



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 100 ~ MAY/JUNE 2021

« One may walk over the highest mountain one step at a time. »

~ John Wanamaker

In the day to day, it can be difficult to see our own progress. Head down, one foot in front of the other, one day at a time, it's hard to see the forest for the trees. It's important to look up from time to time, take a bird's eye view, and get a sense of the distance we have traveled.

When we sent out the first issue of this publication back in spring 2003, it didn't have a name. We asked Fire Hero Families for suggestions, and it became *The Journey*, which is how many people describe the experience of grief. Since then, more than 260 family members and friends of firefighters honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial have written pieces for this publication. That's 260+ different grief journeys, each as unique as the relationship that set it in motion.

We are celebrating a milestone with this 100th issue of *The Journey*. Over the past 18 years, it has been our honor and privilege to witness and highlight the hard-won wisdom and beautiful memories shared in these pages. We remember with love the handful of writers who have since passed on. We salute you all as your journeys continue. And if you haven't written for *The Journey* yet, we would love to add your story to these pages.

Remember to pause, look around, and remind yourself that you are making progress each day. Baby steps are still steps. Some days are easier than others. And you are not walking alone.

Let's check in with a few people and get an update on what they have been up to.

Look How Far We Have Come!

Sharon Purdy has written for at least seven past issues (#22, 23, 38, 48, 50, 53, and 83) of The Journey! Her first piece appeared in Issue 22: Labels—Widows and Survivors, in November 2007.

I Am a Survivor

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

My husband, Lee, died in the line of duty in January 2000. In the weeks that followed, I was mired in paperwork and all the legal things that go with putting the one you loved to rest.

About two months after Lee died, I was on the Internet and found the web site of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. I clicked on the Contact Us page and let loose with all my frustrations about hassles



from insurance companies and PSOB and everything else that I could think of.

A few days later I received a call from Mary Ellis, the Managing Director of the Foundation at that time.

During our conversation, she called me a "survivor." I told her I could not accept the term survivor, since to me a survivor was

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someone who lived through a terrible ordeal such as a plane crash or flood or some other act of nature. She quietly explained that I was a survivor and would learn to understand that term in time.

Now, after seven years, I do understand. I am a survivor. I have survived the loss of my husband and best friend. I have survived closing the business we owned. I have survived dealing with the insurance companies and all the legalities that we deal with. I have survived terrible winters where no one was there to help shovel the snow, long summers where no one was there to help with the yard work. The nights when I walk into a dark house after being

away for the day. Holidays when you are alone in a room full of people. Birthdays and anniversaries without the one you love there to help celebrate. And each day, I survive by just getting out of bed to face the new day. I'm still here. I'm still surviving.

Today, I don't hesitate to contact the caring staff at the Foundation for direction on survivor issues. They are always there and ready to assist. The pain of our loss doesn't go away; it just goes to a place where we can deal with it. I have learned to laugh again. I have learned to appreciate the sunrise again. I have learned to live again.

Lee is with me in my heart every day, but I now understand: I AM A SURVIVOR.

Sharon Purdy—2021 Update

A Long Journey

My husband, Lee, died at the scene of a residential fire. He collapsed from the top of the pumper and was found on the ground. I consider myself one of the lucky survivors. I was senior paramedic at the fire scene, so I was with Lee when we lost him. On the way to the hospital, I was able to tell him I loved him and would try to understand if he had to leave me. And he was gone. On January 8, 2000, I became a widow. (I hate that word, by the way.) Those first few months were full of learning how to continue. It was a learning experience from that point on.

My beautiful mother died three months after Lee, and I was thrown into a flurry of stress and not sleeping and trying to figure out where to start. I made a lot of mistakes those first few months. I learned that finding someone to help me work my way through the paperwork and mistakes I had made was important. If I were to offer any advice to a new survivor, I would suggest they make no large purchases without discussing it with a friend, a lawyer, or a banker. I have seen too many who spent a ton of money those first months and regretted it later.

During those first months, I realized I was having emotional issues. The stress of moving on with the death of Lee and my mother put me over the edge. A smart person



recommended that I talk with someone to help me get back on track. That's how I met The Kid. The Kid was a therapist who kept me alive and helped me realize I had PTSD. He was an amazing person who let me argue with him and say what was on my mind. I think when I finished therapy, he needed a therapist of his own. I spoke my piece, and it helped me move forward. There is no shame in seeing a mental health worker and even taking meds if that is needed. There is no

shame in wanting to be better. If you are having issues, call and make an appointment. Or call the NFFF; they can direct you to the right person to help you.

Remember when you were walking through those first days and friends were all over the place? Then, slowly, they faded back into the world. I quickly learned that we appear to be the only person who still wants to talk about our firefighter. It's not that they don't care; they just don't get it. Their lives went on; ours changed. Please try to overlook it. Those friends will finally understand when they walk our path. I hope it's a long time before they learn that lesson.

I will always remember Lee, but I also learned to live again. Yes, I miss him, but I have learned to laugh, make new friends, and move forward. Honor your firefighter by moving forward. Be happy, smile, and live your life. It's OK to be OK again.



Many of us feel that our firefighter is close to us, and we get “signs” from them. Who are we to question? When I find a dime, I know Lee has been looking over my shoulder. It brings peace to my heart. For some, it’s a butterfly or a special bird or a song on the radio. Doesn’t matter. If that brings a smile and peace in your heart, enjoy the moment. It’s your life.

As for me, I am moving on to a new part of my life. I have always wanted to sing. In fact, I wanted to be a music teacher. Well, I am not a music teacher, but I do sing. I am now part of a trio of musicians. We have been singing in a

restaurant for a few years. I am never going to win a gold record, but I am having the time of my life. I love it, and I can see Lee looking down at me and smiling, shaking his head and wondering what I will do next.

You are a survivor, and you can do anything you want. Be gentle with yourself and know that there is always someone from the Fire Hero Family survivor group to lend an ear as needed. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has saved my life and so many others. They are there to listen, to guide, and to assist when needed. I am forever grateful.

*Liza Aunkst wrote a piece for Issue 83: Advice from My Dad, in June 2018.
She was just embarking on a major step in her life.*

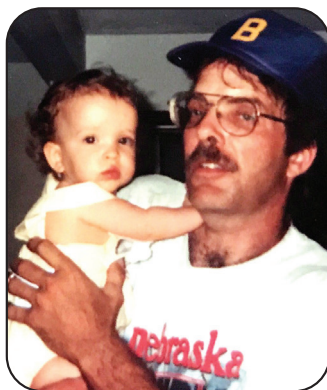
Advice from My Dad

By Liza Aunkst, Daughter of Michael Aunkst (2005-NE)

I was nine years old when my father passed away. The best piece of advice that I received from my father, Michael Aunkst, came after his death on February 27, 2005. This advice came in the form of a letter that my fourth grade teacher had parents write to their children at the beginning of the year to be given to them at some point throughout the year. I didn’t receive my letter until a month or two after my father’s death, near the end of the school year. There is one line that has stuck with me since receiving that letter over thirteen years ago: Never be afraid to ask for help, and always keep trying.

I did not follow this advice through the rest of middle school, but really started to use it at the end of my high school career into my current adult life. When I was still in high school, I had been denied multiple scholarships, usually due to my GPA or my essays. Despite often feeling discouraged, I never gave up but continued to apply. I was granted a NFFF scholarship throughout my years as a college student!

Fast forward into college. I have always been a reserved person and never liked to bother people for help. When the Foundation announced that they were going to be holding a Young Adults Retreat in 2016, it piqued my interest, but



I was a broke college student at the time. This is when I started to ask for help from my father’s fire department and my mother, who told me that she would help me get to the retreat. At the retreat, I met many wonderful young adults and put faces to the names behind exchanged emails leading up to the retreat. I was nervous for my first Foundation event, but after a lot of helpful reassurance from the staff, they helped me through my first event with no issues and not a lot of anxiety.

At the 2017 Young Adults Retreat, I took “Never be afraid to ask for help.” to heart. I had been at my first full-time job out of college for eight months, moved in with a few friends, and actually started to have to pay bills. My depression and anxiety were starting to take over my mindset. Through different conversations at this retreat, I realized this, and Jenny Woodall from the NFFF told me that she could help me find a counselor in my area. I am not one to ask for help or talk about myself in general, but I told Jenny that it wouldn’t hurt to search. She connected me to a counselor in my area that specializes in grief, anxiety, and depression. I got her contact information in August, and it took me until the end of September to

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actually set up an appointment. I remembered the advice my father gave me and took a step and asked for help to better my mental health. I have been in counseling since that time and even set up an appointment on the anniversary of my father's death to seek help talking about it.

This year, for the first time, I attended the NFFF Wellness Conference. I was more nervous than I had been going to the Young Adults Retreat. I did not know what to expect

and barely knew anybody at the conference. As a result of being nervous, I did not ask for help. This started to change as the days went on, and I slowly opened up and asked for help. By the end of the conference, I was so overwhelmed by the amount of love and self-compassion that I had opened myself up to, that I did not want to leave. This entire conference reminded me of the advice my father gave me to never be afraid to ask for help. I plan to use this advice for as long as I can and often use it in my own practice with work. I remind myself daily that it really is okay to ask for help and that, no matter how hard it gets, I always keep trying.

Liza Aunkst—2021 Update

A lot has happened since I wrote my first article in 2018! It seems like it was such a long time ago. In the past three years, I have had a lot of life changes. In May 2018, I got my bulldog, Chunk, and we have conquered a lot of things together. Chunk has helped me through a lot of tough times and even helped me through starting a new job and starting and finishing graduate school.

I have been with my current agency, Nebraska Children's Home Society, since November 2018. In my current position, I support families in the State of Nebraska who have children that are adopted or have guardianship of a child. This is something I have thoroughly enjoyed; knowing the impact I have made on these families helps keep me going, even during tough situations.

In April 2019, I started at the University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work, where I worked on my Master of Social Work degree, with a concentration in mental health and trauma. I am very proud to say that I received that degree in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic and formally graduated from the University of Denver in May 2021. I am also working on becoming a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) in the state of Nebraska. While this is 3,000 hours of work, supervision, and an exam, I know that it will be worth it in the long haul and what I want to do with my life. I want to focus on the mental health of first responders, as this is an area that is rarely discussed or touched upon. I am not sure what the plan looks like to focus on that field, but I know that I will get there some day.



When thinking about the advice my father gave me so many years ago, the past three years have been a huge opportunity to follow that advice. Throughout my graduate school career, there were many times where I had to ask for help because I didn't know how to handle different situations, and it was an adjustment for me while working full time and in the middle of a pandemic. When I started graduate school, I knew that I would struggle, so I set myself up with an

amazing therapist to discuss the stress and anxiety of this role change in my life. While I worked on taking on the newfound anxiety, I also tackled my grief head on. My therapist and I did several sessions of EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), which was exhausting but very rewarding in the end. This is where I really learned that it is okay to have those painful grief reminders and how to sit with them and move forward and not let it hold me in the spot.

When I finished my work with this therapist, the COVID-19 pandemic had started, and my world was turned upside down from being in the office and seeing coworkers and families to working completely from home. I took the opportunity to use the EAP that is offered through my employer to work through another source of anxiety. After my five sessions, I realized that I needed a little more assistance to help calm my anxious mind and started anxiety medication. It took me a while to warm up to the idea of anxiety medication, but it has been a world of change! The year 2020 taught me many things about myself, mainly that I am incredibly resilient and can



conquer a lot of hard things. This is something that I wish everyone I cross paths with will realize about themselves. 2020 put all of us through the ringer, and we have managed to come back out on top as things slowly return to normal.

There are so many things that I am looking forward to in the upcoming few years, especially as it relates to the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. In December 2020, I was approached by NFFF Board Chairman Troy Markel about accepting a spot on the Advisory Committee for NFFF. I gladly accepted, because I have always wanted to give back to NFFF for all the support they have given me. Through the Advisory Committee, I have been assigned specifically to the Scholarship Committee, where I am able to help

provide insight and help other children and spouses of fallen firefighters hopefully receive the scholarships that I received in my undergraduate and graduate school career. Even on the Advisory Committee, I bring the unique perspective of a survivor and provide valuable insight to those making the Foundation function. What I am most excited for with being part of the Advisory Committee is returning to Memorial Weekend this fall, as I have not been to the Memorial Weekend since my father was honored in 2006.

Another opportunity that I have been offered through NFFF is being part of a podcast that is going to be launched soon, where I have been able to fully share my story and the amount of respect and gratitude I have for the Foundation.

Stacy Bowen shared her story in Issue 73: A Repurposed Life, in October 2016, just after her college graduation.

A Repurposed Life

By Stacy Bowen, Wife of Jeff Bowen (2011-NC)

My name is Stacy Bowen, and I am the widow of Captain Jeff Bowen. Jeff lost his life fighting a four-alarm fire in a medical building on July 28, 2011. Jeff was a career firefighter who always knew that he wanted to be a firefighter. I was not that lucky. I was not born with the intuition that I was going to be anything in particular.

I went to college as an adult and graduated at age 32 with my B.A. in Business. I enjoyed this and worked for the same company for 15 years. I was working for this company as a production supervisor when Jeff died. In the blink of an eye, everything I knew to be solid and sound was gone. My family, my life, my world would never be the same. We were forever changed.

Have you read the book or seen the movie [The Fault in Our Stars](#)? The author, John Green, says, "Grief does not change you, Hazel. It reveals you." This statement is very poignant and resonates with me. I felt as if everything about me had disappeared, and a new person had been unveiled. Out of this tragedy, some good began to grow. Just like an epiphany, I knew what I needed to do with my life—social work.



I was struggling after Jeff's death. I needed to make sense out of this tragedy. What was the purpose? I went back to school close to my home, at Mars Hill University, and received my bachelor's degree in social work on May 7, 2016. School as an adult learner is much different than school as a traditional-age college student. Traditional college students come from all over the country and are together for a short span of time. Adult learners are part of the community; they live

there, and most already work there. When adult learners build relationships, these are longstanding relationships. They do not disappear after graduation.

Choosing the path of social work for me is a calling. I feel inside the way Jeff would look when he talked about being a firefighter. No, I didn't know when I was eight that this would be my career, but I couldn't love it any more.

Grief reveals things about all of us—our strength, our weakness, our passion, and our worst fears. But we as survivors can make the choice to say, "This is my process, and I will do it my way!"

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Stacy Bowen—2021 Update

Since writing my original article in October 2016, the one thread that has been constant has been “Time marches on.” In 2016, I had just graduated with my Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and was embarking on a career path with new drive and purpose. In the past five years I have strived to live up to that passion and drive. I continued with school, receiving my Master of Social Work (MSW) in 2020, and I am now working on my licensure to become a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW).

The past five years have revealed that it doesn’t matter how much time passes, how passionate I am about my career; the one constant is how I got here. I got here out of a great personal tragedy. I needed to make sense of the tragedy of Jeff’s death.

One of the things that has developed over the past ten years is my passion for working with and being of service to others. It is through this service to others that I have been able to confront and deal with my grief. In my ability to help others, I have been able to give a new meaning to the loss.

I feel connected to Jeff throughout so much of my life. When I help families through my job, I am connected to



Jeff’s servant-heart. When I talk to our kids or look at the grandbabies he never got to meet, I know he is close by.

I am not one for words of wisdom but can offer personal experience. In 2011, I thought my world had ended. Five years later, life had not ended; instead, it had changed dramatically. Here I can offer experience. Here is where I had to look inside. I had to examine my life and take

time for myself. If someone is struggling, like I did, maybe taking time for oneself and introspection is a good way to gain grounding and begin looking for that much-needed purpose.

We all have our paths to walk and our personal journeys for someone coming out of personal tragedy. If I were to offer words of wisdom, they would be

- ♥ Play to your strengths
- ♥ Hold on to what is dear
- ♥ Dare to stretch your arms outward and upward

What you needed in your darkest moment, someone else needs in their darkest moment—be the light!

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Comments from Fire Hero Families

I love reading The Journey and I look forward to reading family memories.

*I enjoy reading The Journey because I see the reality of the many survivors that came before me.
I see how those families handled their grief. They are emotional stories.
I have laughed and cried in the same publication sometimes.*

*I love reading the stories. I laugh, cry, and smile with each edition. I look forward to receiving The Journey. I have kept almost every one. This is one thing in my life that I do not want digital.
Congratulations on #100!*

To read past issues of *The Journey*, visit www.firehero.org/about-us/media-center/publications/newsletters

**Thank you to all the writers from *The Journey's* first 100 issues!**

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NFFF Fire Hero Family Support and Connection

There are several ways Fire Hero Families can receive support and connect with others throughout the year. Our private groups are hosted online through Zoom for Fire Hero Family members.

Join our private Facebook group for Fire Hero Families


<https://www.facebook.com/groups/NFFFFireHeroFamilyPrograms>

Facilitated Support Group with Dr. Angela Moreland

 Weekly, Tuesdays, 8-9 PM (Eastern Time)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/88CKSYR>

Fire Hero Family Peer Support Group

 Weekly, Wednesdays, 8-9:15 PM (Eastern Time)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/87W8ZFY>

State Connections

 Monthly, 3rd Thursdays, 8-9:15 PM (Eastern Time)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/5MHYWMH>

Men Forging Ahead

 Monthly, 4th Saturdays, 3-4:30 PM (Eastern Time)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/X3JMT93>

Monthly Remembrance Group

 Monthly, 2nd Sundays, 3-4 PM (Eastern Time)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/PQF7X39>

If you have questions about any of these groups, please e-mail Erin at ebrowning@firehero.org.



BJA
Bureau of Justice Assistance
U.S. Department of Justice

Toll-free: 1-888-744-6513

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.

We want to hear from you...



With the 20th anniversary of the September 11th attacks coming up, we know that this marks a very personal date for those whose loved ones were killed on that day and from illnesses that have resulted from response to that incident. If your firefighter died as a result of the September 11th attacks, we invite you to share your thoughts to be featured in an upcoming issue.

To share your thoughts on this or another topic, please send them by August 25 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
Attn: Jenny Woodall
P.O. Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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