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If you'd like to share your thoughts on this topic or other aspects of your personal journey, please e-mail a Word document (and pictures!) to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org by February 28, 2013. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

The Journey

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

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The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2013 ISSUE 52

There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.”

~Thornton Wilder

A lot of people hate the word widow. For most people, it conjures an image of an elderly, sad woman, alone for the duration of her life in a permanent state of mourning. It is a far cry from the challenging but vibrant lives that so many people lead after the death of a spouse or life partner.

Widow is not a title people want at any age, but it can be especially jarring for those whose spouse dies early in life. What does it mean to be widowed at age 30 or 40 or 50, long before death is expected or even contemplated?

Many young widowed people talk about how the world perceives them differently and how others expect them to behave. No matter what they choose, they may be judged harshly for their choices. Friends, family, and even strangers, may have strong feelings about how long after the death of a spouse a person “should” mourn or when they should begin

to date again. Even close friends and colleagues may view you differently when you become “single,” even though that was not your choice. It can feel very lonely to be surrounded by couples when your partner is missing.

If you still have children at home, you must balance your own grief with that of your children. Sometimes what you need for yourself is at odds with what they need. Managing all of that without the person who was your sounding board and partner can be difficult and painful.

And yet, most people find their way. They navigate the early storms of grief and make their way back to living instead of just surviving day to day. Life is never the same, and in some ways you are never the same person you were before. But life has joy and meaning again. In this issue, survivors share their stories of young widowhood and where they are on the journey.

By Julie Drennan, Wife of Charlie Drennan (2001-CO)

Everyone has a story. Even when we feel alone and are certain that no one could understand our plight, our stories are what unite us, make us transparent and vulnerable, invoke humility, and make us human. It is often through personal tragedy that we are able to form deep bonds with those that have suffered a similar circumstance. When we are young, we have an expectation of what our life will become. We think about our education, possible career paths, falling in love and getting married,

having children. We are filled with hope and eager to take our place in this world. As we grow older, we start taking the necessary steps to make our dreams become a reality, and somewhere along this journey, life happens.



Charlie and Julie's wedding day

I am a young widow. A few weeks after I turned 41, everything drastically changed. On September 13, 2001, my husband was murdered by one of his coworkers suffering from severe paranoia, delusional thoughts, and irrational behavior. His death was

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sudden, unexpected, and violent. When I got the call at work, I went into a complete state of shock and disbelief. My mind was racing, and I felt strangely removed as though I was an onlooker peering into someone else's life. I reasoned that this could not be happening to us, to our family. I was in a complete state of denial trying desperately to negotiate with God to take this away from us.

A member of the fire department escorted me and other family members to my son's grade school, and I was faced with the unimaginable task of telling my young son that his dad was gone. I will never forget the look on his face. Later that day we (the family) went to the coroner's office to identify my husband's body. As I stood there looking through the glass pane that separated us, my entire body started trembling. I was fighting back the tears and my mind was screaming, "Please get up. Please don't leave us. We still need you. Please come home." I was surrounded by family and friends, and yet felt incredibly alone and devastated with grief. This was not supposed to happen. We were in the prime of our lives, completely in love with life and each other. We still had a son to raise.

My son was not able to eat and became physically ill. As I held him in the bathroom, I promised him that I would be the best mother I could be and that we would get through this together. The following days, weeks, months and even years were not always easy. Grief is a journey you cannot escape. You must face it head on, taking each day as it comes. In spite of the grief, I felt incredibly blessed to have our son. It is not always easy being a single parent. I second guessed myself all the time. There were times I felt like giving up, but love is a powerful thing, and you persevere. I am incredibly proud of the young man our son has become.

As I wrestled with the idea that I was now a widow—a word I was not able to vocalize for a long period of time, because if I said it out loud, it would mean it was true—and I just wanted to turn back time and change the course of events. In my heart I still felt very much married, and I felt sick when checking off the marital status box on medical and banking forms. This was for older people, not me.

I wore my wedding ring for ten years. I am not sure that I would have taken it off even then, except that the diamond fell out, and I set it aside to get it fixed. Somewhere along the line I made the decision not to put it back on. And I am OK with that.

When you are young, there is an expectation that you will start dating again, and friends and family frequently asked if I was dating. I have dated a few people, and while I honestly had a good time, it also felt strangely awkward,

and I had no desire to pursue a serious relationship. I came to the conclusion that I do not have to date for the sake of dating. I have learned to accept my circumstances and have become content with who I am now. Life does not always follow the perceived natural order of things, and we do not have to succumb to other people's expectations. We must do what is right for ourselves.

When I became widowed, most of my friends were still married with small children. In some respects I felt very alone because there

was no one in my immediate circle that could relate to my circumstance of being widowed at a young age and losing my spouse to a mentally ill person wielding a gun. I felt more of a kindred spirit with people I would see interviewed on the news who lost a loved one to some senseless act of violence. I know that many people join support groups or seek out therapy. I did not do this. However, I did find a site online that was started by another young widow who was seeking input from other widowed people in order to write a book. I contributed anonymously to the site, which was cathartic for me. Her book was later published, and I hope our collective input will be a source of healing for others.

It has been over eleven years since my husband was killed. While there is not one day that I do not think about him, I have walked through hell and come out the other side a stronger, wiser woman who finds great joy in my family and friends. I would like to thank the NFFF for providing a listening ear and a voice to survivors via *The Journey*. While the stories are often heart wrenching, they are also encouraging and provide nourishment to the soul.



Coach Charlie with his son, Jake



By Jennifer DeVore Pfeiff, Wife of Terry W. DeVore (2008-CO)

The absolute hardest thing I have ever had to deal with is the loss of my beloved husband, Chief Terry W. DeVore, on April 15, 2008.

In the eight years I was with Terry, our financial situation was always rocky. In 2008, things finally started looking up for us. Terry had been working for Colorado Department of Corrections for several years and convinced me to apply there as well. I applied and was accepted, and my start date for training was January 2, 2008. By March, I was on the floor working at my chosen facility. We were able to catch up on bills and were finally on the road to financial happiness! We were very much in love. Then the dreadful day of the Crowley County wildland fire happened, and my life was turned upside down.

I turned 30 a month before Terry passed away. We had one child each from previous marriages and two children together: Ryan (9), Breann (9), Katy (5), and Jeremiah (4). I was young with young children, and I was scared to death. Within weeks of my husband passing I had tons of guys coming around all the time like wolves. I became suicidal and drank every day. My youngest brother moved into my basement to help keep an eye on me and the kids. I quit my job; it was too hard not seeing Terry there. My life went from just getting where we wanted it to going down the toilet, and I couldn't figure out why it was happening to me. I am a Christian, but we all question "Why?" when something like this happens.

I tried seeing some men that came around, thinking that going on dates would take my mind off things. I am the kind of person who can't be alone, and that is what I was having the most trouble with. My brother saw this and decided he didn't want me dating just anyone, so he introduced me to a friend of his who would at least be someone to talk to. I agreed, and before I knew it we were practically dating. This was three or four months after my husband's death.

Everyone protested and asked, "How could you? SO SOON!" I did not want to be alone, and I needed help with the children. I'm not good with accidents and blood, and so I wasn't thinking about how soon it was. I had to

put myself into another world to avoid the pain. That's the only way I can describe it. I was so lonely and depressed and was headed down a bad path. This man saved me, and I don't think my life would be the same without him. He helped me and the kids through so much. In my book, he was an angel sent from God when I needed one the most.

People thought I was crazy, and I was ridiculed and talked about all the time behind my back. I couldn't believe how many "friends" stopped talking to me. How could they leave me when I needed them most, just because I was dating earlier than they thought I should be? No one knows what's best for you in these times except you and God, and I will NEVER regret dating early. It was the comfort I needed during my grieving. I want people to realize that just because I was dating so soon doesn't mean the pain or the grieving or the crying stopped. Terry has been gone for over four years now, and I still cry on my new husband's shoulder. Yes, I married the man my brother introduced me to, my angel, Calvin.



Jennifer and Terry's wedding photo

I still can't talk about my experience without crying. The ridicule was so hard on me. I really didn't know how to deal with it other than to ignore it. I don't talk to a lot of people that used to be my friends, and I think it's best that way. I just make new friends. I raise the children the best I can, based on all the things Terry and I discussed about raising children. It's hard at times. My new husband doesn't always agree with how I do things, so it confuses the children. I struggle all the time raising the kids, wishing I could get advice from their father. I ask my late husband's mother for advice a lot, since I'm sure that's where he would go for advice.

When I started to see my new husband, it was really hard on my daughter Katy, who was six. She absolutely did not want me with another man. I couldn't sit by him or hold his hand or hug or kiss or anything. She would cry herself to sleep next to her daddy's pictures and would shut me out. I felt so torn between what was best for me and what was best for the children. If I could go back and change one thing, I would not have brought another man around until the children had enough time to grieve.

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Jennifer DeVore Pfeiff *continued from page 3*

I realize years later that I was very selfish and did not think of how I was affecting the children. They all love Calvin now, and he is such a joy for them, but I wish I had done that part a little differently.

I'm 34 now and remarried and have added another son to my family. We are very happy. Calvin is super supportive of us when it comes to grieving over Terry, going to functions, and even visiting the gravesite and keeping some of Terry's ashes in an urn on the entertainment center. He helps us take flowers to the accident site, and he is very sweet to Terry's parents. I have learned that only we know what we need to help get over the loss of a loved one, but that I needed to be more aware of my children's needs. My angel, Calvin, helped more than anyone through all of this, and I am so grateful for him!



Family picture of Jennifer, Calvin, Ryan (14), Breann (13), Katy (10), Jeremiah (9), and Preston (3)

By Traci Adams, Wife of Tommy Adams (2009-LA)

On February 21, 2009, while cleaning post Mardi Gras parade debris off our ladder truck, Truck 1, my husband, Chief Tommy Lee Adams, lost his balance and fell forward off the side of the truck, landing on his head and neck. He broke nearly every bone in his neck and went into full arrest on a street in my hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana. He was resuscitated and transported to an ER that I worked in for ten years. He slipped into a coma that night and would never wake from it. I was 38 years old. Our girls were 9 and 15. The three of us were witnesses to the entire event.

Tommy lived in a vegetative state until passing from this world December 12, 2009. I was 39 years old. Nothing made sense. The world was upside down.

This was not how things were supposed to be. But it was. I had already been basically alone during the time before he died, so his death was just another step in the entire process. It's now been nearly four years since the accident.

The first maddening thing I encountered were the people that approached me at his wake and funeral to tell me it was OK; I was young, I'd find love again! Are you kidding me? No one approaches a parent at a funeral and says, "It's OK; you can have another child!" The love of my life had not even been dead a week, and I was already being told this silliness.

Being a young widow is a lonely place to be. Most of the activities geared to widows in my church and community were for the over 60 crowd. I also found out that several men came at me only to fulfill what they felt was a sense of duty/loyalty to Tommy.



Kristen, Traci, and Alex Adams on the day of Tommy's accident

By the summer of 2011, the girls and I had traveled the world, and I felt stronger than ever. So I thought I'd begin to date. On the first date, I realized that it was the first time my hand had been held in well over two years. I felt disloyal. To this day, this man is the only person I have tried to date. I kept him at arm's length to the point where we never really even moved past friends. This Christmas, I've taken a step back from the dating thing. I know that there is nothing wrong with me exploring this part of the new world I have found myself in. I know that I

have fulfilled my marriage covenant in its entirety. I think I just need more time to seal off that part of my heart that is exclusively Tommy's.

My girls are now 13 and almost 19, and I find that these ages are a little bit easier to explain some of this to. When I first went out on a date my youngest was 11, and she just was not old enough to understand the concept that my love for her Daddy was never-ending, that it would never change. Now, at 13, she watches me at holiday occasions and birthdays and hates the look of loneliness that she sees shadowing my



happiness. Both of my daughters have told me that they just want to see me happy again and are confident that Tommy's memory and the love we shared, will never be compromised.

Being widowed at such a young age has been a challenge, in all the ways you can imagine and some you cannot even begin to imagine. You are instantly thrown into single

motherhood, womanhood, and every other "hood" you can think of. You basically have to assume the role of both mom and dad, wife and husband. Every single thing is riding on your shoulders. But surviving this, living this, has given me a strength that has shocked me on numerous occasions! I'm not the woman I was four years ago. I'm better!



The death of a loved one presents the question of what to do with traditions, significant dates, and special events. If you have found a creative solution to handling one of these situations, please let us know!

"How do I get through Valentine's Day?"

By Tina Hauk, Wife of Brian Thomas Hauk (1997-IL)

Valentine's Day was the day we chose to get married, Brian and I. It was always my favorite holiday to spoil my family with small tokens of love. When Brian died and I had to celebrate not only our anniversary but my favorite holiday, it was very difficult those first several years. Then I realized that he was in a much better place than I and really prayed hard one day

to ask God to please lift the sadness and pain from my heart. It was an amazing moment when I physically felt all of my hurt and sadness leave my body. Since then I always keep a secret place in my heart just for Brian as my life has moved on. He will always be my very special Valentine, now in Heaven, and I hope someday I will be fortunate enough to join him there.

By Marie Sanborn, Wife of Tim Sanborn (2007-MI)

Valentine's Day for me the last five years has been non-existent. I have avoided the day by staying away from everyone and everything that reminds you. You don't see the flowers, the candy, the happy couples. Tim always picked out the most sentimental cards,



and we always went out to dinner. This year is different for me. I have decided to decorate my dining room table, and of course I included Tim. When I walk by, it brings a smile and happy memories. Maybe my heart is beginning to heal, or maybe it's just another step forward.

Marci VanderGriend sent this short piece written by her son, Zachary VanderGriend (2008-MT)

For many years Valentine's Day has been a day to show one's love for a member of the opposite gender. For years people have been left out of a pointless and hurtful day of love. Day of love? How is this a day of love when we leave others out? When others are forgotten and abandoned? When in our schools we make a point of making some feel loved and special, while others stand in corners crying, maybe not on the outside, but inside most certainly.

My true ideal of Valentine's Day is that this is not a day to celebrate one's love for another. That should be done every day of the year if you genuinely care for someone. Valentine's Day is merely a day to pick one's pocket and make others feel left out and neglected. Care for the ones you love year round; make them feel special all year, not just the second week of February.

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