

Save the Date—2017 Survivor Events

October 6–8

National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend

Emmitsburg, Maryland

To view the services live from home, use the link posted at www.firehero.org.

November 2–4

Parents and Siblings Retreat

Baltimore, Maryland

Registration is open until October 13, 2017. For more details and to access the registration link, go to <https://www.firehero.org/event/2017-parents-siblings>.

December 8

Survivor Tree Lighting

Emmitsburg, Maryland

If you would like to attend, contact Eric Nagle at enagle@firehero.org or 301-447-1431



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...



At our recent Young Adult Retreat, one of the topics that came up was the great advice people remembered getting from their dads. From the practical to the more philosophical, these words of wisdom stayed with them long after their fathers had died. If you lost a firefighter father or mother in the line of duty, what is the advice you received from your parent that continues to guide your life today?

To submit a piece for an upcoming issue, please send it by October 31 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

Attn: Jenny Woodall

P.O. Drawer 498

Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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« *The human heart has a way of making itself large again even after it's been broken into a million pieces.* »

~ Robert James Waller

When a loved one dies, many surviving family members feel as if they will never recover. Even the word “recover” is misleading, as it suggests a return to the way things were before. That, of course, is impossible. But what is possible is finding a life that is full and that feels worth living.

If your loved one died recently, or if you are feeling stuck in grief, the good news is that you are part of a larger community of families of fallen firefighters. Within that community are many people who have been where you are and who have found a way to brighter days. What is the

path they took to get there? There is a different path for each one, and it wasn't there until they walked it. The good and the bad news is that there isn't one way that works for everyone. The good and the bad news is that you have to find your own path. But you don't have to do it alone.

If you aren't connected with other survivors and would like to be, please let us know! We can put you in touch with someone you can communicate with one-on-one. You can attend an upcoming survivor event where you can meet other survivors. We can help you find support in your home community. Let us know how we can help you as you find your way.

Fifteen Years: Time, Reality, and Miracles

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

I never thought that I could survive the death of my daughter. The pain of understanding that she was dead, suddenly and without warning, was so intense I thought I was dying. In retrospect, indeed I was. A part of me did die that day. The hole her death created in my heart remains and will remain until it is my time to leave this life. But even more so, what did die is the reality of time. There is the reality of the time before her death and the reality of the time after her death. There is the reality of the time immediately after her death, and the reality of time altering slightly with each passing year. With the perception of time altered, my life was divided into the time before and the time after her death.

Before her death was a vibrant time of infinite possibility—her upcoming marriage, the family she wanted sooner rather than later, the trajectory of her career. Relocating

to Northern California was on the horizon for me, to be able to help care for those future grandchildren. There was excitement, anticipation, joy. Then came the day in July that ended that divinely beautiful summer.

The death of a child turns all of what was before upside down. The pain and sadness of grief filled the impossibly slow-moving time following her death. I couldn't understand how the world and the people in it could just keep racing along as if nothing had happened. Waking up every day and attempting (sometimes even completing) the mundane tasks of everyday life lead to a gradual synching of the time outside of me and the time within me. As this upside-down new reality slowly sinks in, a new and different reality reveals itself. What was to be will not be. The future, however, was uncertain.

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Fifteen Years *continued from page 1*

The time after her death has been a learning experience. Journeying through my grief was complicated by the journeys of my husband and son, as every person's grief journey is different. That tricky time slowed and sped up at its own will, creating bumps along the road, bumps I somehow worked through each time they reappeared. I came to understand that what will be was up to me.

This reality required work. Along with that work came a more normalized passage of time. And with the more normal passage of time came the miracle. At least it seems like a miracle. Joy returned! And along with it, excitement and anticipation. My son was married and adopted two boys, grandchildren for me, when once I was bereft with the loss of my daughter's not-to-be children. My husband, ever my rock, joined me in retirement where our time is our own, filled with not only the mundane but with the excitement of living life. Time is a miracle. Every day since that terrible July day has been a small miracle.

With the passage of this miraculous time, reality changes. It changes every morning as we are reborn into a new day. The reality of today is the sum of all that is past. It has expanded and grown. This is not to say that the effect of Heather's death is not still with me. I still long for her physical

presence—the sound of her laughter, the feel of her strong arms giving me a big hug, the flowery scent of her hair. I still mourn the loss of what could have been. The hole in my heart is still there. But the miracle of time has transformed the intense pain into a longing that I have learned to satisfy with vivid memory. I have learned to embrace the loss of what could have been, feel it, and let it go, because the reality of today is greater than that feeling of loss. The hole in my heart reminds me not that it's empty, but that it is full of the grace that was and is Heather.

It's been fifteen years since time stopped, shifting the world on its axis, and I find that I am changed. Am I healed? No. When a part of you dies, you are never truly healed. Is there closure? No. How can there ever be closure? She was alive; now she is dead. Closure suggests that all the loose ends are gathered together and wholeness occurs. How can I be whole when she is never coming home? It is, rather, that time has allowed me to learn to live with the reality of today. It's as if a limb is lost, yet I can still feel it. The pain is not the searing pain of when the limb was lost, but the constant ache of where it once was. Perhaps the reality of time did not die on that day, but slowed enough for me to find my way through grief and sorrow, recovering happiness and joy along the way. Perhaps the real miracle of these fifteen years of time is that I have indeed survived.

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Young Adult Retreat

The second annual Young Adult Retreat was held on August 3-5, 2017, near Baltimore, Maryland. A wonderful group of young people gathered to share their stories and talk about the enduring bonds they have with their parent who died and ways in which they stay connected. They spent an afternoon at a local adventure course challenging themselves, solving problems as a group, and facing any fear they had of heights.

Thanks for coming, for sharing your thoughts about future events, and for being a generally all-around great group of people.





Holiday Tree Lighting



Each year the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation decorates holiday trees in memory of our fallen firefighters. These beautiful trees are on display in the Chapel, hung with ornaments from survivors and departments around the country in honor of their fallen firefighters.

If you would like to make or decorate an ornament in honor of your firefighter, please send ornaments to arrive before December 1, 2017, to:

National Fallen Firefighters
Foundation
Holiday Tree Program
PO Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

If you would like to attend the Tree Lighting on December 8, 2017, there will be a brief indoor service at 4:30 p.m., followed by a reception in the beautiful Chapel and an opportunity to view the lovingly decorated trees. To attend, please contact Eric Nagle at enagle@firehero.org or 301-447-1431 at least 48 hours prior to the event. This will ensure that you are on the access list to come onto the National Emergency Training Center campus for this event.

A Note of Encouragement

Connection with other people is powerful! When you are going through a tough time, a simple note of encouragement can make such a difference and give you the boost you need to put a little more bounce in your step. And reaching out to others is good for the giver as well. In this age of instant and mass communication, it can be really nice to receive a personal note by mail or e-mail letting you know that someone else is thinking of you.

Would you be willing to volunteer your time to send notes to people who need encouragement? If so, please e-mail or call Ashley Whitmore at awhitmore@firehero.org or 301-447-1365 and let her know if you are willing to send notes by mail and/or e-mail.

