

NFFF Connect

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all NFFF in-person events have been canceled through the end of summer 2020.

We are offering opportunities for Fire Hero Family members to connect virtually through a variety of programs offered via Zoom and social media, including virtual support groups where you can talk with one another. For more information, Fire Hero Family members can join the new NFFF Family Programs Facebook group at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/NFFFFireHeroFamilyPrograms>. You can also access the information through our website at <https://www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources>.



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

Upcoming Events

Please check www.firehero.org for the most up-to-date information on the status of NFFF events.

Columbia Southern University Scholarship

Interested in an online degree? Columbia Southern University (CSU) is proud to honor those who have served their communities and is granting one scholarship to the spouse, life partner or dependent of a fallen firefighter who has been honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial. This scholarship will cover up to 60 credit hours toward one online degree program with Columbia Southern University. The scholarship will be applied directly to the recipient's tuition for up to three years or until the completion of the selected online degree program, whichever comes first. For more information:

<https://www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources/programs/scholarships/csu>

We want to hear from you...



One definition of the word mantra is "a repeated word or phrase, prayer or chant." Do you have a personal mantra? Is there a word, phrase, or prayer that you return to when you need to ground and anchor yourself? What are your personal words to live by?

How does your mantra help you deal with grief and loss, as well as with the COVID-19 pandemic?

To submit a piece on this or another topic for an upcoming issue, please send it by June 30 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org 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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If you're going through hell, keep going.

~ Winston Churchill

This is quite a season we are in, this COVID-19 pandemic. It has put on pause so many things we hold dear, most especially gathering together in times of both heartbreak and celebration. It has put enormous strain on the medical and public safety communities, many of whom are directly impacted by the illness. The shutdown has caused financial hardship and uncertainty for so many people. The impacts on emotional and mental health are profound. It has been, and still is, hard.

And yet...

There are so many examples of good around us—neighbors working together, communities rallying to support their most vulnerable citizens, families spending quality time. We learn how to use unfamiliar technology in order to “gather” from the safety of our homes for worship, conversation, connection, marking important days. We figure out how to shop remotely, to make masks to protect ourselves and others, to adapt to new expectations.

Those who have grieved the death of a loved one already know a thing or two about doing what seems impossible. They have faced the unthinkable reality, put one foot in front of the other and forged a new path, created a meaningful life that may look nothing like the one they imagined they would be living. Those of us who have faced grief have exercised those muscles and built new strength. We have tools we can use in this current situation, much as we might prefer not to have to do the hard thing yet again.

A few reminders for the journey:

- Take good care of yourself—your body, your mind, your spirit.
- It's OK if you are struggling. Lots of people are.
- Reach out for help. No one has to do this alone.
- This is just a season; it won't always be this way.

By Jessica Varney

Wife of Braden Varney (2018-CA)

I wanted to submit a little something for all who read about a quality of my husband Braden that I am trying to carry forward. Unbeatable generosity. If his whole life could be wrapped up in two words, that would be it. He outshined anyone I've ever known in the way he made people feel special and the kind, kind things he did

for them daily. He was always secretly paying for someone's broken down car or meal in a restaurant or boots needed for work. He even bought a brand new bed and comforter for one of his employees who worked hard for him but wasn't getting a good night's rest due to an old mattress.

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Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.

~ Francis of Assisi

Jessica Varney *continued from page 1*

It wasn't just money; he would give a lot of his time, too. There is a Christian camp near us that needed a long forest road cleared or it could not be in existence. Being a very experienced heavy equipment operator, Braden did the work for a fraction of the cost, and it took him some days to do so. He went back yearly to keep it graded, among lots of other donated tractor services at the camp. He was always there when a neighbor needed him for snowplowing or burying their horses or removing dead trees from their driveway.

But the one he did the nicest things for was me, his wife. Seriously, anytime I mentioned I liked something he would get it or do it for me. True love at its best. The way I'm paying this forward is by leading a grief support group in my town, as well as co-leading a start-up business called WIN (Widows/Widowers In Need) for practical help for those in need—things like weed eating, splitting wood, delivering hot meals, and handyman stuff. I know what it feels like to be a wife one day and a mechanic the next. Any way I can alleviate suffering in this world the way my husband did will be a life well lived. I will carry my husband's torch of generosity until I, too, take my last breath. In honor of his legacy.



Christopher's Jokes

By Maureen Santora, mother of Christopher Santora (2001-NY)

I am submitting this piece in honor of my son, Christopher, who was 23 when he died on September 11, 2001, because he had an extraordinarily good view on life.

Christopher was nicknamed “Jokey Smurf” when he was little. He loved to tell jokes and make ordinary situations into fun. He especially loved to rile his sisters, and just before they were ready to “attack” him he would tell a joke or do something to make them laugh. When he was in middle school and high school, this served him well. He was never in a fight. If someone wanted to fight, Chris would simply make them laugh. This defused the situation. He had many friends, because he was fun to be around. Christopher also found ordinary things to make fun of. We were always amazed at his slant on life. Things that most people would not take notice of, Christopher noticed. He commented on these things and made funny comments about them. He lightened the room whenever he entered.

At times, this could be annoying. But as I look back, this technique of making light of most of the ordinary

annoyances in life was a good thing. Christopher always would say to me, “Don’t sweat the small stuff, Mom!” He balanced his life well. He was very smart and had an extraordinary memory, but that was not what was important to him. Playing basketball, having fun with friends, and helping his family were all things he did with ease.

He was a fierce competitor in every sport, but if someone got injured on the opposite team, he was quick to run over to make sure that person was OK. He never wanted to win in unfair conditions. After his death, several parents came over to Al and me and told us that their sons could always play if Christopher was playing. He never left anyone out, even if they were not good players. There was a sense of fairness. It amazes me to this day.

We now have nine grandchildren; seven of them are boys. We believe that Christopher had a hand in that, as he grew up with four sisters. I tell them all the time about Christopher’s ability to defuse situations with humor. It works. They know all the stories. I hope in their lives they will learn his technique. When things get stressed or people get angry at you, tell a joke. Make them laugh. Things will be better.



It was hard to laugh after our son died. I worked hard to find humor in ordinary things. Now, almost 19 years later, my family laughs a lot. We laugh at the ordinary things in

life. We laugh at the things that to many don't seem to be funny. Christopher is with us each time we do. And, he is with me each and every day.

Finding Family

By Lisa Hampton, wife of Daniel Hampton (2015-TX)

When Daniel died on September 18, 2015, my world fell apart. I was completely lost. I felt no one understood. Four and a half years later I still remember sitting in the church hall after the funeral looking around and not knowing anyone but my family. I realized how alone I was.

My own family struggled with how to handle grief and loss when my sister passed away. When Daniel died, they were not able to provide much emotional help, because they did not understand what I was going through. I attempted GriefShare groups, but I did not find people I could connect with. These ladies had been married to their spouses for many years. They had been through life's major milestones hand in hand. Daniel had passed away less than a month before our four-year wedding anniversary. We had a baby and three other children at home. Three months before he passed away, we had purchased our first home together. We had barely begun our lives together.

For nine months I walked around lost, numb, and feeling completely alone. Then, during the summer of 2016, everything changed. My oldest two boys and I boarded a plane to California to attend our first Comfort Zone Camp. When we were sitting downstairs at the hotel waiting for the bus to take us to camp, our world became not so lonely. Everyone around us was talking and knew each other; just like it had been for the last nine months, we were alone

and did not know anyone. This didn't last long, though. It started with one stranger coming up to us while we waited. She was also a fire widow mom there for camp with her kids. She quickly introduced us to all the other families. We talked, laughed, and had a very enjoyable time. When we

left that weekend, I felt relief. We had found others that we could connect with. We were welcomed into their family with open, loving arms. These new friendships are unbreakable.

That October we attended the Memorial Weekend for Daniel to be honored. Many of those new friends were there and helped us through the weekend. They had stayed in touch over the months after camp and helped prepare us for the weekend. The new family we found continues to grow with each retreat, conference, camp, and Memorial Weekend.

During this hard time of uncertainty, it is heartbreaking that we will not be able to be together in person. But I find comfort in knowing that my NFFF family is there for me. Should I need

someone to talk to, laugh with, cry, or just listen, there is always someone there. I may talk to some daily, weekly, monthly, or just when we see each other in person, but when we do, it is with open arms and hearts. We may talk about our grief, day-to-day life, our kids, or more personal subjects—things that before finding my NFFF family I felt no one understood. My kids and I found our family that shares a bond and love like no other.

