

# The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2011 ISSUE 40

*In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.*

~ Albert Einstein

**I**n grief, there are often sticking points, things we get caught in for a time and really have to wrestle with before we can move forward. Each person has his or her own sticking points, and they are often different even for people grieving the same death. It may be the circumstances of the death that trouble you most. It may be the last conversation you had—or the one you wish

you had—before your loved one died. It may be a certain experience or place you used to enjoy together that you now feel you cannot face alone. You may feel consumed with anger or guilt. Whatever it is for you, it may help to know that this is a normal part of the grieving process. It's important to work through those sticking points, difficult as that is, in order to move through it.

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**By Kathy Phillips**

*Wife of Robert "Bob" Phillips (2007-WI)*

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**M**y husband was a LODD in Wisconsin on October 26, 2007. At the time of his death Bob was making his retirement dreams come true by making his North Woods hunting cabin, which we had owned for several years, his "homestead." He loved the peace and quiet, loved to hunt and fish and loved the rural, small town and its fire department.

Two hundred miles to the south was our original "homestead" condo. Since my retirement would not happen for a few more years, I would stay there during the week to go to work, then travel to the cabin on weekends. Bob and I were 200 miles apart when notification of his death came.



*Bob & Kathy's cabin*

I cannot put into words my emotions making the first 200-mile trip that very next day. I can tell you that, for the next two years, I knew I had to make that 200-mile

trip frequently, at least to protect our investment if nothing else. I started by telling myself I could make it to an outdoor outlet mall which was about 75 miles away, and if I could not make it any further I could window shop and stretch my legs and then return home.

On a better day, the outlet mall would go by quickly, and my next point was a Super Walmart at about the 125-mile mark where I could do the same thing.

*continued on page 2*

**Kathy Phillips** *continued from page 1*

After two-and-one-half years, the property is still my grief trigger. It is very hard to enter and to leave it without falling apart. However, with the help of the PSOB, I have been able to take Bob's "to do list" that he left behind on yellow tablet paper, and continue to make Bob's wishes come true. Seeing the new roof and doors go on while I painted the outside of the cabin and garage, kept my mind focused and busy. I don't

know how long I will continue, but I am able to stay longer, stay positive and strong longer, year by year.

On a lighter note, I am sure many survivors will agree with this. We owned a Chevrolet Avalanche truck during a couple of years that we were making weekend trips to the cabin. It was a favorite of mine. You have no idea how many of these vehicles are on the road until this also is a grief trigger!!

**By Norene Chonka**

*Sister of Mitchel Spoth (1984-NY)*

**H**ow do you forgive one who was responsible for an arson fire that claimed the life of your younger brother? At age 19, juggling college and two part-time jobs, my brother still found the time to volunteer as a firefighter, along with our younger brother and father. On November 3, 1984, in the middle of the night, he responded to assist someone in need. Ironically, the gentleman who started the fire also went to school with my brother; they knew one another!

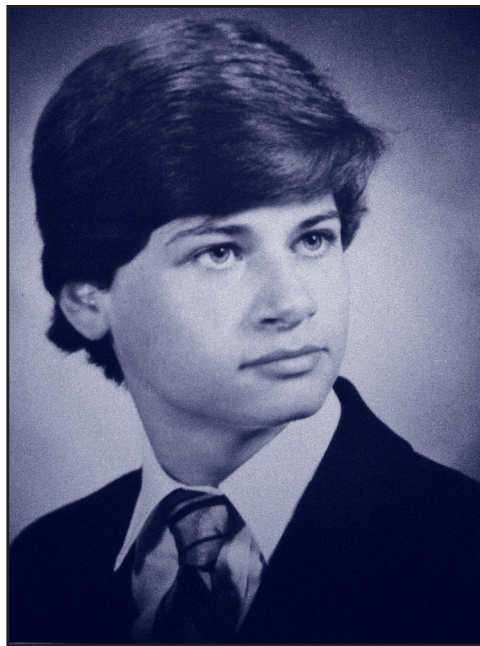
To be forgiven, we must forgive others. It says this in the Lord's Prayer. We were certainly put to the test. For 69 days, Mitchel lay in the intensive care unit, hooked up to every machine possible--one to breathe for him, one to read the "peep" for his lungs to measure the oxygen level. He had cages on both of his broken legs. In an induced coma to heal his lungs, he would blink once for "no" and twice for "yes" when he occasionally came to.

His hands were burned, and I still see the intense blue of his eyes as he looked at us. We were with him every day. I remember on New Year's Eve the nurses were able to sit him up in a chair to get him out of bed for awhile. When

my dad and mom said goodnight to him, his legs would shake as if to say, "Don't go yet."

On January 11, 1985, Mitchel went to his eternal home in heaven. That was 26 years ago, and I have to say I do forgive. It was an accident that my brother got hurt, but the loss is still as heavy today as it was January 11, 1985. I feel sorry for the man who started the fire. I certainly could not bear to live knowing that my actions caused someone else to suffer so. As much as I miss Mitchel, I know he is somewhere peaceful, happy, and is watching over us

all. Mitch and my son Nicholas share the same birthday—March 10th! How often does that happen? I'm blessed, and I forgive. I just miss Mitch.



*Mitchel Spoth*

By **Jessie Miller**

*Friend of Dusty Schwendeman (2002-OH)*

**W**hen I was a little girl, I met Dusty Schwendeman for the first time at a 4-H clinic. Dusty was a young horse trainer, and I was a young kid wanting to learn how to show horses. I can remember that day so vividly even after all of this time. I had never met anyone like him before and I, like most who met Dusty, fell in love with him.

Dusty and I became close. He was 21 and I was 9. He was like my big brother. I remember when he told me he was a firefighter. Of course I asked, "Have you ever saved anyone?" The look in his eyes made quite an impact on me when he simply replied, "Yep." I knew then and there that I wanted to be a firefighter. I wanted to be just like him.

Over the years, Dusty told me more and more about the fire department. Then one day, Dusty and my mom had a disagreement over my horse. Before I knew it, Dusty was out of my life. I was heartbroken. About a year later, a friend and I were at a horse show. I ran into Dusty. I wanted to apologize to him and let him know how much I thought of him. When I said, "Hello, how are you?" he replied sharply, "I'm fine." He turned and walked away before I had a chance to get another word out. I didn't know what to do. I would have done everything differently if I had known that was the last time I would see him alive. When Dusty died, a part of me died with him. Devastated doesn't even

begin to describe how I felt. I hated myself for not grabbing him by the arm and making him listen to me that day. I cried and cried over his picture every night, saying how sorry I was and how much I cared about him. That last look he gave me haunted me. One night, I said tearfully

into the darkness of my room, "Dusty, did you care about me like I cared about you? I just need to know!"

The next day, I went to visit Dusty's parents. When I walked into the barn Kelly, Dusty's fiancée, was there. I knew Kelly, but we had never had the chance to talk much. We began to talk a little when suddenly she said, "Dusty loved you very

much. He told me so much about you. He just thought the world of you!" I couldn't speak as I felt tears well up in my eyes. Dusty had been listening the night before. I knew then that he was with me, and even though we didn't say the words we needed to say before he died, he found a way to let me know. We were okay.

Death brings a lot of loose ends along with it, but I believe in my heart that it isn't the end. It has a way of erasing the anger and resentment we sometimes feel in life. It makes us see things more clearly and recognize what is important in our lives. Maybe, by erasing that anger and resentment, in a way it helps us tie up those loose ends, repair the relationship we've lost, and shows us how to handle things differently in the future.



*Jessie Miller*

*In a dark time, the eye begins to see.*

**Theodore Roethke**



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**By Catherine Renno**


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Mother of Steven "Caleb" Renno (2008-OR)

### I AM A WEARY WARRIOR

*Dedicated to all the survivors of "Iron 44" August 5, 2008*

I am a weary warrior  
shaken to the core

guilty and ashamed  
I should have done more!

Screaming through my being  
the terror of that night

So worn from the flashbacks  
and all the inner fright

I am a weary warrior  
just trying to make it right!

Sorting through all the "what ifs"  
but it's the "what is" I want to fight

All the pain and suffering  
the hearts and lives now changed

I won't forget those men  
nor what they gave that day!

I am a weary warrior  
seeking meaning to my way

to honor those fallen heroes  
I know now what they'd say,

"I was a weary warrior  
now I'm home without fear or pain

So rest your weary hearts  
and enjoy each wondrous day!"

*The pieces shared in The Journey belong solely to the authors and may not be reprinted in part or whole without the authors' written permission.*

## Want to Learn More About Forgiveness?

*"The practice of forgiveness has been shown to reduce anger, hurt, depression and stress and leads to greater feelings of hope, peace, compassion and self confidence. Practicing forgiveness leads to healthy relationships as well as physical health.*

*It also influences our attitude, which opens the heart to kindness, beauty, and love."*

~Dr. Frederic Luskin

For more information and resources, visit [www.learningtoforgive.com](http://www.learningtoforgive.com).

## From the Foundation's Lending Library

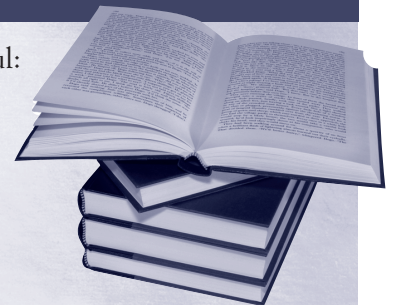
If you are feeling "stuck" in your grief process, here is some reading that may be helpful:

*I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye* by Noel & Pamela D. Blair

*No Time for Goodbyes: Coping with Sorrow, Anger, and Injustice After a Sudden Death*  
by Janice Harris Lord

*Sit Down, God. I'm Angry* by R.F. Smith, Jr.

*When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Rabbi Harold Kushner



To borrow these and other books free of charge, read reviews, or buy your own copy through the Amazon.com affiliate program, visit the Family Programs section at [www.firehero.org](http://www.firehero.org) or contact Pat at [pstonaker@firehero.org](mailto:pstonaker@firehero.org) or (301) 447-1365.



## National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend Logo Contest

In Honor of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's 30th Anniversary, we are excited to announce the 2011 Memorial Weekend Logo Contest. For the first time, the Foundation is asking our fire service survivors to design the 2011 National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend Logo. Here is your chance to lend your creative talents and help us honor firefighters who died in the line of duty in 2010. You will also be helping us commemorate our 30th Anniversary of honoring and remembering America's fallen firefighters. Submissions are due by February 15, and the winner will be notified on Feb. 28, 2011. The winning artist will receive a complete gift set of the NFFF 30th Anniversary/2011 Memorial Weekend keepsakes featuring their logo! National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend Logo Contest Rules:

- Artwork must be high-resolution (300 dpi) and submitted in EPS format. Vector art is preferred.
- Artwork must contain "30th Anniversary 1981-2011."
- Contest is open to family members of firefighters honored on the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial.
- The winning artwork will become property of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation and used on materials and products in correspondence with the 2011 Memorial Weekend.
- All submissions must be e-mailed to Bev Donlon at [bdonlon@firehero.org](mailto:bdonlon@firehero.org), along with the contest entry form, by 5:00pm EST, February 15, 2011.

Go to <http://firehero.org/creative/mwlogo/> to see full color samples of the previous Memorial Weekend logos shown below:



2006



2010



2007



2008



2009





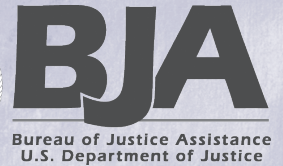
## Public Safety Officers' Benefits Programs (PSOB)

*Did you know...*

Whether a Tribal fire department's firefighters would be covered under the PSOB Program depends on a case-by-case review to determine whether they would be considered a "unit of local government" (and, thus, a "public agency") under the PSOB Act. As general matter, if a Tribe has been determined by the Secretary of the Interior to perform law enforcement functions, it would be considered a "unit of local government" (and, thus, a "public agency") under the PSOB Act.

For questions regarding this information, or for details regarding the PSOB Death, Disability, or Educational Assistance Programs, please call the PSOB Call Center toll-free at 888-744-6513 or 202-307-0635, or visit PSOB online at [www.psob.gov](http://www.psob.gov).

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 about...



People often wish that they could have just one more conversation with their loved one who died. If you could have this conversation, what would you tell your loved one? What do you think he or she would tell you?

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](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org) by February 23, 2011. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

*The Journey*  
**National Fallen Firefighters Foundation**  
PO Drawer 498  
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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