

The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

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In the midst of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.

~ Albert Camus

Teenagers. Most people have a definite reaction even reading that word. Whether you are remembering your own teen years or are currently parenting teenagers (or future teenagers), it's a time of life that triggers a lot of feelings.

The teenage years are a time of enormous development and change, which can make for interesting times. As teens are pushing toward adulthood and independence, the stabilizing presence of family, friends, and community is especially important.

So what happens when a loved one dies suddenly and unexpectedly?

Teenagers have a unique set of challenges to navigate when someone close to them dies. They are thrust into a maturity that their peers often do not share and may not

understand. They may feel suddenly years older than their friends. Teens often feel like they must focus on other people's needs—a surviving and devastated parent, or a younger sibling. Their grief may be seen as secondary to that of parents or spouses, and they may feel very alone. Since many teens go to great lengths not to express their emotions openly, people may mistakenly assume that they aren't really grieving. Nothing could be further from the truth. They are grieving in their own way.

Like people of all ages, with good support, most teenagers find a way through grief and carry those experiences forward to live full, happy lives. Teenagers are energetic, resilient, and hopeful. They think about and feel things deeply. Their life force is strong, and they are reaching for the future and all the possibilities it holds. In this issue, teenagers tell their stories in their own clear, strong, remarkable voices.

Change

By Katie Hales, age 17, Daughter of Robert A. Hales (2008-OR)

Change can be something simple like changing your hair, the food you eat, or the jacket you wear. But change could also be big like a new car, a new lifestyle, or new friends. Then change can be huge and dramatic. It can come in the form of a death of someone you love. That change can make you a completely different person and make you look at life in a whole new way.



Katie Hales

On August 17, 2008, my life, along with my family's, changed in that huge way. My dad, Robert A. Hales, died in the line of duty. He had a heart attack while taking me

to work, shortly after being on the fire lines for over twelve hours.

The first couple of weeks after he died are still a blur. I remember the funeral where he was honored at the highest national ranking. It was the first time I really cried since the accident. I thought that someone needed to stay intact emotionally to keep our lives moving. I felt terrible for not

being able to cry. At first I thought there was something wrong with me, but I realized that because I was with him

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just before he died that it couldn't be true. Then being at the funeral, reality came crashing down. I broke down and don't remember much.

On our way to the reception that was being held at the fairgrounds, we rode in my dad's engine. His best friend, Tim, got to drive us, and something weird happened. We were on a hill when the accelerator broke; the brakes were just fine though. Luckily, we broke down next to a house, and others went in search of some tools. It was pretty funny that we were surrounded by fire personnel and trucks, yet we had to go to a house for tools. The mile-long procession was halted for half an hour. We all said this was definitely Dad messing with us, because he was the fire station's mechanic. Tim had to use a clamp and hold the accelerator wire while he drove. He looked pretty silly crouched down and still looking over the dash of the fire engine to drive.

My mom's birthday was a week after the funeral. My 15th birthday was a week after hers. Dad's birthday was supposed to be three days after mine, and then school started the following week. Most families don't have to go through the "firsts" (first birthday, holiday, anniversary, etc.) for a little while, so it made it that much harder but



Robert A. Hales

maybe easier. We had all the pain at once so we could then start healing.

My Dad was and still is my hero. I want to be like him. He was reserved; he listened to everyone. He never had anything bad to say about anyone. He didn't judge; he wanted to get to know someone before he made a decision about them. He always took time before he spoke so he was saying it in a way that would be understood.

This experience really opened my eyes. It showed me who my true friends were. Who was willing to stay with me while I grieved? Who was using me, and who was nice to me? It helped me grow up. I had gone through something that most don't

experience for years. I matured; suddenly, I wasn't that little girl anymore.

I started to learn more about life. The things that I had valued before my dad's death changed. I started living life as it came. I stopped trying to be like everyone else, because I wasn't. I decided that I wanted to be different.

I learned that you can never take life for granted, for you just might lose it. Not everyone wants to help you or keep you happy. One day your life will change dramatically, and you won't be prepared, but hopefully you can learn from it.

The Call

By Kelsey North, age 16, Daughter of Derek North (2009-GA)

Smoke was thick on this Monday afternoon in February. I could not help but think of my brave parents whenever I inhaled the dreadful smoke. They were both volunteer firefighters at the time and had been for years. It worried me, like it always had.

My day was going just as planned, but something troubled my stomach that entire day. I was at a friend's house whenever my phone started vibrating. "Hello?" I answered. "Hey, Kelsey. It's Aunt Betsy," a familiar voice rang, "Can I talk to Leigha?" I handed the phone to

my friend as I sat nervously, wondering what was being said on the other line. They hung the phone up, and we continued with our afternoon, but I still had an uneasy feeling.

Whenever Leigha got off the phone, we sat on her front porch to wait for her mama. She never said one word to me regarding the call. As her mama was pulling up, my phone vibrated again. It was a text message from one of my close friends saying she was very sorry for my

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The Call *continued from page 2*

loss. I had no clue what she was talking about, so I just disregarded the text thinking she accidentally sent it. My phone vibrated once more, and it was Aunt Betsy. I hesitated to answer, but whenever I did, I heard sobbing and sad cries in the background. It took her a minute to talk, but the words she said will ring on in my mind forever. My aunt sadly said, "There's been an accident."

I sat in shock and wondered who it was. Aunt Betsy would not say anything for about a minute. I started asking her several questions in panic. She finally sadly said, "Baby, Daddy's gone." As the words reached my ears and tears streamed down my face, I screamed to her, "Not my daddy!" That was all I could say.

The world was crashing around me, or it felt so. My daddy was supposed to be at work, where he always was at four o'clock on Monday afternoons. There was no way it could be him. My mind was a jumbled mess. I kept flashing back in the past to all of the memories I shared with my daddy. He taught me everything I know. I could not picture my life without him. After a few minutes, reality hit me hard. My daddy really was gone.

I picked up my phone and called my friend Lee. We might as well have been dating at the time, and he was the only person I wanted to talk to. His voice always seemed to calm me and make me smile. Lee's phone kept ringing and ringing and ringing until I heard his voicemail. I needed the comfort of his voice and someone to tell me everything would be okay. I wanted to be the first person to tell him about Daddy. When someone finally answered his phone, it was his baseball coach. Lee couldn't even talk; it had obviously hit him hard.

Aunt Ashleigh pulled up, and I ran to her. She was more like my sister than my aunt. With tears in my eyes, I said to her, "I just wanna go home." And so we did. As we

approached the red lights in Stockton, my hometown, I could hear the piercing sound of the sirens that seemed they would never end. Going through the intersection, I could see the old fire truck's driver side resting peacefully on a light pole and covered in a bright blue tarp. The truck was completely totaled, but I'll never forget the damage the wreck had caused, on the fire truck and my heart. I cried the closer and closer we got to my Nana and Papa's house. When we got to their house I got out of the car and started towards the front door. As I opened the door I could hear the cries of my family that still echo in my head.

Since this day I have never been the same person. I grew stronger and realized what was important in life. No

one may realize it, but the smallest things in life will be the most remembered. Every day I still expect Daddy to walk through our front door, but I know Daddy is only far enough away to be reunited with the loved ones he lost. Firefighter Derek North, number 206, received his last call on February 23, 2009, at 3:59 p.m. Daddy will live on in my heart forever and always, and I dream of the day

we will meet again with one of those big bear hugs I miss so dearly. I will always stay his Daddy's little girl.

Losing my daddy and best friend has been an experience that has encouraged me to be strong for my friends whenever they need me. It has also inspired me to want to help everyone I can. I now strive to do my very best at everything so I will make Daddy proud. Firefighters motivate me to help people and to become part of the family they provide. I am so thankful for everything the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has done not only for me, but for my entire family. I would help this organization in any way they asked, at any cost. Thank you to everyone who has supported me these past two years. I now stand, on my own two feet, as strong as I ever have.



Derek and Kelsey North

For My Daddy

By Mollie Brack, age 19, Daughter of Steven C. Brack (2004-GA)

You are forever in my heart

If I had only known

That day we would part

My love would have shone

I loved you

But I couldn't say it then

I will let my words be few

Though I know it will be hard to say again

If there is a heaven or someplace beyond

I know that you are watching over me

Maybe you are fishing at a pond

I just hope that you are happy with what you see

I miss you so bad

Because you were the best father I ever had

Goodnight, My Angel

By Elizabeth Napolitano, age 15, Daughter of John P. Napolitano (2001-NY)

Dear Mommy,
I'm so sorry for putting stickers on your mirror. I pinky promise I will never do it again. I love yo-

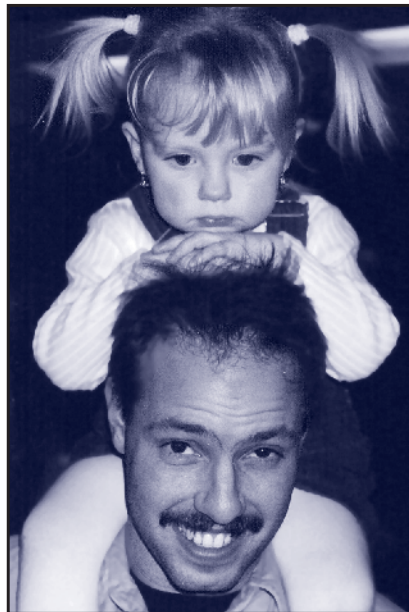
"Elizabeth can you come here for a second?" yelled my mom from the living room. I sighed, looking at my unfinished apology letter. I was never good at saying, "I'm sorry." No six-year-old is.

My heart thudded against my chest like the pounding of bats wings. I knew my mom was going to punish me harshly for the stickers. No food for a week, sleep outside, something terrible. As I stood up from my desk I fixed my hair and straightened my shirt in the mirror. My Mom liked it when I looked neat.

Apology note clenched in my sweaty fist, I made my way down the never-ending hallway to my doom. As I was passing the bathroom, I could see my mom sitting on the couch, but she couldn't see me. The sunlight poured through the bay window behind her head, its rays forming a bright halo around her own golden locks. She seemed to be lost in thought, picking at loose threads in her sweater. Her

eyes were bloodshot and filled with emotion. Her face was swollen and moist from lack of sleep and tears.

I dropped my note. *This can't be about the stickers. No way. Did Smokey run away, maybe?* "Hi, Sweetheart," she said in a whisper. I didn't know what to say, and neither did she.



Daddy's Little Angel

All her words were trapped in her throat, but her eyes were telling a story I was too scared to hear.

To break the deafening silence, I walked over and sat next to her on the loveseat. My Mom took my hand in hers, and I braced myself for what she was about to tell me. "Honey, something terrible has happened." The pit of my stomach fell out of my butt. I didn't like where this was going. I wanted to run back to the comfort of my bedroom, hide under my PowerPuff Girl sheets, and cuddle with Allie the Alligator. I took in my surroundings, looking for an escape, but Mom was still holding my hand in a

death grip. There was no way out.

The next moments were a blur of confusion, tears, and embraces. When my Mom told me Daddy was never

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Goodnight, my Angel *continued from page 4*

coming home again, I thought it was an April Fool's joke. Then I remembered; it was September 15th. I sat there stunned; for some reason, I almost knew this was the news she was going to tell me. All too soon, I saw my beautiful angel mom turn into a crumbled, beaten down widow. I needed to cheer her up. "Mommy, I don't want you to sleep alone." I was expecting a smile, but all I got was a fresh batch of tears. I tried to hold in my sobs, tried to be strong for my mom, but I just couldn't. Then she told me something I will never forget. "It's okay to cry sometimes," she said, "Just always remember the good times, and what a hero he was. He will always be alive in our hearts as long as you always love him." So we cried and hugged and cried some more until there was no water left inside us.

Later that night, as I lay in bed cuddling my alligator, counting the cracks in my ceiling, I made a promise to myself. I promised I will always be there for my mom. Even when I'm a teenager with the worst attitude, I will never forget the day her world came crashing down on her and I was the only one still holding her up. I learned that life isn't fair. If it was, I wouldn't have spent the day, and the years to come, crying into my mother's shoulder. As I fell asleep, I whispered for only my stuffed animals and the spirit of my Dad to hear, "You've taught me everything I know. I'll miss you forever, and I'll love you even longer. Goodnight, my Angel."

Poem

By Andriana VanderGriend, age 20 (10-teen), sister of Zachary VanderGriend (2008-CA)

I have decided to start writing to remember my brother, the special moments in life, and the days that so easily pass us by without warning. I write from joy, I write for comfort, but most of all, I write to remember.

The moments less frequent
When I think of you
Though that does not mean
I forgot you.
Your memory dances
through my mind
Like the wind through
the trees



Forever you will be
My best friend, for life
I still don't understand why
And the tears don't stop
But my big brother you were
And my big brother you will
always be.
I miss you, Zach.

Zach and Andriana VanderGriend

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Where Were You on September 11th?

From Wendy Feinberg-Kotula, Wife of Alan Feinberg (2001-NY)

Dear Friends,

In the City of New York, Tuesday, September 11, 2001, began as a breathtakingly beautiful day. Crystal clear, bright blue skies accompanied commuters on their way to work; and children on their way to school. It was impossible not to feel good on a morning that was so lovely. But shortly after the work and school day began, that brilliant sky became the backdrop to the darkest event in our nation's history. On that day, we all were struck by a harsh reality: we can never feel safe or secure again.

Within minutes, the United States was victimized by a brutal act of terrorism, fueled by hatred of everything our nation stands for. Three thousand lives were lost when the World Trade Center was hit by two hijacked planes (with two more to follow, in Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania).

With the collapse of the Twin Towers, my world collapsed as well. On that day, my husband, FDNY Firefighter Alan Feinberg, gave the ultimate sacrifice—his life—as he worked to save others.

It's so hard to believe that almost ten years have gone by. Like many of the loved ones left behind, my children and I have moved forward with our lives and continue to heal. But the magnitude of the day, of the loss, of my family's personal pain, is with me every day. With the 10th anniversary of 9/11 approaching, I find myself

wondering how others felt and feel about that horrific day ten years ago.

I am interested in knowing where you were when the planes hit on September 11th, how you dealt with the aftermath, how it impacted your life and what your thoughts are about that day now, nearly ten years



Alan Feinberg

later. I invite you to share these thoughts, feelings, reactions and/or any stories about your experiences. Feel free to send drawings, journal entries, poems, etc.

I would love to compile your responses as a keepsake book, possibly for publication. More importantly, I want these recollections to be chronicled for posterity, so that 9/11 will never be forgotten. Through the years I have dedicated myself to ensuring that

the memory of that day remains in our hearts and minds—please help me to continue that quest.

Please respond through e-mail or regular mail, and kindly pass along my e-mail to a relative or friend. I would like my request to reach as many people as possible, because I believe that everyone has a story to tell.

Wendy Feinberg
Wendy.Feinberg@yahoo.com

From my heart to yours...thank you so much.

PEACE ALWAYS,
Wendy



First Leg of My Journey

By Sami Johnson, wife of David Straub (1990-MO)

On May 20, 2011, I graduated from Johnson County Community College with my associate degree in general studies. I am forever grateful for the financial support granted to me as a spouse of a fallen firefighter. When I was a young wife and mother, I never expected to go to college. That was not in my plan.

When my firefighter husband, David Straub, was killed in 1990, I had an established career as an entertainer. David and I were singers in Branson, Missouri. After David died, I continued my singing career for many years. Then a wonderful thing happened to me. I met a wonderful man, Todd Johnson. Todd and I fell in love and married a year later. I then moved to Kansas City, where Todd serves as an associate pastor.

Life was good again, my kids were grown and well on their way to establishing their own lives and, thank God, my life was beginning to take shape. I had waited for this new opportunity and for a new life for 13 years.

When Todd and I married, I began to realize the career I had known my whole life would not work in Kansas City and did not fit into our lifestyle or schedule. Todd suggested I start looking into going to school. I called

my friend in Washington, DC, Mr. Eric Martin, with the Department of Justice's Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program, and began to find out what benefits were available to me for college. That was in 2008. Although this is only the first leg of my journey, I feel like I am well on my way to preparing myself for a new career in creative writing, as well as continuing with my singing career. I am now more prepared to teach young people how to make a career in the music business.



Sami and Todd Johnson

Although the finances were provided for my education, I believe that it came at a very high price. I will never forget the sacrifice of my husband, fallen firefighter

David Straub. I am proud to have been his wife and the mother of our precious children.

As we are approaching enrollment in the fall semester for college, I encourage you as spouses and children of fallen firefighters to look into beginning or furthering your college education. It has changed my life, and it could be the beginning of a new direction for you, should that be something you desire.

Thank you for helping me with this new beginning for my life.

Books Related to Teen Grief from the Foundation's Lending Library

Bereaved Children and Teens: A Support Guide for Parents and Professionals
Earl A. Grollman

Fire in My Heart, Ice in My Veins
Enid Samuel Traisman, M.S.W.

Flowers for the Ones You've Known
The Centering Corporation

The Grieving Teen
Helen Fitzgerald



How It Feels When a Parent Dies
Jill Krementz

Never the Same: Coming to Terms with the Death of a Parent
Donna Schuurman

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

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Programs (PSOB)

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



BJA
Bureau of Justice Assistance
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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

IMAGINE THE POSSIBILITIES...

Do you dream of playing college sports one day? Of becoming a teacher, professional musician, physical therapist, automobile mechanic, or other incredible career that requires higher education? Teenagers and adults alike have shared that their college and vocational school dreams have come true with educational assistance from the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Program. Email PSOB today at AskPSOB@usdoj.gov to learn more about the money PSOB can provide to help you live your dream.

We want to hear from you about...



How grief affects family relationships. People cope differently with stress, and grief is an extreme exercise in chronic stress! If you and your loved ones drive one another crazy under normal circumstances, that can be magnified when everyone is dealing with the wild emotions that grief brings. How did your family find ways to respect one another's styles and differences as you all went through this experience of loss together (but also alone)? What did you learn about one another? If you had it to do over again, what would

you do differently? What words of advice could you offer to other families who are struggling with this?

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 September 15, 2011. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

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