



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 71 ~ MAY 2016

Opportunities to find deeper powers within ourselves come when life seems most challenging.

~Joseph Campbell

First, a little history... The annual National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Service has been held since the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial was established in 1981. Over the years, the annual service was expanded to include a weekend of activities for families, including small group sessions where survivors could meet with one another, and the annual Saturday night Candlelight Service.

The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation was created in 1992 to honor and remember America's fallen fire heroes and to provide resources to assist their survivors in rebuilding their lives. In 1998, the NFFF received a grant from the Department of Justice to expand its programs. In the years since, we have created publications, events, and programs to help support fire service survivors year-round.

One focus of the past five years has been adding services specifically for children and young adults. Now in its fifth

year, the Hal Bruno Camp for Children of Fallen Firefighters has two distinct camp programs that serve children and stepchildren ages 4-17. In the summer of 2015, the NFFF partnered with Outward Bound USA to offer a pilot program for young adults, age 18-25 who have lost a firefighter parent. This 7-day program, which combined backpacking and hiking in the majestic mountains of Colorado with a specific grief component called Heroic Journey, is designed to encourage expression in a safe environment and to help young adults discover their inner strength. In June 2016, thanks to a generous donation from the family of fallen firefighter Tim Gunther (2015-NY), the NFFF will be hosting a Young Adults Retreat for children, stepchildren, and siblings of fallen firefighters between the ages of 18 and 25.

In this issue, survivor Sandra Hales talks about her experiences on the 2015 Outward Bound trip.

By Sandra Hales, Daughter of Robert Hales (2008-OR)

When my mom first told me about Outward Bound (OB), I thought it would be unlike any experience I had ever had, good or bad. The more I learned about it, the more I felt like I couldn't pass it up. It didn't sound particularly hard; however it also sounded like a good challenge. After having had the same feelings towards the Hal Bruno Camp for Children of Fallen Firefighters, I knew I couldn't pass up something potentially just as important in my life as that camp had been to me.

So, I gave my mom the thumbs up to buy a plane ticket and started filling out the paperwork. I got everything turned in and even had a phone conference to check up on the fact that I would be fit enough to participate in OB's course they

had set up for this Heroic Journey. As it came closer to the day I became overly worried I wasn't going to be able to do all they wanted or I was going to hate it, or even just the age-old fear, "Will anyone like me?" There was no going back.

When I arrived at the airport I was in shock. I was really going to do this. I had spent the last two weeks breaking in my new hiking boots—purple of course—and trying to piece together all of the things they said were required for our course.

All of the kids gathered in the vast Denver airport getting ready for a journey that would eventually become a life-

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altering week. We were separated into our age groups and shuffled into vans to be taken to our camps. Once there, we took the clothes and essentials out of our own bags and learned how to pack a hiking backpack and how to correctly and safely put the backpacks on, for they do actually weigh a bit. We spent our first night learning everyone's names and learning little things like how to clean your dishes, because in the field any food left over you have to pack out. Sadly, no nice trash cans conveniently in the woods for your use.

Half of the people present were associated with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, so I immediately felt connected and comfortable with them. The other half were young adults who had also experienced loss in their lives, just not firefighters. Though I didn't know at first, in the airport I had the privilege of meeting Jason Stout from the Outward Bound organization. He helped fill in some of everyone's gaps and made you feel more comfortable sitting in a large airport waiting for everyone to arrive. He explained that OB had made a decision to put the two groups together because neither had enough people for a full group. Together we were perfect. Go FID squad!!

We went rock climbing at Turtle Rock. We learned metaphors connected with rock climbing and our personal experiences in life, like when there's someone there to belay you while you climb, the person makes sure if you were to fall, they would have the rope and catch you. Our instructors helped us to see that in our everyday struggles



we have people who would belay us, or have our back and always be there when we fell. There at every boulder or "turtle" we had to scale.

This opportunity shed more light on my life than I ever could have imagined. I never doubted my ability to complete anything I set my mind to, and so I went into this challenge with my head held high, determined to, as my instructors repeated often "squeeze every bit of juice out of the orange for your juice." Yet every day we were faced with several challenges meant to show us how strong we are, both physically and mentally, and that often we do need help even if we would like to think we can go it alone.

Many times on this course we were spending more time encouraging and pushing each other to take just one step more, to breathe in deeply and exhale the negative thoughts we might have, or to just take a simple moment to enjoy the beauty we were missing by being too concerned



Sandra Hales (fourth from left) with her Outward Bound companions.



with where we were going and not where we were. No one is perfect, and with those imperfections we bonded. I will never forget a single person from my trip, whether it was Joe who got to drive our shy, antisocial, media engrossed group from the airport on the first day or Nicki who made us the best hamburgers ever.

From everyone telling their stories of their loved ones, to hearing the laughter after they remembered their favorite thing about that person, we bonded. From the mushy granola at five a.m. before the sun to the cinnamon rolls on the last day of hiking made by our fabulous instructors, we were together as a group that has already decided we need to get back together again next summer.

We went from a silent car ride to laughing the night away. We are all different because of our circumstances and the boulders we've faced, but to work together to get everyone from one side of a mountain to the other with a peak attempt in the middle, you build an unbelievable, lifelong relationship with each person. Everyone has their own areas of expertise and then the area they need to improve. No matter what we did, everyone got to stand next to someone new, to have new conversations, to feel comfortable with everyone, and to have the whole group cheer you on when you needed it, whether you knew you needed it or not. Some people were ready to hike but weren't ready to share their story. So with the help of the whole group we all worked together to be comfortable sharing how life was at home or school and worked up to what we were really struggling with or what we had struggled with.

Some conversations might not seem important, like what music you listen to or if you played sports, but if you think about it, how can you get close to someone and share your very soul without finding out how they handle your outermost surface that everyone sees? Having already shared my story for some time, I did volunteer to go first, which was so terrifying. You don't know these people yet, but you know deep down no one there is going to judge you, only help you see you are not to blame and to point out how far you've made it. To remind you they will be there even after this crazy hiking trip. It's crazy to think you could share your life's tragedies with eleven virtual strangers and three instructors you aren't even sure you like yet.

It's stressful, you have to adapt, and most of all you need to be open to squeezing the damn orange. Are you willing to jump as a group, get your socks wet, or sleep alone in the



When we started on the hardest hike to the top of the peak, we all chose a rock to carry with us. And whenever we felt like we couldn't go any farther, we were supposed to pull out the rock and think of someone who had been there for us and had made us stronger people. Because that climb was for them. And when we finally got to the top, the Skittles were a reward of sorts, and we all wanted to leave them with our rocks (though that wasn't allowed, because you can't feed the wild animals)... This is the photo of our "loved ones" we had climbed for, also sharing the Skittles with us.

woods? All of these things may have been daunting when we first learned of them, but as each day passed and each challenge showed itself, we stayed together as a group, as a team, and we helped each other conquer it.

We may all live apart, and we may not all get to be together again, but we all know we have ten others our age we could reach out for in need or in invitation to celebrate our success, like when we graduate college or we finally find the path in life we want to take. And we have four great instructors/logistics OB's we can reach for to stay in touch, to share our pain, our success, or just what we did last weekend. We have these people we can always go to for anything because we are a family. We are the FID squad for life.

We all know we are capable and don't have to know what we want right now, but we need to remember how much potential we have bottled up inside. And when we feel we can't find it, we will remember this experience and remember we brought all of our potential out and give it a big boost.

I will always be your belay, as you will always remain mine. Thanks for the awesome time in the wilderness.

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BJA

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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

Would you like to participate in Outward Bound 2016?

The NFFF has partnered again with Outward Bound USA to offer an exciting 7-day adventure designed to encourage expression and help participants find healing. This program is for young adults, 18-25 who have lost a firefighter parent.

The dates for the course are August 8-14, 2016, and there is still space available. The NFFF and Outward Bound partnership provides tuition for this program, making it free for you to attend. In addition, the NFFF will reimburse your airfare up to \$350 after you complete the course.

If you are eligible for this program and would like to attend, please contact Eric Nagle at enagle@firehero.org as soon as possible. Eric will provide you with a link to the Outward Bound USA program package.

**All forms are due by July 8 in order
to participate.**

We want to hear from you...



We used to think about grief as a series of stages people went through or tasks they had to complete to be healthy and whole again. Current understanding of grief has changed, and we now know it is a very individual process, sometimes more like a rollercoaster than a ride from point A to point B. For those of you who have been living with your loss for years now, what was the process like for you? How did you feel in the first few months, the first few years, and how is your life different now?

If you would like to submit a piece on this or another topic, please send it to arrive by July 15, 2016 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
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This project was supported by Grant No. 2012-PS-DX-0001, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.