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**Marty Cropper** *continued from page 5*

others heal and, in doing that, allows me to feel good about myself.

For newer survivors, the hurt will never go away, but it becomes a "quiet" hurt that pops up every now and then. A song, a picture, or past memories remind us of what we can no longer hold. I've gone through many stages of grief—denial, anger, resentment, and finally acceptance, but it does take a while. We are all survivors; some of us are a bit farther along on our journey of healing.

We all know that firemen share something special, and so do their survivors.

*Good timber does not grow with  
ease; the stronger the wind,  
the stronger the trees.*

**~J. Willard Marriott**

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



The most helpful, touching, supportive thing someone did for you after the death of your loved one. Whether it was a friend, your sister, another survivor, a member of the clergy, a member of the fire department, or a perfect stranger, what's the one thing that stands out in your memory as providing comfort when you really needed it? When someone has died people really want to help, but often may not know how. Tell us about someone who "got it right" and provided just what you needed at the right moment.

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](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org) by April 30, 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

MARCH / APRIL 2013 ISSUE 53

*When we do face the difficult times, we need to remember that circumstances don't make a person, they reveal a person.*

~ Emma Jameson

**D**oes grief last forever? Will I always feel this way? These are common questions, especially in the first year or so of intense bereavement. You can ask ten people and get ten different answers, as everyone's experience is unique. Here's the bottom line: when someone you love dies, you are changed by that experience. You will never return to the exact life you had or be exactly the person you were before. You will probably experience intense and confusing and fluctuating emotions for a period of time. And you may continue to have periods of sadness and moments of anguish for years after the death of your loved one.

But here's the other part: grief should not overshadow your life forever. As you move through the experience, with time and intention, there should be a return to the things that bring meaning and joy to your life. It may be bittersweet, carrying that loss forward with you as you go. You may often feel the tug of both sadness and joy. You will miss that person who is not physically with you, but

you may also feel that the spirit of that person and the love you shared is still within you. You may find reservoirs of strength you never knew you had. You should expect to feel alive again. Most people get to a place where they can laugh and make new memories and engage in the activities that make life feel worth living.

Most people don't get to that place alone. They find people to walk this very difficult journey with them. They pour their energy into the living people whom they love. They seek out new relationships with people who can support this next chapter of their lives. They rely on old friends. They seek out wise counsel from a clergy member or counselor. They enjoy the unconditional acceptance and presence of an animal companion. And very often, they find other survivors who they can walk with, giving and receiving support along the way.

In this issue of *The Journey*, survivors share their own take on how "the journey" changes over time.

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By Sonya Richter, Wife of Brian Richter (2001-AR)

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**I** am a 12-year survivor. In the beginning, I was a zombie. I walked through the motions of the living. And while my friends and family gave me great support, veteran survivors gave me what I could not find anywhere else. There is so much truth to the idea that only someone that has gone through the same journey as you understands you. I was so lost in my pain. I could not imagine my life without Brian. This was not in my plans, and I could not seem to make a new plan.

Had I not attended that widow group session, with the prompting of Tina Hauk (wife, IL-1997), I would have

missed out on a great "passing it forward" moment. I would have missed out on happiness. This session happened the year before I met my fiancé. An older survivor told us her story of moving forward to remarry. I had a whole new inspiring outlook after hearing her story. I do not know who she was, but she changed my life that weekend. She showed me that there was no place in my life for guilt about moving forward with love and living my life. I left Maryland that Memorial Weekend with a brand new attitude.

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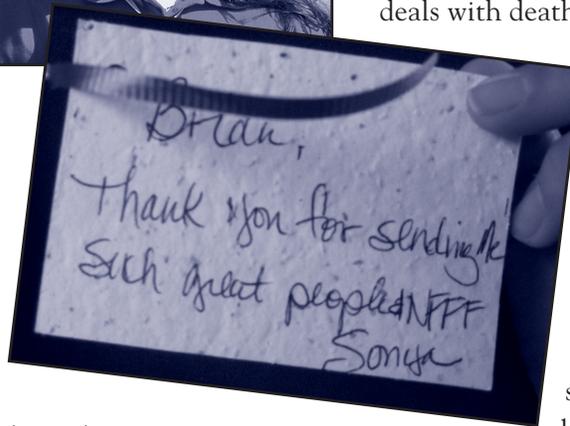
**Sonya Richter** *continued from page 1*

I have now made it to the point of engagement and remarriage, but that doesn't change my past. I will always be Brian's wife/widow, even after becoming Tim's wife. I have reached a point where those two images of me have become one. I owe that way of thinking and allowing myself to become that woman to the NFFF programs and survivors. I still look to and seek out survivors with more years and experience than me, as well as those with similar experiences. I think I will always be in a state of recovery with my grief. It is ever changing, but it will never leave me.



Sonya Richter

As my needs have changed, so has my involvement with the NFFF. At first it was to help me recover my life. That has evolved into taking classes to share with my state about LODD and their prevention, educating them about the NFFF and survivors, and helping survivors in my state and across the country. I feel my role these days is to help those who are coming after me. I also recognize that I still need to take care of me. I still need what I emotionally receive from other survivors and the NFFF. It recharges me mentally to interact with other survivors, and in helping others I receive it twofold.



I would tell new survivors that it doesn't get better; it gets different. Someone told me this in 2002. We were in Washington, DC, for the Memorial Weekend. It was Sunday night, and several staff, survivors, and fire service members were sitting relaxing together. I watched them for a moment; they were laughing and enjoying themselves. I said to myself, "I want that again. How did they do it? How did they get there?" I thanked them for everything they had done for us that weekend. The last thing I said was, "Tell me it gets better." And they almost answered in unison: "It doesn't get better; it gets different." There is no truer statement than that. You will always hurt, just in different levels now. Everyone heals and deals with death differently. And there

is no guidebook. You truly know that your grief is changing when you talk about your firefighter and laugh with tears streaming down your face.

I would tell new survivors that life and living is hard enough; do not be so hard on yourself. Don't try to do it by yourself. We started seeing a psychiatrist after Brian died. I attend the widow group sessions during the Memorial Weekend and Survivors Conferences. They help. I am a living proof success story. I would not be where I am in life or the woman I am without the survivors and the NFFF.

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**Surviving the Test of Time**


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

**A**s I begin my thirteenth year as the wife of a fallen firefighter I look back on where I was and where I am now. Thirteen years, thirteen lifetimes, thirteen seconds; every day flies and every day drags on forever. I have grown as a person and continue to carry Lee in my heart as I volunteer for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Initial contact from the Foundation gave me comfort knowing that I was not alone and there was this amazing

organization with a staff that has hearts bigger than any I have ever seen. They were there to assist me in planning my first trip to Emmitsburg when Lee was honored in 2001. They continue to be there for each of us today.

My first impressions were of the many volunteers who were there to make sure my experience during the Memorial Weekend was a good one and that Lee was honored with dignity. I carried home feelings of belonging



and vowed to return each year to repay the kindness and love I was shown. I met so many amazing veteran volunteers who had walked my path before me. Their quiet grace and dignity demonstrated to me the true meaning of “survivor.” They were always there with a smile, a shoulder, and a kind word. And after all these years, they are still there serving new survivors. I am honored to call them my friends. I am proud to say that I, too, now return each year. I have learned what it’s like to be that shoulder, the ear to listen, and that heart to love for those who are walking the path we all walked before them.

I have been to nearly all the Survivors Conferences and find that it’s a double-edged sword as one of the “veterans.” I go for my own selfish reasons. It renews my strength, fills my heart, and calms my soul every year. It also gives me a chance to help set an example of what growth and healing can be like to those who are new to this journey. Please know that when I meet you, I will



Sharon Purdy with NFFF Executive Director Ron Siarnicki

be there for you and will help lead you to your own path of healing your heart. But I am also there to remind myself where I have been and how far I have come.

If a new survivor asked if the pain and confusion goes away, I would tell them yes. I have to qualify by saying that the pain of our loss is always there, but it goes to a place where we can deal with it. It will not always be that “fist in the gut” feeling. The confusion clears, the sleep returns, the smiles will indeed come back, and you will begin to live a life once again.

Please remember, there are no rules to your grief. It is your loss and your grief. You will heal in your own way and in your own time. Those who have walked that path say that as long as you can take one small step forward, you are OK. And always remember that we are only as far away as a phone call, an e-mail, a text, or a short ride in a car or plane. We are there for you. Blessings to you all.

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

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**A**s a 10-year survivor, I find that I need less from the Foundation in terms of programming. However, I still have a need for contact with other survivors, especially those whose children have died. The reason is this: they are the only ones who truly know. Widows and widowers share an equal, but different loss. Mother and fathers, even, have a different loss. I still need to interact with mothers. Just a hug provides a sense of comfort and release. I can release my sorrow and longing in the arms of another mother in a way I cannot anywhere else, even in my husband’s arms.

Many survivors enjoy sharing the “fire” connection. That is not so important for me. I am proud that Heather was a firefighter, but our family was never part of any fire service. I have enjoyed the benefits of being in the “fire service family” only at NFFF related events. I have no connection at home in my everyday life, so there is a disconnect there.

Over the years, a survivor’s needs change. It may not be necessary to attend every Survivors Conference or every Memorial Weekend, although I love to volunteer and I have loved serving on the advisory board to the NFFF’s Board of Directors. I still feel I have something to offer and to get from participating in peer support contacts and sending Remembrance Cards. I think it is important to be able to make contact with the mothers of fallen female firefighters as I have been called on to do. Newly bereaved mothers need to be able to see that the person writing to them is alive and well and coping and able to reach out and offer help. I feel it offers a kind of hope that can only come from another mother.

I believe that since I have personally benefited from having the NFFF reach out to me and embrace me, I have a moral obligation to give back. My heart tells me that I want to give back, for a number of reasons:

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**Sylvia J. Kratzke** *continued from page 3*

I was helped immensely by the Foundation in those early years in three key ways.

- A) honoring Heather and recognizing our loss
- B) being remembered every year through the Remembrance Card and other programs
- C) bringing survivors together for peer support

In the beginning, honoring Heather was the primary concern in my mind. I don't want anyone to forget that she lived and was real and was beautiful inside and out and was amazing and ALIVE when she was alive. The Remembrance Cards insure that someone besides me remembers that her bright light was extinguished too early and yet she lives on in others. Volunteer opportunities and the Conference offer the gift of healing in the arms of other mothers. I cannot get than anywhere else.

As my initial pain subsided, by coming back as a volunteer and seeing the newly bereaved, I was able to see how far I had come. Life does go on, even as life has seemingly stopped for them. New survivors need to see that, and I need to be reminded how it was then and how far I have come, because there are still days when it feels so new and raw.



*Sylvia Kratzke (right) and her daughter Heather*

I felt then and I believe now that the NFFF needs to continue to provide services to the newly bereaved. It was a lifeline for me and will be for them if they choose. If volunteering can help the Foundation do that, I will participate for as long as I am physically able.

New survivors are only able to hear so much. Their lives have changed forever. Their world is upside down. The most important gift we can give them is ourselves. Our acknowledgement of their loss and pain, our ears to listen, and opportunities for them to vent, cry and feel comforted. The Memorial Weekend does that. The presence of survivors at that Weekend is invaluable. We don't really need to tell them anything, because their shock and grief limit what they can hear. It will sink into them later that other survivors have done just that—

survived to LIVE another day.

The intensity of grief fluctuates and changes as time passes. You learn to live with it and that feeling pain and loss will not do to you and your life what it did in the beginning. You learn to experience it when it happens, go with the flow, and let it go. You realize that you will forever feel the pain of loss, but happiness and joy will be there, too. Memories will always be in our hearts, and life gradually becomes bearable and even pleasurable. No magic pills here. Just love.

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**All the Parts are Working!**

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

**I**t's a great day! All the parts are working and there are no aches or pains! It's going to be a wonderful day!"

As I boldly made my declaration of the state of my body, I watched the stunned face of my young co-worker. She obviously had not lived enough years to have a full appreciation of having all the essential parts of one's body functioning properly at the same time. As we parted ways, she smiled and said, "Have a great day, and I hope all those parts keep working!"

Isn't that what we all hope for...to have all the parts working? As the birthdays begin to add up, it becomes quite apparent that every day is not going to be a celebration. Some days are just quite simply a very long, rocky road from morning to night. So when a good day comes, it is indeed a time of celebration.

And so it goes with grief. When we suffer a loss, our "parts" become wounded and no longer function at their best. Some of those parts are so disfigured that we hardly



recognize them. Some parts are in such an upheaval that they actually seem to have taken flight and left our bodies. As I look at my friends, I tell myself, “I am sure I know these nice people. They look very familiar.” I go to the grocery store and wander aimlessly up and down the aisles. I say to myself, “What is wrong with me? I don’t even know how to grocery shop anymore!” I jump in my car intending to drive to a familiar location and suddenly find myself in a completely different place. “How did I get here, and why am I here?” I ask myself. As I take the roast from the oven, I think to myself, “What am I going to do with all this food? After cooking for two for so many years, I don’t know how to cook for just me.”

When we suffer a loss, our bodies and our minds are jolted as if they have been in a horrible accident. As a body in an accident takes time to heal, so does a body that has been in a “grief accident.” While we are reeling from the shock of the loss, life around us is going on as normal. But, for some strange reason, our normal is gone and things are just not working. Try as we might, we cannot bring back that normal into our lives. Our bodies and our minds attempt to recreate the familiar actions of days past. As the days go by and our lives become more and more unfamiliar, we become frustrated because we

no longer recognize ourselves. We are not the person we used to be and we don’t know that new person.

With loss comes change. The old normal is gone, and we must find a new normal. Slowly, step by quivering step, we walk into our new life. It’s not an easy path. Sometimes the road is rocky and steep, and we might stumble and go back a few steps. But, we have learned to pick ourselves up and get back on that road. We will continue down that road, for that is where we have found others who pick us up when we fall and help us to continue on our journey. And along that road we will find glimpses of a new normal shining through the darkness. And here and there will be a brightly lit, wide open meadow filled with a new normal for all those weary travelers. As I look across that meadow I see signs for my new normal: covered dish, Share Night, Chicken Foot, theater, dinners with the girls, just to name a few. And as I hop back on that road to continue my journey, the road suddenly looks brighter. Those new normal signs are shining brightly and lighting my pathway.

Yes, it’s going to be a great day. All the parts are working and there are no aches or pains!

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By Marty Cropper, Wife of Leroy Cropper (1995-MD)

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**W**hen I first joined the survivor group after the year Leroy was honored, I was a bystander, not knowing where I fit in. For several years, I had various duties during the Memorial Weekend—helping with registration, making plaque rubbings, being a hotel greeter.

Then the Foundation was willing to let me experiment with a project making memory boxes, and I think I’ve found my niche. Now this project is a popular activity each year

at both the Memorial Weekend and the Survivors Conference.



Marty Cropper teaching how to make memory boxes.

I get an overwhelming sense of joy when I see survivors creating their special box for special memories. I see myself as being a small part in our big picture of helping survivors on their way to healing, and I am thrilled and blessed. Thank you. God has given each one a talent, and the sum of these talents make a whole.

My motivation comes from wanting to continue to help

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