

# The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

NOVEMBER 2005 ISSUE 11

**S**iblings are sometimes referred to as “the forgotten mourners.” They are often the ones who step forward to support the parents, spouse, and children of the person who has died. They may help with the many details that must be handled after a death. But each sibling also carries his or her own deep loss—the loss of a shared history, a lifelong companion, support and assistance in

dealing with major life events or aging parents. And because they are not always recognized as having suffered a significant loss, siblings may feel very alone.

When we asked survivors to write in about losing their brother or sister, we received more submissions than for any other issue of *The Journey* so far. Here are their stories.

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## Ryan Stewart

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*brother of Thomas G. Stewart, III (2002-NJ)*

I was 27 years old, living and working in San Diego on July 4, 2002, when I got a call I never expected. It was my father, telling me that my older brother, Tommy, was killed in the line of duty during the night in the town where he and I grew up. Tommy, a career firefighter in Gloucester City, NJ, was killed with two other firefighters while trying to rescue three young girls. Earlier that same night, he had proposed to his girlfriend from atop his fire truck's ladder just before our town's Independence Day fireworks display.

Without hesitation, I boarded a plane and came back to New Jersey. Deep down inside, I knew I wouldn't call San Diego my home for much longer. Within weeks, I dissolved my lease, terminated my contract, and moved back home to NJ. I couldn't bear the thought of being so far from my parents and my brother's new fiancée, who were devastated with grief, or my brother's 18-month-old son who was now without a father.

So here I am, more than three years later, asking myself, “What have I learned?” One thing I've learned for sure: No one person deals with the death of someone the same as another person. Anyone who says, “I know how you

feel,” despite their best intentions, has never walked a mile in your shoes, or you in theirs, with regard to loss. The pain of a loss is a very personal experience. What I have to say is only my experience. It is not intended to tell others what to do, think, or feel.

I've learned that a traumatic death will try your friendships and family bonds. I've become friends with people I least expected, and his death turned other relationships to stone. Death seems to be a true acid test of many relationships.

I've learned my sense of loss will never fade, because I truly loved my brother. Sometimes it seems to grow deeper; other times it seems to retreat. Some days I cope better than others, but I always manage to cope. I know my brother would not have wanted me to just surrender to the pain.

If you lose a sibling, especially if you were one of two, you'll probably try to carry the world on your shoulders for many people by

gritting your teeth and bearing it because “they would have done it for you.” But remember, they wouldn't want you to lose your mind. Don't be too proud to cry, call a friend to talk about it, pump some iron...





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## Ryan Stewart (cont.)

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Different days will bring different experiences of grief. I went through a phase where I drank more, another where I worked more, and still another where I withdrew from many of the people I'd grown close to through the years. Find what you need to do to constructively get through each type of grief. If you don't have that special someone to talk to about things, take a look around - even macho guys - there's someone who'd probably be glad to be there for you.

If you lose a sibling and they had children, one of the hardest things may be to grapple with the thought of their children without a parent. I know I wanted to replace my brother at first, but I came to realize that I could never replace Tommy. All I can do is be there for

his son to help and guide him and keep Tommy's memory alive in a healthy way.

You may be left to manage your sibling's dreams, whether a side business or a hobby. I learned that if I didn't share in Tommy's dreams in life, it was best to put his dreams to rest with him. I couldn't live out his dreams for him. They were his dreams; he would only want me to live out my own dreams.

I hope each of you can find the peace I have with the loss of my brother. God bless those who have given their lives striving to save others and the men and women who continue to protect us each and everyday throughout the world.

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## Debi (Clark) Nett

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*sister of James E. Clark, III (1999-OK)*

In our family, it was just my brother and me. Growing up, our father was in the military, so we traveled a lot. Sometimes my brother and I were all the other had. We grew apart a little when he was a teenager, because no guy wants his little sister tagging along. We became close again as adults, and I was in the delivery room when my niece was born and stayed with my niece and sister-in-law when they first came home from the hospital.

When I was 25 years old I was in the hospital for three weeks and they thought I had leukemia. My brother was there for me. They were fixing to send me to Houston for chemo and a bone marrow transplant, and he was making plans just as fast as the physicians were to go with me and be my donor. It wasn't leukemia, but another rare disease, and he was always checking up on me while I went through extensive treatment for over a year.



I think siblings are often forgotten, to a point, when these types of tragedies happen. Siblings need attention, too. That doesn't sound quite right to me. It sounds like I felt abandoned, and I really was not. There are just things that siblings go through that nobody else knows they have to go through. My husband is my rock, but it is just not the same as running to your big brother.

After my brother died, I felt that I had to be strong for my sister-in-law and niece and, most of all, my parents. I had little time to worry about anything else. There were so

many things that had to be done that it seemed all a blur. After all the services were over, I had to deal with the aftermath of the awards, dedications and law suits that followed.



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## Debi (Clark) Nett (cont.)

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When my father had a heart attack and had to go through some surgeries, I realized that I am now IT. I am the sole sibling to take care of my parents when the time comes. You realize that there is nobody else to fall back on for help like you have done through the years. He isn't there for me to ask questions, advice or help from

anymore. I still think, with certain things, "I wish Jim were here. He would know what to do or could help." I am sure other siblings have the same worries about suddenly becoming the 'only child' when you have always had backup your whole life. You suddenly feel very alone. I miss my brother every day.

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## Roger Nadeau

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*brother of Gerald Nadeau (2002-MA)*

I am a retired fire chief from New Bedford, Massachusetts. My brother, District Chief Gerald Nadeau, died in the line of duty on October 24, 2002. Gerry loved the fire service. He was an instructor for the Massachusetts Fire Academy, was on the state Hazmat Team, and had a bachelor's degree in Fire Science.

Prior to his death, Gerry went to a large apartment house fire and told me how hard it was to contain this fire. Several men, including Gerry, felt poorly after the fire.

About a week later, he responded with the state team to a chemical spill. Several days later, he had trouble breathing. Gerry was placed in the hospital. His condition worsened, and he was transported to Rhode Island Hospital's lung ward.

He called me and said that he couldn't breathe any longer and was going to be put on a breathing machine. I said, "I love you, Gerry." His reply to me was, "I love you too, Chief." And he hung up the phone. I turned to my wife, Nancy, and said I didn't like what Gerry said to me. It sounded like a goodbye. It was, as he never spoke to me again. Two days

later, he died, with his wife and children by his side. We were fortunate we also were there. Boy was it hard to let him go.

We stay involved with his wife, Diane, and their three children, and because of it we have grown closer. We went to two graduations, and we have lunch together often. We give them as much support as we can. Survivors need support from family members and friends to show that somebody does care after the funeral.

Hopefully this fall a fire station will be named after Gerry so his name will be remembered.

I have become involved with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation so I can help chiefs know their responsibilities and the benefits to which the family is entitled. I also encourage survivors to take advantage of the help available for those left behind.



I would be very happy to help any brother survivors of a fallen firefighter through this tough time. Remember: it is OK to cry.

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## Marianne Halderman

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*sister of David Halderman (9/11/01-FDNY)*

One year after 9/11, I felt as if the bottom had dropped out of my life. I was angry all the time. I would cry for no reason. I hated my job, I hated my marriage, and I hated myself. It was hard for me to get up in the morning. I was tired and anxious all at once. We were constantly going some place or doing something, always in the limelight. I had lost my father, a retired FDNY firefighter, a month

before 9/11. We never had any time to stop and grieve.

I had heard that they opened a counseling unit through the fire department. I felt funny calling them, thinking they probably would tell me that it was too late, or why now? But they never did. They made me feel comfortable from the start. Apparently a lot of people were calling.



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## Marianne Halderman (cont.)

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For so long I felt isolated and alone, and now someone was telling me that what I was feeling was totally normal.

I met with a counselor named Mary. I told her the story of my brother, all the while feeling like I knew her. She looked so familiar. It turned out that her brother was in the same fire house as my brother! (He wasn't working on 9/11.) I knew then that Mary and I were destined to meet. She became a fast friend and confidante, part of my family. I would never have come as far as I have without her help. She tells me that I did all the work, but she gave me all the tools.

In counseling, I learned that what I was feeling was not so unusual, and I wasn't alone. There were a lot of people struggling with the same things that I was. I have become a calmer person. I will never get over the loss of my brother, but I have learned to live with it. There are still



some days that I am sad, but I work through them. My life has changed tremendously, and I owe it all to counseling. My advice to anyone who is struggling with a loss or trauma: make the call. There are people out there who will help you.

Six months into counseling, I joined a support group for siblings at the counseling unit. We told our stories and found that talking about our loss was a great way to help us heal. We learned about the stages of grief and that there are no set rules. I have made great friends, and we share a common bond:

the loss of a brother.

Life is short. I no longer take it for granted. The last four years have been very difficult for all of us, but with the grace of God, prayer, and the great people that I have met, I am able to look to the future with hope.

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## Nancy Nee

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*sister of George Cain (9/11/01-FDNY)*

As we watched the horror of the day unfold on TV, I didn't fear for my brother's safety, because I thought he was on his way home from work. As the South Tower collapsed, little did I realize that Georgie was gone forever.

Four years, many tears, many sleepless nights, much anger and resentment, have not made it any easier to grasp my loss. There are still days when I really expect to hear from him. There are many times I look at his pictures, and wonder, "How did we become part of this nightmare?" How is it that this horrific and historic event happened to us? Four years and there is no answer...

As the oldest of four children, I never expected that my baby brother would leave this world before me. The cold reality is that this did happen to us. I am here, and he is

not. So we carry on, because we have to, not necessarily because we want to. People say: "He would want you to be happy. He would want you to move on." Well intended, I know, but moving on without the brother that I adored is very painful.

And yet we have. We have "celebrated" holidays, births, weddings, birthdays, and much more, all with heavy





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## Nancy Nee (cont.)

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hearts and sadness in our smiles. I try to hear George's huge laugh!! It was contagious, even if you didn't know what he was laughing about.

We have taken up skiing, a passion of his. Even my mother got on skis for the first time a few years back. We had a street renaming ceremony for him. My brother and my mom run a golf outing in May, the month of his birth.

My sister helped create a memorial foundation at a therapeutic riding school, which benefits children with disabilities. I volunteer, helping a mother who lost her son in Iraq, sending packages to soldiers still fighting for our freedom overseas. We all do something to honor George. It's the only thing we can do. That and make sure, to the best of our abilities, that George C. Cain is not forgotten!!

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## Patricia Mulligan

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*sister of Dennis Mulligan (9/11/01-FDNY)*

Dennis and I were 6½ years apart in age, yet we were like twins. We looked alike. We had similar personalities and demeanors. There were times when, at family gatherings, we would actually complete each other's sentences or thoughts. And then we would laugh.

Dennis was killed evacuating the lobby of the North Tower of the World Trade Center. I know that most people

don't believe in one's ability to feel the death of someone close to you, but at 10:30 a.m. on 9/11, I was sitting in my office with a client when I felt something pass through me. It startled me, and I leapt up, struggling to find a plausible explanation to my client for my seemingly erratic behavior. As we know now, the North Tower collapsed at 10:29 a.m. I do not doubt that it was the extinguishing of my brother's life that I felt.

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## Sibling Love

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*A bond formed at birth and forged a lifetime.*

*The forgotten cornerstone.*

*The unbreakable link.*

*Unconditional love.*

*And then...the searing of the soul.*

*The unimaginable. Immeasurable loss.*

*We cast about, untethered.*

*Searching for life. Our life.*

*Because we can no longer recognize it.*

*And so the struggle to rebuild the soul begins.*

*Dwarfed by the memory of lost love.*

*Adjusting to a loss greater than you.*

*You toil in the shadows, inspired by the love that sustained you in life.*

*And now in death, a hand is extended downward*

*To pull you up.*

*The unbreakable link.*

~Patricia Mulligan~



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## NEW BOOKS IN THE LENDING LIBRARY

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### **Helping Children Cope with the Death of a Parent: A Guide for the First Year**

*By Paddy Greenwall Lewis and Jessica G. Lippman*

### **A Music I No Longer Heard: The Early Death of a Parent**

*By Leslie Simon and Jan Johnson Drantell*

### **The Orphaned Adult: Understanding and Coping with Grief and Change After the Death of Our Parents**

*By Alexander Levy*

### **Surviving the Death of a Sibling: Living Through Grief When an Adult Brother or Sister Dies**

*By T.J. Wray*

### **When Parents Die: A Guide for Adults**

*By Edward Myers*

The Foundation maintains a library of materials dealing with grief and loss, which survivors can borrow free of charge. For a complete listing of titles in the library, visit the Family Programs section of our Web site, or contact the Foundation for a list.

### **We want to hear from you about... the life you never imagined you would have (and never would have chosen!)**



No one would choose loss, much less the sudden, traumatic death of a loved one. So it is remarkable that many people go on to find positive growth and happy lives after suffering such a tragedy. Often, survivors are faced with challenges that cause them to grow and do what they would not otherwise have done. They find strength and resilience they never knew they had. One survivor describes it as "living life to its fullest, even when that life is not what we wanted it to be." Is this something you have experienced in your own life? If so, please consider sharing your thoughts and experiences with other survivors in an upcoming issue of *The Journey*. Please send your stories, by December 31st, to:

***The Journey* • National Fallen Firefighters Foundation**

P.O. Drawer 498, Emmitsburg, MD 21727

(301) 447-1365

firehero@firehero.org