



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 66 ~ MAY / JUNE 2015

*When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that
in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.*

~Kahlil Gibran

Many survivors struggle with what to do with significant dates and events after a loved one dies. Whether it's the winter holiday "marathon," graduations and weddings, or quiet, personal holidays like birthdays and anniversaries, sometimes celebrating is the last thing on your mind. How do you handle that?

It's important to keep in mind that there isn't just one answer to that question. People need and want different things. We have heard many examples of creative ways in which families have marked or not marked these occasions. Here are some options:

Do nothing.

Really, that's an option. If you choose not to celebrate a "special" day this year, the world will not end, and the day will come around again next year. It's OK to sit this one out. Not everyone will agree with this, but do what works for you.

Do something different.

Leave town. Go to the beach. Or visit a new city. Or just go to the movies or a new restaurant. If it feels like doing what you usually do will only make you feel worse, then turn the tradition on its head. You can go back to old traditions later if you want to.

Do something intentional.

Find a significant way to mark the day in honor of your loved one. Volunteer for or donate to a cause they supported. Visit a place that was special to them. Eat at their favorite restaurant. Light a candle.

Do something that grounds you.

Get a massage or a manicure. Go to church. Go for a hike. Paint. Go horseback riding. Surround yourself with whatever calms you and brings you peace.

Continue traditions.

Celebrate the way you usually do. Know that it will feel different. Your life has changed. If you find comfort in the touchstones of tradition, just know that there will be some tears as you revisit those familiar rituals this year.

Sit this one out.

If you are invited to a wedding or graduation while you are in deep grief, consider carefully whether to attend. Write a note, send a gift, and acknowledge the important day. But if you feel you will be too overwhelmed with sadness, don't torture yourself by putting yourself in that situation.

Set the tone.

A lot of people worry that their loved one will be forgotten over time, that others will go back to their lives and the memories will fade away. Friends and relatives may tread lightly, unsure if they should mention the person who died, not wanting to upset you. It's OK to tell people what you need and want. Address it head on. Invite people to share their memories. If you let them know it's OK, then they can relax and share their special memories with you.

Say yes even if you feel like saying no.

Many survivors have observed that soon after a death, there are many offers of help and support, but as time goes on,

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those offers tend to dwindle. As you are able, accept some invitations and let people know how much you appreciate being included.

Consider the children.

The children in your family may want to celebrate in the ways that they are used to. Enlist the help of friends and family to help make this happen. Maybe this isn't the year to buy all the presents, bake a cake from scratch, or invite 15 children to sleep over. Be realistic about what you can

handle, and don't do it alone. If your children want to celebrate differently, let them know that's OK, too. Ask what they want to do, and be open to their suggestions.

Take care of yourself.

No matter how you choose to mark the day, make sure you are taking good basic care of yourself. It can be difficult to focus on good nutrition, exercise, and rest when you are grieving. Do your best to keep yourself healthy.

In this issue, survivors share their thoughts on marking time since the death of their loved ones.

My Lifelong Hero is Gone

By Debbie Stevens, Wife of Tom D. Stevens Sr. (2014-IN)

We met in 1972, when I was 15 and Tom Stevens was 17. It began as a great friendship and developed into love. We married on March 8, 1975. We were young, in love, and so happy to be together. We remained friends and enjoyed each other's company, always doing things together even after 39 years of marriage. Tom made everyone around him laugh. I heard the same jokes over and over again for more than 30 years, so I would laugh and just shake my head. Tom was a happy, kind, loving man. He liked playing tricks on everyone at the fire house and cooking for them on Saturdays after station duty. And every chance he got, he would be somewhere playing softball with his sons and grandsons.

Our lives were like everyone else's, ups and downs, but through it all we loved each other. In November 2013, Tom came home from his job at the fire department where he was assistant chief and told me he wanted to go to Las Vegas for a little vacation, just the two of us. So he booked flights and got us a room in Las Vegas for the week of December 3, 2013. It was cold here in Indiana, so we were looking forward to some warmer weather. When we got there it was only 50 degrees, but we enjoyed ourselves anyway. The whole trip was very relaxing,

Tom even saved up extra money so we could buy things for the kids. We talked about our 40th wedding anniversary which was coming up in March 2015. We were going to Alaska. That was our plan!

We had Christmas 2013 with our two sons, Tom Jr. and Mike; two daughters-in-law, Melissa and Tama; and four grandchildren, Brandon (17), Nathan (12), and 1-year-old twins Juliette and Gabriella. Tom truly loved his grandchildren and their time together; they made him happy. Our 39th anniversary was on March 8, 2014, and for the first time ever we decided to stay home. This was unusual, because we always went out to eat. We would celebrate later. Well, unbeknownst to us, later would never come.



Tom D. Stevens Sr.

March 17, 2014, just nine days later, was another quiet day at home, except for one fire run Tom went on. We just watched TV and relaxed. At about 10 p.m., Tom went to bed. Between 1-1:30 a.m. on March 17, 2014, he had a heart attack and passed away in his sleep. It was the most horrible night of my life! What will I do now? How could I go on without him? We were all distraught to say the least!



We will never have our 39th wedding anniversary dinner. Tom would not get to see his granddaughters turn 2 in May 2014, his grandson Brandon graduate from high school in June 2014, celebrate his 60th birthday in August 2014, or celebrate our 40th wedding anniversary in Alaska in 2015. It was a very sad year. There were a lot of things we did not get to celebrate with Tom. He is gone!

So, our sons, Tom Jr. and wife Melissa; Mike and wife Tama; and our grandchildren, Brandon, Nathan, Juliette, and Gabriella, made the best of it. On every anniversary, birthday, graduation, and holiday, we talked about what Tom would have done, how Tom would have celebrated. We even told his silly jokes and laughed at them again! We lit sky lanterns and launched them from our deck, with notes inside telling him we love him and miss him.

On March 8, 2015, which would have been our 40th wedding anniversary, our grandson Nathan was baptized

at the Christian Church. He picked this date in honor of our 40th anniversary, in memory of his Grandpa. It was a very emotional day, but a good one. Now March 8th has two special memories.

We've spent the past year on our own, making the best of it, without Tom's silly jokes, without our family's leader, without hearing him laugh, or seeing his smiling face. I miss my wonderful husband; he was the love of my life, my best friend, half my identity, and now he is gone. I thank God for our great sons, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren who keep me going. Without them I would not survive this lonely journey.

For the fire department, they have lost their kind, funny, devoted assistant chief.

*Tom, your family loves you and misses you.
You are our hero!*

My Journey Thoughts

By Donnella Hardee, Wife of Rodney Hardee (2013-SC)

After the shock has worn off, you realize you no longer have that person you have spent your life with. Every event, every family outing has been centered around a pager sounding, taking your loved one to help someone in need. All of a sudden it goes quiet. The pager sits silently on his night stand, never to call him out again. The house is now quiet. No more hurrying and scurrying to get out the door. All of the well-wishers have gone back to their own lives. You realize it is all over, and what are you going to do now?

Living in a small town where almost everyone knows everyone, has been good. People ask how you are doing and are quick to tell you how much they appreciated your loved one. But sadly people forget too quickly. I don't want my husband to be forgotten. He spent his life helping people, not for pay or glory, just because it was the right thing to do. I would love to see schools, churches, and fire departments set aside a day similar to Memorial or Veterans Day to honor our firefighters and especially the fallen.



Donnella Hardee



Rodney Hardee

My greatest fear is that before long everyone will forget my firefighter ever lived. I want to tell people, "Don't be afraid to talk about my loved one." It is o.k. It makes me happy to be reminded or hear things he said or did. Don't forget to invite me to social events. We are no longer a couple,

but I still matter. To be included in events at the fire station means so much. When it comes down to it, fellow firefighters and their families matter almost as much as immediate family members. They share the same life you have lived and the connection is strong. I need their support to get through this grieving process. I now can understand what "The Journey" is and realize I need help to get through this journey.

In May, we gave two high school seniors college scholarships in Rodney's memory. This is our second year of giving them, and my family and I get great satisfaction seeing deserving people go to college.



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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

Meet the Fire Heroes at www.firehero.org

Do the stories you read in The Journey ever make you want to read more about these fallen firefighters? If so, their stories are just a few clicks away. On our website, we maintain a tribute space for each firefighter who has been honored at the National Memorial. To find a bio, go to www.firehero.org/fallen-firefighters and search by the last name of the firefighter.

Families are invited to submit a bio and photo for their firefighter so others can read about their lives and service. If your firefighter has already been honored at the National Memorial and this information was not submitted, please e-mail a bio and photo to webteam@firehero.org, so we can post them on your firefighter's page. Help us share the stories of America's brave fire service heroes!

If your firefighter has not yet been honored at the National Memorial, please contact us for specific instructions about how to submit your bio and photo.

We want to hear from you!



Experiencing loss and grief can change our beliefs and the way we view the world. Did this happen for you? Use this statement as a way to think about how your beliefs have changed: "I used to think..., but now I know..." Write down your thoughts and send them to us to share in an upcoming issue of The Journey.

Please send your submission, along with a photo, by August 10 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

Attn: Jenny Woodall

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