

# The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

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*To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.*

~Thomas Campbell (1777-1844)

**D**eath is a normal part of the life cycle. It has always been so. But when someone we love dies, the experience feels anything but normal. This is especially true when death happens “out of season”—when young people die, when parents outlive a child, or when a young child is left without a parent. We search for explanations, but sometimes there may be no answers.

There is no question that loss changes us profoundly and permanently. But death does not end relationships. We find ways to go forward, weaving both the loss and the legacy of the person who died into the story of the rest of our lives. In this issue, survivors share their thoughts about their personal journeys of loss and continued connection.

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**By Elizabeth M. Hartsell**

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*Daughter of William C. Hartsell (1986-NV)*

**M**y father, TSGT William C. Hartsell, USAF, passed away in the line of duty nearly 25 years ago. A toddler at the time of his death, I would never have memories of his voice or hugs, but I knew he was a firefighter and my mother and older sister had loved him. Growing up, I heard stories about his childhood and saw family photos, but I felt empty because I still didn't understand WHO he was.

As a young adult, I decided to take time off from college and joined AmeriCorps to do disaster relief. Part of the motivation behind that was how often my grandma talked about Dad's passion for service. During my time in the trenches of National Service, I learned about myself and, surprisingly, who my father was. Working alongside

firefighters and other servicemen and women who make up this nation's first line of defense, I met my father. That is to say, I had a deep understanding of the type of man he was. Few men and women make the choice to put themselves in harm's way to protect people they may not know. Those who do are extraordinary, yet often deceptively humble.

To have my father honored during the 2010 Memorial Weekend after so many years was a blessing and a joy. To see my mother and grandmother honored and cared for in such a loving way is something I will never forget and will always be thankful for. Four generations of my family got to witness the great dignity with which your organization honored my father and family. Thank you!



*Elizabeth Hartsell*

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**By Laurel VanAuken***Daughter of Gail VanAuken (2000-MI)*

I can certainly say that losing my mother in a line-of-duty death when I was eight years old has affected my everyday life now. My mom and my dad responded to a call early in the morning and were involved in a car accident. She was killed instantly, and my dad survived with some minor injuries.

I didn't have a mom to help me go through puberty. I didn't get to tell my mom she's ruining my life because she wouldn't let me go to a party. I didn't get to hug her when I passed my driving test. While other girls were shopping with their moms, I was home learning how to clean, doing chores most kids don't learn how to do until they're sixteen or older. I missed out on all those events that mothers and daughters do together.

But it didn't make me bitter or envious. It taught me that life can be taken away in a matter of moments. It may be unfair and hard to understand, but I think it's made me stronger as an individual. My mom played a huge role in our community. Everyone loved her. Her being so popular

in our town made it very hard to move on after her death. Now, though, it's a good thing to know that everyone around me knew her and can help me put together a better image of who she was.

My sister has really been my mother figure. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't know much about my mom, and I would have been left with only faint memories. Losing my mom has challenged my everyday life, because of the community we live in and how popular she was amongst everyone.

Growing up in a family where firefighting was all around me, I already loved the idea of becoming one. After my mom passing, the dream of becoming a firefighter grew stronger. Not only do I have a passion to help people, now I want to honor her and all the women who've overcome stereotypes to do something they love. I honestly believe my mom is my guardian angel. She isn't just a mom to me anymore. She can be a butterfly on my shoulder or a whistle in the wind, but no matter what, she is always near me and watching over her family.

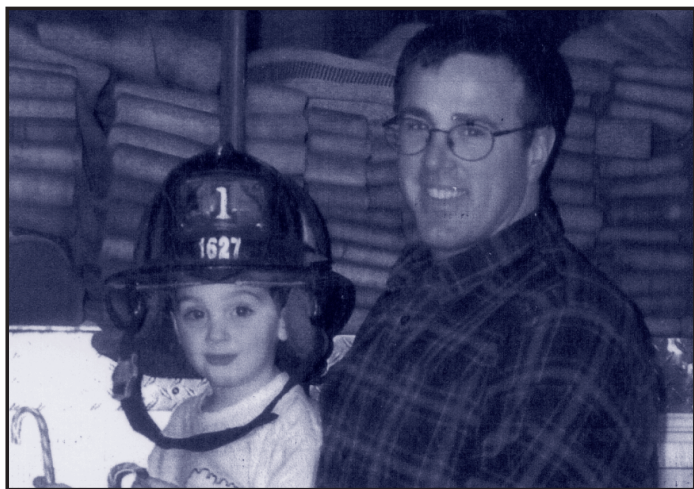


*Laurel VanAuken (2nd from left) with her sister, Michelle Price; cousin, Shine Caramia; and aunt, Carole Chisholm*

**By Antonia Fontana***Mother of David J. Fontana (2001-NY)*

**O**n June 8, my fourteen-year-old grandson, Aidan, took part in a moving up ceremony with his eighth grade class at his school in Brooklyn. His dad—my son Dave—was not there, because he was killed at the World Trade Center with 342 other firefighters.

As my daughter, Vicki, and I sat in the audience, we thought of Dave and how happy and proud he would be to be here watching his six-foot-tall son finish this step and prepare to go on to high school.

*Aidan Fontana, 2010**Aidan with his dad, Dave, in 2000*

After the ceremony, we went off to a restaurant with Aidan's mother and her family and celebrated. Leaving the group, Vicki and I went back to the garage to pick up our car. As we were crossing a street, Vicki said, "Mom, look up." I looked and saw Ladder 122 truck passing by. Ladder 122 was Dave's first house, but not "first due" in downtown Brooklyn. Dave is here, we thought, and he wanted us to know it.

**Looking for resources for grieving children?**

**T**he Foundation can help you find counselors, support groups, and grief camps for children in your local area, or put you in touch with others who have had a similar loss.

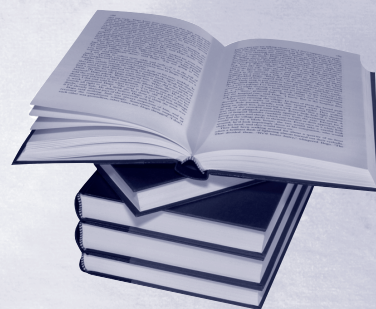
Contact Jenny Woodall at [jwoodall@firehero.org](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org) or (301) 447-7691.

We have a lending library of books dealing with grief and loss.

Visit [www.firehero.org/resources/library/index.html](http://www.firehero.org/resources/library/index.html) to search for specific titles.

There are many resources available online. Search for "children grief" or

Visit [www.firehero.org/resources/families/other.html](http://www.firehero.org/resources/families/other.html).



## Public Safety Officers' Benefits Programs (PSOB)

*Did you know...*

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Office at the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice, provides death, disability, and education benefits to those eligible for the programs.

Should a firefighter's death be found eligible for the PSOB benefit, and the firefighter has no surviving spouse or eligible children for PSOB purposes, the next level of beneficiary is the "PSOB Designee" on file with the agency at the time of the officer's death. The PSOB Office has partnered with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (NFFF) to provide the following information to departments regarding a PSOB designee—especially vital in those instances where a public safety officer is not married and has no children, or adult children only.

The "Designation of Beneficiaries" template can be customized with department letterhead and is available for download from NFFF at [www.firehero.org/resources/departments/last/](http://www.firehero.org/resources/departments/last/). If you are a member of the fire service

or have family members or friends who are firefighters, please take advantage of this important resource.

For questions regarding this information, or for details regarding the PSOB Death, Disability, or Educational Assistance Programs, please call the PSOB Call Center toll-free at 888-744-6513 or 202-307-0635, or visit PSOB online at [www.psob.gov](http://www.psob.gov).

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Programs are a unique



**BJA**  
Bureau of Justice Assistance  
U.S. Department of Justice

partnership effort of the PSOB Office, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), U.S. Department of Justice and local, state, and federal public safety agencies and national organizations, such as the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, to provide death, disability, and education benefits to those eligible for the Programs.

**Toll-free: 1-888-744-6513**

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



Completing dreams. Sometimes when a loved one dies, our dreams for the future die with them. But if we can hold on to some of those dreams and bring them to fruition, there can be a special sweetness to that. Maybe life isn't exactly how we'd envisioned, but we've managed to hold on to some dreams and live to see them come true. Do you have a story about a dream completed?

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](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org) by January 20, 2011. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

*The Journey*

**National Fallen Firefighters Foundation**

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