

The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

JANUARY 2007 ISSUE 17

A “Adult Children.” It sounds like a contradiction. But when you lose a parent, no matter how grown up you may be, you experience the loss both as an adult and as a child. Even people in middle age, who may have children of their own, describe feeling orphaned after the death of a parent. Parents are the foundation, there before we are even aware of them. When they are gone, it can be profoundly sad, disorienting, frightening, and lonely.

Statistically, losing a parent is a common experience. It is viewed as the natural order—parents eventually die, and their children survive them. Because of this, adult sons and daughters often are not recognized as having suffered a significant loss. They may have less support from others and may take on the role of caring for the surviving parent or other family members. In this issue, “adult children” share their stories.

A Teenager's Grief - By Jennifer Cormican

Daughter of Bruce Cormican (1995-WI) - Jennifer was 17 when her dad died.

The hardest thing for me was to learn that I didn't know everything. That's a big blow to your ego at the age of 17 and starting your senior year of high school! I had started to develop a sense of who I thought I was, where I wanted to go in life – and then nothing. I had no idea where to go, what to do, who to talk to, who was there to help me versus who was there to take advantage of me.

Due to the public nature of my dad's death, the students at school looked at me differently. Teachers treated me differently, and other students got mad at me because the teachers treated me differently. At first, it was okay; I needed people to show me the sympathy. After a while, I was searching for one place that I could be where I was considered “normal.”

Communication is SO important; it was the one thing that my family had not done justice to, and I believe it caused a lot of the issues that we had.

It alienated me from the grieving process. I wish I had had more people that I could have felt safe talking to. I

thought that my issues were minimal compared to what my mom was going through, so I never “bothered” her with my thoughts, fears, or my questions. I was never reassured that it was safe to ask questions.

My saving grace was one of my dad's friends. He let me complain, cry, and ask questions without being judged or asking why I wanted to know the answer. Thankfully, it was also okay that the topic of my dad never came up. My head got a chance to rest. Almost all others didn't want me to talk about my dad or to appear sad because it was a reminder of something so harsh.

People don't understand that you don't “get over it” after a week, a month, a year, etc. Everyone grieves at his or her own pace. For me, it was six years. I just needed to be angry – with EVERYONE and for ANYTHING. It was the only outlet that I found; it was my form of communicating and asking for help.

Professional counselors did not work for me; I wasn't open to getting help from them. I lost sight of my dreams, determination, goals,



continued inside

A Teenager's Grief - *continued*

and ambitions and started just going through the motions of the day.

In my late college years, I started to regain who I was. I didn't make the best choices in the six years after my dad died...I never got into drugs or alcohol, but I forgot how to think for myself and make decisions that were in my best interest versus doing something because others said I should.

I gave my mom a lot of problems when she started dating. I felt like it was thrown in my face and no one wanted my opinion. It wasn't that I didn't want my mom to date. I wanted her to talk to me and let me know that these things were going to happen. The worst feeling in the world was to think that my dad was going to be "replaced" and that she would forget about him.

My mom has become my best friend and someone that I know is going to be there, no matter what. I didn't need

all the answers or to be perfect. Through all of my tantrums (at the age of 22!) my mom still loved me. She never faltered.

It wasn't until after my dad died that we talked about serious issues. It was then that I learned about wills, organ donation, burial wishes, hospital orders, and life insurance. Until "it" happens to you, those things are only words. As a child, they are not words that normally come up in conversation. Even at 17, I wondered who would take care of me if something happened to my mom; she was the only parent that I had left.

I had to make the conscious decision to stop being angry and move forward. If anything can come from my experience, it is that no other teenager has to spend that many years learning new things the hard way. There are many things that I feel I missed out on because of the way I dealt with my dad's death. Better communication has made my life a million times better.

My Daddy - By Holly Hilterbrand

Daughter of Gary Jolley (2005-KY) - Holly was 31 when her dad died.

My father was such a hero, not only to me but also to my children and my brother. He responded to a fire call on June 28, 2005, when lightning struck a home. On the way back to the fire department, he passed away of an apparent heart attack.

It is hard to go on with my life knowing that my Daddy is no longer here with me. It is especially hard around the holidays and his birthday. But I stumble through it all because he takes care of me still to this day. It is a big adjustment to get used to, and I don't think I ever will. I remember the things he has done for me and my children and for others as well. It is such an honor to be the daughter of Gary W. Jolley. He is greatly missed by friends and loved ones.

Growing up, there was no one like my Daddy. We had good times and bad, but mostly good. He got to see me grow up, and he was there for me when I got married. After I got married, I didn't go visit with him like I probably should have, but Dad and I understood each

other and we always knew how the other one felt. We laughed together and cried together. He was my friend and my father and my hero. And now I know he was not only a hero to me and my family, but to many others as well. When something like this happens, it makes you open your eyes and realize what everyone around you truly means in your life.

We went to the Memorial Service in Emmitsburg, and it was wonderful. I would suggest to anyone who may have the chance to attend the memorial service in the future to attend. We found some comfort there but still there is nothing that will ever take Daddy's place in my heart.

I love you, Daddy. You are always in my heart and my mind, every minute of every hour of every day. Some days I just don't think I am going to be able to make it, and then I see you looking down at me from heaven telling me that it is ok, that you are still with me and always will be.

The Child of a Firefighter - By Laurie Kornfuehrer

Daughter of Gary Tilton (2004-TX) - Laurie was 36 when her dad died.

What was it like being the child of a firefighter?

- It was being 5 when the first tone sounded
- It was playing in bunker gear and falling down in his boots
- It was learning to roll hose after pumper race practices
- It was a red Motorola alarm that rang through the house followed by the rings of the telephone
- It was the pick-up truck backed into the drive
- It was the red fire department jumpsuit hanging on the back of the door with pockets filled; ready to go
- It was opening the front door and standing clear as he ran out to answer the call
- It was Thursday night meetings and weekend trainings
- It was helping keep training records year after year
- It was fire department functions and pumper rides
- It was watching 4th of July fireworks from the grass fire truck
- It was "Fill the Boot" and MDA Labor Day telethons
- It was fajita dinner fundraisers and VFW Christmas parties
- It was being a live "victim" for vehicle extrication training
- It was being a junior fireman and establishing an Explorer Post
- It was missed meals and delayed family celebrations
- It was being proud that his passion was his occupation
- It was pinning his bugles when he realized his dream of becoming Chief
- It was being 36 when he suddenly toned out

What is it like being the child of a fallen firefighter?

- It's a journey unexpected; never chosen nor desired
- It's an emergency room filled with firefighters
- It's flags at half-staff and messages on marquees
- It's condolences from officials and media coverage
- It's a funeral and farewell with protocols
- It's sold out flower shops and a house full of food
- It's honor guards, color guards and empty bunker gear
- It's a parking lot full of fire trucks and ambulances from across the area and state
- It's 77 honorary pallbearers who called him "Big Chief"
- It's bagpipes and a processional of 600 firefighters
- It's a flag-draped casket atop an engine draped in black
- It's a dad and his little boy on the side of the road saluting as the procession drives by
- It's firefighters and spouses walking a mile behind the casket-topped engine as the lone bagpiper plays
- It's a folded flag and a helmet
- It's the ringing of the bell and the final tone out
- It's waiting; expecting him to walk through the door from a call or training like so many times before
- It's being honored guests and remembrances
- It's weeping when you see a fire engine or hear the distant sirens
- It's going through a fire drill at work and crying before it's over
- It's memorial services and posthumous honors
- It's folded Texas and United States flags that have been flown over the capitols in Austin and D.C.
- It's firefighter escorts and the National Memorial Weekend
- It's becoming a member of the family of fallen firefighter survivors within the family of the fire service
- It's longing for the smell of well-used bunker gear
- It's not being able to pick up the phone for his advice with an approaching hurricane
- It's volunteering and giving back to honor his memory and continue his legacy
- It's missing a firefighter who was my 10 foot tall and bulletproof hero



You can read more about these firefighters in the Fallen Heroes section at www.firehero.org

For further reading on the loss of a parent in adulthood, these titles are available through the Foundation's Lending Library:

Death of a Parent: Transition to a New Adult Identity

by Debra Umberson

How to Survive the Loss of a Parent: A Guide for Adults by Lois

F. Akner, C.S.W.

The Orphaned Adult: Understanding and Coping with Grief and Change after the Death of Our Parents

by Alexander Levy

When Parents Die by Edward Myers

Mark Your Calendars

Contact us for more information about these upcoming events:

March 26-30, 2007

2nd Annual Survivor Conference,
Washington, DC

July 30-August 7, 2007

Survivor Cruise on the Carnival
Miracle, New York, San Juan, St.
Thomas, Tortola...

PUBLIC SAFETY OFFICERS' BENEFITS PROGRAM

Did You Know...

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Program provides benefits including death, education assistance, and disability to those eligible for the program. The PSOB Office at the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice is responsible for implementing the PSOB Program. Under the PSOB Act, benefits are available to the survivors of public safety officers found to have died as the direct and proximate result of a personal injury, as well as certain eligible heart attacks and strokes, sustained in the line of duty. As defined by Congress, a public safety officer is an individual serving a public agency in an official capacity, with or without compensation, as a law enforcement officer, firefighter, or member of a rescue squad or ambulance crew. The

PSOB benefit for eligible deaths and disabilities occurring in FY 2007 is \$295,194. In addition to reviewing and processing cases, the PSOB Office works with national public safety groups, educating agencies regarding the PSOB initiative and offering support to families and colleagues of America's fallen officers.



BJA Bureau of
Justice Assistance

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program

Toll-free
1-888-744-6513

PSOB Online
<https://www.psob.gov>

We want to hear from you...



When you lose a spouse, even the word used to describe your relationship with your loved one changes. You are no longer called a wife or a husband; now you're a widow or a widower. (And many people have strong feelings about those words!) Losing a partner changes so many aspects of one's life and future. If you would be willing to share some thoughts about your experiences with widowhood, please send your story as a Word document, or in the body of an e-mail, to firehero@firehero.org. Or, if you don't do computers, send it to:

The Journey • National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

P.O. Drawer 498, Emmitsburg, MD 21727

(301) 447-1365

firehero@firehero.org

Remember: you have a story to tell, one that may help someone else who is struggling. Most of the survivors whose stories appear in *The Journey* have never written anything for publication before. Don't worry if you're not a "real writer." Just send us your thoughts in your own words, and we will work from there. And you don't have to write about the topic above!