



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 103 ~ JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2022

Let my name be ever the household word that it always was. Let it be spoken without an effort, without the ghost of a shadow upon it.

~ Henry Scott Holland

Grief is awkward for people. Most of us aren't taught how to interact with or support others after a loved one dies. To avoid uncomfortable interactions, we may sidestep the subject entirely, backing away from the big scary elephant in the room. But when you ask people what others could do to support them after the death of a loved one, one of the most common answers is this: *Say their name. Ask me about my person. Tell me a story about the person I love who died.*

During the making of the documentary film *Speaking Grief*, they captured the way people's faces changed when they were asked to talk about their loved ones who had died. People's eyes lit up, and they smiled in spite of themselves, remembering with love. You can see some of those images at <https://speakinggrief.org/get-better-at-grief/supporting-grief/say-their-name>. In this issue of *The Journey*, Fire Hero Families share why that one simple action can mean so much to a grieving person, no matter how much time has passed.

Those Five Little Words

By Sandra Clinton, Wife of Madison "Maddy" Clinton (2018-OK)

It was an innocent statement. Someone had stumbled upon my blog and had read a few posts. This person is involved with line-of-duty deaths and honoring those who sacrificed for others. I received a message on social media. After relating some similar life experiences, I saw those five little words that evoke a wide range of emotions. Those words can be dangerous if you aren't ready for what comes next.

These five words can make a person cry, smile, laugh, or get a faraway look in the eyes. For most people, these five words make their day. It's proof someone cares. They are a new chance to make sure a life continues.

What are these magical five words that I love to hear but could be regretted by the person uttering them?

Tell me about your husband.



Maddy and Sandra Clinton

Those words start my mind swirling. Do I start with what I know of his younger years? Do I begin with how we met? Should I tell how he would help anyone he could, anonymously if possible? Maybe you need to hear how much he cherished me or how hard he worked to provide for his family. I definitely have to tell you about his adventurous side and how much of a daredevil he was.

One thing's for sure—I will tell you as much as I can for as long as you want to listen.

See, when you ask me about my husband, or ask anyone about the person they are missing, you acknowledge their existence. You are saying you care enough to listen. By saying, "Tell me about your person," you are giving a chance for the name to be said, for that person to be remembered.

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Sandra Clinton *continued from page 1*

Reliving those moments also helps bring a little more peace to my heart.

If you don't know what to say to someone who is grieving, those five words are a good place to start. You could even get it down to four.

Tell me about your husband.

Tell me about your son.

Tell me about your daughter.

Tell me about your mom.

Tell me about your dad.

Tell me about your wife.

Tell me about your brother.

Tell me about your sister.

Tell me about him.

Tell me about her.

Only say them if you are ready to spend some time. Once you speak the words, listen with your heart. You have no idea how much those few words can impact a life.

Sandra has a blog called Learning to Live Again, where she shares thoughts about love, life, loss, faith, and her Maddy.

You can read more of her work at

<https://learningtoliveagain.wixsite.com/website>.

Her Name

By Sylvia Kratzke, Mother of Heather DePaolo-Johnny (2002-CA)

For those who have had to face the death of a loved one, common ideas about grieving quickly become myths that begin to topple like dominoes in a line. I think one of the misconceptions that most parents of children who have died would agree is most important is simply saying their name. The neuroscientist David Eagleman once said, "There are three deaths: the first is when your body ceases to function, the second is when the body is consigned to the grave, and the third is that moment, sometime in the future, when your name is spoken for the last time."

For some reason, people don't want to say the name of your child in conversation. Most likely, if it is a friend or relative, they don't want you to feel bad or to bring up feelings of loss and pain. What they don't realize is that you are already feeling loss and pain. It never goes away. We just learn to live through it. Denying us the pleasure of her name is like denying she existed. Or that she did exist but—poof!—she's gone. No need to talk about that.



Heather with her brother Jeremy

For strangers, it is awkward when they inquire about how many children I have. Well, I'm not denying her, so my answer is, "One son and one daughter. She died in 2002." It is awkward for them, but not for me, because I understand that to deny her existence would be disingenuous. Most folks just murmur their condolences. Some ask what happened. I usually offer a thank you and/or a short answer and steer the conversation back to where it was.

Others not speaking her name is a misguided attempt to avoid discomfort. They're not comfortable talking about a dead person, and they think they will be making me uncomfortable. Just the opposite is true. I want to hear her name. I want to hear your stories about her. I want to tell my stories about her. I need to be able to express how much we still miss her. I need to express my wonder about where she would be in life if she were still here. I need to hear her name. HEATHER. She was born, she lived (and boy, did she live!), and she died. She lives, still, in all who are willing to speak her name.



Writing for *The Journey*

*“The latest issue of **The Journey** is awesome. I loved reading these articles—such messages of hope and resilience. You do such a great job of coming up with encouraging topics.”*

*“**The Journey** is so wonderful. It lets us know we are not alone in the feelings we have inside us, and it is OK to still feel a part of you is missing.”*

*“**The Journey** is a life saver to me sometimes. Thank you so much for all you do.”*

One of the challenges of serving a community that is spread out across the country is helping people feel connected. Many Fire Hero Families do not have direct contact with others who have experienced the line-of-duty death of a firefighter. Most never attend one of our in-person events after the Memorial Weekend. This publication, *The Journey*, is one of the ways we try to help people feel less alone in their grief.

Early in your grief, while you are still dealing with intense pain and trying to make sense of your experience, you may not be ready to write something for publication. It can be quite helpful to write for yourself during this period; it is a great way for many people to work through

feelings and get clarity around thoughts and emotions they are struggling with.

When you get to a point where you want to share your experience and offer something to others who are newly grieving, we would love to hear from you! We want people to be real and authentic, not to sugarcoat the pain and difficulty of loss and grief. It is also important that each piece has a bit of hope, insight, or encouragement for the reader.

People sometimes ask what they can write about. Really, it can be any aspect of your own experience with grief and loss, the insights you have had, how it has impacted your life and priorities. Since many people find it easier to write on a particular topic, we include a writing prompt in each issue. However, you do not have to write about a specific topic. If there is a particular story you want to tell, you can just tell it, and we will do our best to find a place for it. You do not need to be an experienced or polished writer, just a grieving person with a story to share.

Please send questions, comments, or submissions for *The Journey* to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org. If you don't use email, you can send pieces by mail to Jenny's attention at the address listed on the last page of this issue.

Grief in Progress Podcast

Everyone's journey through grief is unique, but shared stories can be a powerful tool of hope for those who have experienced sudden loss. Our new Grief in Progress podcast inspires listeners with messages of resilience from other Fire Hero Family members who have found their own ways to cope. The compelling episodes feature one-on-one conversations with spouses, children, and life partners of fallen firefighters—but the perspectives they share will resonate with anyone dealing with grief. Through the generosity of these Fire Hero Families, the open dialogue focuses on contemporary issues of grief and offers strategies to promote healing. Most of all, Grief in Progress inspires new ways of seeing the world and connecting with others after tragic loss.

Visit www.griefinprogress.com

Listen and subscribe on Spotify, Amazon, or Apple.



Support and Connection for Fire Hero Families

Join our private Facebook group for Fire Hero Families

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

You can find information on upcoming virtual and live events at

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

Facilitated Support Group

open to adult Fire Hero Family members, for those who are struggling with grief and do not have a strong support system; facilitated by psychologist Dr. Angela Moreland

 **Weekly, Tuesdays, 8-9 PM (EST)**

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

Fire Hero Family Peer Support Group

open to adult Fire Hero Family members; meet in small groups to share experiences and ideas

 **Weekly, Wednesdays, 8-9:15 PM (EST)**

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

Men Forging Ahead


open to adult men from the Fire Hero Family community; informal conversation and connection

 **Monthly, 4th Saturdays, 3-4:30 PM (EST)**

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/X31MT93>

Monthly Remembrance Group

during the anniversary month of your firefighter's death, join others who are also remembering their firefighters; facilitated by Vickie H. Taylor, LCSW; open to adult Fire Hero Family members

 **Monthly, 2nd Sundays, 3-4 PM (EST)**

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.

Write About Your Journey



After someone dies, the focus is usually on that person's immediate survivors—spouse, children, and parents. We know that so many others are impacted by a death and may not receive the same level of support or recognition—siblings, unmarried partners, ex-spouses, nieces and nephews, grandchildren, aunts and uncles, cousins, friends. The list goes on... If you fall into one of those groups, we would like to hear your stories of

what your firefighter meant to you and how their life and death has affected your life.

If you want to share your thoughts on this or another topic, please send them by April 15 to:

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

This project was supported by Cooperative Agreement 2020-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