole self would ooze out and melt away. As far as I was concerned, it really didn't matter, because my son, my future, was dead. However, on the other side, there were siblings, grandparents, and my husband who also needed to have help through this time of grief.

Many times I would sit for hours and just stare at the television set. It didn't matter to me that it wasn't even on...I was tuned in to what was replaying in my head over and over. The hurt was coming from deep within and would build up and the tears flowed continuously. Even now, as I

continued inside

Carol Ransdell *(continued)*

remember this time, tears come to my eyes.

Before my son died, I always thought I was empathetic when I heard of other parents whose children had died. I knew they had suffered a terrible loss, and I was sorry for them. Now I find I was naïve and totally ignorant of the overwhelming pain until it happened to me.

Many people expressed their sympathy for my loss, and I appreciated it with heartfelt thanks. However, one day a mother added the words, “My son died when he was 19.” I responded immediately with the words, “Then you really do know.” I suddenly felt better, because there was someone else who did understand the depth of what I was feeling. Sharing the pain made it more tolerable for that moment,

just knowing I was not alone. I then realized the importance of grief support groups.

As parents of fallen firefighters, we have additional opportunities to meet and share thoughts, stories, and tears with other families through activities with the Wildland Firefighter Foundation and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. I didn’t know anyone in these organizations before I went to the survivor events, but there is an instant bond with the other parents who are making the same journey. This has been very helpful for me, because I have made many supportive friends.

I am so sorry for your loss, and I hope you can find some peace soon.

By Teresa Thompson

mother of James Fugate, Jr. (2005-OK)

I am a mother who lost a son at the age of 20, going to his last fire call. He lost control of his car, which cost his life. In my heart, I know that he was doing what he loved to do in life: helping others, no matter what it cost. I can remember how he apologized so many times when he got to the hospital of how bad he had hurt his parents. He didn’t realize how bad he was hurt. He just wanted Mom and Dad to understand that he was so sorry. I told him, “It will work out. You are all that matters. The car is replaceable. It’s okay.”

“It’s okay” is what I heard so many times through any events to do with the firefighters. It’s okay to cry, get mad, to hurt. Now I really understand what it means. It’s okay, because I have done all that and still do.

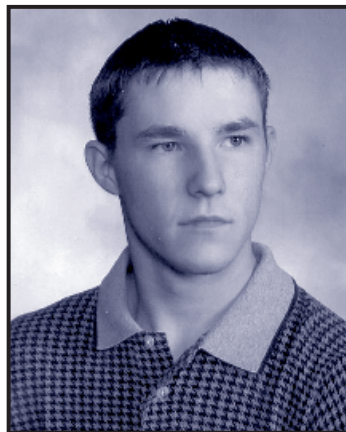
So now I remember all the good and bad times that I have had with my son, James Fugate Jr. In my heart, I know

that God got a very good one. I used to ask the question, “Why?” That is such a simple three-letter word. But there is no answer for that three-letter word. I have learned such a

simple thing, but that was two years later when one day I had missed him so much that I asked that “Why?” again. Then it hit me in the heart: God only loans them to you for awhile. Then he needs them back to help him. With this in my heart I now understand.

So each and every passing day I thank God that he has my son in a safe place. He has no more pain, sorrow, wants or needs.

God provides all of that for him now. Mother and Dad will see him again. So I pull up another tomorrow and go on until it is my time. The hollow spot in my heart will heal, and I know that I will never be without him in my heart. I live my life like he would if he was still here.



By Sylvia Kratzke

mother of Heather DePaolo-Johnny (2002-CA)

I had always said I didn’t think I could survive the death of one of my children. You see, I was a single parent from the time my children were six and five. I was mother, father, cook, cleaner, and taxi driver. I brought home the bacon and cooked it, too. Every decision I ever

made was made with the consideration of how it would affect my children. They were the center of my life. I saw them through awful adolescence, the terrible teenage years, and off to college, college graduations, varied scary (for me) travel adventures, and two weddings (mine and my son’s).

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It was hard to raise them alone, but there was so much love in our home, and they brought me so much joy. Their many accomplishments made every difficult moment well worth the effort. When my thoughts or the conversation turned to the unthinkable, the loss of one of them, I just knew I could not survive. How could I? They were my life.



On July 28, 2002, an engine rollover on the Stanza Fire took the life of my beautiful daughter, Heather. She was 28, newly married (she had eloped, the scamp!) and, according to her, the happiest she had ever been, so full of life and possibilities. When they told me, I was devastated. My heart hurt. Someone was trying to rip it out. I knew that I, too, was going to die. My head was spinning, and oh-my-god, that scream is coming from me! Surely, I am dying, and what about Len (my husband and Heather's loving stepfather) and my son? How can I tell him that his sister is dead? Or Sean, Heather's new husband? How can I tell him his future has tumbled down a mountainside and disappeared? No, this can't be true! Wait, I can't die yet. I have to figure this out. The screaming has stopped, the men are asking who they can call for me. "My husband," I say, and it is then that I know I am still alive.

That was almost five years ago and, as I write this, it is as if it were yesterday. I can feel the pain of loss as acutely now as I did then. Mostly, though, I choose not to. That's one of the blessings of time and acceptance. It has not been an easy journey. It has been harder, even, than all those years of single parenting. I have had to learn to live again. We all have had to learn those hard lessons: she is gone from this life, she now lives in our hearts, her love continues in the way we who are left behind choose to conduct our lives. I have been blessed with a loving family. We are strong in our

faith in God and in each other. We know that grace got us going and keeps us moving along this hard road. Grace has led us to people who are supportive and understanding.

It is important to keep yourself open to these graces, for an understanding heart can be in places you least expect: at work, in a book, at the hairdresser's, online, or sleeping next to you. It is also important to seek out those who can understand. A support group or grief counselor, I believe, is a necessity. It is a safe place to express your grief and to have it validated. It is also a place where you can explore the possibility of continuing your life without your loved one, a place where you can find hope.

I wish I could tell you there is a magic way to heal from a loss of this magnitude. There isn't one, but healing is possible. Take care of yourself, eat well, rest, exercise, seek out those who understand, be gentle with each other, for everyone grieves at their own pace. If possible, when the time is right, explore ways to honor the memory of your loved one: create a scholarship, a charitable fund, or a memorial plaque in your community. It is a way to keep their memory alive and to do good in their name.

In time, I was able to reach out to others who were newly bereaved. In reaching out and offering understanding and hope, I found I was blessed with being able to see my own progress on this healing journey. I have made new friends, friends who share the same feelings, friends who understand. It is one of the ways that I obtain the strength to continue this ongoing journey. My heart still hurts sometimes, but I no longer think I am dying. That space where Heather should be is empty of what she once was, but full of love and grace and memories of my cherished daughter. And I know it will be this way for the rest of my life, as it will be for the rest of yours.

I was wrong. The death of a child is survivable. Like me, you will not die. You must simply live through it. You will live and love again. The gift of memory will sustain you. The gift of family and friends will sustain you. Your love will sustain you. They are with you still.

The pieces written by Sylvia Kratzke and Carol Ransdell originally appeared in "I, Too, Lost a Wildland Firefighter," a collection of personal reflections assembled by Judy Rama, mother of Dan Rama (2002-OR) for the Wildland Firefighter Foundation. To request a copy of this booklet, please contact the WFF at www.wffoundation.org.

My Son My Hero by Michael Mozzillo

The author, a retired FDNY firefighter, writes about the death of his son, Christopher, and his personal journey since then. Christopher Mozzillo, also an FDNY firefighter, died in the World Trade Center on 9/11. We are pleased to add this book to other firsthand accounts written by fire service survivors. You can read more at:

www.eloquentbooks.com/MySonMyHero.

To borrow books through the Lending Library, visit www.firehero.org, or contact Linda Hurley at (301) 447-7693 or lhurley@firehero.org. If you want to purchase a copy, please consider buying from Amazon.com through the link on the Foundation's Web site. Purchases made through the Amazon.com affiliate program will benefit National Fallen Firefighters Foundation programs.

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program (PSOB)

PSOB Frequently Asked Question...

How can I check on the status of a specific death, disability, or education claim that has already been filed with the PSOB Office?

Call the PSOB Office toll-free at 1-888-744-6513 to speak with the Benefits Specialist assigned to the claim.

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...

What can we do to help a person who is grieving? People often wonder what they can do and how they can help those closest to the person who has died. Was there something that stands out for you as a very thoughtful gift or gesture after your loved one died? Was there a book, a memorial donation, an act, a photo, a letter, or a story that was particularly helpful to you, or that came at just the right time? Is there



something you now do or give to others after a loved one has died?

If you'd like to share your thoughts on this topic or other aspects of your journey, please send a Word document or e-mail to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

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