

Grief Camps

The Hal Bruno Camp is limited to children and stepchildren of firefighters honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial. We sometimes receive inquiries about siblings, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews who are interested in attending a grief camp. Here are a few options you may want to check out.

Comfort Zone Camp

www.comfortzonecamp.org

- Free camp for children ages 7-17 who have suffered the death of a parent, sibling, or primary caregiver
- Locations in California, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Virginia

Camp Erin

www.moyerfoundation.org/programs/CampErin_About.aspx

- Free bereavement camps for children ages 6-17 who have experienced the death of someone close to them
- Multiple camp locations across the United States

Local Bereavement Camps

www.moyerfoundation.org/nbrg/default.aspx

- Many hospice organizations and grief support agencies hold camps for grieving children. Find information about what is available in your area using the link above.

Books about Grief in Children and Teens

You can borrow a copy of these and other titles through the NFFF Lending Library at: www.firehero.org/resources/library/children.html

The Grieving Child and *The Grieving Teen*, Helen Fitzgerald

Help Me Say Goodbye: Activities for Helping Kids Cope When a Special Person Dies, Janis Silverman

The Loss That Is Forever: The Lifelong Impact of the Early Death of a Mother or Father, Maxine Harris, Ph.D.

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

You Are Not Alone: Teens Talk About Life After The Loss of a Parent, Lynne B. Hughes



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

We want to hear from you...



What's the most valuable thing you have learned in your grief journey? What little nugget of truth or wisdom can you share with those who might still be struggling? What have you learned about yourself?

Remember, you don't have to be a "writer" to write for *The Journey*. Everyone has a story to tell, and we want to help you tell it. Even if your spelling is lousy or you failed English or you have a difficult time figuring out where to start, just write from the heart and we will

happily help you get the words right so your unique story shines through.

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 a picture) to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org by May 1, 2014. If you don't do computers, please 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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The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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« *Anyone who does anything to help a child in his life is a hero to me.* »

~Fred Rogers

For a child, losing a parent changes life forever. It shakes the foundation and sense of safety that every child relies on, and the surviving parent or guardian is left with the daunting task of restoring stability to that child's life. If it takes a village to raise a child, additional "villagers" may be needed to help raise a child whose parent has died.

Children need guidance and support through the sometimes disorienting experience of grief. They need truthful information about what happened, presented at the level that they can understand. They need to know that someone will always be there to take care of them. They need time to adjust to how life will be now that the family structure has changed. They need to feel that they are heard and understood. Because they are still going through the normal stages of human development, children tend to experience different elements of loss as they grow up. Processing their grief and loss becomes part of their development.

Here are three things you can do to help your children:

1. Take care of yourself. Your stability will provide security to your children.
2. Educate yourself about the way adults and children grieve. Learn about normal grief, as well as signs that someone is struggling and may need additional help.

3. Model healthy grief habits. Your children learn from watching you. Make sure they know it's OK to express their feelings, thoughts, memories, and worries, and to ask for help.

This is a good time to call in reinforcements and to accept offers of help—extended family, friends, mentors, faith

community, coaches, counselors. Having presence and support from a circle of adults can help children feel more secure.

The NFFF is able to offer support to children through the Hal Bruno Camp for Children of Fallen Firefighters. Now in its third year, this unique program gives children the chance to attend camp with other children who have lost a firefighter parent in the line of duty. For many, it is the first time they have encountered someone else who has experienced something like they have. Campers are also able to bond with supportive adults who have been trained for this unique program. A parent component allows the adults to form connections and access resources for ongoing support.



In this issue, campers and parents share their experiences and thoughts about Hal Bruno Camp. Registration is now open for the 2014 camps. For more information, visit www.firehero.org/resources/families/kids.

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By Baylee Cox, *Daughter of Anthony P. "Tony" Cox (2007-KS)*

My journey with Comfort Zone Camp (CZC) did not begin with a smooth start and gleaming outlook. I think my exact words were, "Mom, are you kidding me? I'm 17 years old. I don't need to go to some stupid camp for little kids. I'll be the oldest one! This is so stupid! I don't even want to go!" But before we delve into the brooding angst, let me explain my side of the story.

I lost my father, Anthony P. "Tony" Cox, in August of 2007. I was 11 years old, and I thought the apocalypse was upon me. I had always been a daddy's girl. When my dad died, I went through grief counseling, therapy, learning to trust again, and everything I could do to help myself deal with the loss of my dad. I ended up finding myself through volunteering. In 2009, I started volunteering at the center where I had received therapy. After my first two years, I felt I was ready to help with Hearts of Hope, a local grief camp for children who have lost a loved one. I found that the kids related to me better than they did to most of the adults. Every year since then, I have challenged myself to relate to more and more of the children, regardless of their stage of grief.

Someone mentioned the Hal Bruno Comfort Zone Camp to my mother and me last year. They said the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation had a special camp just for children of fallen firefighters. I thought, "Jackpot! What a great opportunity to volunteer! This is going to be great." Oh, to be young and naïve. I started researching information, and I thought that the youngest age to volunteer was 17. My mother emailed Linda at the Foundation to ask how I could sign up to volunteer. She received an email saying that I could not volunteer, but that I could attend as a camper. I'm sure the look on my face was one of those priceless angst-y teenager looks of disdain, followed by an, "Excuse me, what?"

Regardless, I allowed my mother to drag me to Virginia. A large part of me was hoping she wouldn't actually make me go and that I would be able to go somewhere cool or just hang out all weekend. (Spoiler alert: that was not what happened.) My mom dragged me onto the bus, off the bus, and actually took my cellphone. How was a teenager to



Baylee Cox

survive? I managed to survive, without social media or even a selfie. When we got to camp everyone got to meet their "big buddy," the adult volunteer in charge of looking out for an individual camper for the weekend. Some big buddies are actually members of the fire service. To be honest, my big buddy and I didn't match, but other big buddies stepped up and made me feel more than welcome. It was one of the few times since my dad's death that a member of the fire service actually made me feel like they were looking out for me and that they cared about me.

The camp does such amazing things. When we arrived they separated us based on age. Personally, I struggle during group grief sessions with younger children. I love children and interact with them well, but I always feel the need to show restraint and let the other kids grieve. If my siblings or family are around, I feel the need to show restraint as well. CZC is about YOUR grief, no one else's. It's really all about what you put into camp. CZC keeps the rules the same for everyone. Participation is encouraged, but not forced. They do not even force you to talk about your story! Tell me any other "grief exercise" that has that option. Where have you not been forced into the spotlight, and awkwardly, maybe even through tears, told your story? I can't think of a single one, and I've been to MANY.

At CZC they do ask you to bring photographs of your loved one to share with the other kids in your healing circle. Your healing circle, regardless of age, will become your support group. As I write this I am beginning to tear up, as I cannot express how much I appreciate my healing circle. Every single person, including ALL of the big buddies and Miss Kim, has truly become someone I not only admire, but am eternally grateful to have met. When I first laid eyes on my healing circle I thought, "Oh great, look at us. We are all so different, there's no way we are going to accomplish anything or even get along." This guy from Maryland and I were the only ones in our healing circle who had not been to camp before. It was also our last eligible year for camp, so I thought he would wait to tell his story last since we were new. Wrong again. He went first, as in literally the first night. Thank you, Maryland. As if I did not feel awkward enough. However, it got better. Eventually others started



going, and I soon learned that I was not the only one who felt awkward. This was reassuring, and I knew I was normal.

At first I thought this girl in my group did not like me, but after we talked at free time I knew I liked her. North Carolina was so funny there was no way we could not get along. This other guy kept cracking jokes, and when he said he was from Nebraska I knew we had to be friends because that's what we do in the Midwest; we stick together! I have plans in February to attend a Helmet Blessing in memory of his father, not only as a friend, but as a child of a fellow fallen firefighter. This other girl in my group had a tattoo of a turtle! How cool is that? She was from Oregon, and we were instant friends! Arkansas was nice enough to think of me when he attended this year's Memorial Service in Emmitsburg. Idaho and I still keep in touch. We actually have to use snail mail to communicate, but it's worth it!

There is a reason I am diving into my personal stories, and that is understanding. The other members of your circle will know how it feels to have such a public funeral, where thousands watched. They understand how it feels to read about your parent's passing and to hear and watch it on the news over and over. They know the shock of accepting that your loved one is no longer here. I cannot even describe how much I appreciated someone else knowing how it felt to be in the news, to be videotaped by news crews, or how crossing the Sea of Blue at the Memorial felt. We all agreed on that feeling you get through your whole body at the sound of bagpipes.

This camp is the place where you will meet more than friends. You will meet the people that "get it," lifelong friends that

understand exactly how you feel. You may be that grumbling teen that thinks you don't need this, but I guarantee you will feel so much better if you go! You can even email me if you have questions! If this does not make someone want to go to camp, drag them there and make them experience it for themselves. You will all be glad you did!

A Note from Doreen Cox, Baylee's mom:

There is just one inaccuracy in her story. I didn't drag Baylee to camp; I bribed her to go!

I knew I could get Baylee to go to camp if I told her we could visit the Holocaust Museum in Richmond. Sneaky on my part, but I truly felt the camp experience would give her a different perspective on grieving. I want her to have all the tools she needs to deal with losing her dad and eventually me. So thank you, Eileen, for answering all my questions about the Holocaust Museum in Richmond, and thank you, Matt Tobia, for taking us and picking us up that rainy Friday morning.

I lost my mom when I was a little older than Bay and my younger sister was still in high school. I don't think I ever allowed myself time to grieve or allowed myself time to actually think about what had happened. I certainly didn't have any skills to deal with it. It was just don't stop, keep going, as I was in my second year of PT school. I want Baylee to have skills and others to talk to. I want her to have options. I never in a million years thought she would lose her parents so young.

Camp for us was definitely worth going and accomplished more than we ever thought it would.

By Jenny Van Handel, Wife of Heath Van Handel (2009-WI)

This is a camp where kids can be kids. With the direction of educated staff and members of the fire service, a safe haven is born. It's a place where the thought of a lost parent is not as unbalanced as it seems to a single parent and kid, a place where the expectations of others are not imposed upon you. Kids cut from different cloths are brought together because of one common thread.



Brett Van Handel with firefighter camp volunteer Mike Pfaltzgraff

I have witnessed the positive effects of both camps on my children. It is a blessing from the unsung heroes of the Foundation, the fire service, and the Hal Bruno Camps for Kids. The boys have left the camps and return to me with optimism and a growth that is hard to put into words. I will say this without question: my boys are heading in the right direction with me and my expectations. The camps and their staff are respectful of the children's need to be kids.

By Trina Buss Sgrignoli, *Wife of Brian Buss (2009-MT)*

My daughter, Madalynn, got so much from the Kids Camp. She felt safe to share her feelings. The tools she gained about how to express and communicate her feelings have been helpful, especially with the anger and loss of, “I wish Daddy could see me....” It was also



Madalynn (L) at camp

important for her to see that other kids her age and older have the same feelings, needs, and wants.

Madalynn can't wait to be there next year. As a mother I'm grateful that she has this time to express herself and gain the coping tools she may need throughout her life.

Three Perspectives on Camp

By Ami Rudzki, Jessika Blanchard, and Ryan Blanchard, *Ex-wife and daughters of Todd Blanchard (2005-NC)*

From Ryan, age 13

If someone was thinking of going to camp, or if a parent was thinking of sending their child, I think the key would be to make sure the child knows that the people going to camp are in the same situation as the child. Let them know that at camp, everyone's there for each other. We all go for the same reason—to talk about our loss of a loved one. You shouldn't be afraid to cry or tell your story. The first year I went, I met a girl named Emily, and we've been friends ever since. The first year of camp I was scared to go, but at the end I was happy that my mom convinced me to go. I now look forward to going to camp every year. The second year, I started to become friends with someone else that I met the first year. We text and talk nearly every day; he's one of my best friends even though he's more than 1400 miles away from me.



Ryan at camp

Going to camp has changed my life, and it's an unforgettable experience. When I get too old to go to camp, I look forward to becoming a counselor so I can help other kids come out of their comfort zone and enjoy camp. If there's a new kid who's scared to be at camp, or if they're a pre-teen or a teenager, I'll try to be their first friend. I think everyone going through a loss should have the opportunity to talk about their experience with others who have experienced a loss also.

From Jessika, age 16

I recommend Comfort Zone because it isn't “just a camp.” It's a place that most kids dread at first, or maybe they want to go. Everyone's experience is different. It's a place to have fun, make friends, and make memories. We don't sit and talk about our feelings. We sit and talk, yes, but we play games that show us we need people to help us through hard times. This camp has taught me a lot and shown me I'm not alone. I plan on going again this year.



Jessika with her Big Buddy

From Ami (the mom), old (LOL)

As soon as I saw this opportunity for my children to attend Comfort Zone Camp, I knew I wanted to take them. I had some resistance from one child, and the other wanted to attend. When I picked them up after the first weekend, before we even got out of the parking lot they both asked me if they could come back next year. My children learned, for the first time in seven years, that they were not alone. They looked forward to the second year. These children bonded in a way that even I am amazed with. They have made friends that they talk with, write letters to, text, call—some of them on a daily basis.



Ami Rudzki

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Three Perspectives *continued from page 4*

As a mom, I benefited tremendously from meeting other parents. I usually shy away from these types of gatherings because I tend to not want to talk about my feelings. I also felt for a very long time that because I had not met anybody else in my exact situation—Todd and I were divorced—I would not be able to relate. Listening to other

people speak and hearing their stories was very helpful to me, and imagine my surprise when not only did I meet an amazing group of people, but I happened to meet someone in a very similar situation. I left there feeling that I, too, am not alone on this journey. The feeling of support and family with this group is irreplaceable. If we are going to be on this journey, there is no need to do it alone.

By Lynn Brown, *Wife of Jay Brown (2010-GA)*

My daughter, Carter, and I went to Kids Camp last year at the Nickelodeon Hotel. It was her first experience with the NFFF camp. She lost her father at three years old and went to the Memorial Service in Emmitsburg in 2011. Prior to this, she was at the fire department daily.

Carter enjoyed interacting with the volunteers at the camp and other kids that were there. She went from a shy girl



Carter Brown enjoying camp

who wouldn't let her mother leave her to a girl that looked forward to launching herself into the arms of these volunteers and enjoying the times that she had there. She participated in activities that honored her dad and allowed her to talk about the memories she has of him. We both enjoyed our time at the camp, and the NFFF staff and volunteers were awesome as always.

Your child and you will truly benefit from this camp.

By Grant Fouts, *Son of Frank Fouts (2010-IL)*

Hello. My name is Grant Fouts, and I am almost 10 years old. I went to the National Fallen Firefighters Kids Camp last year in Virginia. My father, Frank W. Fouts V, passed away on July 1, 2010. I remember that day so clearly. Only being six years old, I had no friends that had ever experienced losing a parent. Being fortunate enough to go to a special camp like yours has helped me to meet others like me. I was also able to talk about things with new friends that were going through the same thing as me.

I went to camp last summer and I had so much fun! If you don't like swimming, s'mores, races, or having fun all day, then this camp is not for you. One of my favorite things I was able to do was the water trampoline. We actually were able to jump up and down on a floating trampoline in the water! It was so much fun. I also loved going on the zip line because you go so fast. If you are loud enough, then your table will get to eat before everyone else! The food was delicious.

It was so easy to make friends at camp. The counselors helped us with many things during the camp. One of the

counselors taught me that it is very good to share your emotions. I still do this as much as I can today. When you are at camp with your group you get to do fun arts and crafts! We were able to make our own box to remember whoever passed away that was special to us. I made a box with multiple colors because it was all of my dad's favorite colors. I will keep that special box with me forever just like the great memories we made at camp together.

I feel more and more kids should go to camp. It was so easy to make new friends, and I was able to keep all of them. I hope more kids can go to camp, because that means more friends for me and each other. The more friends we make, the more memories we take and keep with us forever.

Thanks for allowing me to have such a great place to go and meet new friends and learn new things together.



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