

# The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

MARCH/APRIL 2012 ISSUE 47

*Through humor, you can soften some of the worst blows that life delivers. And once you find laughter, no matter how painful your situation might be, you can survive it.*

~Bill Cosby

**S**ometimes when you are in the thick of grief, nothing seems funny. Laughing can feel like a betrayal of the person you loved. But a healthy sense of humor is definitely helpful in continuing to live fully after something terrible has happened. Life is just funny sometimes, and humor has a way of creeping back in.

The theory used to be that grief unfolded in a series of predictable steps. Most people who have experienced

grief do not find this to be true. Grief comes and goes in intensity. It is possible—and normal—to cry one minute and laugh the next. Some days the humor may be dark. Hopefully, in time, you will be able to see the lighter side of life again and to laugh with abandon.

In this issue, survivors share their stories about the funny moments that have helped keep them smiling despite difficult times.

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By Mrs. Donna Auch, Wife of Steve Auch (2011-IN)

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**A** few months ago, I had someone ask me if I felt guilty when I found myself laughing or enjoying myself. Steve and I had so much love for each other and our life. I know in my heart that Steve would want me to continue on my journey and enjoy life. In my walk through this thing called grief, I have realized that Steve's death wasn't about me. It was his journey, and I am thankful that he wanted me to be a part of his journey.

When it came time to put up Christmas decorations this year I wasn't really into it. I am a supervisor for Indianapolis Fire Department Communications, and as I was talking about what I was going to do, my shift said they would come over and help. I took them up on it, and on the first Saturday of December I had



Steve Auch

five dispatchers and their kids in my home decorating for Christmas. We had a wonderful time, and what could have been a daunting task turned into a memory of fellowship, laughter and good food!

After everyone left I decided I wanted to put lights on the bushes out front. Steve had outlined our roof in prior years; this I knew I could not attempt. As I pulled out the lights I noticed that there were notes attached to the wheels the lights are stored on. I opened the white pieces of paper and on each one was a diagram of our home drawn with an indication of where the lights on each wheel were to go. My husband had done this without my knowing, and now I stood there with yet another gift from him. I smiled as I strung the lights that day. I just might have to scrapbook those notes.

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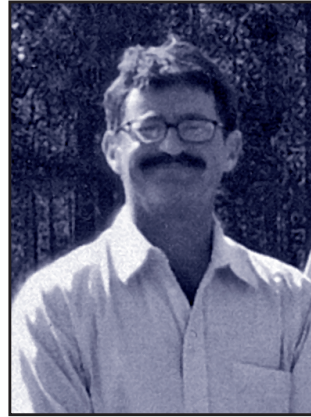
 By Linda Spittler, Sister of Steve “Upte” Uptegrove (2009-OR)
 

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**H**umor is a wonderful way to handle the grief that we all feel after losing someone we love. I would like to share a story with you about my brother, Steve Uptegrove, who spent 35 years loving his career with the U.S. Forest Service. Steve was killed August 20, 2009, by a snag while cleaning up a marijuana grow operation in Eastern Oregon.

Steve loved deer hunting. During his memorial service in John Day, one of his best friends and hunting buddies shared this hunting story with us.

There were several of them in hunt camp, and they all had their own tents. In the middle of the night, Steve’s buddy, Brad, got up to answer



Steve Uptegrove

nature’s call. Brad stepped behind a tree to take care of business, not realizing that while getting out of his tent he had knocked over his heater. Needless to say, his tent and belongings went up in flames and were gone in seconds. My brother crawled out of his tent rubbing his eyes. Brad looked at Steve in disbelief and said, “Hey Upte, you are the only firefighter here. Why didn’t you do something?” Steve calmly looked at him and simply said, “Sorry, man. I don’t do structures.”

Steve was a really loving and giving person. Every card that I received commented on how friendly he was and how he always had a smile. To this day, whenever I am really missing Steve I think of that story and it still makes me laugh.

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 By Marci VanderGriend, Mother of Zachary Jake VanderGriend (2008-MT)
 

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**P**eople who haven’t gone through a loss would think we’re nuts for laughing at a funeral service but sometimes, when the tears won’t come anymore, all that’s left is the laughter. Thinking about this humorous assignment brought me back to Zach’s service where so many people had offered their “If there’s anything I can do...” sentiments. Finally, after hearing all I could handle, one poor man was the recipient of my frustration. When he asked if there was anything he could do, I replied, “Our house needs painting.” He was in shock. I guess his “anything” didn’t include house painting. I later learned he was my husband’s boss!

Earlier at the graveside service, there were three men in suits and dark glasses. We assumed they were some sort of security placed there to keep the press away; the men honestly looked like Secret Service agents. It turned out they were coworkers from my husband’s company who didn’t get the “casual attire” memo!

Also at the graveside, I can still see the funeral director’s jaw drop when coworkers of Zachary’s started to plaster the casket (or “dead box,” as Zach called it) with Neptune Aviation logos. They slowly filed past and stuck their chosen sticker on the beautiful blue and chrome casket

that had been so carefully polished by the funeral director. Even in my grief, I had to chuckle a little.

Probably one of the most hurtful, later turned helpful, things came about three weeks after the service. Zachary had an apartment in Missoula, Montana, and we needed to move his things out of it. On the way to Missoula, we stopped to visit with the parents of a girl who was sweet on Zach at the time of his death. The girl wanted to accompany us to Missoula to move Zach’s things, but her father stated that since it was a single young man’s residence, there would most likely be inappropriate things in the apartment his daughter shouldn’t see. His statement made us so angry at the time; he obviously didn’t know our son!



Zachary Jake VanderGriend

When we walked into Zach’s apartment for the first time since moving him in a few short months earlier, we steeled ourselves for the emotions that would no doubt come flooding over us. Seeing the sight in his bedroom, we began laughing uncontrollably; scattered all around the bed were aviation magazines. No girly magazines or pin up girls, just airplanes! Our son hadn’t changed at all. The anger turned to laughter. Without this man’s cruel statement, we would have never seen the humor in this situation.



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**By Pam Mansfield-Burditt, Sister of Mark Mansfield (2002-KS)**

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**M**y father, Richard, was hospitalized for 3 months before passing away. My mom, my brother Mark, my sister Patty, and I had been at the hospital day and night the entire time--sometimes all of us, sometimes on a rotation.

The day after Dad passed away, Mark climbed into my dad's Suburban to drive all of us to the funeral home to make arrangements. As you can well understand, we were all very somber, distracted, and exhausted.

Mom climbed into the front seat and turned to Mark as he was backing out of the driveway and said, "Now be careful, Mark. This is a really big truck." Mark turned to her with an expression on his face and a tone of hilarity in his voice I will never forget and said, "Mom! I drive a fire truck for a living!" It took about half a second before all of

us were in tears with laughter. We laughed so hard we had to pull over. We cried tears of laughter mixed with tears of sadness all the way to the funeral home. I think our exhaustion played a part in the hysteria, but it lightened up the moment at a very sad time in our lives.



*Pam Burditt with her mom, Darlene, and sister, Patty*

On the day of Dad's funeral, we all locked ourselves out of Mom's house and had to break in. I am sure my father was thinking, "Now how on earth are they going to survive

without me?" Sadly, almost two years later we lost Mark at the fire station in Overland Park, Kansas, and I often wonder how we have survived without either one of them. I am confident that Mom, Patty, and I have kept them well entertained with some of the "fixes" we have managed to get ourselves into since then.

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**By Bonnie Hall, Wife of Sid Hall (2007-IN)**

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**I**t was the day of Sid's funeral, a day of many emotional moments that my heart will never forget.

After the procession, the funeral, honors, tributes, greeting people, and Sid's "Last Call" at the fire station, again we got back into the car and drove to the cemetery. Just before the cemetery service started, one of the firemen from Sid's fire department had left his fire pager on, and a call came in to go to the local private college because someone had a burnt



*Sid Hall*

pizza. All of us from town chuckled, for these kinds of calls came often, whether for pizza or popcorn or brownies.

It really was the perfect ending to the day, for Sid and I had gone to that college, and that is where we met. When Sid graduated he worked there for 20 years. And yes, with the fire department Sid responded to every call from campus. I never thought humor would creep into that day, but it did, and I knew that Sid was smiling with us.

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**By Gail Fowler, Wife of Robert E. Fowler (1997-NY)**

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**GRIEF**

Grief is a tear streaked face.  
The wailing of the wind and the wailing of sirens.  
It is musty and damp, death.  
Salty tears running down my face and into my mouth.  
I'm weak, cold, empty.

**HOPE**

Hope is the rainbow after the storm.  
The laughter of friends sharing memories of their loved ones.  
The fresh smell of the earth after the rain.  
A cool, refreshing drink.  
The hug of a fellow survivor and friend.

*The pieces shared in The Journey belong solely to the authors and may not be reprinted in part or whole without the authors' permission.*

## Kids Camp 2012

It's not too late to sign up for Kids Camp 2012! The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation is partnering with Comfort Zone Camp to provide a weekend bereavement camp for children and stepchildren, ages 7-17, of fallen firefighters who have been honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial. Structured camp activities will provide an opportunity for children from across the country to meet with others in their age group with similar experiences and to learn skills to cope with their loss. Comfort Zone Camp provides a therapeutic component in combination with a dynamic camp setting, allowing campers to process their grief in a fun and safe environment.

The camp will be free of charge, and the Foundation will help with travel expenses and local transportation for campers and parents. The Foundation will also provide lodging for parents/guardians near the camp site. The camp is made possible by a donation from State Farm, a bequest from the family of Hal Bruno, and a Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance grant.

**What?** Hal Bruno Camp for Children of Fallen Firefighters

**Who?** Children and stepchildren, ages 7-17, of firefighters honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Emmitsburg, Maryland

**Where?** Camp Hanover in Mechanicsville, Virginia

**When?** Friday-Sunday, June 8-10, 2012.

**The deadline to register for camp is April 30, 2012**, but please do not wait until the last minute! For more information on Comfort Zone Camp, or to register, go to [www.ComfortZoneCamp.org](http://www.ComfortZoneCamp.org). If you have questions, contact Linda Hurley at [lhurley@firehero.org](mailto:lhurley@firehero.org) or (301) 447-7693.

*I would never have made it if I could not have laughed.  
Laughing lifted me momentarily . . . out of this horrible situation,  
just enough to make it livable . . . survivable.*

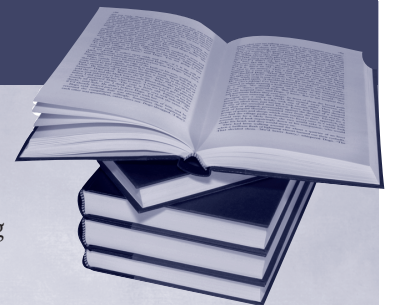
~Viktor Frankl

### From the NFFF Lending Library:

#### The Courage to Laugh: Humor, Hope, and Healing in the Face of Death and Dying By Allen Klein

This book is filled with anecdotes and discussion of the importance of laughter during life's most significant passages. In the darkest hours, humor can provide the light that leads us through the tunnel.

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





## Survivors Embracing Life

**M**ost people would describe the death of a loved one as one of life's most difficult events. Interestingly, when you ask people what they learned from that experience, many will say, "I learned that I was stronger than I ever knew." Grief and loss can force us to grow in ways we might not otherwise choose and to harness inner resources we didn't know we had. This strength becomes part of a "new" life after loss.

— By Rachel Love, wife of Shane Kelly (2002-FL) —

Five years after my husband Shane Kelly's death, I decided it was time to focus on creating a "new" life for myself. I began this journey by enrolling at the University of Central Florida. This is a photo of me with my parents the day I graduated from UCF with my Masters in Social Work. Thanks to the PSOB education benefit I was able to start a new career and new life for myself. Every day I go to work and get to help others, it is my way of paying it forward for all of the support and help I have been given throughout this journey. Whenever I am able to impact someone's life, I am so proud that Shane's legacy has touched them in some way.



— By Nina Charlson, mother of Scott Charlson (2008-OR) —

This is a picture of my class of 4 and 5 year old students. I started back to teaching three weeks after Scott's death, and they have been the best "medicine" for grief recovery in my life. Their hugs are priceless and precious!



— By Marilyn Flynn, wife of Michael Wayne Flynn (2009-NM) —

Last year I went back to Northern Arizona for the first time since my husband died. We met and lived there, and the place was magic to us. I was worried about going back. Would I break into tears at the sight of all our old familiar places? Would it be ruined forever because of what happened? The answers were "No." It was different, but not ruined. It still had some of that old magic that drew me there in the first place many years ago.

Here is a photo from my travels—a painting trip to Meteor Crater. Art is not a "new me" thing; it's more that I'm starting to be able to get back to doing my old thing. I am a professional artist, and I was not able to paint anything for a long time after losing Mike. I wondered if I would ever be able to paint again, but here I am, back at some of my favorite locations, painting again, and even managing a bit of a smile. There's nothing like standing on the rim of an awesome landscape to distract your mind from your daily troubles. To see my artwork, visit: [www.tharsisartworks.com](http://www.tharsisartworks.com), [www.airtankerart.com](http://www.airtankerart.com), [www.artellus.com](http://www.artellus.com)



— By Marci VanderGriend, mother of Zachary Jake VanderGriend (2008-MT) —

I was able to skydive with other survivors this spring. This was especially meaningful as my son was killed in an air tanker crash. Before the jump, I tucked his photo in my jumpsuit, and during the freefall, I threw white rose petals to him. Zachary always brought me white roses for Mother's Day; I now give white roses to him on Mother's Day and place them at his grave. This time I delivered the roses! I still have no words to describe the emotion of floating through the air in honor of my precious son.



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**Public Safety Officers' Benefits Programs (PSOB)**


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

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**

### From PSOB

In December of 2011, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Office, Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice reluctantly bid farewell to Ms. Valerie Neal, Senior Benefits Specialist and long-time supporter of PSOB's efforts to provide vital benefits to the survivors of America's fallen firefighters, law enforcement officers, and other first responders.

With more than 27 years of service in the PSOB Office, to countless survivors and public safety agencies Ms. Neal "was" PSOB! Her commitment and dedication to the PSOB Program positively impacted so many lives; while she has retired from PSOB, her efforts have left a legacy for the PSOB Office as it continues to serve survivors in honor of fallen public safety heroes nationwide.



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



Touchstones. Do you have a special object that you associate with your loved one and from which you draw strength? Perhaps it's something that belonged to your firefighter, or something you carry with you when you need to feel his or her presence. Tell us about your touchstones and how they help you feel connected to the person you love who is no longer physically with you.

If you'd like to share your thoughts on this topic or other aspects of your personal journey, please send a Word document or e-mail to Jenny Woodall at [jwoodall@firehero.org](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org) by May 15, 2012. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

The Journey  
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation  
P.O. Drawer 498  
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