

# The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

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*This is the message of Christmas: We are never alone.*

~Taylor Caldwell

It's that time of year again—holidays, shopping, songs, food, parties. Memories, dread, sadness, obligations, forced cheer. Depending on “where you're at,” this time of year can either feel like an extended celebration or a series of land mines. For many people whose loved one has died, the winter holiday season is the toughest time of year.

Wherever you are in your own journey, it's good to anticipate that there will be some tough moments and to have a plan in place to deal with those. Here are a few things to remember during the holidays and as we head into 2012:

1. There are no rules for celebrating the holidays, despite what others might tell you. If you need to sit this year out, create a totally new tradition, or limit how much you do, that is perfectly OK.
2. Take people up on their offers to help, or seek out a friend to share shopping, cooking, wrapping, etc. Or maybe just to get out for a walk or a cup of coffee.

3. Make sure you get the rest, nutrition, exercise, and stress-management you need. Spend some time in prayer, meditation, or quiet reflection. Be gentle and protective with yourself.

4. Don't believe the propaganda! All those images of happy, intact families smiling around the Christmas tree and couples toasting the New Year with a kiss are just advertising. There are many people whose hearts are heavy this time of year. You are not alone.

5. This is a good time of year to touch base with other people who have suffered losses. Even if it has been many years, you can be sure they are feeling some of the same mixed emotions this season, and they might need a listening ear and company just as much as you do. Help one another!

In this issue of *The Journey*, survivors share stories about holidays and miracles and unexpected gifts.

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By Jim Daughetee, Father of Shane M. Daughetee (2007-TN)

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I think back at all the Christmases my wife, Linda, our son, Shane, and I spent together—24. On Christmas Eve, one of my sisters always had everyone over for food and to exchange gifts. When we would get home, we would let Shane open just one present. Christmas was always a special occasion for us—the excitement of Christmas morning, getting up at who knows what hour. Then there was opening all of the packages, having a big breakfast, and then just spending the rest of the day together. As the years passed, Shane was older but the excitement was still there. On the evening of December 24, 2006, Shane and his wife, Nicole, were at our house, and we celebrated Christmas together. To see the smiles on their faces as they



*Shane and Nicole Daughetee*

opened the presents was all we needed to make our Christmas that year. Each time I look at the pictures, I always get a smile.

Then, on January 26, 2007, at 12:45 a.m., we received the worst call of our lives. Shane had fallen through the floor at a house fire, and they were unable to rescue him.

Every Christmas Eve, after spending time with my family, we always go to the cemetery and visit Shane. We sit and talk about past Christmases and how great they were. This, to me, is a great comfort. He may not be here on earth with us, but I know he is looking down upon us as we sit and tell stories. He will always be in our hearts and minds.

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By Jeanette Studer, Wife of Gary Studer (2008-OH)

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Gary died June 28, 2008, the year of the “stimulus checks.” Gary and I had discussed how we were going to spend our new found fortune, and I had read an article about Honor Flight, the organization started to transport WWII veterans to Washington, DC, to visit the WWII Memorial.

The check arrived after Gary died, so I donated the \$2,000 to Honor Flight of NW Ohio. I knew Gary would have been an escort on that flight. Since he died, I asked his very good friend,



*Gary Studer*

Assistant Fire Chief Ernie Gehrke of Whitehouse Fire Department, to take Gary’s place. The money donated paid for Ernie’s flight and for four veterans.

Since I can’t buy presents for Gary anymore, I send a check in his name to Honor Flight of NW Ohio every year to send five veterans on a one-day journey to visit the war memorials in DC. Knowing Gary would have been on every flight as an escort, I encourage the firefighters and paramedics at his department (Whitehouse Fire) to go in his

place by paying half of the cost of their ticket.



## Two Miracles In Boise

By Dave Rama, Father of Daniel Eric Rama (2002-OR)

**T**he worst event of my life, the death of our second son, Daniel, put us in contact with the Wildland Firefighter Foundation (WFF) in Boise, Idaho. Each May, the WFF hosts the families of fallen and injured firefighters, to assist families in dealing with their losses and to allow those families to share experiences with each other. This gathering can be very sad, but also very healing. It was at two separate Family Days that I saw two miracles up close and personal, and these events challenged my perceptions, and changed some of my thinking.

In 2007, a Lakota medicine woman named Ruby Gibson worked with the children of fallen firefighters to help them understand the loss of their parents. She gathered the children on the grass in a circle marked with flowers. As Ruby settled the children down and got them comfortable, flying directly toward us was a red-tailed hawk. It flew straight to the position of the children, paused in mid-flight, and hovered over them about twenty feet off the ground, then gave a cry, and flew off to the north. I can only say this—it was the damndest thing I've ever seen. First of all, I would have thought a hawk in flight could not hover, and the hawk was too close to the ground to be riding thermals. Second, wildlife adapt to human intrusion on their hunting ground by relocating away from the danger. The presence of the Boise Airport some 300 yards away precludes the idea that this was a hunting area for the hawk. The conclusion I drew from witnessing this event was that Ruby Gibson stands in good with God.

The final event of this gathering is a dove release, held on the same grassy field where the "Miracle of the Hawk" took place. In 2009, preceding the dove release, the foundation director asked one of the parents to speak about an experience she and her husband had when they visited the mountain where their son died. It was several years after the tragedy, and they climbed over the slopes where fourteen firefighters had perished. You can only imagine the emotions these folks felt. Ruth had gotten away from the group a bit and was having a chat with God. She asked God for a sign that her son was all right. It didn't need to be a lightning bolt; a butterfly would suffice to let her know that her boy's spirit was well. God remained silent. When her husband caught up with her, she told him of her disappointment that she had not been favored with the appearance of a butterfly. Her husband, Don, responded, "You mean like this one on my sleeve?" And there on his jacket sat a butterfly. Ruth admitted being shocked and astounded. They later told this story to a naturalist, who told them the butterfly would not have been found at that elevation at that time of year. That, by itself, is a wonderful story, but it is not the miracle we witnessed. As Ruth was concluding her remarks in front of perhaps 150 people, a small white butterfly rose from the grass and flew over the assembled family members.

Miracles are exciting, wondrous happenings. When God starts to strut, it is a glorious show. Whatever your experience with miracles, I hope you appreciate the inexplicable workings of life. I hope you enjoy a few miracles of your own. Let me know when it happens. I love a good story.

## A Gift for Christmas

By Antonia Joan Fontana, Mother of Lt. David J. Fontana (2001-NY)

**L**ast December I drove to Brooklyn to lay a blanket of evergreens on my son David's grave. Passing his firehouse on the way, I stopped in for a cup of tea and to talk with the guys from Squad 1. When they discovered my plan to visit the cemetery, they asked if they could accompany me. We left the firehouse with my car leading the way and the rig with five bunker-clad men following. Once there, the men carried the blanket up the hill. The lieutenant, Dave's friend Billy from probie school, asked me to hold one side

of the blanket, a firefighter holding the other, and lower it onto the grave. As we did that, the men came to attention and saluted. Then, as tears rolled down my face, Dave's friend Paul said a prayer, and the men saluted again, a Christmas gift of love from his firefighter brothers.

This year on September 7, my 85th birthday, the men of Squad invited me to go to the cemetery with them to honor

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## *'Twas Survivors' Night*

By Arlene Zang, Mother of Robert

Apologies to C

*T'was the night before Christmas and all thru the house,  
Not a creature was stirring, except me on the couch.  
The shopping was finished, the stockings were hung  
The Christmas tree lighted, I'm finally all done!*

*I have no ambition, no good Christmas cheer,  
It took me much longer than usual this year.  
I'm tired, exhausted, and thinking of bed  
I just can't get rid of this pain in my head.*

*I looked at the presents, all under the tree  
And wished for one more, just one thing for me.  
The touch of your hand, the feel of your kiss  
The everyday touches and glances I miss.*

*Alone with my wishes of what it could be,  
I realize it's different at Christmas for me.  
I swallow real hard, and I tried not to cry,  
but a deluge of tears was clouding my eye.*

*When there in the room I heard such a clatter,  
I sprang to my feet to see what was the matter.  
And high by the mantel, all in a row,  
a choir of angels, wings white as the snow.*

*The light was so bright that I squinted to see,  
the legions from heaven now looking at me.  
"Do not be frightened, do not despair"  
We came down from heaven with loved ones to share!*

*And there to my left, was a sight to behold,  
They all wore old turnouts, white, black and some gold.  
Their helmets were painted black, green, red, and yellow,  
The white one belonged to some special wise fellow.*

*They were covered with soot as they stood toe to toe,  
But one just stepped forward and started to glow.  
And standing before them, I watched through my tears,  
Said, "Greetings from Heaven" from all of us this year.*

*The look in the eye and the nod of the head,  
Soon let me know I had nothing to dread.  
But the sound of the voice made my heart skip a beat,  
And the touch on my hand was in no way discreet.*

*Meet Father Mychal, my own special friend,  
Tries to keep us in line, but his work never ends.  
He is hosting the service on this Christmas Eve,  
Please light a candle for those that believe.*

*I want you to meet the rest of my crew,  
These are our Chiefs, bored with not much to do.  
Our Captain is funny and brave and sincere,  
And we all love our "Louie" ... talks off your ear.*

*The crowd in the back is my own "Truckie" crew,  
They raise up them ladders, know just what to do.  
'Til my driver and tiller and probie arrive.  
And meet our new medics, they love to save lives.*

*We got our own plane, and the pilots to fly.  
While our divers, smoke-jumpers, and roughnecks stand by.  
Awaiting assignment and letting us know,  
That only the best are now part of this show.*

*Our engines are cherry, highlighted and bold,  
Hose, Axes, and pry bars all coated with gold.  
We fly there at the light speed, thru those pearly gates,  
And I can assure you that we're never late.*

*The Tennessee boy that escaped from the fire  
was saved by our crew, when things there went haywire  
"A miracle," Parents said in the press,  
but really, just saved by an angel's caress.*

*As you can see, our gang is well fed,  
We get steak, mashed potatoes, and real homemade bread.  
There's ice cream and cake for those special occasions,  
And Monday night football (with beer) on all stations*



# Night Before Christmas

by Tim Zang-Broxterman (2008-OH)

Clement Moore

Birthdays and Holidays we celebrate here  
When you light your candles we know you are near  
With whispers and prayers and words of deep love  
That are brought up to heaven on the wings of a dove

Card games on Fridays, both poker and gin,  
Fishing with time to rest and sleep in.  
And every night there's a Las Vegas show,  
Elvis, "The Rat Pack" and others you know.

Our heavenly scoreboard tracks all earth's events,  
Like birthdays, and concerts, and money you spent.  
The little ones' victories, concerts, and goals,  
Are recorded with love, on St. Peter's large rolls.

And from high up in heaven, I can still see  
all the wonderful ways you all honor me.  
The cool honor guard, the pipes and the drums,  
The care that you used with my picture album

One more reminder before we all go,  
I'll be watching from heaven above so you know.  
I'll always love you, I have from the start,  
I left you my memories, down deep in your heart.

Remember that hawk that circled the sky?  
That was me up in heaven telling you "Hi".  
And the dime that I left you, in my own chair?  
My way of reminding you, "Know I'm still there."

I found myself screaming, "Don't leave me, don't go,"  
But deep in my heart, I already know,  
That wishing and dreaming and calling your name,  
Won't keep you from heeding your new call to fame.

Your new band of brothers, your fire family,  
God's better angels await you I see.  
Responding to fires, saving lives, from above  
While saying I miss you, from heaven with love

The light is now dimming I can't hardly see,  
No wait that is smoke, just left of the tree.  
And now I hear sounding that eerie alarm,  
Warning "get out, get out" away from this harm.

Wait, that's no alarm, my cell's calling me,  
I'm still on the couch, warm, snug as can be.  
Were you really here talking? Or was it a dream?  
My mind tried to tell me it's real as it seems.

Look ! There in the corner, a dirty footprint,  
I know you were here, thanks much for the hint.  
The air by the tree holds the scent of your smell,  
But who would believe me, who would I tell?

That our new band of angels now gathered above  
Sent real Christmas Greetings from ones that you love  
And left us reminders of what used to be,  
And hope for the future on this Christmas Eve.



## A Gift for Christmas *continued from page 3*

Dave for the upcoming tenth anniversary of September 11. These 15 men, some still at Squad 1, some promoted to other houses, and some retired, were visiting the graves of all 12 men Squad lost that day in 2001. My friend Rosemary, whose son George was also lost that day, drove into Squad with me. As we had our usual cup of tea, the men on duty rushed out to a fire.

Soon we got a cell phone message that the cemetery visitors would be at Green-Wood in 15 minutes. Rosemary and I left the



*Squad 1 Tribute to Dave Fontana*

empty house and drove to the Green-Wood entrance. There we were met by nine cars and 15 men. Driven to the gravesite, we walked up the hill in the rain with a beautiful floral wreath. The rig then arrived with five more men. The group gathered, saluted, and stood in a circle to tell stories about Dave. Those who had known him wanted to make sure the new members also knew him. They told me, "We will never forget." I know I will always remember their

affection for him and their kindness to me. A happy 85th birthday indeed!

## It All Started With a Motorcycle

By: Laurie Tilton Anderson, Daughter of Gary Tilton (2004-TX)

Life is a funny thing; you never really know where it is going to take you. In 2004, life was plugging right along for my dad, Gary Tilton, a firefighter in Texas, and Jack Gerhart, a firefighter in Pennsylvania. Neither one knew the other, nor had any reason for their paths to cross. Both of them died in the line of duty in 2004, my dad in October and Jack in December. They were both honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend in 2005. I decided that weekend that I was going to return each year to volunteer and honor my dad. Jack Gerhart had a friend named Rusty, who looked to him as a mentor in the fire service, had been a coworker, and had escorted his widow during the Memorial Weekend. Rusty also decided that Weekend that he was going to return each year to volunteer and honor his friend.



*Rusty and Laurie*

Fast forward to 2007. My mom and I arrived for the Memorial Weekend a little earlier than usual, as she was scheduled to testify at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing about the Hometown Heroes Act. We were transported to and from DC by three firefighters, one of whom was Rusty. Rusty had been recruited for the trip by his fellow DCFD firefighter, Mike Donlon. The notorious DC metro traffic made for a long two-hour ride back to the hotel in Frederick. On that ride home, the conversation in the van turned to the Red Helmets Ride coming up on that Saturday. Mike looked at me and told me that I should ride with Rusty on Saturday. I had never been on a motorcycle before, but decided it might be fun. Well, the ride was fun, so much so that it changed our lives forever. We were married in 2008!!!

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**Motorcycle** *continued from page 6*

The story goes that it all started with a motorcycle, but that's not entirely true. It really started with the loss of two heroes. The bittersweet truth is that Rusty and I would never have met if my dad or Jack were still alive or had died any other way than in the line of duty. My dad always told my mom that if something ever happened to

him, she would be taken care of. I think that orchestrating Rusty into my life was his way of taking care of me, too. In 2004, I had heartache, a greater sorrow, grief, and despair than I had ever known. Since 2007, I've felt greater joy, hope, and happiness than I ever thought possible. I know that my dad is looking down and smiling...he always wanted a motorcycle!

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

**From the NFFF Lending Library:**

This book review was written by Bonnie Hall, wife of Sid Hall (2007-IN), who donated a copy of the book to the Foundation's Lending Library. Thank you, Bonnie!

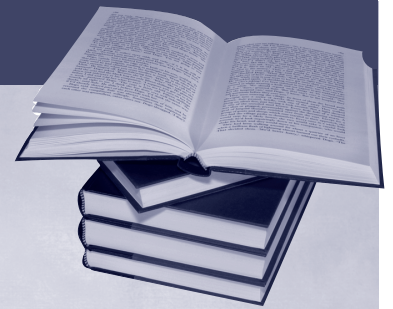
**Moments of Comfort by Faye Landrum**

This was the first book that I read after I had come to Emmitsburg for the National Fallen Firefighter Memorial Weekend when Sid was honored. I refer back to my copy many times.

I felt that the Memorial Weekend Service, when Sid was honored, was really Sid's funeral. I drove out and back alone, and it really hit that trip that he was gone. The number one place Sid wanted to go was that area of the country, for the mountains and history like at Gettysburg. So, in a way, I was taking that trip for him. I found when I returned that I was in the midst of grief as I was after Sid's funeral here in Indiana, only the shock had worn off, and it was a deeper grief. I knew I had to find some source of help, something daily.

This book contains 60 short chapters, starting with "It's Okay to Cry" and ending with "Flying Lessons." Each chapter begins with one or two verses of Scripture. The next two pages are a short meditation. The last page has a one-sentence prayer and also a quote that ties in to what the chapter speaks about. There were days when I could not handle reading more than that. Though the author's husband died of cancer, I felt I had found someone who did understand what I was going through.

To borrow this or other books free of charge, read reviews, or buy your own copy through the [Amazon.com](https://www.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.



## Public Safety Officers' Benefits Programs (PSOB)



**BJA**  
Bureau of Justice Assistance  
U.S. Department of Justice

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.

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### From PSOB

The Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Office at the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice, assists survivors and agencies with federal claims filed on behalf of America's fallen firefighters, law enforcement officers, and other first responders, as well as officers catastrophically injured in the line of duty. Looking back on 2011, the PSOB Office offered a Call Center that is open from 7:00 AM – 7:00 PM, so individuals receive a “live voice” when they call; PSOB Outreach Specialists who assisted with collecting all required basic documents so cases can move forward for review; and PSOB Benefits Specialists who reviewed ever-challenging and complex cases, and saw many of those cases through to approvals according to the PSOB Act and its regulations. After receiving the benefit on behalf of their fallen loved one, many survivors contacted PSOB to share how the benefit saved a family home from foreclosure, paid for a critical car repair—or even ensured lifesaving medical care. “The benefit,” survivors often recall, “came just in time.”

## We want to hear from you about...



Humor. Sometimes when you are in the thick of grief, nothing seems funny, and laughing can feel almost like a betrayal. But humor is part of life and has a way of creeping back in even when things are heavy. Where did you manage to find humor even in the darkest moments? How was that linked to your firefighter? Do you have a particular story you'd like to share?

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 January 20, 2012. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

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