



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

Scholarships *continued from page 6*

Columbia Southern University Scholarship

The NFFF/Columbia Southern University Scholarship program is open to spouses and life partners of firefighters honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial. Columbia Southern University is a completely online university offering degree programs and a flexible learning style designed to accommodate a busy life.

For more information and to download an application package, go to:

www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources/programs/scholarships

2014 Memorial Weekend DVDs are now available for purchase through the NFFF's online store at www.fireherostore.com.

We want to hear from you about...



Anniversaries and life events. After the death of a loved one, the calendar is full of significant dates that once brought excitement and joy but might now bring a sense of increased sadness or dread. What do you do with those birthdays, anniversaries, and the anniversary of the death? What about significant life events like a wedding, graduation, or the birth of a new baby? We know that many of you have found incredibly creative ways to take control of those days, finding new ways to celebrate those bittersweet milestones and to honor and

remember your loved one. Please share your stories with those who may still be struggling to figure out what to do.

Please send your submission, along with a photo, by March 31 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
Attn: Jenny Woodall
P.O. Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

This project was supported by Grant No. 2012-PS-DX-0001, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 64 ~ JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2015

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

~Mary Oliver

First things first. Congratulations, you made it through the holidays! You sent the cards or you didn't. You baked the cookies or you didn't. You celebrated with family or you stayed at home by yourself. You actually enjoyed it this year, or you couldn't wait until it was over. Whatever you did or didn't do, felt or didn't feel, it's over now, and you got through it. Go ahead and forgive yourself for whatever you think you got wrong or failed to do. While you're at it, go ahead and forgive everyone else, too, for whatever they did or didn't do. Let's start over with a clean slate.

The beginning of a new year is a natural time to take stock of things. It's a time to look back, remembering and reflecting on what has been. It's a time to look at where you are now, however different it is from where you thought you'd be at this moment. Here you are. It's a time to look forward, at the expanse of your life stretching out before you—complicated, terrible and wonderful, scary and full of possibility. What will you do with it? How will you meet each new day? What do you want to see when you stand at the end of this year, looking back again at another circle around the sun?

Going through the loss of a loved one has a way of sharpening our focus and weeding out what is unnecessary or unimportant. Many people say that they no longer worry about life's little trials, no longer trouble themselves

with life's little dramas. They see clearly what is most important—to love the people who are still here, to seize opportunities, to refuse to waste even a single day. Not that anyone gets things right all the time, but maybe some of the less important stuff falls by the wayside. Some people express that they are no longer afraid to die, when their time comes, because their loved one has gone before them. We're not talking here about actively wishing to die, which is something different. We're talking about not having the same fear you once had, particularly if you believe you will see your loved one again after death.

If grief has gifts, living life well might be one of them. Recent research suggests that people who have experienced some adversity are ultimately happier than those who have experienced no trauma at all. When something terrible happens, what we do with that helps determine what our future will look like. We can't change the events that have occurred, but we can change our own outlook about them and how we move forward. It's a very difficult and very important choice.

Whether or not you embrace the idea of New Year's resolutions, this might be the perfect time to set some intentions for how you want to live this year and where you want to put your focus going forward. In this issue, we'll look back and look forward and see where we're headed.

Registration for the 2015 Hal Bruno Camps for Children of Fallen Firefighters is now open. There are two camps—one for ages 4–6 and the other for ages 7–17. For information, please contact Bev Donlon at: bdonlon@firehero.org.

Gail's Rock

By Laurel Van Auken and Carole Chisholm, Daughter and Sister of Gail Van Auken (2000-MI)

The family in this picture is standing atop “Gail’s Rock” in August 2014. We first discovered the rock in 1979, when Gail was merely 20 years old, and the rock has been the foundation of a family tradition ever since.

Gail VanAuken died in the line of duty as a firefighter in November 2000. Gail has two daughters and two sons and was married to Rick VanAuken. Gail also has four surviving sisters and one surviving brother.

Every summer for over thirty years, our family has enjoyed a three-night/two-day canoeing and camping trip on the Little Muskegon River near Big Rapids, Michigan. Our group each year is impressive, with 15-20 canoes in the water, 30-40 family members and friends, and children as young as two years old. Encountering Gail’s Rock is a favorite annual tradition in our family. Here’s the story...

In the summer of 1979, the water level of the Little Muskegon River was unusually high. Gail was canoeing with her younger brother, Gary, who was seven years old at the time. Because of the high water level, the rock in the picture was completely hidden below the river’s surface.

The river’s current at this spot is quick. Gail and Gary were moving along at a swift pace when they unintentionally struck the undetected rock with their canoe and abruptly came to a complete stop, as if someone had pulled an emergency brake. Because of the rock’s perfect placement just below the surface of the water, their canoe found a picture-perfect resting spot on top of the rock.

As the rest of us watched this sudden stop—and their bodies lurching forward—we were all amazed, shocked, confused, and entertained. Once we determined the cause of this sudden halt and realized the remarkable size and sloping shape of the rock, we all laughed, and the rock became known as “Gail’s Rock.”

Since the summer of 1979, each year we look forward to finding Gail’s Rock and measuring the water level in comparison to the rock. There are summers when the rock is once again submerged, as it was in 1979, but most

years Gail’s Rock juts out of the river to greet us as we approach.

The “encounter” with Gail’s Rock each summer is easily the most exciting and dramatic part of our annual canoe trip, as each team of canoers attempts to plane their canoe across the top of Gail’s Rock, just as Gail and Gary did in 1979.

Because, in most summers, Gail’s Rock is protruding substantially out of the water, this requires that we paddle as hard as we can

in order to breach the water in an attempt to balance our canoes across the top of the rock without the rapid current catching either end of the canoe and capsizing us. Since Gail’s last trip with us in the summer of 2000, each of us has made our approach—some of us making second or third consecutive attempts—as the rest of the family bangs their oars against their canoes and cheers the paddlers on.

After each team of canoers has made their best effort to perch atop the rock, Gail’s husband, children, and grandchildren climb onto the rock for an annual picture. This is the most recent picture, and it includes,

L-R, front row: Gail’s grandchildren, Mixy, Jaxon, and Kelli’s daughter, Avril

back row: Gail’s son, Ben; her husband, Rick; her grandson, Jacob; her son, Chris; Chris’s fiancée, Kelli; Kelli’s daughter, Autumn; and Gail’s daughter, Laurel

Missing from this year’s photo are Gail’s daughter, Michelle, and Michelle’s son, Aeron.

We’ll see you next summer, Gail’s Rock!



Gail Van Auken's family atop Gail's Rock.



By Phyllis Bielefeld

Mother of Larry C. Gressett Sr. (2011-MS)

I am the mother of fire hero Larry C. Gressett Sr. Larry was a single father to my two grandsons, Larry Jr. and Waylon. He gave them a birthday party at the fire department and took their picture by the fire truck. It was a great birthday for them. Larry Jr. and Waylon think of Daddy as an angel still riding on his fire truck. I wrote this poem for them, and we would like to share it with all the survivors.



Larry C. Gressett's sons in front of his fire truck.

Angels Ride on Firetrucks

*Firefighters are the greatest heroes of all
Risking their lives for anyone in need of rescue, some will fall
Give the ultimate sacrifice, and have no fear
Leaving us with broken hearts and tears
God will only take the best from us
To become angels riding on fire trucks
Every time we hear the sirens blow
We think of Number Six, always ready to go
Daddy is an angel with golden wings to fly
Larry Jr. and Waylon know you are riding along, when your
Toomsuba fire truck goes by
Although we can't see you, we know you are with us
Climbing a ladder or carrying a child, angels ride on fire trucks
Our fallen firefighter heroes in heaven above
Will forever be in our hearts with everlasting love
Roll on, Daddy.*

By Riki Haukaas

Sister of Robert Henderson (2005-WY)

"Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened. Mom, that's me!" my 12-year-old son, Kai, told me excitedly. "It's by Dr. Seuss, and that's me, or at least how I want to be."

I know he truly wants to be this way, because my son is very emotional and often cries when things are over. It doesn't really matter what's over. It might be school for the year, a summer camp, a sports season, or a family vacation. When he's had fun doing something, almost before it's over he starts to get sad that it's ending, because he doesn't know if he'll ever have that same good experience again. He's been this way ever since I can remember, but he is only now



Kai Haukaas

getting to the age that he recognizes it and wishes he wasn't this way. Of course I've tried to get him to look at things this way for years, but it took the simplicity of Dr. Seuss for him to "get it."



Robert Henderson

Unfortunately, I think part of the reason my son gets so emotional when things are over is because of his age when my brother, Robert Henderson, died. Kai was three years old and the youngest of my brother's and my combined six kids. Over the next few years after Robert's (Uncle Bob's) death, whenever we'd

ask Kai why he was upset or crying he'd say, "I miss Uncle Bob." We knew that most of the time he wasn't really

continued on page 4

Riki Haukaas *continued from page 3*

missing Uncle Bob, but at such a young age he saw those closest to him cry because we all missed Uncle Bob. I have no doubt that he thought that if you were upset, sad, or crying, it must be because you missed Uncle Bob. About two weeks after the funeral he asked if he could have a picture of Uncle Bob to hang by his bed so he “wouldn’t forget him.” As I was getting a picture to print out, he asked to add pictures of my husband and me, his siblings, and our pets. He hung this collage of pictures by his bed for several years and even took it with him when we were away from home for a few days. I’m sure Kai did this as a way to keep us close to him, and that he was afraid he might lose us like he lost his uncle.

When Kai found that quote this week and related it to how he gets emotional about situations, I was so happy, because not only did it show he is gaining insight into his feelings, it showed he wanted to have a positive outlook on life. I have always been grateful for my upbringing and the way our family came together after my brother died, and how we celebrate Robert’s life more than we mourn his death. We tell stories, laugh a lot, and often give a toast to him so he knows he is still with us. While we still have our moments of sadness and grief and would give anything to have him back, the fact that we did have him is what is important. So thank you, Dr. Seuss, for such wonderful advice: *“Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened.”*

Dreams

By Melba West, Wife of Robin West (2011-SC)

My dream, from as long as I can remember, was to be happy and have a happy family. Not to be rich (though that would be nice), just happy.

My dad drank to escape responsibility and reality (which I am sure came from his childhood), creating total chaos in my family’s life. My mom was and is truly a good and Godly lady, but she was young and very naive and not sure how to handle this type of life. My early memories do not include a lot of happiness—mostly sadness, shame, and not feeling good enough.

When Robin and I started dating, it was hard for me to accept his love, always expecting the worst to happen. I loved him so much, but expected it to be taken away. God blessed our love, and I learned what real love on earth was. We had two children, and I was living my dream of happiness. My heart was so full of love for my family, I thought it would burst.

Our life was not always easy. We had our share of difficulties, but through it all we had our love and each other. We had fun and lots of laughter. We put God first in our lives and raised our children to love God and to treat all people with respect and love.

No matter what the day brought or what tomorrow might bring, when I went to bed at night with my Robin, all was

right with my world. He truly was half of me and who I was. We had our dreams of growing old together, taking grandchildren on trips, sitting on the swing and enjoying life. We were supposed to die like the couple in “The Notebook.”

On June 19, 2011, my life, my world, and my dreams fell apart and shattered. He was gone. My best friend, soul

mate, and the love of my life was gone forever. Dreams—what were dreams? They did not exist anymore. How on earth was I supposed to live? I had no idea.

The following two years are pretty much a blur. I woke up every morning going through the motions of living, just existing. There was no joy in anything for at least a year. I was totally devastated.

My children were my rock. I don’t know what I would have done without them. But they were dealing with their own grief. They

had their own families. Their children were devastated as well. For the first time in my life, I was alone! I knew God was carrying me every step of the way, but I was without Robin and did not know how to live.

On July 4, 2012, my daughter reminded me that basically there was still life.

On that night I cried out to God that I wanted to live. I was truly “broken.” I have no idea how long I was on the



Robin and Melba West



bathroom floor sobbing to God. The next morning I began to see beauty again and had a peace and a little joy in my heart. I could see a tiny light (the size of a lightning bug) far away. That was a beginning of life for me again. God has and is continuing to show me that I can live and I am (though it's extremely difficult) learning who I am.

After two-and-a-half years, God revealed to me what "Grace" really means. It means God is righteous, alive in me, constantly and consistently with me, and is Everlasting!

As I'm writing this, it has been three years and two months since I have been without Robin. I still miss him, and I still have the hole in my heart. I think about him all the time and am still sad sometimes. But I am living again! I have joy and peace that comes from God. And I am excited to see what God has in store for me next. Robin would be proud. My memories bring smiles and laughter now (most of the time).

Although I thought my dream was broken and gone forever, I find that I have the same dream—although it will come in different ways now—TO BE HAPPY!

The pieces that appear in The Journey belong solely to the authors and may not be reprinted without their written permission.

NFFF 2015-2016 Scholarship Applications Now Being Accepted

Completed applications must be postmarked and received by April 1, 2015.

NFFF Sarbanes Scholarship Program

The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation offers financial assistance for post-secondary education and training to spouses, life partners, children and stepchildren of firefighters honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial. Children and stepchildren must be under age 30 and have been under age 22 at the time of the firefighter's death.

Our Scholarship Partners

Several organizations partner with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation to provide educational assistance to survivors of fallen firefighters. Survivors who apply for the Foundation scholarship program may also be eligible for awards from these organizations.

National Association of State Fire Marshals John Heinz Memorial Scholarship Fund

National Association of State Fire Marshals

Provides educational scholarships to the surviving children and spouses of fallen firefighters and emergency medical personnel, and who died in the line of duty on or after September 12, 1982, and qualified under the Department of Justice's Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program.

Vantagepoint Public Employee Memorial Scholarship Fund

ICMA Retirement Corporation

Assists children and spouses of deceased public employees who died in the line of duty, who plan to continue education in college or vocational school programs. Scholarships are offered each year for full-time study at an accredited institution of the student's choice.

Global Health and Safety Fallen Heroes Scholarship Fund

Offers annual financial assistance for higher education and training to families of firefighters honored at the National Memorial in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

Motorola Solutions Foundation Memorial Scholarship Fund

Provides educational scholarships, particularly focused on science, technology, engineering or math, to children, stepchildren and spouses of firefighters who died in the line of duty and are honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial.

continued on page 6