

The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

JULY/AUGUST 2012 ISSUE 49

“ Sometimes, reaching out and taking someone’s hand
is the beginning of a journey. At other times,
it is allowing another to take yours. ”

~Vera Nazarian

The *Journey* was created so fire service survivors from all over the country could share their stories with one another. It’s a way to share the struggles and the strengths, the sadness and the unexpected blessings that sometimes come after the loss of a person you love. It’s about offering hope to those who are still trying to find it. It’s about reminding people in tiny towns and big cities that they are never alone, even on days they might feel that way. Sometimes it’s about looking at the lighter side of things—sharing a funny memory or celebrating milestones as people are able to once again embrace life.

Since the first issue of *The Journey* was published in May 2003, hundreds of survivors have put their thoughts down on paper and computer screens all over the country. Many of them are writing something for publication for the very first time. Some worry that they aren’t good enough writers or that what they have written won’t really be of interest to anyone else. But they take a deep breath, take

a risk, stick the letter in the mail, hit send. And then their stories go out across the miles to hundreds of other survivors. We often hear from readers about how those stories affect their lives, touch their hearts, give them hope, about how they recognize their own experience in another person’s words.

The next issue of *The Journey* will be our 50th. If you have written for this publication in the past, thank you! If you’ve never written a piece, but there’s something you’d really like to share, please send it in! If you have been moved by something you’ve read here, let us know so we can share that with the writers. If you have suggestions or requests for future issues, send them along.

This issue features pieces from a few people who wrote and said, “I don’t know if this is what you’re looking for. I just want to tell you about my firefighter. Yes, he was a hero, but I want to tell you about who he was to me.”

By Beverly Vinisky, mother of David E. Vinisky (2004-PA)

A Mother Remembers

Wednesday, August 25, 2004, supper time. We asked our son, David, if he wanted to have dinner with us, and he accepted. As he was leaving he said, “Good supper, Mom.” Those were his last words to us, his parents. Later the firemen were turning in to our driveway to tell us about the accident. In 1947, David’s grandfather and father were among the founding fathers of our small Raccoon Township Independent Volunteer Fire

Department. Both David and his brother, Drew, became volunteer firefighters as soon as they were old enough. Many nights our family was awakened by the siren telling us there was a fire. You could be sure David was out of bed and downstairs in a flash. It got so that usually David was one of the first few there, and he was up in a truck, ready to go. Because of this the firemen started calling it

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Mother Remembers *continued from page 1*

“David’s truck.” The firemen brought “David’s truck” to the funeral home for his memorial service.

Every Wednesday was work night at the fire department, and most Wednesdays that was where you would find David—checking equipment, the truck, practice drills—whatever needed to be done.

Sometime after David’s death, his son, Mathew, joined the fire department. That has made four generations of Viniskys in Raccoon Township Fire Department. Mathew cares

about the fire department the same as his dad. He took courses consisting of 345 hours of state fire training classes and was recently elected as one of Raccoon Township’s assistant fire chiefs. He is very proud of his service, as his dad would be.

As a tribute to David, the fire department has placed a small monument by the door where people that come to the fire department events may see it. It reads:



In Memory of David E. Vinisky - Son, Brother, Father and Brother Fireman 1955 - 2004.

— By Michelle Clasby Brennan, sister of John Clasby (2008-MA) —

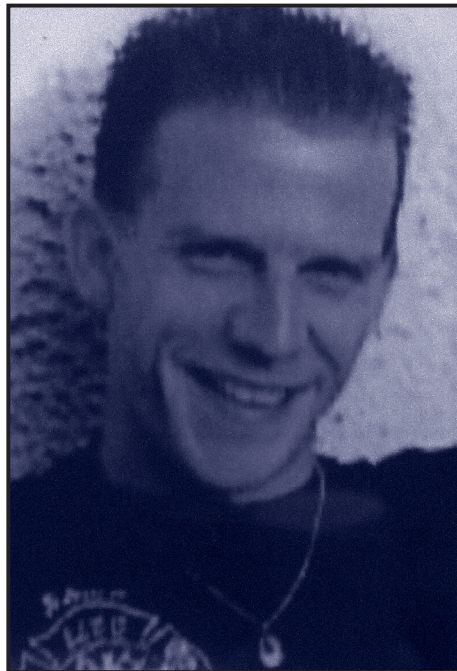
My Brother, My Hero!

My brother, John Clasby, was truly my hero, for oh so many reasons—his sense of humor, his wit, his intelligence. He was so comical. He loved so many so deeply, and in response was loved by so many. Even after his accident he was stopping for people who had locked themselves out of their cars or their cars wouldn’t start. He carried both a slim jim kit for opening locked car doors and cables for jumpstarting cars. He even found a man slumped over his steering wheel experiencing a heart attack. Without John being his inquisitive self, the man would have died.

Here’s the punch line—these acts of kindness were all performed by a paralyzed man in a wheelchair who never had a moment when he was not in incredible pain.

This story starts back on June 29, 1999, in Hull, Massachusetts, a small town south of Boston. John was 35 years old when he was injured while fighting a five-

alarm fire. A gun had been abandoned in a garage wall, and when the gun heated from the intense fire, the bullet discharged and severed his spine, leaving him confined to a wheelchair and in severe pain for the rest of his life.



John Clasby

Despite all this, John moved on. He was there for our family—myself, my two children, his mom and dad, and his three children—a 5-year-old daughter and 4-year-old twin boys. John was so adventurous that even this horrific accident was not going to get in his way of leaving his children some of the best memories, and I think there is no better gift!

June 29th stopped our family as it was, but from it emerged a new one. This man had such an imagination. At Halloween, John got a wagon decorated with safety lights and Halloween

decorations. He attached it to his Lark scooter, bungied himself in, and took the kids out for hours. John made life fun for others even when it wasn’t fun for him.



Learning to ride a bike is a good story. Off to Walmart, back home with 4 new bikes, 3 kids who couldn't ride without training wheels. One by one he got them ready, and while bungied in, off they went, John holding each child's bike one at a time. They all learned to ride bikes that day.

We lost John twice—on June 29, 1999, and then on Veteran's Day in 2008. We buried my brother in an

honorary funeral with over 1,300 in attendance—firefighters in dress uniforms, in turnout gear, in plain clothes, bagpipes, flags flying high between fire trucks with ladders extended.

John was truly unique--his wisdom, his passion for life. Thank you for allowing me to share some of my brother's life.

By Janet Cusson, mother of Richard Cusson (2002-CT)

My son died on June 30, 2002. That was a day that changed the whole family's life.

Richard was a wonderful drummer. He loved music and loved to sing. His goal was to always help in any way he could.

He loved being a firefighter and a medical response technician. When his pager went off, so did he. He was amazing to watch.

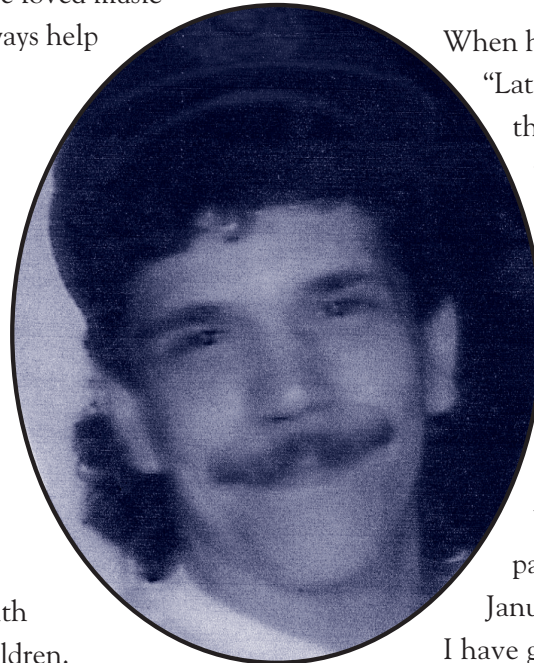
His older brother was a firefighter, and his dad was fire police at the same fire department, Station 65 at South Killingly Fire Department in Connecticut.

Richard was 30 years old when he passed and was still living at home with us. He wasn't married and had no children.

Richard loved everyone and was very devoted to his family. He was a hard worker. Everyone misses him.

We waked him on my husband and my 36th wedding anniversary. I could not believe the friends and the

firefighters that came to pay last respects. They came from all over. The line was further than the eye could see. He was buried in Webster, Massachusetts, with my parents.



Richard Cusson

When he left, Richard would always say, "Later." He never said, "Goodbye," because that was forever. Whoever thought when we talked that morning and he said, "Later," that it had the same meaning?

I created a memorial page for Richard, and I would like you to visit. It is www.richard-cusson.virtual-memorials.com.

Nineteen months after Richard passed, his father joined him on January 24, 2004. It is still hard for me.

I have good friends in the survivors. I joined Angel Moms, and that is a great group of people. People who have not gone through the loss of a child do not understand.

I have wanted to write this for a long while. I started and stopped, and I got the courage to finish this time.

*You don't raise heroes, you raise sons.
And if you treat them like sons, they'll turn out to be
heroes, even if it's just in your own eyes."*

~Walter M. Schirra, Sr.

Survivors Changing the World for Good

Death and loss are generally not positive experiences. But what people are able to do in response to loss is sometimes amazing. Here are a few examples of survivors who have created something good in the wake of something tragic.

— By Catherine Rucker, wife of Steven Rucker (2003-CA) —

AEDs for California Schools

After Steven's death, the Novato Fire Foundation was formed. One of the Foundation's goals was to place automated external defibrillator units (AEDs) throughout our community. I became actively involved in emergency preparedness for our local school district, and I was shocked to learn that our school district refused to accept AED units that were being offered by the Novato Fire Foundation. Our school district was afraid of the liability. Yes, the State of California has an AED Good Samaritan Law. However, entities are only protected if they can prove that they had proper oversight for their AED program. And so I formed a campaign to educate the public.

In December of 2010 our school board trustees voted 7-0 to implement an AED program at the high school level. I know that Steve would be proud because he loved being a paramedic, and he loved being able to save people's lives.

After my success in implementing an AED program for my local school district, I applied to law school. I entered the Golden Gate University School of Law as a part-time night student in August of 2011 and completed the first year in good standing. Over the summer of 2012, I participated in a special litigation program at GGU. For the fall of 2012, I have been offered an internship with the Transportation Security Administration (TSA). I will be learning about the defense side of employment law.

I lost Steve nine years ago and I am amazed by the path my life has taken since. At first I put all of my energy into stabilizing my children, Kerstin and Wesley. I receive grant funding from the U.S. Department of Justice's Public Safety Officers' Educational Assistance program, which helps me buy my textbooks and pay for other expenses. Now that my children are more mature and are more able to deal with their own issues, it is time for me to pursue my own dreams.

— Lauren B. Mulkey Glover, wife of Louis Mulkey (2007-SC) —

Coach Mulkey Scholarship Fund

Captain Louis Mulkey was my dear husband of one year and one day when he was killed in a fire at the Sofa Super Store in Charleston, South Carolina, on June 18, 2007. Louis was a basketball and football coach at Summerville High School. He was a dedicated (and very animated) coach who was respected and admired by players and parents alike. He worked hard to teach his players and their friends that, while the game is important, it's merely one part of life; and he stressed the importance of continuing their education in college.

After his death I started a scholarship fund in his honor to maintain his legacy. I compiled a committee of people to include fellow firefighters and coaches, family friends, and fellow teachers. We developed criteria for the scholarship, which is open to any graduating senior who has received a varsity letter in any sport and has been accepted to an institution for higher learning. We have held various fundraisers (golf tournaments, t-shirt sales, pancake breakfasts) and always welcome private donations. To date, we have given almost \$20,000 in scholarships to very deserving individuals.



The season after his passing ESPN did an “Outside the Lines” piece about Louis and his team that fought to win the state championship title. You can view the piece at www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GQ4xsn0d_I.

If you would like more information about the scholarship program, please email me at coachmulkeyscholarshipfund@yahoo.com. My goal is, at least one year, to be able to provide a student with a full scholarship.

Liz Gardner, wife of Thomas A. Gardner (2001-NY)

The Thomas A. Gardner Science Teacher Endowment Fund

After my husband died on 9/11/01, I set up an endowment fund at the college he graduated from. The fund was created to support and advance the learning of science and of nature by children and by the public at large, and the application of science understanding to the hazards of modern society.

The activities of the fund include the annual Thomas A. Gardner Science Teacher Award, which is given to a candidate who is certified or graduated as a Queens College science teacher in the Science Teacher Careers Program. The award is presented

at the Queens College graduation ceremony each spring. Scholarship recipients receive a certificate of recognition and a tuition scholarship of \$1,000 designated exclusively for their graduate studies in teacher education at Queens College.

The Thomas A. Gardner Science Teacher Award was given for the first time at the June 2002 graduation and continues each year to date. It still is very heartfelt, and the recipients are very honored. For me it is a wonderful way to keep my husband’s name alive and to be able to tell his story to future science teachers.

“ We shall draw from the heart of suffering itself the means of inspiration and survival. ”
~Winston Churchill

Survivor Cruise 2013

Several years ago, a group of fire service survivors started going on cruises together. The group has grown over the years, and many wonderful memories have been made. The last cruise in 2011 was to explore the wonders of Alaska. This year, we are heading back to the islands.

- Mon Carnival Breeze Grand Turk 7:00
- Tue Carnival Breeze La Romana, Dominican Republic
- Wed Carnival Breeze Curacao
- Thu Carnival Breeze Aruba 8:00

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Please join us for our 5th Survivor Cruise with a twist! We will be cruising and having a great time as we raise funds for the NFFF. How great is that??

The Carnival Breeze departs Miami on August 3, 2013, for an 8-night southern Caribbean itinerary.

- Sat Carnival Breeze Miami, FL
- Sun Carnival Breeze “Fun Day” At Sea





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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

Survivor Cruise *continued from page 5*

- Fri Carnival Breeze "Fun Day" At Sea
- Sat Carnival Breeze "Fun Day" At Sea
- Sun Carnival Breeze Miami, FL

www.carnival.com/cms/fun/ships/carnival_breeze/default.aspx

Please contact Terry, our travel agent, to make your reservation at High Performance Travel at

(386) 846-4440 or liv2cruz@cfl.rr.com

For those who want to fly in the day before for a less stressful Bon Voyage Day, we will be looking into a hotel in the Miami area for the night before.

Please e-mail Cathy Foxmatt1@msn.com when you have made your reservation, or if you have questions about the cruise.

This cruise is being organized by a group of fire service survivors. It is not officially endorsed or sponsored by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

We want to hear from you about...



When a firefighter dies, there are often young children—sons and daughters, grandchildren, or nieces and nephews—who will have few or no first-hand memories of that special person. What can you do to ensure that person's memory is kept alive so those children get to "know" that loved one? We have seen so many creative examples of how families do this over the years. Send us your thoughts, ideas, and photos so we can share them with others who may have the same questions.

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 (and pictures!) to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org by September 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
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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