

Save the Date

May 7–9, 2017

Survivor Wellness Conference

Charleston, South Carolina

More info/registration: <https://www.firehero.org/events>

June 10–16, 2017

Outward Bound, Philadelphia (ages 18–25)

Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area, Pennsylvania

July 21–23, 2017

Kids Camps for Children of Fallen Firefighters (ages 4–17)

Boulder, Colorado

August 3–5, 2017

**Young Adult Retreat for Children of Fallen Firefighters
(ages 18–25)**

Ellicott City, Maryland

October 6–8, 2017

National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend

Emmitsburg, Maryland

November 2–4, 2017

Parents and Siblings Retreat

Ellicott City, Maryland



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...



Losing a loved one is hard enough. What if your life was already pretty hard before that happened? What if you were already parenting a special needs child, managing a serious illness, facing financial difficulty, or struggling with other issues? What if this wasn't the only death of someone close to you? Sometimes life overloads us with too much at once, and we have to figure out how to manage multiple difficult situations. If you've been there before, what would you say to others who

are in this situation? Where did you start? What helped you? What words of wisdom do you have to offer to someone who feels overwhelmed by their situation?

If you would like to write about this topic or another, please send it by May 15 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

ISSUE 76 ~ MARCH/APRIL 2017

I know now that we never get over great losses; we absorb them, and they carve us into different, often kinder, creatures.

~ Gail Caldwell

When we describe grief in children, we think of it as something that becomes part of the development process. As children grow into more mature understanding, better emotional control, a greater sense of independence, the loss they experienced is part of that growth. At each new stage, they process different aspects of what it means to have lost someone close to them. Even children who were born after the death of a parent or sibling grow up in a family affected by grief and loss, and it becomes part of their experience.

We have to remember that human development is lifelong. Those ages and stages don't end when we reach adulthood. There are distinct seasons of adult life—young adulthood, working years, parenthood, retirement, growing old. And each of those seasons brings into focus new aspects

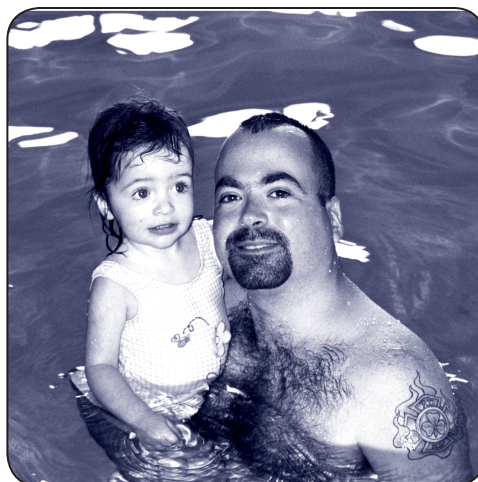
of what it means to have lost that person we loved. It becomes a part of our story, lifelong, ever unfolding. The unanswerable question remains—what would life have looked like if that person were still here?

We can hold life's sadness along with its joy. Neither is diminished. They don't cancel one another out. We can move forward without ever completely letting go of that connection we shared. Even after death, the relationship continues. The bond endures. The imprint of their lives continues to live on in ours.

In this issue, the pieces are about feeling all the feels, living the rich complexity of a good, fulfilling life that includes abiding grief and a sense of bittersweet. It's all part of the story.

By Erica Brennan, Wife of Peter Brennan (2001-NY)

The morning after my 29th birthday, my husband, Peter, left for work for the last time. I never heard from him again. That day was September 11, 2001. I was 24 weeks pregnant with our second child. I darted away from the cameras, bucked the press. I boldly told Diane Sawyer's research team to "leave me and my children alone." I moved away from the people and the town that kept asking to see "his baby." I ran from places where others first introduced my children as "the son



Peter Brennan with his daughter

and daughter of ...” My survival plan, and the execution of that plan, worked.

Some time ago I went to a bouncy house playground with my children and my two nieces. While I was there supervising all the kids, I saw a man with his two young children. The man's physical features and the layout of his family—a young daughter and a son about two years younger—drew me in. I wrote this poem about the experience.

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Erica Brennan *continued from page 1*

*He looks like you
 He is your height
 He shares your build
 He has your hair color
 And is wearing your exact five o'clock shadow
 His eyes are just like yours
 He is playing with his young daughter and his toddler son
 I feel it
 It hits me in the throat first
 I feel like I am being choked
 I struggle to breathe
 Next, it hits my chest
 As if a ton of bricks has fallen on my rib cage
 My heart struggles to beat
 Under the weight of it all
 Then, it hits my legs
 They lose their strength
 My knees give way, and
 I crumble to the floor
 I lay there
 Paralyzed
 Hoping my heart will find a way to beat again
 My eyes ache
 I stare at the younger man
 I wait patiently for the pain to pass
 A few minutes and this sheer torture will fade
 I have become a master at recovery
 But still, when I remember,
 Really remember
 My body is catapulted back to the true agony of losing you,
 and
 My soul shudders at the reality that you are gone*

By all appearances I have moved on. My children with Peter are now both in high school. They are academically successful, social, emotionally stable, active, happy

members in the community. I have had subsequent relationships and another child. I have a great job, a great boss, live in a loving community, and have a great social base. I am the picture of survival. No, I am a survivor. But like all survivors, I carry sadness. Sadness that I have recovered from. Sadness that is carefully, skillfully managed and maintained in a pocket of my heart. I have gone to countless hours of group and individual counseling to work through and heal that sadness. That sadness does not darken my days or my nights. That sadness does not cloud my positive, happy parenting. That sadness does not dim my gratitude for all the wonderful things that this life has blessed me with. It does not shadow my “glass half full” attitude.

But the sadness is there. Every once in a while it overcomes me for a few moments and drops me to my knees. When that happens, I wait for the paralysis of sheer grief to pass, and I stay on my knees for an extra moment or two. I stay there on my knees, and I say a prayer of thanks. I thank God for the gift of love that I shared with an amazing man—a love that was so deep, so unconditional, so eternal. I praise God for the children that Peter gave me, children who are the living embodiment of his physical traits and his personality—happy reminders of my Peter.

When I am done praying, I get up and I carry on. I carry on like so many other people that have lost someone so dear to them. Like so many other people that are forced to soldier on, to parent alone in the midst of crushing heartbreak. People who have fought back grief to be the best parent they could be for the young children that their loved one never intended to leave behind. People who believe that the best way to honor their loved one that has passed is to be the best they can be for the rest of their human days. Those people are Grief Warriors, and they understand me.

My compassion and my love go out to everyone struggling for survival in the midst of grief.

By MaryRose McNamee, Wife of Steven J. McNamee (1993-IL)

I Finally Realized What “Never Coming Back” Meant

Our daughter, Anne, was 8, and our son, Steven, was 5 when the accident happened. Steve tucked them into bed one night, then headed off to the Chicago Fire Academy early the next morning before they woke up. A little later that day I received the call that changed our lives forever. There was a training accident, and Steve had been

rushed to Northwestern Hospital. I arrived at the hospital to the news that he has sustained massive head trauma as a result of a fall. The details of the fall were less important to me than the condition of my husband, my rock, my life.



Steven McNamee



Family, friends, and CFD members gathered to keep vigil, hoping against hope that Steve would/could come back to us. It was not to be. After 36 hours of watching, waiting and praying for a miracle, I ultimately made the painful decision to remove Steve from life support. A few minutes after he was disconnected from the machines his body came to rest, and his spirit left him. It all seemed like a bad dream. The fog of denial was settling in. However, I had two children that needed to be tended to. How does one begin a dialogue about losing a father who was literally here one moment and gone the next?

Anne had been brought to the hospital to be with us. Steven, I felt, was too young to comprehend what was going on. He remained back at my mother's house. While Anne chose not to actually see her dad, she was witness to a series of events that culminated in his passing. I remember holding her close to me and doing my best to explain that Daddy had died. Her hero, her #1 fan, was gone. She seemed to understand.

We arrived back home that evening. Friends and family started arriving. Everyone was trying to make sense of a situation that was beyond senseless. Finally my son came home. He had that big smile he was known for on his face. He asked me why he had to spend the night at Grandma's and why he hadn't gone to school that day. I took him to a quiet room to try to explain. I was about to rock his world and remove that charismatic smile for a long, long time. I needed him to realize that his daddy was gone. He wasn't dancing with the angels or playing on a cloud. His daddy had died and was never coming back to us.

The next few days, weeks, months were a blur for all three of us. Eventually we began to try to settle into a new routine. We had no other choice. The following school year my children transferred to a different school. There were tears and fear of yet another change. But, luckily, things settled down. The three of us spoke about Steve often. There was sadness, but there was also joy and laughter at all the wonderful stories of happier times together. I felt it

was important to keep this dialogue flowing. It was my way of making sure that both of my children had wonderful memories of their dad.

About four years after we lost Steve, another Chicago firefighter died in the line of duty. Since I would be attending the services, I explained to my children why I would be busy and away a bit more from home those next few days. This immediately led to all of us reminiscing about those dark days we shared. At one point Steven looked at me from across the dinner table and said, "Mom, do you remember when I started first grade at the new school and I cried all the time?" I told him I did. "Do you know why I was crying?" he asked. I told him I remembered him telling me he was



Mary Rose, Steven, and Anne McNamee

afraid of yet another change in his life. "Yes," he said, "there was that." But, he explained, that was also when he finally realized what "never coming back" meant, and it made him sad. His words cut me to the bone. I asked him why he didn't tell me then. He said that he knew how sad I was and he didn't want to hurt me any further. I told him he should never be afraid to tell me if he was upset about anything. But the damage was already done. My brave little six-year-old had carried on with his new found knowledge

alone. As a parent, I was devastated and angry at myself for not realizing how complicated this issue must have been for both of my children.

Since that time, I have tried to use this episode as a teachable moment for other parents who may have to experience such loss with their own young children. "Keep talking," I tell them. "Keep the conversation going. Don't for one minute assume that our children are comprehending what we, as adults, are struggling to understand ourselves." As anyone who has lived through a traumatic event such as this knows, there is never truly an end to processing the loss. As our children grow and mature, we need to continue to have a frank and honest ongoing dialogue. I believe it is only in this way that we can foster a healing process, in the hope of coming to a place where we can be both physically and emotionally healthy.

Remembering Fallen Fire Heroes: Fred Garber (1990-PA)

Submitted by his parents, Jay and Lois Garber

When Fred was killed in the line of duty on July 10, 1990, he left three children, who were not quite 8, 5, and 3 years old, and also a 2-month-old baby. The two youngest children have worked through their grief in unique ways. The youngest wrote the words and music to a song about his daddy “who never came home, but daddy went home” (to Heaven), which was published in issue #63 of *The Journey*.

Crystal, who was not quite three years old when her daddy died, had an interest in dance from a young age. She graduated with a dance major from Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 2014. Her ambition is to develop and perform in works which move not only the body, but also the soul.

In 2016, she established FRED/Dance Co. In collaboration with other performers, they choreographed a piece entitled “In Weeping.” In describing the performance, she writes,

“I seek a space in which artists can find healing through the movement and sharing of that which is deeply personal. ‘In Weeping’ is an image of personal encounters with grief—sometimes in isolation, sometimes shared, but always felt. We have a common thread of loss, and we have allowed our sorrows to be carried by the whole.”

In September 2016, she chose to do this performance on the lawn of the house where she grew up with her dad, on their farm in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We were touched by the movements that showed how individuals wrestle with their grief in isolation and in shared encounters.

We applaud our granddaughter in using dance as another avenue to show the struggles grieving persons feel.

To learn more about Peter Brennan, Steve McNamee, and Fred Garber, search the online Roll of Honor at <https://www.firehero.org/fallen-firefighters>.



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Programs Staff Update

Happy spring , everyone! Spring is the beginning of the first stages of something new! Let's say goodbye to the winter blues and hello to new beginnings.

As many of you know, our beloved longtime program director, Linda Hurley, retired at the end of 2016. This was not an easy transition for us at the NFFF or for the survivor community she faithfully served for so many years. And we know it wasn't an easy decision for Linda! She certainly was dedicated to her work with the Foundation, and she was touched so deeply with the friendships she made over the years. Be assured that Linda's big heart and love for all survivors will never change; she is still finding ways to be involved behind the scenes. We want to express our gratitude to Linda for being an inspiration to us all and to wish her well in her much deserved retirement. We are happy to report that she is busy and thrilled to be able to devote more time to her role as "Grammy" to her two beautiful granddaughters.

You might be wondering, what happens now? We know that change can be hard. We are excited about offering a full year of survivor events for all ages, and we hope to see you in the year ahead. Under Linda's leadership, we launched and developed some beautiful programs, and we know it's up to us, the Survivors Program team, to nurture and grow these programs. Linda's guidance and advice over the years has helped each of us to grow professionally, and we are confident that we can do a great job. We also want to hear

from you, the survivor community, about what you would like to see going forward. What programs and experiences have touched your heart the most? What new ideas do you have? How do you want to be involved in bringing those dreams to reality?

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We are here for you, and we want to hear from you. We look forward to seeing you this year!

