

The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

MAY 2010 ISSUE 36

*I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge
myth is more potent than history - dreams are more powerful than facts
hope always triumphs over experience - laughter is the cure for grief
love is stronger than death. ~Robert Fulghum*

A few issues ago, we asked readers to write about premonitions, dreams, visions, and visitations they have experienced during the grief journey. This topic clearly struck a chord with a lot of people.

Many people experience vivid dreams and visions of deceased loved ones. Regardless of your beliefs about what happens after death, you may have experienced a sense that your loved one is still present and looking out for you. For many people, this brings great comfort

and reassurance that their loved one is safe. Unless these experiences are frequent, upsetting, or intrusive, they can be considered a normal part of grief.

Some survivors notice, in retrospect, that the person who died seemed to have a sense that time was short, even if the death itself was very much unexpected. Some people see signs that their loved one was “wrapping up loose ends” in the days or weeks before the death.

By Rebecca Taylor

Wife of Harold Taylor (2006-IL)

I look forward to receiving each issue of The Journey. I relate to the stories and know I am not alone and I'm not going crazy.

In the January issue, Baylee Cox talked of her “Pennies from Heaven” jar. Someone gave me a jar and told me, “If you find a penny, pick it up and put it in this jar. Your angel in Heaven is thinking and watching over you!” I never thought I would write about or say, “I believe,” but here I am. I was always afraid to say it because I thought everyone would think I was crazy or just wishing Harold was here.

My first week alone in the house after Harold's passing, I was scared and not wanting to sleep. There was so much

going through my head, and all I would do is cry for him. Then it happened—arms came around me and scared me to death. Even in my fear, I knew it was Harold's comfort.



Harold & Becky Taylor

I began wondering, was it a dream, or was it real?

I had to believe it was real, because only Harold held me that way. Throughout most of our marriage, we worked different shifts, and if I was already asleep when he came in, he would gently put one arm under my shoulder/neck and the other around my waist. Could I really be feeling this wonderful

feeling one more time? I felt like I was going crazy. For many weeks after that night, I would go to bed, just lie there and want that feeling again. My heart pleaded,

continued inside

“Please comfort me! Come back!” It never happened again.

It came to the second spring without Harold, and I had to get the house and yard stuff ready for the season. Friends and family helped me the first season, but now I was on my own. After a long day, I was tired and ready to give up. “I can’t do this alone,” I thought. So I came in to lie down, upset at myself and asking, “Where are you? I need your help.” Something made me look up, and there it was - the glow of Harold’s face. He said, “You will be alright.”

A split second, and the image was gone.

I think of that every season with the different things I have to do. I thank God for Harold and the things he would have me learn. He taught me a lot. I just had to find that will and confidence to do it.

I am glad to say, I have come a long way. I will be alright. Is it Harold getting me through and watching over me? I believe so!

By Charlotte Birchmore

Wife of Clarence Birchmore (2002-VT)

Clarence died March 16, 2002, of a heart attack while responding to a fire call. We had been married for 41 years.

For me it’s been hawks. I’ve received many signs, but the hawks are the strongest ones. They appear when I most need them. I feel like the spirit of my husband sees me through their eyes, checking in, saying, “Hello, I’m with you.” I travel quite a bit for my job, and always I see the hawks. Someone said to me, “How is it that you see all these hawks when no one else does?” My heart is in tune with them, I think. Or Clarence’s heart is.

In the months after his death, I’d say to myself, “Show me a sign. I need to know you’re here.” I soon realized I was receiving signs, but I hadn’t been able to see them. My family erected a field stone with a plaque to Clarence in one of the back fields where he loved to hunt and work the land on the farm where we lived. I had begun to notice the occasional hawks on my drive from home and would send little messages to Clarence. “Hi, Honey. I’m ok, but I miss you so.” One day when I was feeling lonely, I walked to the back field where the stone is and decided suddenly to deviate from my path. As I came closer to the stone I looked down, and there was a large, beautiful hawk feather lying in front of me that I

would never have seen if I’d followed my usual path. I picked it up with such gratitude.

The best and most personal message came two years ago on our anniversary, February 11, always a tough time. As I neared home on my drive from work, feeling sad and



By Trent Campbell/Addison Independent

Charlotte Birchmore

fighting back the tears, I popped a CD by Josh Groban into the player to hear, “To Where You Are.” As I crested a rise in the road, once again, I said, “Honey, if you’re there, show me a sign.” With that, a huge hawk swept across my windshield as Josh Groban sang and I cried. I actually credit that song with saving my life.

In the first months after Clarence died, I heard that song

on the radio, and it sent me to my knees. It said all the things I’d been feeling. I immediately ordered a copy and listened to that song every day for months. It was my anthem and prayer combined.

Another coincidence (?) is the song, “The Tennessee Waltz.” It was the last song Clarence and I danced to, and I’ve heard it all over the world in the oddest places – a cafe in Holland, a hotel in China, ships at sea, and a host of other places. And, when the realization comes of that song playing in the background, I know for sure he’s with me, forever locked in my heart. It takes my breath away every time.

By Karen Munz

Mother of Brian Munz (2008-IL)

My son Brian lost his life fighting a house fire on July 22, 2008. Looking back in the weeks and days before his death, our family and Brian's friends could see signs that he may have felt his death was imminent.

A couple of days before his death, Brian changed his song on MySpace to "I Can Only Imagine." The winter before, Brian had told us a couple of things he wanted done if he ever died. One of them was to have this song at his funeral. We honored his request.

Two weeks before Brian's death, he called his brother, Greg, to tell him about a friend's major heart surgery. Before he hung up, Brian told Greg, "Love you." He had never verbally told him that before.

For a couple of years, I had talked about tilling up my big flower garden and starting over. It had been there for 10 years and was still pretty, but had gotten overgrown with weeds. One day in April 2008, Brian and a friend from the fire department tilled up the garden, and we started over with new plants. The week of Brian's funeral, the garden was in full bloom.

The thing that I hold in my heart happened three days

before the fire. Our fire department was taking family pictures that day, and I asked Brian if he wanted to have a picture taken. He said he did. He had to be there in the afternoon for a group picture; our appointment was in the morning.



Brian Munz

Brian asked our fire chief if the firemen would have pictures taken with their helmets and gear. The chief said he didn't think there would be time. I told Brian, "Our turn won't take long. Why don't you ask the photographer if you could have a picture taken with your gear?" After we had our pictures taken together, Brian asked. The photographer said, "Sure, Bring your ax over, too. That will be a great picture."

Brian got to see the proofs on the computer. He picked out several pictures to order for our family. Three days later, Brian was gone. He went down in the fire with his ax.

I think that day of the photographs was meant to be. It was Brian's way of showing me how proud he was to be a fireman and a way for me to cherish the memory forever. The picture in all the press coverage and in the fallen firefighter's book was that picture taken three days before his death.

By Sylvia Kratzke

Mother of Heather DePaolo-Johnny (2002-CA)

Babci's Dinner in Heaven

Heather's beloved Babci (Polish for Grandma) died one year less one day before she did. I am sure they spend much time together on the other side. As the 7th anniversary of Heather's death approached, I said a small prayer to her to please visit me in my dreams. I just wanted to see her beautiful smiling face. But when I saw her in my dream, I just had to hug her and hold on to her for a while, because it had been so long, and I just don't know when my own chair will be ready for dinner at Babci's table....

I walked down the staircase of the huge manse, not recognizing it, but knowing it as well as I knew the house on Ledger Street, where I grew up. The stairs curved from the second floor, and I floated more than walked down. Still my shoes made scratching sounds on the uncovered wood of the steps as I descended. I saw her as soon as the stairwell turned toward the opening of the dining room.

The light was streaming in through the floor to ceiling wall of open windows. Flimsy coverings were gently floating and undulating at the whimsy of the breeze,

continued on next page

and these were framed with dark silk drapes pulled back with thick tasseled cords. She was standing with her back to me, looking out. She looked long and lean in a short dress, loose, draping beautifully, a white wisteria floral gathered at the shoulders with a string of silver baubles. Rather unlike her, I thought. She is more the slinky jersey knit, show every curve, “if you’ve got it, flaunt it” kind of girl. Her hair was short and dyed white blond, and as she turned to face me, loose curls bobbed and bounced about her face. Her famous lipsticked smile lit the room, her eyes sparkled with delight, and as she opened her arms for an embrace she said with sweet sarcasm, “And you want a hug, too?”

“Yes I do,” I replied. “I have waited so long, and I miss you so.”

As we hugged and kissed and held each other close, I

looked around the dining room. It was an elegant space with high ceilings, heavy wood beams and wainscoting, with a stone fireplace at the far end. The highly polished mantle held our family photos and matching lamps with dangling crystals. The room was dotted with several round tables, and some spaces for yet to be placed tables. They were set with tea colored floral cloths, china, silver and crystal; very formal and beautiful, very Babci. There were round tablecloths on the floor where there were place settings and crystal glasses set and waiting. I understood that those places were spoken for but not yet ready, as the tables and chairs had not yet arrived.

I also understood I couldn’t stay. This was a gift, an answered prayer, a brief glimpse into what may be, a fleeting moment of bliss. I awoke with a smile.



Heather DePaolo-Johnny

By Tammy Baker

Cousin of Charles Edgar (2006-TX)

The Visit

About six weeks had passed. The wild jasmine was no longer in bloom; the petals had fallen from the old country roses that had woven themselves so tightly through the old fence in front of the house. The days had grown longer and warmer.

I still found that the days of the week passed by quickly; each weekday felt as though I was not a participant, just an observer. It almost seemed as though I only floated through those days, watching all that was happening around me, yet not truly conscious of my contribution. The weekends seemed to stretch to infinity; a

complete awareness of the absence, the ticking of a clock.

Suspended in yet another foggy week, I prepared for bed-pulling on a gown, brushing my teeth, lying down after the same quiet, long evening. On my right side, my knees

bent and pulled upward toward my chest, both arms bent in similar fashion as my knees, I slept.

The clock knew no time, the day gone, the morning yet to come. A sensation on my left arm, from the bottom of my gown’s sleeve to the crook of my elbow, then down my arm to the wrist, extracted me to partial consciousness. Lying very still as my mind cleared, my eyes



Charles Edgar

Baker *(continued)*

still closed, I thought, “A bug. A spider?” Not moving, just lying quietly in wonder, it happened once again. This time again it started at the bottom of my sleeve, ran down my arm to the elbow, making the curve, and continued to my wrist, a light continuous trail down my arm. My mind now very clear, opening my eyes I reasoned, “This is no bug, nor is it a spider, for a small creature would not make the same trail down my arm.”

In an instant, I became aware. I sat up to a pressure on the foot of my bed. There was nothing for my eyes, no words for my ears, yet I knew that he was there at the end of my bed. At that very same instant of awareness, it

came to me. Without audible words I was told, “You will be happy.” As quickly as it began, just in an instant it was over. I sat there, not moving. I was filled with a warm comfortable feeling. I was able to lie back on the bed and sleep the rest of the night.

In the years that have passed, I have wondered why I was not frightened, why I did not get excited, why I did not anticipate or wish it to happen again. I have never been able to figure that out for myself. My only answer is that the peace that I received from that visit was enough to last a lifetime.

By Bonnie Hall

Wife of Sidney Hall (2007-IN)

What I am going to share brings chills, and I am grateful you are allowing us to share these things. I know that people would not believe it and say I just imagined it, but I didn't.

My husband, fallen firefighter Sid Hall, starting about 18 months before he died, told me on three separate occasions, “If anything happens to me...” And then would tell me to take care of myself and how he meant for me to do that. Then, just 41 hours before his final fire call came in, was the evening of New Year's Day

2007. Usually on January 1 of every year we would go over memories of the past year and what we were looking forward to in the new year. Well, this time Sid wanted to urgently talk about how to direct, guide, and provide for our boys. One son was in his 20s, and the other was in high school. Again Sid made it clear to me that, “If ever anything happened to him,” to take care of myself. I don't know if he knew that his death was imminent or not, but something was telling him to talk to me about these details. What he told me helped me as I made decisions after his death.

Since Sid's death I have several times sensed his

presence. There was a certain way that he touched my right shoulder when he was near me in a room, or when we were out somewhere, that no one else did. I have felt

that touch several times and especially in the midst of difficulties and struggles.

But, the strongest time I felt his presence was when I was driving by myself through the mountains of Maryland on my way to the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend. I am from the Midwest, and we do not



Chris, Bonnie & Matt Hall

have mountains or deep curved roads. A few of the curves in the mountains of Maryland kind of took my breath away, and I was a bit shaky when I was driving. I stopped in a rest stop to get my nerves back. I just sat in my vehicle with my hand on the armrest. Then, as if he was sitting there, I felt Sid's hand on mine just like he would do when we would take trips together. No one else was in the vehicle, and no one would know how he held my hand when we went places, and so I was convinced it was him. That touch gave me the strength to continue on my trip, and when I arrived I knew he was walking with me at the Fallen Firefighters Memorial.

By Marty Cropper

Wife of Leroy Cropper (1995-MD)

As these occurrences were happening I thought nothing special about them, but after Leroy's death they took on a new meaning.

Leroy owned and operated a towing and auto repair service for about 10 years. In the early spring of 1995, he decided that it was time for him to retire, so he sold the business along with the wreckers and all his equipment. The building and property were to remain in our names, and they were leased at the beginning of April 1995, one month prior to his death.

Not really talking about death and dying in a serious way, but kidding, he told me that he surely hoped that he would die before me because, in his exact words, "You just have too much stuff for me to go through!" And he also said, "Don't call [funeral director A]. I don't want him touching me. Don't call [funeral director B]. He'll pick me up in a sweat suit. Call [funeral director C]." That's who we had for his funeral, and what a memorable service it was.

We spent many a day down on the beach at Assateague Island, requiring the vehicle to be in four-wheel drive, and one day he thought I should learn what to do "just in case you wanted to go down by yourself and I don't want to go." With him instructing me, I lowered the air in the

tires, put her in four-wheel drive, and drove all the way to the Virginia line and back off the beach.

Several weeks prior to his death, he spent long hours with his mother, brother, sisters, aunts, and several of his cousins, just talking of times past and recalling memories.

When I went to the emergency room to see Leroy, I kissed him and saw just one tear running down his cheek

from his left eye. I feel that he knew that things were not going well.

Do I think that Leroy had messages from God that He would soon call him home? Yes, I do, and that comforts me knowing that he is in Heaven with Jesus and the rest of his firemen buddies.



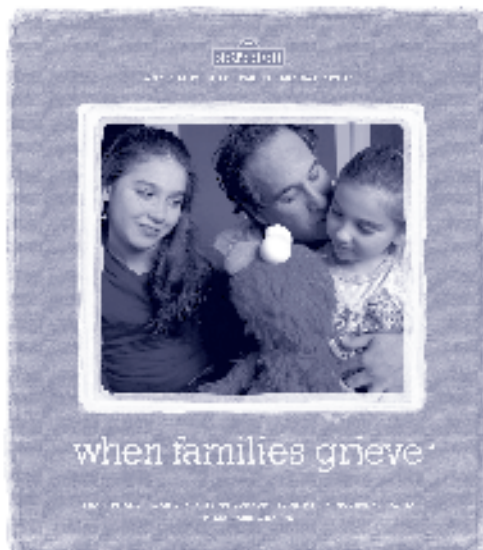
Marty Cropper & Grandson Ben

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New Resources for Children and Families Who are Grieving

Sesame Street's newest outreach initiative, *When Families Grieve*, featuring Elmo and the Sesame Street Muppets, provides tools and significant resources to families with young children who have experienced the death of a parent. These resources were designed with the guidance of content experts, and will help to:

- Reduce the levels of anxiety, sadness, and confusion that children may experience following the death of a parent



- Provide families with age-appropriate tools to support and comfort children, including ways to talk about death with a young child
- Reassure children that they are loved and safe, and that together with their families and friends, they can learn ways of being there for one another and move forward.

When Families Grieve launched on April 14th with a powerful

New Resources for Children *(continued)*

and heartwarming television special featuring Katie Couric, Elmo, and the courageous stories of families who have experienced the death of a parent. Immediately following the television special, free distribution of the groundbreaking multi-media When Families Grieve kits began to families and service providers across the country.

The bilingual (English and Spanish) kits include a DVD featuring the Sesame Street Muppets, a storybook for children, and a



magazine for parents and caregivers. These high-quality resources give families tools to support children while providing reassurance that together they can learn ways of being there for each other and move forward. All project materials and additional resources are available at sesamestreet.org/grief.

This wonderful new resource features the story of our own Athena, Holly, and Morgan Schwantes, the wife and daughters of fallen firefighter Russell Schwantes (2006-GA).

When Kids Go Back to School After the Death of a Loved One

We are interested in hearing about how children adjust as they return to school and normal activities after the death of a parent, sibling, or other close relative. Our primary purpose is to identify specific needs of families and children so that we can develop materials to help with this transition. All identifying information will be kept in confidence.

If you had school-age children, from kindergarten through college, at the time of your firefighter's death, we would like to hear from you. Please take some time to consider the following questions and send your feedback to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org or by mail to the Foundation's address.

1. What ages and grade levels were your children at the time of the line-of-duty death?
2. How long after the death did your children return to school?
3. How did your children feel about going back to school?
4. What kind of preparation was done before the children returned to school? Was there a plan in place in case a child needed extra support?
5. How did the death of your firefighter affect your children in terms of school? Did your children experience academic, social, emotional, or behavioral issues that interfered with their success in school?
6. Did your children receive community or school-based grief support services such as counseling or attending a grief support group? If so, please describe.
7. Were there things that were particularly helpful or harmful to your children's adjustment back to school and other activities?
8. What information was or would have been helpful to you in helping your children adjust after the death of your firefighter?
9. What suggestions do you have in terms of materials or programs that could help support grieving children?

Want to Read More?



Grief Dreams: How They Help Us Heal After the Death of a Loved One

by T.J. Wray & Ann Back Price



Hello from Heaven

by Bill Guggenheim & Judy Guggenheim

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Programs (PSOB)

New PSOB Call Center

On behalf of survivors of fallen public safety officers nationwide, the PSOB Office is extremely pleased to announce its newest resource designed with survivors in mind: a PSOB Call Center that is fully staffed Monday through Friday from the hours of 7:00 a.m. – 7:00 p.m. The Bureau of Justice Assistance and PSOB Office want survivors and surviving agencies experiencing a line-of-duty death or catastrophic disability to know that PSOB Cares – beginning with a live voice on the other end of the telephone line.

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.



BJA

Bureau of Justice Assistance
U.S. Department of Justice

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Programs

Toll-free: 1-888-744-6513

We want to hear from you about...

Sometimes it's the little things. Maybe you are "doing well" with your grief—back at work, handling your day-to-day responsibilities, able to get through the day without crying. But there are those little things that bring it all flooding back again. These "grief triggers" can catch you by surprise. Survivors sometimes say, "I'm doing fine as long as I don't go to (fill in the place), see (fill in the sight), or hear (fill in the song)." Many people remember the first time they see or do or hear that dreaded thing and realize that they can handle it without falling apart. It's a definite sign of healing.



Maybe you have had this experience.

If you'd like to share your thoughts on this topic or other aspects of your journey, please send a Word document or e-mail to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org by June 15. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

The Journey

PO Drawer 498

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