

The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

MARCH / APRIL 2011 ISSUE 41

Dreams are necessary to life.

~ Anais Nin

After someone you love dies, it can be difficult to think about the future. You dreamed about the things you would do together, planned for good times yet to come, knew that person would be there by your side. When the picture of the future changes so drastically, it's painful at first to even look at the path ahead. One thought many survivors express in the beginning is, "I don't know how I will live without him." It takes some time to begin to forge a new path.

Some people begin by completing a dream they shared with their loved one. If you were planning a move, a trip, or a project at the time of your loved one's death, completing that goal or dream can be a way to honor the memory of the person who helped dream it. Though it may be bittersweet, there is often a lot of comfort in seeing the dream through. In this issue, survivors share their stories of dreams completed.

The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.

~ Eleanor Roosevelt

The Gathering Place – A Dream Comes True

By Linda Buckel, wife of Joseph W. "Pete" Buckel (2005-MD)

For months, buckets of sand and cement, and tons of fieldstone lined the walls of our unfinished basement. It was our dream to convert this big space into a place where the kids and grandkids, our family and friends could gather. And, of course, there would have to be a fireplace.

Pete was a stonemason by trade. He had already stoned everything else in sight—upstairs fireplace, walls, flower and shrub beds, walkways and steps—and our ranch style home was handsomely

covered with rough fieldstone. Giving Pete a hammer and chisel was like handing an artist a paintbrush. He loved his work, and his work always reflected his natural talent and creativity.



Linda Buckel lovingly shares her husband Pete's stone fireplace

So what was the big deal about starting the fireplace in the basement? What was the hold-up? I was anxious, but I knew good things come to those that wait, that things happen for a reason, that it's all part of a major plan.

Just two weeks before our

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The Gathering Place *continued from page 1*

retirement trip to Colorado, Pete finished a beautiful stone fireplace that covered one entire end of the basement. I was ecstatic, and the barn beam that Pete had chosen for the mantle even had a little heart carved in it and beside it, my initials, LB. Our dream had begun, and after our Rocky Mountain vacation we would get back to work and bring this dream to fruition.

As fate would have it, Pete never got to finish our basement. Two weeks after returning from Colorado, this strapping, strong, supposedly healthy man died of a massive heart attack responding to a local fire call. Many dreams were shattered that day. In the beginning I couldn't have cared less about the basement or the beautiful fireplace. I couldn't think ahead. I didn't want to think ahead. I just wondered how life was going to go on without my rock, my strength, my Pete.

Many say, "Time heals all wounds," but I believe that it is what we do with our time that makes a difference. Grief can be very time consuming, but I have found that it is the hopes and the DREAMS of the past that drive us into the realities of an unknown future.

Two years ago, I found a contractor that made the dream of a spacious room a reality. Descending the steps to our new family room, one sees a ledge where figurines of a firefighter, fire truck, and a Dalmatian have been strategically placed, and a beam of light shines on a sign that reads, "The Gathering Place – Where Warm Memories Are Made With Family and Friends." It is a place for coffee and conversation, brunch, lunch or a dinner party, games with the kids, or an evening of scrapbooking and TV. It is a place of warmth and remembrance, honoring the dreams of those present and past, showcasing the handiwork of the firefighter/stonemason that placed the first rock that set this dream into motion.

A Dream Fulfilled

By Barb Pelton, wife of James M. Pelton (2001-MI)

My husband Jim's dream was to build a log cabin on 12 acres we had in the lower northern peninsula of Michigan. The spring before he was killed, we harvested our hardwood trees on our farm to use as beams and to cut to size for hardwood floors. On our land up north, we had mature red pines, along with a large field of Christmas trees. We began cutting, shaping, and taking the bark off the number of logs needed to build our cabin. The logs were stacked and covered for the winter of 2000.

In the spring of 2001, Jim began making the area among the Christmas trees ready for the logs, and on Memorial

Day, a crew of family and close friends came to help erect the logs. What an experience that was! It took the entire long weekend to complete the wall and rafters. Since we were having a veranda style porch both front and back, each of those rafters had to be made on site.

Until the 4th of July, Jim and I worked on it, doing what the two of us could do without help. On the 4th, a group of friends who had helped from the beginning came to shingle the roof. Of course, it was one of the hottest weekends of the summer. They could only work a few hours in the



Three stages of construction of Barb & Jim Pelton's cabin: 1. walls; 2. roof; 3. finished!

A Dream Fulfilled *continued from page 2*

morning, stop, then pick up again in the late afternoon. Monday morning, they finished a super “hot” job.

The last time Jim worked on the cabin, he hung the painted doors he had made. They still have his fingerprints because they weren’t quite dry when he hung them.

After Jim’s death in August, my one wish was to be able to finish his dream. It was only through the organizational skills of our friend Stan that it took place. I was in charge of all meals and helped out where I could. Insulation in

roof, walls erected on inside, corn blasted to clean logs inside and out, windows installed, chinking of logs, porch floors done, staining of logs inside and out, plus sealing it all. That doesn’t include laying, sanding, and finishing the hardwood floors inside; painting the few walls that needed it; competing the kitchen and bathroom; and installing the washer and dryer.

It took longer than Jim had hoped, but we are enjoying “Jim’s Dream.” It was through our fire department, family, and friends that his dream “lives.” This is definitely a cabin that LOVE built.

Dreams Completed

By Melissa Woitalewicz, wife of Kenny Woitalewicz (2004-NE)

Valentine’s Day.....a day that is spent sending flowers, candy, cards and having dinner with your sweetheart. Well, for most that’s how it’s spent. In 2004, we spent it in the ICU, not knowing if my husband of 14 years, Captain Kenny Woitalewicz, would pull through. Along with his fellow firefighter, Captain Bob Heminger, Kenny responded to a house fire in the early morning hours of Valentine’s Day. The roof collapsed as they attempted to rescue an elderly lady. Bob died the next day, and Kenny succumbed to his injuries two days later.

Kenny and I met in September 1987 and were married in June 1990, in the town we now called home. We were blessed with two boys, Matthew, age 10, and Ryan, age 4, at the time.

There was a home that we both drove by daily, waiting for the day the owners would put a “For Sale” sign in the yard.

It finally happened, and we became proud owners of that home. We also purchased a corner lot down the street, and Kenny’s dream was to someday move our home to that lot and make it a rental property, and build us a new home on the lot on which we lived.

Weeks before the accident, we went to the bank with the floor plans, and we were in the process of working out all

the details. The Valentine’s Day accident put a halt to all of those dreams. I knew it wasn’t something I could do. I had absolutely no idea how to build a house, let alone move one!!

A few months later, talk started about fulfilling the dream that Kenny had

started for his family. I was reluctant. I wasn’t sure what I was getting myself or the boys into. I didn’t think I could pull this all together and manage to make it work like he wanted. We found a little black book in Kenny’s



Matthew and Ryan Woitalewicz on the porch of their new home.

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Dreams Completed *continued from page 3*

pickup that had names, phone numbers, and bids that he had gotten on doing some of the work. He had things so planned out already that a contractor was hired and work began!! We moved the current home to the corner lot, and work began on the new home. The boys were able to pick the location of their bedrooms in the basement when the walls were being poured. A new house was on its way.

In September 2004, the new home was finished, and we were living in the dream home that we had planned so many years before. The only part that was different was that Kenny wasn't here to share it with us. He had looked forward to hearing the kids running up and down the basement stairs to their bedrooms, and he couldn't wait to have a family room where we could all spend a Sunday afternoon watching movies. Since moving in, we've made a corner room in the basement with a display case for all the memorabilia pieces we've gotten over the years in his honor.

The boys and I also worked hard at making another of Kenny's dreams become a reality. As owner of the local laundromat/carwash, Kenny wanted to update the facility to be more modern and user friendly. He was in the process of tearing out the old flooring, installing new walls, and painting the inside of the laundromat. While the contractors were doing work on the houses, the boys and I were able to finish the renovation. We purchased six new washers and a new dryer. His dream of having an updated facility was completed!!

Kenny was a dedicated father and husband, wonderful son, brother and friend and is missed by all who knew and loved him. We treasure the "I love you." we received from him on that special morning of February 14, 2004, as he walked out that door. Even though he may be gone from our lives, he still holds a special place in our hearts, and he'll never be forgotten. We are living in the dream home he had envisioned for his family. Kenny was always our hero; now he's everyone's hero.

After The Storm

By Marie Sanborn, wife of Timothy Sanborn (2007-MI)

As the storm passes and the fog clears, there is a promise of a rainbow.

In 1990, Tim and I packed up our three daughters, two dogs and a tent and headed north across the Mackinac Bridge to vacation in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, the UP. We stopped at a realtor's office that was advertising Lake Superior frontage lots for sale. After taking the local boat tour to see the Pictured Rocks, we realized how beautiful the area was. We walked the lake lot that was advertised, went back to the realtor's office and bought it. Just like that! Tim said that it was the fastest thing I'd ever made my mind up on...other than him, of course!

For the next several years we camped on our property; first in a tent, then in a camper. We dreamed of building a log home someday. When the lot next to ours went up for sale, we bought it, too. Almost had to sell one of the kids and the dog, but we made it happen!

In 2000, "Loon Landing," our log-sided garage, was built, with an apartment above. This got us out of the camper...ahhh...a flushing toilet and hot shower! Traveling six

hours from our home in St. John's to our "camp" in the UP, we spent many four-day weekends planning and dreaming about the day construction of our log home would begin. It was so much fun!

In 2006, Tim retired, and we started getting the St. John's home ready to sell. In 2007, our oldest daughter married in April, I retired, and our second daughter would marry in October. Life was good. Our plans were on track. All of that changed when Tim suffered a heart attack at a residential structure fire and died en route to the hospital. I went to Loon Landing in 2007, and I was in a fog.

I decided to spend the summer of 2008 in the UP. Tim's presence was so strong there. I did a lot of thinking, sorting things out and soul searching. Someone once told me not to make any major decisions for three years. That was good advice. I found, though, that as time passed my

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feelings were changing. The UP just felt right. During the summer of 2009, I decided to move forward with the dream that Tim and I had together to build our log home.

It was something I had to finish for Tim and for myself. I did not want to live with the unanswered questions of “What if?” or “What could have been?” But how would I feel once the house was completed?

I contacted Bill Walther, the man who built the garage, whom I trusted and who advised me. We began construction. It

was emotional. When decisions had to be made about plumbing, electrical, things I knew nothing about, I became depressed. When I had some crazy idea, Bill would bring me back to reality. A friendship with his entire family and the work crew formed, and I know that if I ever need any help



Marie Sanborn in front of her dream log home on Michigan's UP.

with anything, they will be there for me. I didn't have to compromise about colors, flooring or counters. I was getting everything **I** wanted. It was exciting! But then, a flash of anger would come, and the guilt of enjoying **our** dream without Tim was overwhelming. We both worked so hard for this to happen. **We** should be making these decisions together!

My daughters were not happy with my decision to move so far away. But, through this process they have come to realize that this is right for me. I have awesome neighbors, am in good health, and can do most things by myself. I have found a confidence and

strength that I didn't know I had. What's most important, though, is that I have found a new “normal” and comfort. Memories do go with you, wherever you are. I am happy and living each day to its fullest with no regrets. Tim would be proud.

Dreams can come true...

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NEW in the Foundation's Lending Library

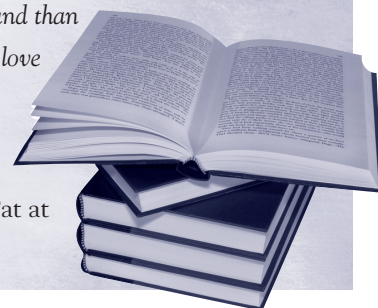
Military Widow: A Survival Guide

By Joanne M. Steen, MS, NCC, and M. Regina Asaro, MS, RN, CT

Written specifically for military survivors and co-written by a military widow, this book contains a lot of information that may be helpful to fire service widows as well. It covers topics including sudden death, myths about grief, what to do with wedding jewelry and memorabilia, widow humor, coping with significant dates, and dating (or not). The book is very user-friendly, organized in short chapters, and presented with both practicality and humor. One wife of a fallen firefighter had this to say:

“The book is wonderful! Just as there are specific issues with a military widow, there are some specific issues with a firefighter widow. With all of the specific issues aside, I have found in my work with widows that there is more common ground than not. I love this book because it speaks from the heart. I used part of it last night with a group of widows. I love it and plan to use it tonight in another grief share group.”

To borrow this and other books free of charge, read reviews, or buy your own copy through the Amazon.com affiliate program, visit the Family Programs section at www.firehero.org or contact Pat at pstonaker@firehero.org or (301) 447-1365.



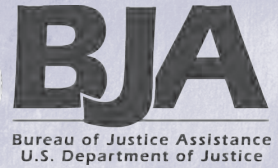


Public Safety Officers' Benefits Programs (PSOB)

Did you know...

The Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Office considers it an honor to administer its benefit programs on behalf of America's fallen and catastrophically injured public safety officers and their loved ones. To further honor the nation's fallen firefighters, in April 2011, the PSOB Office will offer a display—The Heroes Walk—recognizing fallen firefighters whose PSOB claims are currently active or were approved in the past 18 months. Photographs of this display will be available through NFFF in upcoming months.

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



are a unique 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...



Grief can be a very physical experience. Like other forms of stress, it can affect overall health, stamina, appetite, immune function, and existing health conditions.

What have you learned about grief's effects on your body and how to handle that? What suggestions do you have for others about how to deal with the physical aspects of grief?

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 by May 9, 2011. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

The Journey
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
P.O. Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

This project was supported by Grant #2009-PS-DX-K016, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author(s) and do not represent the official position or policies of the United States Department of Justice.