

## Save the Date—2017 Survivor Events

### July 21–23

Kids Camps for Children of Fallen Firefighters

Ages 4–17

Denver, Colorado

### August 3–5

Young Adult Retreat for Children of Fallen Firefighter

Ages 18–25

Linthicum Heights, Maryland

### October 6–8

National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend

Emmitsburg, Maryland

### November 2–4

Parents and Siblings Retreat

Baltimore, Maryland

### December 8

Survivor Tree Lighting

Emmitsburg, Maryland



**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.

**Toll-free:** 1-888-744-6513

## We want to hear from you...



We accept pieces written by survivors of firefighters honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial about their personal experiences with loss. We would love to hear from you! You don't have to be a fancy writer or an A student. Just send us your story in your own words, and we can help get it into final form.

If you would like to submit a piece for an upcoming issue, or if you have an idea for a theme for an upcoming issue, please send it by August 1 to:

[jwoodall@firehero.org](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org) (preferred) or  
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

Attn: Jenny Woodall

P.O. Drawer 498

Emmitsburg, MD 21727

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Programs (PSOB)

This project was supported by Cooperative Agreement 2016-PS-DX-K001, 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.

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# The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 77 ~ MAY/JUNE 2017

*You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.*

~ Jon Kabat-Zinn

**I**n 2016, a group of 18–25-year-old sons and daughters of fallen firefighters met at the Airlie Center in Warrenton, Virginia, for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation's first ever **Young Adult Retreat**. Here's what they had in common: They all lost a firefighter father in the line of duty. Beyond that, it was a pretty diverse group. They were from nine different states and came from big cities and small towns. Some were just out of high school, many in college or starting in the workforce, and at least one had a wedding date on the calendar. Some of them lost their dads when they were young children; for others the loss was much more recent.

But those differences fell away as they shared their stories. However unique the details of each situation, they had all lived one experience. They got one another. They connected.

We were impressed and moved by this vibrant group of young people and the wisdom they had to share. In this issue of *The Journey*, we share some of the thoughts and themes that emerged from the discussions in that room.

The second Young Adult Retreat is coming up on August 3–5, 2017, near Baltimore, Maryland. Here's who is eligible to attend:

- Child, stepchild, or sibling of a firefighter who has been honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Emmitsburg, Maryland (including those who are approved to be honored in 2017)
- Age 18–25 at the time of the retreat
- Out of high school

The retreat, including lodging, is free of charge to eligible survivors. In addition, the Foundation is able to provide partial reimbursement of travel expenses to help young adults attend. We hope you can join us!

For complete details:

<https://www.firehero.org/event/young-adults-retreat-2017>.

Register online at:

<https://www.regonline.com/young-adult-2017>.

Questions:

Contact Bev Donlon at [bdonlon@firehero.org](mailto:bdonlon@firehero.org) or 301-447-1603.



## Thoughts from the 2016 Young Adult Retreat

### What do you remember just after your father died?

*I couldn't process what was happening.*

*The funeral was awful, invasive, and too public.*

*I went numb. I couldn't even hear what people were saying to me.*

*Time distorted. I was in a fog.*

### How did things change after your firefighter's death?

*People rallied together to support us.*

*When the fire department didn't support us, it was hurtful, like losing your second family.*

*The experience has opened me up more emotionally.*

### What is/was helpful to you after your dad died?

*I like to hear the happy stories and memories.*

*Getting back into a routine helped me.*

*I like talking about my dad. I want to keep his memory alive.*

*My pastor told me, "People will say some awful things that may be painful to hear. They are trying to say they love you; they just don't know how."*

### What is/was not helpful?

*I don't want to be treated like I'm fragile or special or different because of my loss, especially at school.*

*I appreciated the condolences and sympathy that people offered, but it wasn't really that helpful or comforting to me.*

*What are we going to do with 19 fruit platters??*

*Because it was a high profile incident, there are so many reminders. It "belongs to everyone" and is brought up in relation to everything else that happens.*

*Words of comfort are often not comforting.*

### What did you do to take care of yourself after your father died?

*I cut people out of my life who weren't supportive.*

*I surrounded myself with people who support me without pity.*

*I put on a fake happy face until it was real.*

*I choose carefully who I share this information with.*

*I decided not to keep asking "Why?" and "What if?"*

*I needed to get away from my small town and all the scrutiny. Now no one knows my story unless I want to tell them.*

*What helped me was helping other people.*

*I made a decision to focus on happiness.*

### What is hard for you? What do you struggle with?

*I don't remember what his voice sounds like.*

*It's still hard for me to talk about what happened.*

*I worry about pushing people away with too much grief and sadness.*

*I don't want people to feel sorry for me.*

*It is profoundly unfair when good people die.*

*People questioned whether it was an actual line-of-duty death since he died from a heart attack.*

### What did you learn after your father died?

*People are afraid of grievers.*

*We (the grieving family) are the trigger that causes other people (family, friends, fire department) pain.*

*Other people start to forget after a few weeks.*

*My dad passed his love of service on to his children.*

*Grief breaks down all barriers.*

*I found out who my true friends were.*

*The worst has already happened. I can do anything now.*

### What do you want other people to know?

*I still have a dad. He just isn't alive.*

*The fact that I was too young to have memories doesn't make my loss or grief less.*

*I am still me!*

*I love the things that are in my life that connect me to my dad.*





### Comments about the 2016 Young Adult Retreat

*This event showed me that I am not alone in my grief.*

*This retreat offered me a valuable opportunity to share my story and meet others facing the same struggle. I have learned from them and gained an amazing group of people to lean on.*

*I have longed for the chance to connect with other survivors my own age.*

*This weekend was exactly what I needed.*

*Because I was very young when my father died, I struggle with not having my own memories of him. This retreat brought me out of my comfort zone and allowed me to safely explore and express my grief and the struggle of being a child survivor.*

*It was a very healing weekend for me and my sister. It was a real blessing to be surrounded and supported by others who have been on such a similar journey.*

*The tools and workshops that I participated in during this retreat are simply invaluable. For the first time since my father died when I was very young, I was surrounded by people who I could relate to. The amount of support, compassion, and love I received from strangers who are now family is indescribable.*

*Sharing our stories was a unique and special opportunity to talk out in the open about things we usually keep bottled up, but that tend to weigh most heavily on our minds and hearts.*

*I felt safe enough to say aloud much of what I've thought for years.*

*Sharing our stories and hearing how others deal with grief lets me know I'm not alone.*

*I loved the balance of grief topics and life-related topics. There were fun bonding activities between deeper conversations.*



### Illinois Survivors Conference

**W**hat started as a discussion between three friends at a corner bakery about what more could be done for survivors of line-of-duty deaths in Illinois evolved into the first Illinois Survivors Conference. Now in its fifth year, this event brings together Illinois survivors who are spread from one end of the state to the other and who come from large career departments like Chicago to very small, rural, all-volunteer departments. The program is uplifting and heartfelt. The memories, insights, and friendships add to the experience of knowing you are not alone, nor will you ever be.

The size of our group and the bond created between all of us grows a little bit more each year. Please join us on

September 7th for the annual Illinois Survivors Conference, held at the Holiday Inn in Carol Stream, Illinois. Benefits include discounted rate on hotel stays, dinner and happy hour, and a free round of golf in the Chicagoland Memorial Golf Tournament on September 8th, which raises money for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. For more information or to be placed on our mailing list for this year's event, please contact Steve Tullis at 708-218-7800 or [stullis@ameritech.net](mailto:stullis@ameritech.net).

*The Illinois Survivors Conference exists thanks to the efforts of Illinois survivors and fire service personnel. It is not officially affiliated with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.*