



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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« *The only gift is a portion of thyself.* »

~Ralph Waldo Emerson

What do you carry with you each day? When someone dies, we certainly carry sadness with us for a time. Perhaps anger or exhaustion or regret. Those feelings come with us as we put one foot in front of the other each day.

Hopefully you carry some positives with you as well—gifts and strengths and memories from your firefighter that bolster your courage and help inspire you. Fire service survivor Katy Smith, mother of Robert Henderson (2005-WY) used her son’s courage to help her do something she

knew would test her limits. While she ran the 2006 Salt Lake City Marathon, she carried a card in her pocket that said, “If Robert could run into a burning building, I could run a marathon.” And she did.

Many of you have shared stories of finding strength you never knew you had, inspired in part by the gifts your firefighters gave you. Those gifts are still within you. Keep your eyes open. There may be gifts still yet to come.

My Best Friend My Dad

By Ameray Henderson, Daughter of Robert Henderson (2005-WY)

April 18, 2005, was a day that changed not only my life or my family’s life, but the city of Evanston and the state of Wyoming. That was the day I lost my best friend, my everything. I lost my dad to a smoke explosion while searching for children reportedly trapped in a burning townhouse. My father was a volunteer firefighter for over 11 years, and he loved every second of it. At the time of his passing I was six years old, and I was just starting kindergarten.

Before my dad passed away I was always with him. I still remember going down to the firehouse and climbing on the counters and getting into their food and drinking the most amazing red cream soda ever. I was probably at the firehouse more than I was at my actual house. That was my second family and home. I absolutely loved it there. One of my favorite memories I have with my dad was when he brought the fire truck to my preschool and showed all the kids. That was a pretty fun day. After showing all the kids

I got to leave school early and ride back to the firehouse in the fire truck. It was so much fun. My dad was my best friend, and I can always remember doing everything with him. I was a daddy’s girl, and I always will be. My dad means the world to me.

Another fun and amazing memory I have with him was the last time I went hunting with him. We only went one day. We were supposed to go the whole weekend with my dad’s friends, but my mom got sick. Since she was feeling better, we went that Sunday. We just went up by the windmills, so nowhere far from town. All I really remember from that day was having to move the elk down the hill with my mom so my dad could get a better shot. My mom and I started walking towards the elk. All of a sudden the ground and all the bushes and trees started shaking, and we could see dozens of elk running down the hill. My dad had to wait for the last moment so he could try and get the biggest one.

continued on page 2

Ameray Henderson *continued from page 2*

After my dad shot and we waited for the elk to calm down, my mom and I walked to my dad and we saw the big elk he got. The elk was so big that the only way we could get it out of the mountains was to cut it in half and call some other guys from the fire department. My dad shot that elk around 6:00 a.m., and we didn't get home until about 8:00 that night. It was crazy big. But that was the last day my dad or I went hunting.

I always loved to do things with my dad like hunting or riding 4-wheelers or just being with him at his other job at the post office. I can't really think of a moment that I wasn't with my dad or at school.



Ameray Henderson with her dad and brothers

I am 16 now, and things have really changed since my dad has passed away. I'm still trying to understand that my dad isn't going to come home anytime soon. I still cry and grieve, but that's part of life. My two brothers are currently attending the University of Wyoming. The oldest brother has a nine-month-old baby boy. They are both doing very well. For the last ten years my mom has raised three kids on her own, and she has done an amazing job.

The biggest thing I have learned from my dad passing away, that no one ever really learns until they lose someone close to them, is that no matter where

I am or who I am with, my dad is always with me, and he is always watching over me.

The Gifts My Son Gave Me

By Maureen Santora, Mother of Christopher Santora (2001-NY)

Christopher died on September 11, 2001, but I could not process this until November 2, 2001. I truly believed that he would be found in a hospital or would one day walk in the door. None of this happened, of course. Accepting his death, I suppose, was my first step in my mourning and the beginning of my grief journey.

As I look back almost 14 years, I feel so blessed at the many gifts Christopher has given me. One that I hold dear is the gift of friendship. Along the way, I have met and gained so many wonderful people who are now special friends. They don't judge my moods. They don't try to stop my tears. They give me tissues instead. Whenever I am with them I know in my heart that they understand. They expect nothing from me. They just accept me for who I am now. Because of our shared grief—losing a part of us too early because of bravery and courage—we have bonded.



Maureen (center) with friends Jean Brack and Jane Neville

Sometimes when I am home, I lose my way. When I return to these special gifts of friendship, I feel my son has brought me happiness and joy. I look forward to our semi-annual meetings. The annual Survivors Conference makes me feel joyful. We laugh. We cry. We bond with newer families. It is always a wonderful experience. I am "home." The Memorial Weekend allows me to remember my early days. I hope that the new grieving families will connect and know how very special the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation really is. It was, and still is, a lifeline.

Christopher will always be a part of me. He will forever be in my heart. Because of his untimely death, I was given the gift of special friends. They are now a part of me. I am very grateful for that.

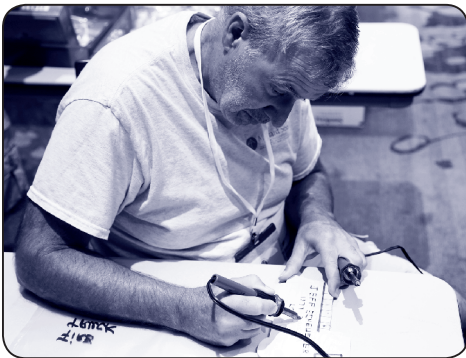


Survivors Conference

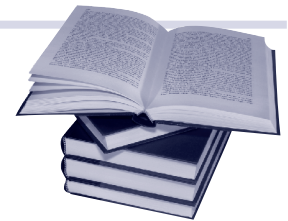
If you were able to attend the 2015 Survivors Conference in Annapolis, Maryland, we hope you...

- Learned some new things—like how to eat a Maryland blue crab, hula dance, operate a power saw, or hide and find geocaches
- Had time to reflect—on how far you have come, and on what might help you find additional joy and healing
- Spent time with people—met some new friends and caught up with friends who feel more like family
- Made some great memories—watching the Orioles play (lose), cruising on the Chesapeake Bay, and touring beautiful downtown Annapolis

Thank you for making the trip and being with us for a memorable event!



Further Reading



Several workshops facilitators from the Survivors Conference are also published authors. Here are a few titles to check out. Book descriptions are adapted from Amazon.com.

Title: *Life After the Death of My Son: What I'm Learning*

Author: **Dennis Apple**

Dennis has facilitated workshops including *For Bereaved Parents* and *Struggling to Reclaim My Faith*.

In 1991, Rev. Dennis Apple's 18-year-old son died suddenly from complications of mono. This book shares a glimpse of the unspeakable pain, helplessness, frustration, and eventual healing that he and his wife have experienced since losing their son. Dennis explores the dark, lonely road of grieving for a child. He discloses his anger and disappointment with God, discusses his frustrations with friends and family, and shares how he's dealt with the grief attacks, which continue to sneak up and surprise him. His painful, yet promising story offers comfort and connection to those walking similar paths.

continued on page 4



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

Further Reading *continued from page 3*

Title: *The Story Within*

Author: **Laura Oliver**

At the 2015 Survivors Conference, Laura presented *Write It Down to Lay It Down: Healing Grief*.

Laura Oliver has been teaching aspiring writers for more than a decade in workshops and university classes. Now she has written the book her students have been asking her for, a book that aspiring writers of every genre can use to guide, coach, and encourage them on their journey. *The Story Within* employs the compelling art of memoir to illuminate craft and touches on nuanced subjects only a teacher who is herself actively writing knows to address. Each chapter offers excerpts from Laura's own stories, as well as those of students and published authors and then provides fresh advice and clear instruction on the subject of writing.

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We want to hear from you!



What keeps you grounded in difficult times? Is it an old friendship? A hobby? Exercise? Faith? Time spent in nature? What helps you hold on and stay centered when the storms of life are swirling around you?

Please send your submission, along with a photo, by October 20, 2015 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

Attn: Jenny Woodall

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