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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.

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We want to hear from you!



The Journey provides a place for survivors to share their stories, written in their own words, with other fire service survivors across the United States. Grief can make people feel quite alone, and this publication is one way we have to remind people that others share and understand their experiences and feelings.

We welcome all survivors who have a firefighter honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Emmitsburg, Maryland, to submit pieces they have written about their firefighters and their experiences with loss and grief. We want to hear from spouses, parents, siblings, children (of any age), extended family members, and friends. You don't have to write about

a specific topic; we can almost always find a place to include a particular piece. You don't have to be an experienced writer or an A student; we will work with you to make sure your words tell your story well. And we extend a special invitation to those of you who have never written something like this before. We love to hear from first-time writers.

If you would like to submit something for publication in 2016, or if you have an idea for a topic you would like to see covered, please send it to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
Attn: Jenny Woodall
P.O. Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering.

-Ben Okri

Grief is sometimes likened to a storm. It's an apt description if you imagine suddenly darkening skies, harsh weather, a boat being tossed around in an angry sea. There can be a mix of powerful, churning emotions along with a sense of being unmoored and adrift.

What can you do to find some stability and shelter during this time?

After the sudden death of her young daughter, author Ann Hood learned to knit. As she describes in her memoir,

Comfort: A Journey Through Grief, she had to really concentrate on what her fingers were doing, and this gave her a few moments when she could focus on something other than her overwhelming grief.

If you can find one thing to hold on to, a lifeline of sorts, something to steady you, sometimes that's the way you begin to find your footing again. In this issue, survivors talk about what has helped keep them grounded during the storm of grief.

By Claire Veseth, Mother of Anne Veseth (2012-ID)

My husband and I planted a garden the first year we were married, and it was the beginning of an annual event. When he became a quadriplegic in the spring of 2003 from a sledding accident, friends said, "You aren't going to put in a garden this year, are you?" And I said I was, because it was the one thing that was a constant in life: you plant, you water, the seeds sprout and grow without regard to what else is going on in the world. I have gardened every year since with the same appreciation for the ageless cycle of the seasons.

Twelve years later I am marking the third anniversary of my daughter Anne's death from a falling tree while fighting a forest fire in central Idaho.

The fires in Idaho are again burning this year. The beans are ripening on the bushes. Small towns are evacuated, houses burn, people lose everything

they own. The tomatoes turn red. There are weddings to attend and road trips to travel. The zucchini proliferate and need picking. My heart aches when I hear on the news that another firefighter was killed by a falling tree. The ripe cucumbers are hanging from the vine. This cycle of the growing season grounds me, this cycle of life that continues, oblivious to the events or tragedies that are happening all around.



Anne Veseth

The alyssum and sweet peas send forth fragrance whether it's a beautiful sunrise or a smoky hot one. I see and smell and process senses differently after these tragedies in my life. I am more grateful for each sunrise, each landscape vista, the produce and the fragrances.

My children and I are more cognizant of reality—that I may not come back from my road trip, they may not come back from their rafting

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Claire Veseth *continued from page 1*

trip or their weekend getaway. We are more grateful for the safe trips, for each time we get to see each other, for the presence of each other in life in phone calls and letters.

I have visited the site of Anne's death each of these last three years and see how the site has changed. That first fall we visited the site, you could see the tree that hit her, all 120 feet was visible, the forest was barren and uninviting. This year, the bushes are starting to grow and green up the area, the undergrowth is starting to curl over the log, covering the starkness of the naked tree on the ground. It reminds me of the hole in my heart, the rawness

that first year and the softening as the years go by. The fallen tree is still there, but it is starting to be draped by new growth.

Three more firefighters have died this week. I cried when I heard the news. I ache for those families, for the journey they are starting. And even as the mourning begins, the tomatoes need picking and I hang on to the cycle of the seasons, to something that remains constant and makes sense.

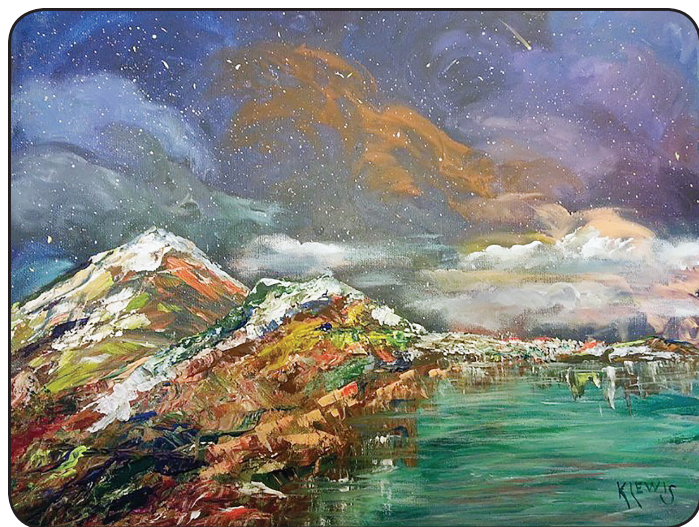
We remember and grieve for those that have died, we hug those we have left, and we cherish every moment that we have to appreciate all that surrounds us.

By Kay Lewis, Mother of Michael Lewis (2006-ID)

There are life changing events in one's life that happen. Mine was on August 13, 2006. My son, who worked for the Forest Service for almost 20 years as a wildland firefighter, was killed in a work related helicopter accident at age 37. Mike had a love for the arts, so I decided to make something beautiful and positive happen in the year 2013 by taking a painting class at the senior center.

I have learned so much and grown as an artist since I first started. Painting is now my passion; it brings me a peace that I haven't had for many years. I feel Mike's presence as I paint, and I love painting in memory of my son and now also my husband, Gary, who was killed in June of 2014.

Life presents challenges. I've had a lot of support. I am learning how to be strong, figuring things out, doing things that I never thought I would or could do. When I get overwhelmed, out comes the painting material, and I am



one with the canvas. My paintings have brought hope back into my life. I allow myself to get lost in my paintings with peace in my heart.

My family and friends are excited with my progress with each new painting I do, since every work of art I have done is so different. I have many years ahead of me to try new ways of making beautiful things happen on the canvas, and I look forward to each new adventure of where my paintings will take me, since each one tells a different story of where I am today. I am happy to say that something beautiful has come out of something so horrible. I know Mike and Gary are, in spirit, happy for me, living my life, finding joy in this life. I am always saying life is good, and I totally feel that from my heart.



Kay Lewis





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

What keeps me grounded in difficult times is my faith in God. Everyone faces troubles or storms somewhere in their lives. I have always had faith, but never needed that faith so much as the day I lost my husband and every day since then. I didn't allow myself to think that one day Rodney might leave me. The first days, weeks, and months after he died were overwhelming. Life was one big fog that didn't seem to go away. It was hard to make decisions or even remember what I did the day before, but work, running a home, and paying bills had to go on. By the time my fog cleared, a year had passed. I realized God had carried me through.

Then, a test of my faith. My husband had implemented a food distribution program through our church. As members of the Low Country Food Bank, we receive a large truckload of groceries one day per month to distribute to needy families in our area. Anywhere from 160 to 200 boxes of groceries, and as many as 500 people are helped on any given day. Thanksgiving and Christmas require collecting additional items such as clothing and gifts to insure families have happy holidays.

Rodney coordinated the volunteers and was responsible for the success of the day. When he died, I realized I had to step in and keep this program going. There have been days I wasn't sure I could do it, but God made a way, and not one food day has been cancelled in the twenty-seven months since he died. Again, my faith has given me the strength and courage to keep this program going. Focusing on helping others who are less fortunate than me helps me see beyond my loss.



Donnella Hardee

Staying grounded requires faith, learning to take one day at a time, doing the things that make me happy, staying away from depressing situations and people, and learning to ask for help when I need it. The firemen are always available. Volunteering with the National Fallen Firefighter Memorial Weekend has now become a part of my life. Some days are better than others.

Holidays are on the near horizon, and I can already feel the sadness. I refuse to let my sadness hinder the happiness of the holidays. I will decorate, fix holiday meals, have presents under the tree, and help the less fortunate. I will laugh and be happy. I will carry on the traditions with my family as Rodney and I always did. When I feel sad I will allow myself to remember all the good memories, play the songs we loved. Then I will pick myself up and look forward to a new day. I have faith that one day the sun will shine bright again.



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Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact.

—William James