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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

2013 Survivor Events

The NFFF is hosting several upcoming events for fire service survivors. If you have never attended a Survivors Conference or sent a child to a Hal Bruno Camp for Children of Fallen Firefighters, maybe this will be the year. Not sure if you should attend? We'd be happy to talk with you about these events and to put you in touch with other survivors who have attended in previous years. Please contact Linda Hurley for more information at lhurley@firehero.org or (301) 447-7693.

- **Fire Service Survivors Conference** (adults only)
April 14-17 2013 ~ Phoenix, AZ
- **Hal Bruno Camp for Children of Fallen Firefighters**
(ages 7-17, separate program for parents)
June 7-9, 2013 ~ Goochland, VA
- **Hal Bruno Camp for Children of Fallen Firefighters**
(ages 4-6 with parent)
August 8-11, 2013 ~ Orlando, FL

We want to hear from you about...



The experience of being widowed at a young age. What is it like to suddenly lose your spouse when you are under age 50? How do you parent your children without the support of your partner? What reactions did you get from other people, and how did you handle them? What about the decision whether or not to date again? Tell us about your experiences, what you have learned, and anything that might help others in a similar situation.

If you'd like to share your thoughts on this topic or other aspects of your personal journey, please e-mail a Word document (and pictures!) to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org by January 20, 2013. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

The Journey
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
P.O. Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2012 ISSUE 51

Be soft. Do not let the world make you hard. Do not let the pain make you hate. Do not let the bitterness steal your sweetness. Take pride that even though the rest of the world may disagree, you still believe it to be a beautiful place.

~ Kurt Vonnegut

Anyone reading this publication knows that life is not fair. The death of someone you love is among the most painful, unfair things that happen in our lives. Death is a natural part of life, and grief is a universal human experience; however, it feels anything but natural when you are in it.

It's so easy to fall into a swirl of sadness and defeat when you are grieving. As the earth continues to spin and people go about their day-to-day lives, the grieving person often wants to shout to the world, "Stop! Can't you see that life as I knew it has ended?"

Life as you knew it has ended; but life has not ended. And so begins the difficult process of finding your way in this new world. At first it may seem like you are on a different planet altogether. The rules have changed. Things that once brought joy may now bring tears. Places that were dear to you may provoke painful memories. Friends of many years and even family members may pull away.

Laughter may feel like a betrayal. Everything that people say may sound like the wrong thing. And there is no map or set of hard and fast rules with which to navigate this new landscape.

It takes a great deal of courage and strength to walk this journey. Courage, in the beginning, may simply be deciding to get out of bed and face the day. It may be calling one friend or paying one bill. It may be a trip to the grocery store. Eventually courage may mean stepping onto a plane alone for the very first time. It may mean leaving for college as planned even though your world has been turned upside down. It may mean risking new love, knowing full well that hearts can be broken.

Baby steps become strides. You meet each day as it comes. And then one day you may be welcoming a new grandchild, or making a speech, or reaching out a hand to someone who is struggling. And you will realize how far you have come.

— By **Andriana VanderGriend, Sister of Zachary VanderGriend (2008-MT)** —

On September 1, 2008, my life changed drastically in an instant. My brother was killed as a wildland firefighter in an air tanker crash. For those of you unfamiliar with wildland firefighting in the western states, heavy air tankers are used to drop retardant in order to prevent the spread of wildfires. My brother, Zach, adored aviation from the time he was two. He wanted to fly

before he could ride a bike or drive a car. This passion never died as he started working at airports when he was 14 and was homeschooled his last two years of high school so he could get his pilot's license. A month after his seventeenth birthday, he was a licensed private pilot. He was the flight engineer (head mechanic) on the air tanker

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and eventually would have been one of the pilots had he lived his dream. Unfortunately that would not happen. Rather, he would sacrifice his life a mere 92 days after starting work with Neptune Aviation, Inc., a company that contracts with the U.S. Forest Service to fight wildfires.

Zach died the first week of my senior year of high school.

Two months later I turned eighteen; nine months later I graduated with honors, bound for San Diego Christian College. I would later transfer to California Baptist University, where I will complete two bachelor's degree programs in philosophy and political science in December 2012. But it is what happened during the summer of 2010 that brings me here to tell you my story.

My parents and I were living in Gig Harbor, Washington, at the time of the crash. In the spring of 2009, I began to consider getting my pilot's license and following in my brother's footsteps while charting a path of my own. For those of you who are parents, I'm sure you can imagine what I thought my parent's reaction would be to this. I didn't tell them of my interest for quite some time. But my mom knows me (for better or worse) very well. One day in a store on the water in Gig Harbor, I was looking through some artwork and came across a few paintings featuring airplanes. I showed them to Mom, visibly excited by the fact that they were airplanes, and she asked, "Andri, do you want to get your pilot's license?" Taken aback, I hesitated and replied with a shy, "Yeah." Expecting her to forbid me from getting my license because of how Zach was killed, I braced myself for the worst and was surprised when she said, "Call your dad and ask him."

So, I called my dad. He said yes. Then I called Kristen, the CEO of Neptune Aviation, now my pseudo aunt, and told her of my interest. She invited me to live with her and her family in Missoula, Montana, for a summer and get my license through NorthStar Jet, the sister company



Andriana in the air



Flying with Zach's headset

of Neptune. The following summer, I moved to Missoula and got my pilot's license in seven weeks, falling short of Zach's record of just six weeks.

These seven weeks were not easy, however. My parents left me in Missoula on Memorial Day, the same day they had left my brother exactly two years earlier, never to see him again. I was following in my brother's footsteps; they could only pray my steps were not the same. Being in Missoula, where Zach had last lived, was hard for me and for my parents. One day I stumbled upon his apartment where

I had spent Memorial Day weekend with him. I called my instructor and said, "I'm not flying today." However, when I did fly I felt like angels were around my little Cessna protecting me from the Montana Big Sky. What was a concern initially—being around the heavy air tankers and even sharing the sky with them—became a source of strength.

I cannot even begin to express the emotions that I feel while in the air. I feel closer to my brother (especially because I fly with his headset) and can see exactly why he adored aviation so much. It was a difficult process—mentally, physically, and emotionally—but I would not change it for the world. I have truly been blessed by the opportunities which have arisen due, in part, to the heroic death of my brother. This is just one of the many things I have been able to accomplish or been given the chance to adorn my life with—things I never previously imagined possible.

I hope these words I have shared encourage you to follow your dreams, no matter what obstacles may lie in the way. As I once heard, "Obstacles are merely given to you to prove that what you want is worth the fight."



By Renee Elkins, Wife of Dan Elkins (2004-CA)

My husband Dan, a captain for the Los Angeles County Fire Department, was killed while traveling on the Pine Fire on July 13, 2004. Needless to say, I was devastated. My family was devastated. I wasn't really able to function very well for the first year. I did what I thought I had to do, or sometimes what others thought I had to do. My focus on life was not there; I had such a desire to be with him. I wasn't suicidal, but I definitely didn't care whether I lived or died in many ways. I didn't want to leave my kids, who were adults, but I really had convinced myself that in lots of ways they would "get over" losing me if I was gone because they would know I was with their dad. I now know that my thoughts were so off!

About a year and a half into the grieving process

I started attending a grief support group at a church in my area. My own church had one at that time, but a friend suggested I try somewhere different. I did, and it was there that I met my first friends who had lost their husbands, both in tragic, sudden ways like me and through sickness. I felt like I had just looked into the eyes of hope as I listened to and began to start friendships with these women who were also in my age range. (I was 46 when my husband was killed.) We would get together for dinner, lunch, just to talk, and we would laugh until we cried. Humor and laughter are things that I had not felt for a very long time. Our bond was made and we are still close friends today. We "get it." We love each other and make allowances for each other and try to understand each other's pain and journey.

In August 2009, as I was driving home from a weekend at the beach with my family, my daughter called in a panic. There had been a huge fire burning in the mountains

near my home as I had driven out of town that Friday, but now Sunday night as I was driving back, I was sharing the freeway with lines of fire trucks, camp crews, and CDF trucks headed to the huge Station Fire burning out of control in the Angeles National Forest. The freeway was clouded with smoke and ash, which is always such a reminder of my own husband's death. My daughter called in tears to tell me that two LA County firefighters had



From L-R: Kathy Hall, Lori Quinones, and Renee Elkins

been killed that day on the fire. All of my own memories came rushing back from July 13, 2004. I was a mess inside, but immediately began to pray for the families of those men, whose names had not yet been released.

The names were released on the morning news the next day, and to my horror one of the names was the husband of a

woman who was a teacher in the same school district in which I taught. My heart was broken for both of these women. Lori was pregnant, three weeks away from giving birth to her first child. Kathy was my age at the time of my husband's death, with two boys who were away at college learning to be adults while she and her husband were beginning the empty nest years, just as Dan and I had been. I was devastated for these women and the journey of grief and sadness that I knew lay before them. I went to both of their husbands' memorial services. As I sat in the stands looking over the "sea of blue," I hoped that God would draw the three of us together one day.

In November 2009, three months after the deaths of Firefighter Specialist Arnie Quinones and Captain Ted Hall, I was able to meet with their wives, Lori and Kathy. We have been getting together once or twice a month ever since. In the rawness of their grief, I relived my

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own. In the experience of my journey, I think I was able to give them some hope. I believe we have helped each other to maneuver through the waters of fire department changes, ups and downs of support, the pain and honor of memorials. We have laughed until we cried over things that others would not find funny, allowing humor to be the salve of healing on hearts broken and fractured. We have shared in watching a young mother raise a new baby girl who is the image of her daddy, and another mom who has had to allow independence to her boys while trying to find her own way. We have developed a friendship and

bond that is based on a horrible commonality in our lives, but at the same time have gone beyond that and have become friends because we love each other.

I don't think any of us would be where we are today without each other and many others in our lives who have chosen to share in this journey of grief and heartache that doesn't just go away. As they recently marked the third anniversary and as I just passed year eight, I feel like I have come to know who their husbands were and to appreciate the relationships that they shared with men who, like my husband, gave their lives to protect the life and property of others.



The death of a loved one presents all kinds of dilemmas about what do with traditions, significant dates, and special events. What do I do with his clothes? How should we celebrate the holidays? How should we honor his memory at our daughter's wedding? As with most things, there is no template that works for everyone. But if you have a story to share about your creative solution to handling one of these situations, please let us know! It may help someone else with a question like...

What should I do with our wedding rings?

By Brandi Dukes, Daughter of William "Roger" Vorwark (2009-MO)

After receiving the last issue of *The Journey*, I thought I would share what my Mom decided to do with her and my dad's wedding rings.

My birthday has proven to be very bittersweet since my dad's death in 2009. He was ALWAYS the first to call me the morning of my birthday and wish me a happy birthday. I sure miss those phone calls.

My 30th birthday fell on 11/11/11. My mom, Cindy, decided to give me something very special to remind me daily of my dad and



Brandi Dukes wearing the pendant made from her parents' rings

their love. I was surprised that day not only with a party; but a small special box. I opened this box to find a silver necklace with a big odd shaped silver clump pendant with a tiny diamond. I was confused at first; not sure what it was, but inside the box along with the pendant were two tiny pictures of wedding rings, one my Mom's and the other my Dad's. She had taken their wedding rings and had them melted down into a pendant for me; the most thoughtful

and special gift I have ever been given.



I am now able to wear this symbol of my parents' love for one another around my neck each day. I am able to pull that pendant out of the box, and it serves as a reminder of many things. Some days it goes on

with a smile, others with a tear. But I know within the pendant I wear there are many memories of love, laughter, and good times with my family that I will cherish forever.

What should I do with the stockings?

By Traci Adams, Wife of Tommy Adams (2009-LA)

My husband, Tom, died 13 days before Christmas 2009. All my decorations were already up, so we went through his death, funeral, and Christmas kinda in a daze that year. When the holidays rolled around in 2010, I was faced with putting up all our stuff again, which I did (our girls were 16 and 9). The one thing that really troubled me was his stocking! I know that sounds funny, but we are huge stocking people!! I still get stockings from my mom, and I'm 42!!! So they are a huge tradition. I fixed up my mantle that year and carefully arranged our four matching and monogrammed stockings.

What got me was what to do from there. The thought of filling his stocking with the traditional stuff, only to be left Christmas night with the dilemma of what to do with it, was too much. My youngest still believed in Santa! I was at a loss. This is how I handled it.



Tommy, Traci, Alex, and Kristen Adams

Tom's stocking stayed there, and on Christmas Eve I stuffed the other three and took his. The next morning when the little one got up, she asked where Daddy's stocking was. I told her that when Santa came, he took Daddy's stocking with him back to the North Pole to hang on a very special tree that stays up all the time for the people that we have lost. From then on, Daddy's stocking would hang on that very special tree forever.

This may sound kinda simple to some, but it gave peace to me and two broken little girls. I have since been able to hang just the three stockings with sadness, yes, but without it tearing me into a thousand pieces. Sometimes you have to conquer the smallest things

to even start to heal inside and find peace.

Merry Christmas to all of you. May you find that something, either little or big, to bring you peace and healing this holiday season.

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