

Did You Know?

On October 4, 2007, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) Director Domingo S. Herraiz testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee on issues related to BJA's Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Program, and the Hometown Heroes Survivors Benefits Act. Director Herraiz shared with the Committee his concern regarding the issues surrounding the Hometown Heroes claims, and underscored his dedication to the public safety community, noting "as the son of a firefighter and the nephew of a police officer, I am concerned and committed to do everything I can to make certain that the survivors of our fallen heroes receive the benefits they deserve."

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Program provides death, disability, and education

benefits to those eligible for the program. The PSOB benefit for eligible deaths occurring in FY 2008 is \$303,064. PSOB partners with key national public safety organizations, including the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, to provide information and support to survivors and surviving agencies of America's fallen officers.



"I think a hero is an ordinary individual who finds strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles."

-Christopher Reeve-

Editor's Note: You are all heroes.

We want to hear from you...



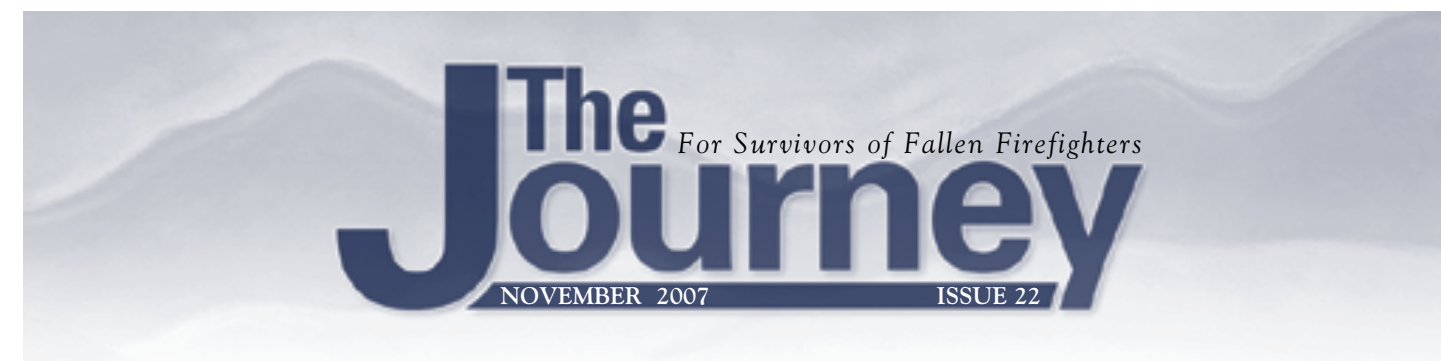
After someone we love dies, it can be hard to smile and laugh again. In the beginning, we may only feel the heavy weight of loss. But one sure sign that we are moving forward is when we begin to remember those times when our loved ones brought us such joy, and we can actually feel some of that joy again.

Share one of those stories with us, one that brings a smile to your face even now, one that gives a sense of who your loved one was and how much joy and laughter he or she brought and still brings to your life.

Please send your story as a Word document, or in the body of an e-mail, to jwoodall@firehero.org. Or, if you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly written copy to:

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Labels are everywhere. Artist. Athlete. Republican. Methodist. Liberal. Husband. Veteran. Teacher. American. They help define parts of our lives, but generally fall short of giving the full picture of who we are. Death

and grief bring their own set of labels, words we may not want applied to us, used to describe a situation we wish we were not a part of. In this issue of *The Journey*, writers share their thoughts about some of the labels of loss.

What Does It Mean to be a Widow?

By Jo Ann Tilton, Wife of Gary Tilton (2004-TX)

Widow. Now there's a title I never expected to have attached to my name, at least not for many, many years. But, without warning, on a very normal day in October 2004, that dreaded title came my way. I awoke that morning as Mrs. Gary Tilton, the proud wife of the fire chief. Before that day ended, I had become the widow of the fire chief. In an instant, not only did my life change; my title changed. That can be hard to comprehend.

When I became Mrs. Gary Tilton, I was overjoyed with the change. I was thrilled to change the title of "Miss" to that of "Mrs." In fact, much planning went into that name change. It even included a celebration commonly called a wedding. It was a joyous occasion, and that title lasted for 37 very short years. Even though in our wedding vows we pledged to be true to one another until death should part us, I never thought that parting would come so quickly.

I loved being Mrs. Gary Tilton. I was the wife of the fire chief, the wife of the city councilman, the wife of the Rotary president, the wife of the clown making hospital visits, the wife of the State of Texas Firefighter of the Year, the wife of the Texas A&M Fire School instructor, the wife of the founder of the Katy Vehicular Rescue

School, etc., etc., etc. My husband was very involved in his community and especially the fire service across the state of Texas. Whatever he did and wherever he went, I was by his side supporting him.

Then one day, my world abruptly changed, without consulting me. I was not ready to give up the title I had so



willingly acquired 37 years previously. I had always thought that Gary and I would grow old together. It was not to be. Way too early in life, I found myself wondering, where do I fit now? I am no longer married. I think of singles as young, never married folks, so I didn't fit there. As much as I didn't want to admit it, the only

category that fit was "widow." I will never forget the first time I had to write the title "widow" after my name. It was painful then, and I somehow think it will always be painful. Each time I write that title, it serves as an affirmation that my husband is no longer here. What other station in life do you have a title change that reminds you and the world of your loss? I know that widows are to be honored and cared for, and I feel very honored and much respected. But it is a position of honor and respect that neither I, nor any widow I know, would chose.

continued inside

What Does It Mean to be a Widow?

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As a widow you must find a way to honor and keep the memories while looking to the future. You walk a tightrope everyday of trying to please the world around you while still keeping those memories alive. You find yourself in a balancing act of memories and trying to create a new life for yourself. At times that can be an overwhelming challenge. After all, you had not planned to start a new life. But, at some point, the reality of being a widow sinks in, and you realize that whether you like it or not, a new life has begun for you. How that new life plays out is up to you. You have to find a way to let go of the past enough that the past becomes a memory, allowing you to create new memories in your new role. Everyday we take one more step into our future and our new life. Some days those are very small steps, but they are steps. As widows, we are working on a new "normal." The old "normal" suddenly went away one day with our spouse. It is hard to create, but little by little, day by day, it does happen.

It has been three years since my title changed to widow. Everyday I ask God to get me through that day, and He never fails me. Little by little, my "normal" is changing. I have found ways to honor the memories while creating a new life for myself. In that new life, I am in charge of the widows' ministry at my church, serve on the Board of Adjustments for the City of Katy, am in charge of the vote tabulation for the city elections, serve on the board of Katy Christian Ministries, teach a Bible study at church, speak at Christian women's groups, and serve as president of the Gary Tilton Firefighting Training Fund (a non-profit organization providing training funds for Texas firefighters).

Oh, and in honor of my husband and our marriage, I now wear my wedding ring on the right hand. That way, I can still honor our marriage without the world being confused.

What does it mean to be a widow? It is the most honorable title that no one seeks.

I Am a Survivor

By Sharon Purdy, Wife of Lee A. Purdy (2000-OH)

My husband, Lee, died in the line of duty in January 2000. In the weeks that followed, I was mired in paperwork and all the legal things that go with putting the one you loved to rest.

About two months after Lee died, I was on the Internet and found the web site of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. I clicked on the Contact Us page and let loose with all my frustrations about hassles from insurance companies and PSOB and everything else that I could think of.

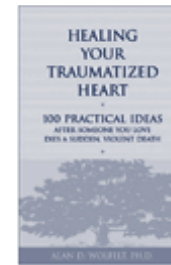
A few days later I received a call from Mary Ellis, the Managing Director of the Foundation at that time. During our conversation, she called me a "survivor." I told her I could not accept the term survivor, since to me a survivor was someone who lived through a terrible ordeal such as a plane crash or flood or some other act of nature. She quietly explained that I was a survivor and would learn to understand that term in time.

Now, after seven years, I do understand. I am a survivor. I have survived the loss of my husband and best friend. I have survived closing the business we owned. I have

survived dealing with the insurance companies and all the legalities that we deal with. I have survived terrible winters where no one was there to help shovel the snow, long summers where no one was there to help with the yard work. The nights when I walk into a dark house after being away for the day. Holidays when you are alone in a room full of people. Birthdays and anniversaries without the one you love there to help celebrate. And each day, I survive by just getting out of bed to face the new day. I'm still here. I'm still surviving. Today, I don't hesitate to contact the caring staff at the Foundation for direction on survivor issues. They are always there and ready to assist.

The pain of our loss doesn't go away; it just goes to a place where we can deal with it. I have learned to laugh again. I have learned to appreciate the sunrise again. I have learned to live again.

Lee is with me in my heart every day, but I now understand: I AM A SURVIVOR.



Book Review

Healing Your Traumatized Heart- 100 Practical Ideas When Someone You Love Dies a Sudden, Violent Death

-by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

By Katy Smith, Mother of Robert Purjue Henderson (2005-WY)

When the death of a loved one is sudden and/or violent, as is the case with most firefighter deaths, grief is complicated. The traumatic nature of the death and thoughts and feelings about it, affect all aspects of grief.

This book can be opened to any page and the suggestions read and applied, if they fit your unique situation. If not, you can try another idea. Some suggestions may be helpful immediately after the loss and others may help several months later.

You can request this or another book free of charge through the Foundation's Lending Library, by visiting www.firehero.org and going to the Family Programs section. If you do not have Internet access, you can request a listing of available books by calling Linda Hurley at (301) 447-7693. The requested materials will be mailed to you.

On a Lighter Note

By Sylvia Kratzke, Mother of Heather J. DePaolo-Johnny (2002-CA)

Photos from the 2007 Memorial Weekend are now available!

To view photos, go to the Memorial Weekend section of the Foundation's Web site. If you would like to purchase photos, contact Jenni McClelland at jmcclelland@firehero.org. Please include your name, e-mail address, and the name of your firefighter, and Jenni will send you a secure link to access photos and purchase prints.

One day when Heather was four or five, we were grocery shopping. She was sitting in the cart while I was looking over the dairy case. One particular brand of dairy products had "Elsie the Cow" as their brand logo. Heather must have been studying Elsie while I decided which eggs to buy, because she suddenly asked me, "Mamma, why do cows have bells?" I absentmindedly answered, "I don't know, honey. Why do cows have bells?"

"Because their horns don't work," she said, and broke into howls of laughter. I started to laugh and asked her where she heard that joke. She said she just made it up. That was my girl.

Save the Date

The annual Holiday Tree Lighting will be held on the campus of the National Fire Academy on **Thursday, December 13, at 5:00 p.m.** If you would like to, you can send in an ornament to be placed on the tree in honor of your loved one.

The 3rd annual Fire Service Survivors Conference will be held in Washington, DC, **April 1-5, 2008.** The next issue of *The Journey* will include more information about the Survivors Conference.

Please contact Linda Hurley at lhurley@firehero.org or (301) 447-7693 if you are interested in attending either of these events.