



Red Light, Green Light, Blue Light – The Family

Joe Minogue:

Welcome to today's special edition of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation After Action Review.

My name is Joe Minogue. I'm a Retired Lieutenant with the FDNY and I currently act as the FDNY liaison for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Today we're going to be talking about the life and the tragic loss, line of duty death of Carmelo "Carmine" Puccia.

To frame the time, mayor of New York City was Mayor Lindsay. The Fire Commissioner was Mr. Lowery. And the Chief of Department was John O'Hagan.

With me today for the segment is the Puccia family, and also NFFF Director of Programs, Fire Service Programs, John Tippett. John, can you give us some thoughts on why we're here today and a little insight on what we're doing?

John Tippett:

Sure, first of all, thanks very much to the Puccia family for coming out and helping share the story of the life of Carmine. We're very excited to have you here and very grateful for your time.

The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation was created by Congress to help families of the fallen, and also remember firefighters who die in the line of duty and in an extended version, also provide training to firefighters so that we can prevent as many of the preventable line-of-duty deaths in the future and your meeting with us today is a significant contribution to fulfilling that mission, so we can't say thank you enough.

Joe Minogue:

Thank you, John, thank you very much.

And now if you don't mind, introduce yourselves and I'll start with you, Mom.

Jane Puccia:

My name is Jane and I'm happy to be here today, number one, to share my husband's life, but to tell you a little bit about myself also, that I was born in Brooklyn and so my husband was born in Manhattan, but we met in Brooklyn, so that Brooklyn is a good part for us. And after we got married, we settled in

Brooklyn and I was a, I worked for the Navy for three years, and then after that I was a secretary at a Catholic school on Staten Island, so that's part of my life. And I have two beautiful daughters that I'm very proud of.

Joe Minogue:

Well, I thank you for being here and I know this journey about the dedication to this building started a long time ago. So to have you here, and I don't wanna say end cap it, but kind of add to that story is, I think is a gift that we're gonna be giving to everybody, not just here in the FDNY, but around the country or whoever else wants to listen to it.

So, I appreciate the three of you being here and your families for supporting your efforts to be here, so thanks a lot.

Jane Puccia:

You're welcome.

Joe Minogue:

So now I'm gonna ask you the question, how did you meet?

Jane Puccia:

Oh.

Joe Minogue:

How did you meet Carmelo and did you know him when you first met him as Carmelo or as Carmine?

Jane Puccia:

Carmine.

Joe Minogue:

That's how you first met him.

Jane Puccia:

Yes, that's how he introduced himself to me.

I'll tell you a little bit about my father. He would always work his vacation so that my mother could take us down to Coney Island and do day trips. So she would always take us to Coney Island and my father would work and we would record things at the little arcades telling, "Daddy, we miss you," and all this stuff. But he was the great father, so he gave that to my mother, and we didn't drive, nobody in my family drove, so it was always taking the bus, taking the train down to Coney Island.

And I never went in the water because somebody pulled me under once, so everybody always used to go in the water and I would stay with the blanket and Carmine was at the beach the same time and he was on vacation and he was sitting a blanket over, so he happened to walk over to me and I said, "Hmm, he's kind of cute, yeah." So, my mother, (daughters laughing) so he started talking to me and we drew up a conversation and everything and then my mother saw that he was in our blanket and she got very upset over that, 'cause don't forget, I was 16 when I met him, and he was 21, so there was a big difference then, but she didn't know that at that time.

So anyway, he asked me for my phone number, and I gave it to him, which was a, usually you don't do that but I did it for some reason. I just was really, I knew I liked him. There was something special about him. He was gentle, he was, you know, very, very good looking too. I guess that had to play a part.

(all laughing)

Janey Puccia:

The attraction was definitely there.

Jane Puccia:

Definitely there, and so anyway, so my mother saw that he was sitting at the blanket and she rushed right up and she said, then he introduced himself to her and then he left and he went on his blanket, so then had said to me before that, that, you know, 'cause he said, "Do you drive? Did you drive here?" I said, "No, we took the train." And so then my mother, he said, "Oh, I'll drive your whole family home." And my mother said to him, "No, how would that look for your father? Your father would not appreciate us coming home in a stranger's car," so anyway.

So anyway, we laughed, and I thought he took my phone number. Every day for three months he called.

My mother would not let me go out with him, or my father. Every day he would call and say, "Did they say we can go out? Did they say we can go out?" And it was maybe three months before and then he, then finally my mother says, after I got all his information, who he lived with, how many sisters does he have, where does he work, and all of this. So anyway, she finally let me go out with him. So that was the beginning of our relationship.

And he taught my, he was just a great guy. My mother fell in love with him, my grandpa, everybody fell in love with him, my sister, he was just, and he loved cars. He loved convertibles.

Joe Minogue:

Convertibles?

Jane Puccia:

Convertibles, he had a 1959 Cadillac convertible, baby blue.

John Tippett:

Oh wow.

Jane Puccia:

And he also had a red Chevy car, convertible also. So, for us, we never had cars. My father didn't drive, my mother didn't drive, and he taught my brother how to drive, so he was the first one to drive in our family.

So that was the part of my life where we met him, and from there everything was just perfect.

We got engaged when I was 19 and we got married when I was 20. We lived in three rooms for six years. Shortly after we got married, he lost his job, and that's what made him decide to take the fireman's test, but he was never without a job and I became pregnant and I thought, and he told, "Don't worry, you'll be fine. I'll always have a job." And he always was a provider. And then he said to me, and he said to me, "We will get by." And at that time, women were not allowed to work if they started to show, so after four months, I had to leave my job and I worked for the Navy at that time. So, I left my job, but he had many jobs in between.

And my brother at that time got very sick with cancer and he was only 23 years old, and Carmine would take my brother all the time to the doctors to get chemo and all of that to take care of my brother.

He just was a giving person and had so much love and he just gave constantly to whoever needed that love.

So, we decided, we stayed in our house. We bought a house. We were in three rooms. We bought a house in Staten Island.

August 31st my brother died.

We moved into my, and September 16th, September 14th, my father-in-law died, and we moved into our house November 20th on Staten Island.

I had no phone, no nothing in 1969. And that's, no phone until he died. That's when they finally put the phone in. After all those six weeks or month, that's when they put the phone in.

But I had a dream before I got married, while I was married, and he became a firefighter. I had a dream that man would come, came to my house to tell me that he had died, and I never put the TV on to watch the news at that time. So then shortly after that, that's exactly how it happened.

The house that I never knew was mine was in that dream and that's how they came. They came because I had no phone, so they came and rang the doorbell and that's when they told me about the tragic death of my husband. And that's when I felt that I, the wind was knocked out of me at 26.

And then not only did I realize how difficult it was for me, but how difficult it was for his children.

God has been so good, and my greatest gift was my children as I see he lives in them and he continues to live and we keep him alive. Never forgot, kept him alive all these years as if he was still with us.

Joe Minogue:

In our conversations earlier, I could see that in all three of you, you know, that he still lives. We don't just stop loving somebody, you know, you just continue loving in all of your faces and every word that you shared with us.

Janey Puccia:

I can remember looking out the window and seeing four men in black overcoats and I turned to my mom to tell her that there's four men with dark coats on and she literally like fell to her knees. I could still see her falling to her knees, not even understanding what was going on because that was all that was said to her, she knew.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, that'd be tough, I don't care what age you are.

What about you, Isabel? What do you remember?

Isabel St. Clair:

I was five.

I do remember my mother sitting on the couch and then the knock at the door and two, I only remember two men coming to the door dressed in black. And they came in and my mother screeched and dropped to the floor and I don't remember much after that, except I felt like we were shuffled upstairs to the bedrooms with, well I know who it is now, my stepdad, the priest that came to the house and he sat with Janey and I upstairs and I remember it was a lot of boxes around the house 'cause we had just moved there, so there was a lot of change going on and then this trauma, you know, that happened to us. But yeah, it was just scary, it was scary.

Joe Minogue:

It was scary, yeah.

John Tippett:

Jane, who did you reach out to after the shock of the notification?

Jane Puccia:

I couldn't even reach out to my mother and father because I had no phone.

John Tippett:

Right.

Jane Puccia:

Okay, so I had to go to a neighbor's house that was down and my mother and father didn't drive, so then they live in Brooklyn and they had to get to me so I felt very alone, moving from Brooklyn, moving from my family and then moving to Staten Island, but this was like our dream house and we thought, well, you know, this is where God wants us to be now and I remember making sure that I could walk to a church. So, there was a church always in walking distance 'cause my mother always said to make sure you're by a church.

But I reached out to, I went to a neighbor's house. It was so confusing that day that someone stayed with my daughters while I went to a neighbor's house to call my mom to tell her that Carmine had passed.

So, she said, "I'll try to get somebody to take us over as soon as I could get there, Jane." So that's what she did. She got there as fast as she could, which wasn't very fast.

It was really, we really felt alone.

Janey Puccia:

You were alone.

Jane Puccia:

We were alone, it was heartbreaking.

Everybody had left and then we were there waiting for my mom to come. No one ever took us to see my husband.

He left that day. Isabel got off the bus. She waved to her father at the bus stop. Janey was with me. She waved and I walked to the house, and he got on his bus after she got off the bus, and then I was only 26, somebody should have taken me to see him, but I didn't know the extent that he got hit with a train.

And then that was a very difficult time for me to go through.

And so, then my mother and father came and they were excellent for me, they really, they were there a lot the whole time. I don't know what I would do without my mom and dad. They were very special.

But then, and then back in those days, you didn't take your children to funerals.

Joe Minogue:

No.

Jane Puccia:

That was another heartbreak for my daughters. Their father was gone and they didn't—

Isabel St. Clair:

No closure.

Jane Puccia:

No closure for them. And then you think—

Janey Puccia:

We didn't even understand.

Jane Puccia:

No.

Janey Puccia:

What death was at that time.

Jane Puccia:

Nobody, only my brother had just died, so I was grieving the death of my brother after the four months and then my husband died, and my mother had to go through that also. And then my daughters went through it because they were so close to my brother also, so it just was heartbreaking.

And then they take you into the funeral home and I'm with my father and his best friend, Tom, who was a firefighter. I couldn't even walk up to the casket because it didn't look like my husband. So, I said, my father said, "What do you want me to do, Jane?" I says, "Daddy, you go, you tell me what I should do. "So my father went and he came back and he says, "Jane, you have to close the casket." So we closed the casket and it was difficult and I'm sitting here, I'm grieving, and my daughters are grieving. They're so much younger than I am.

How did they get through this? How did they get through this? And they had nobody. I didn't know anybody that was a widow at that time, at 26. They didn't know anybody who didn't have a father at four and five, so it was a hard time and there was no help out there for us, no help where you can go and talk to somebody to grieve and get it off your chest, so there wasn't anything.

So, my whole thing is my faith. I tell you; my God got us through everything. He really did. And He's still with us and I instill that in my daughters 'cause that's how we felt even when we got married. It took three to get married. It takes God, the center, and you and your husband.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah.

Jane Puccia:

And it's just the way it is.

Joe Minogue:

I think it was a perfect segue to, you were sharing with me earlier that, you know, you met on the beach, you shared it with us, but tell me about how he asked you to be man and wife. How did that happen?

Jane Puccia:

That was, he asked me, he said, "Let's go visit church." So, I said, "Okay," 'cause I was always in church. We went to Mass daily, so I know I love to go to church. So, he went into church and we sat in the back pew and then he says, "Jane, you think it's time that you would marry me?" And I was like, "What? Of course, I would!"

What a perfect—

Janey Puccia:

You think it's time.

Jane Puccia:

What a perfect place, church.

Jane Puccia:

(Jane laughing)

He couldn't have picked a better place to marry me, you know, to engage me to get married.

Joe Minogue:

Spirituality in all our conversations seems to be center on all your lives.

Jane Puccia:

It is.

Janey Puccia:

And then when you got married, there was a dove in the church.

Jane Puccia:

Yes.

Janey Puccia:

When you got married, there was a dove.

Jane Puccia:

A year later I got married and my sister was the maid of honor and she said to me, "Did you see that dove flying around you and Carmine's head?" I says, "I did. It was the Holy Spirit," I said.

Joe Minogue:

Oh, I love it.

So, when did you find out that his name was really Carmelo?

Jane Puccia:

Oh, he told me right away.

Joe Minogue:

He did.

(all laughing)

So how did Carmine, how did that come out?

Jane Puccia:

Well, Carmelo is an Italian name, and his parents were from Italy, so, Sicily and Italy, so he said, he tried all different names. He said, "Maybe I should be called Carl, maybe." But he finally stayed with Carmine, he said, "Because that's the closest to Carmelo was Carmine."

I guess that's the American name of—

Joe Minogue:

So, everybody in the New York City Fire Department knew him as Carmine or?

Jane Puccia:

Yeah, I think so.

(Jane laughing)

Janey Puccia:

The American way to say Carmelo.

Isabel St. Clair:

I mean, yeah.

Janey Puccia:

The American version. The American version is Carmine, yeah.

Joe Minogue:

So, what jobs did he have before he became a New York City firefighter?

Jane Puccia:

He was an aircraft mechanic for Republic Aviation at Long Island.

Joe Minogue:

Okay, right.

Jane Puccia:

And that's the job that, shortly after we got married, he got laid off from, so he was looking to get another aircraft mechanic so he had his name into all the air, you know, the Pan-American, American, whatever airlines was out there to see if he can get a job. Nothing right came through right away, so he was a New York City cab driver. He drove a UPS and they would deliver packages 'till midnight. I couldn't wait till he came home.

And then meanwhile he took the fireman's test and then he got a job working for Pan American as an aircraft mechanic and he was happy, but then the fire department called and he said to me, "Jane, I think I'm gonna try for the physical." And I says, "Okay, if that's what you want, you could try for it." So, but he wasn't that tall.

(Jane laughing)

He was like a half an inch too short.

So, he would sleep on a board, a door, anywhere on the floor just to grow that as, you know, when he was going for the physical and he finally, he made it, 5'8" so that was good, he was happy.

So, he said he took this job because he wanted security in case something happened to him.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, yeah.

I think I've read somewhere that he was a Naval Reservist as well.

Jane Puccia:

Yes, yes, he was.

Joe Minogue:

And he delivered diapers sometimes.

Jane Puccia:

He did deliver diapers. Diapers, that was one of his other jobs, he delivered. I told you, he would not, he always made sure he had a paycheck, one job to another, one job to another. If they laid him off, he would get another job.

Joe Minogue:

I think that speaks volumes of who he is as a person, you know, and the legacy that he gave to you, the three of you, you know.

Jane Puccia:

Oh, they have so much of his qualities in them. He was gentle, loving, caring, would do anything for anybody, anybody, and my daughters are the same way. They both would do anything. We all are that way.

We just, 'cause God gave us those gifts and if you don't use that gift of love, you can't give.

Joe Minogue:

True, true.

Jane Puccia:

You can't give.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, yeah.

I'm sure when he was in probie school, he had that same drive, you know, and that same gift did help everybody else out.

Can you tell me something about what you remember about him going through probie school?

Jane Puccia:

Probie school? Probie school was, he would go through probie school okay, but we would be waiting all

the time for him to come home.

Yeah, and we lived in Brooklyn, as I said, three rooms. We made sacrifice, but one of his friends would go back and forth with each other and they would, he had some nice stories, I guess, he told.

We wanted him to give up smoking, but he wouldn't give that up.

(Jane laughing)

"Why should I?" He said, "Look at my handkerchief, it comes right back."

(all laughing)

So, he didn't give that up anyway.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, tell me about that. When he first went to Engine 53, what was the feeling for you, for you, and you know, what do you remember?

Jane Puccia:

Well, as I said, I would never put on the news when he was at work and there were no cell phones that he could say, "Jane, I love you." It had to be when he left in the morning or when he came back and gave us a kiss or, you know, whatever.

But every time he was on a shift, my girls would be up, and he was coming off a night shift, I would be we waiting at the window for him, and I would say, in Brooklyn they had alternate side street parking, so we would look out the window and say, "Let's see how many times Daddy goes around the corner."

(Jane laughing)

Janey Puccia:

And we were like, "There he goes."

Jane Puccia:

There he goes, one.

Janey Puccia:

And again, there he is.

Jane Puccia:

So, it was quite a few times, but every time that was out, what we did, we waited by the window.

Janey Puccia:

Always made a big deal about waiting—

Jane Puccia:

I made a big deal when he was coming home because I was so happy—

Janey Puccia:

When he was gonna be home for dinner and everything.

Jane Puccia:

Happy to see him, yeah.

I just thought he was such a family man, so loving and caring, as I said, yeah.

We were so in love. So, in love.

John Tippett:

Clearly evident.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, yeah.

John Tippett:

Very much clearly evident.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah.

John Tippett:

And it continues. I mean, you can see that it continues in all of you, even through your pain. It's still there to have those happy memories of what you've experienced to carry you through some of the hard times. I know the girls were young, but you know, some of the memories that you may have or some of the things you might remember.

I mean, we have a lot of folks in our audience that are also going through this. They don't have the

years and years of things that you have had to go through. So, what kind of things do you, would you like to share or could you share with?

Janey Puccia:

I can remember one moment that sticks in my mind when I was a kid is when we were in the city and we were driving in my dad's car and I was four so red light, green light was like a huge thing to me, you know? And my dad was stopping at the green light, you know. Horns were honking and I'm like, "It's green light go. Go, red means stop, green is go." Like, I remember saying that over and over and, you know, horns were honking, and my dad just got, ignored me, you know, just got out of the car, and held up traffic and all we could see was him crossing this old lady with a cane who could not cross the intersection.

(Janey crying)

And that sticks in my mind.

Joe Minogue:

That's a nice memory, yeah.

Janey Puccia:

I say I think that is why I work in the field that I work in because I work with people with disabilities, and I just wanted to be just like my dad my whole life and I just wanna give back to people in the community.

And that lady with a cane really stuck through my, you know, that's just the person my dad was, like he would help anybody, do anything for anybody.

He was just, you know, his hugs were genuine and just—

Jane Puccia:

Big hugs, yeah.

Janey Puccia:

Throw, you know, yeah, big hugs, you know, and everything was perfect. He was perfect. He was too perfect for this earth.

Jane Puccia:

God wanted him.

Janey Puccia:

Yeah, God had a purpose for him, you know.

Jane Puccia:

He knew we would be survivors, so as long as we have God in our life, we are survivors, yeah.

Joe Minogue:

What about you, Isabel?

Isabel St. Clair:

One of my memories of my dad was when I was in kindergarten, and he was coming to pick me up in his car and I was running. It was Christmastime and I was, we had just moved to Staten Island, so I was running to the car to get to him and so excited because I had just made an ashtray for him out of clay and I was so excited, but I fell and it broke, and that was one of the hardest things when he died 'cause he said, I can remember him saying, "Oh, don't worry, you could make me another one." And I think when he died, for me, it was like, "Well, now I'm not gonna be able to make an ashtray for him."

And I carried that through my whole life, well, for a while until I had my second child and she died at two months old. And in the hospital, I don't know why I connected the two things, but I, you know, when you grieve as a child, it's different. You have different things that come up in your mind. But it was like, "Dad, here, this is my gift to you. Take care of her up there." So, he's got one of his grandchildren up with him.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, the spiritual connection and everything that we've talked about so far, whether we're on camera or before, it's spiritual. And I do believe he's here, I do.

Jane Puccia:

He's there.

Joe Minogue:

I do.

Jane Puccia:

He's that star every night that I look up and I see and he's the brightest one.

(Jane laughing)

He's really bright. He's there, he is, very much so.

Joe Minogue:

So, I'm gonna start, I think I'll start with you, Jane, and then I'll get you and then I'll go to Mom.

So, if I were to say, what's the one memory of him that puts the biggest smile on your face, and you know, if you wanna, you know, join it together and put it together, that's great.

Janey Puccia:

Well for me, I was really daddy's little girl. I just followed him all over the place and he was always very handy. He was a jack of all trades and he was always in the basement like fixing things and, you know, want to make the house better, and like, he was a superhero to me, you know.

And I can remember just staring at him, you know, and watching him hammer and stuff and then I was always right by his side so he wound up giving me a little ball-peen hammer, kind of set me up so I kind of would get a, you know, give him a little break 'cause he was trying to work, but I could remember just staring at him and staring at him 'cause he just was so, he was the best, you know?

I just admired him and just followed him all over the place.

Jane Puccia:

We were just a loving family, we really were.

Joe Minogue:

And Isabel, you have a big smile for ya?

Isabel St. Clair:

Yeah, I remember sitting in the car, his cars, he loved cars, so I remember sitting in the backseat and they always had humps in the car and I remember always sitting on the hump in the back while he was driving and having a good time.

(Isabel laughing)

Jane Puccia:

And no seats belts then.

Isabel St. Clair:

Yeah, no seat belts, no, no, no.

So, I, you know, car rides with him, 'cause he loved cars, was to me a fun adventure and that's what I remember having fun with him.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, so the car rides, were they just around Brooklyn, Staten Island or would you go all the places?

Janey Puccia:

Oh, we went all over with the car. Brooklyn, we had, because you know, my grandparents still lived in Brooklyn at the time, so it was nice because like my mom said, my dad was the only one that drove.

Jane Puccia:

So, we had a way to them.

(Jane laughing)

And then after he died, I didn't drive, so I was taking three buses to go see my mom with the kids. And Janey would always get—

Janey Puccia:

Throw up.

Jane Puccia:

So sick on the bus, so I says, "Oh, Janey."

(Jane laughing)

This happened, so I says, "Oh, I better learn how to drive."

Janey Puccia:

You learned how to drive.

Jane Puccia:

So, I went and took driver's lessons and what happened is I told the guy, "You have to take me on the highway, take me over the Verrazzano Bridge and you have to teach me how to drive in Brooklyn."

(Jane laughing)

So he did.

He did, he was very good. I had double lessons at a time and I took my driving test in a snowstorm.

John Tippett:

Oh, my goodness.

Jane Puccia:

And I passed, so God was looking out for me there. So from that day on, I was driving, right? Here comes Mom, be careful.

(Jane laughing)

John Tippett:

Did you have the top up when you took your driver's test?

Jane Puccia:

No, I didn't.

Janey Puccia:

She had a red Dodge Dart Swinger.

Jane Puccia:

No, no.

(Jane laughing)

No compared to both, no, no, no, no compared to both.

Janey Puccia:

The horn was on the handles, like on the—

Jane Puccia:

So when I got tense—

Janey Puccia:

She said, "I love this, I could just squeeze the handles and it just honks the horn."

Joe Minogue:

So, I can't leave you out of the big smile. So, we talked about the ball-peen hammer. You talked about, you know, driving in the back of the car, which I remember vividly. And you've shared a whole bunch of smiles with us today. What's your big smile?

Jane Puccia:

My big smile is just being in love with him and having his children. As I said, that's the best gift I ever got.

And I always smiled. We never fought, we never argued, we never had a fight in the house or anything like that. We were just a really close, loving family and that was my happiness. That was his happiness. So that was my joy. You might want to say that was my everything.

John Tippett:

That's really tremendous 'cause the amount of pain and suffering and heartbreak that you went through to not have your family torn apart, I think is a testament to not only his love, but your love for each other. And I think the lesson that you have for others is you pull together rather than pull apart, if I could be so bold.

Jane Puccia:

Right.

Janey Puccia:

It was very hard for us. At the time, you know, we were scared and we just didn't want to lose anybody, you know, and we were scared going to sleep that we were gonna like, you know, I wasn't gonna see my mom again and, but you were like the best mom. I can remember my mom saying the right words to me, you know, my sister, and she would say, "Goodnight, I love you and I will see you tomorrow."

Jane Puccia:

I slept in the room with the girls. They had their twin beds and I slept in a cot because they were afraid that I was not gonna be there when they wake up in the morning. So that's how I would sleep all the time in the room with them in a cot, yeah. For a while, yeah.

So, we got past what we had to get past, yeah.

Joe Minogue:

I want to thank you so far for sharing so much about your husband, about your dad, about a member of the New York City Fire Department.

John Tippett:

I think it's a nice way to kind of transition to what would the you of today tell the you of then? So, if you think back, how would you? Jane, you were 26. Janey, you were four. Isabel, you were five.

Even through some of your decades, how would you tell, what would you tell the you of then? What would you tell the 26-year-old Jane Puccia?

Jane Puccia:

It takes time.

You need to grieve.

Cry as much as you need to.

Don't hold it in.

Talk about your loss.

If somebody else doesn't want to listen, you'll find somebody who will listen.

Stay close to your faith in God.

Talk to your husband.

Talk to your wife.

They're there.

I, for one, didn't let him die because he is, as far as I'm concerned, I will see him again and he's still alive.

So, I would tell them each day, just take, don't look down the road, just work with the day that you're working with.

But if you have children, make sure you stay close to your children. Make sure you instill in them that after you're gone, that they should still be close.

And I would say that would be what I would say.

Each day is a struggle.

Some are worse than others.

And I'm 52 years without my husband and I still sometimes, on our anniversary, take out my wedding album and I look at it and I feel like I'm in that day.

So, there's always a way of you drawing closer to your husband or your deceased one, whoever leaves you.

John Tippett:

Great.

Jane Puccia:

Because they don't really leave you.

They are with you.

John Tippett:

True. Isabel?

Thank you.

Isabel St. Clair:

I would tell a five-year-old that your dad's still here. You can talk to him and you'll be able to talk to him the rest of your life and he knows that, he's watching you, he's watching over you. So, I always would look up to the sky and say, "I know you hear me right now. I know you see me doing this, or I know you see me doing that."

So he was still a presence and he'll still be there for you.

You can talk to him, yeah.

John Tippett:

Thank you.

Jane?

Janey Puccia:

Basically, I don't know, a four-year-old, I would say that your dad is always gonna be with you. You might not always see him, but he's always gonna be there to talk to, to cry with. And it's okay to cry because I used to have to go upstairs and cry because it was, but it's okay to cry. It's okay to talk about your dad. You don't have to just not say anything.

Joe Minogue:

And actually, this is probably a great segue into me asking you about Ed Ireland. Ed Ireland is here and he's gonna be in next section and he's been in your life for a long time, a long time.

Jane Puccia:

He has. Actually, they used to travel back and forth to the firehouse together, you know, and probie school 'cause Ed lived in Brooklyn at that time and then they would travel back and forth and actually Carmine was replacing Ed that night. He relieved Ed that night. So, Ed got a phone call, I guess, when he was driving home that a firefighter died in that house and he turned around and went back right to the house, yeah.

Actually, Ed Ireland was the first one at Christmas, bought them each a bike.

Janey Puccia:

Yeah, we used to get these bikes. They used to magically appear and it wasn't until we went to the Centennial when we saw Ed Ireland that he told us.

Jane Puccia:

He says, "Those bikes were from us, from me."

Janey Puccia:

I just thought like they were just coming from the heaven, the sky, like Daddy was bringing these bikes down. Like, I mean like, yeah, every year I got a bike. Then we found out that it was Ed that was buying us the bikes for a while.

Jane Puccia:

Sure, and I had to teach them how to ride it.

(Jane laughing)

That wasn't fun.

Joe Minogue:

So, Ed's been around for the whole time?

Janey Puccia:

We lost touch with him.

Jane Puccia:

Lost touch with him, as you said, but we did touch base with him at the Centennial. And then also when they had the 50th, Janey had called up the firehouse and said, "Are you gonna be doing anything for my dad? My dad is 50 years deceased." And then they put this big thing together at Engine 53 and Ladder 43 for us, which was a really-

Janey Puccia:

They were very accommodating. They were like, "We would love to."

Joe Minogue:

Can you tell me about that, about the plaque dedication?

Jane Puccia:

They'd rededicated the plaque again to my husband and Isabel was there with her husband and Janey was there. Of course, Isabel's children didn't come 'cause they're in different states. And my three grandchildren were Janey's three children were there and they did a beautiful dedication for us. We felt like royalty.

(Jane laughing)

And that's, we don't usually feel like royalty.

Janey Puccia:

It was funny because they had said like, "Oh, you know, we don't, 50 years, that's a long time. We haven't done a 50 years." They haven't, that house, they were like, "We have to be honest with you, it's the first time we've ever done it and we are very happy that you reached out to us."

John Tippett:

As you pointed out to them that the 50th anniversary was coming up, we do get a sense sometimes that the plaques and the things that are up on the wall become part of the background and as you move further and further away with the cycle of firefighters that have been through there, get to a point where they didn't know Carmine, they didn't know the people that knew Carmine, and you do tend not to forget, but it's not in the forefront of your mind either and it's a poignant reminder that yeah, there's some things that need to be—

Janey Puccia:

They said it too, she said, "We walk past this plaque every day, but now we will walk past this differently," because we all got up and we said, you know, what we had to say and, you know, Isabel said her ashtray story and I said my, you know, red light, green light story and you know, that story I tell to millions of people, like my coworkers. It's like my go-to story because I think it really just shows the character of my dad and then who knew that as I got older, that there was another light, there was a blue light now. It wasn't just red, it wasn't green, it wasn't just yellow. There was a blue light in my dictionary now and that's because of my dad. Because of my dad that we have that blue light and there's been, you know, changes, provisions made for.

Jane Puccia:

Sometimes you just think that, you know, that is he really a hero? Was he really a hero? Like Isabel would say, "Mom, he got hit by a train. He didn't really save anybody." But he did.

Joe Minogue:

He did.

Jane Puccia:

He was the only firefighter that was ever killed on a train station on the tracks.

Janey Puccia:

And from the moment he gave up his life, he saved past, present, and future firefighters and that's what he did. He saved his brothers.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, in my eyes and I know that this building and everybody comes through that this building, you know, recognizes that, you know. We all try, John, to explain, to find a dictionary definition of what a hero is and it's not something that you can easily shape, but when you step out and you look at the bigger picture, you could see what a hero is. Did somebody make a difference in somebody else's life? Did somebody else save somebody else's life? Was somebody's death in vain? Our current times we look at September 11th, you know, like why, why, why? And there are many changes that happened to the New York City Fire Department, to the whole country, based on tragedy. And your dad, your husband, in my eyes, and I know the people that are in this room, and people that are outside that are gonna be coming through this building, recognize your dad as a hero and your husband as a hero 'cause he is.

Jane Puccia:

He is.

Joe Minogue:

He is.

Jane Puccia:

He is.

Joe Minogue:

So, you know, keep that love.

Janey Puccia:

Because he did, he saved his brothers from, no one ever lost their life because the power was-

Joe Minogue:

Red light, green light, blue light. Now I'm gonna keep that with me, you know, for always.

Janey Puccia:

Wasn't there when my dad was working, it wasn't there.

Joe Minogue:

Yeah, so I think everything that we have talked about in this last two minutes is gonna bring us to this building, the building that we're sitting in right now.

Jane Puccia:

This beautiful building.

Joe Minogue:

This beautiful building, thank you.

Janey Puccia:

It's off the charts.

Joe Minogue:

So, there was some gentleman that we're gonna talk to later that had a vision, had a vision to recognize your family, to recognize your dad and your husband. And there was no stopping them, there's no stopping them. You saw that earlier when you were here, and they made this beautiful, beautiful, beautiful building. So, talk about your thoughts about the people that put this together, the building together. Even the people that called you up and said, "Hey, we're gonna do a podcast." Talk about what that means to you as a family and as individuals. What does that mean to you, that when you walk in this building, you know, your dad and your husband's alive here?

Jane Puccia:

He is. Very much alive. You could feel the presence, you can feel him in here and you could see it everywhere.

And the people that worked on this building, you could see the labor of love that they put into it. It wasn't just put together. Every corner, every inch of it.

The day that we walked into the ceremony, the bag piper playing at the end of the tunnel was like, felt like 50 bag pipers were playing and it was only the one and the Green Beret that wore his Navy uniform that stood on the corner of the platform so straight, I didn't even know it was a person there. It was like, and he said to Brendan that he wouldn't wear his Navy uniform for anyone, but he wore it for Carmine, so it was just a beautiful thing. I mean, to see his pictures on the wall too, as I said, it's just the whole building. There's nothing I don't like about the building. It's just breathtaking. I want to come over here all the time, but the traffic is not good.

(all laughing)

Isabel St. Clair:

And the experience of actually walking down on the tracks, when we first saw the station, I can remember when I was in the city at the subway station, always looking down at the tracks and knowing that my dad was down on the tracks and he lost his life there.

And when we actually walked down onto the tracks and then saw his name in the graffiti, the impact of that was just, it just floored me. It was just amazing just to actually experience being on that down on the tracks and seeing his name there and it really memorialized him.

Janey Puccia:

As if my dad was unforgettable before, it's like now no one will ever forget him.

And this building just, it's just so unique because I, you know, the Subway Unit, the whole Subway Unit and Brendan Connolly just took the time to really get to know who my dad was, what he did, and what he sacrificed and just, it just was so much love.

Like every little tile that they put into this building was out of love and it shows and just, my dad is here because we feel him and it just, it wasn't just, you know, a memorial for my dad just slapping things together.

I mean, it just, it was just the pictures that say that family is everything, you know, and every little detail and the love that they put into this building to make it so off the charts and—

Jane Puccia:

Well, we can't thank the Fire Department enough and Brendan and the Subway Unit for this. I would've never ever thought that I would have a building like this named after him, never. And to be still alive and to be able to come and walk through it is a gift, it's a gift.

Janey Puccia:

Eternally grateful for this.

Joe Minogue:

That's a great walk-in to my next question, and then I'm gonna punt over to John. What's your impression of the FDNY, the New York City Fire Department of today? I mean I think this Subway Unit, the whole crew, I think that speaks about who the New York City Fire Department is, but what's your impression of the current New York City Fire Department?

Jane Puccia:

I think they're number one, okay? Can't help but say that. They are number one.

I'm not gonna say I think, they are number one.

(Jane laughing)

Janey Puccia:

Everything New York is number one with my mom.

Jane Puccia:

My grandson said, "You're a true New Yorker, Nan." You bet.

(Jane laughing)

But they are number one and I love them, and I think they are, now they share so much a brotherly love with each other and they're a group of men and women now that would be more than happy to go the extra yard to help anybody. That's just my impression. I really love the Fire Department.

Isabel St. Clair:

They're good cooks.

Jane Puccia:

Good cooks.

(Jane laughing)

Brendan, yeah.

We've had a few good meals.

(Jane laughing)

That's right, they are good cooks.

Joe Minogue:

So, me being a retired member of the Fire Department, I think everything that your dad and your husband represents lives with us, I really do. If it's something that I, when I was working, would bring to me every day is empathy and compassion for others and trying to give back to somebody, to somebody that I didn't know.

The story about your dad stopping and everybody honking horns.

Janey Puccia:

He didn't care.

Joe Minogue:

That's who the FDNY is.

Jane Puccia:

Yes.

Joe Minogue:

That's who the FDNY is.

All:

Yeah.

Joe Minogue:

So, and I can see it in your face as we're talking, the glow is about yeah, that's my dad and that is the FDNY.

Jane Puccia:

Yeah, and that's love and they have a lot of love.

They have a lot of love.

Joe Minogue:

So, I'm gonna switch over to nationally. We all say we never forget and sometimes there's a gap and it's out of our control, but we nationally got the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. We recognize that, John, if you would explain the Brick Program to us.

John Tippett:

Sure. When the National Memorial was created, it was 1981, it was dedicated in '82, and over the years, other family members had come forward and said, "Well, what about our family member that died prior to that? How do we recognize them?" So the Foundation created a Walk of Honor® on the grounds of the National Fire Academy and on that walkway are bricks that are dedicated to the firefighters that died before the National Memorial was created. And there is a node on the walkway for FDNY firefighters that died before 1981 and Carmine has a brick there that was purchased by Vina Drennan, the widow of another New York City Firefighter that died in line of duty. So even though we can't get every name on the plaque of the National Memorial, we felt it was fitting to put all of the other firefighters, there's over 8,000 names of firefighters that died prior to the National Memorial being dedicated, that are recognized and remembered there. And we have a photograph of the brick to provide you and then once the weather clears up, 'cause it's just as nasty in Emmitsburg, Maryland, today as it is in New York, we will get a rubbing done of the brick and send it to you as a memory.

Jane Puccia:

That would be beautiful.

John Tippett:

Because this is a project that was really at the heart of one of our former Chairs of the Board. He wanted every other firefighter that couldn't be named on the memorial to have recognition. So, he made it an effort on his part to get all of the states and fire departments to send the names in and sponsor bricks for the firefighters that died prior to the memorial being created.

Jane Puccia:

That's beautiful.

John Tippett:

So, we did get a photo of them.

I think we're at a pretty good point here to express our deepest gratitude for your courage and candor to come forward and share your intimate knowledge and memories of your dad and your husband, who sounds like a man that we should all model ourselves after.

And I think that what we hope to accomplish here will be accomplished when other firefighters and family members listen to the podcast or watch the podcast or look at the extra material. They'll get a sense of what it means to be a firefighter, which means to serve, serve others, not yourself. It means that family members don't ever forget, and we shouldn't forget either. And even though it may have taken 50 years, a group of men and women of the New York City Fire Department came together because they were inspired by what they learned and what they look at in their history and decided to make a fitting tribute to a sacrifice so that every other firefighter that walks in here has a human connection to this training facility because you can't learn better than by knowing another human being was part and parcel of this process. So, on behalf of the Foundation, I can't thank you enough for bringing Carmine to life for us. I know there's been a lot of tears, but I hope there's been some smiles. I hope there's been some happiness.

Janey Puccia:

I'm so glad that he is really finally recognized for what he did because it was big, it was huge.

Jane Puccia:

On our part.

John Tippett:

As everyone.

Janey Puccia:

Because like it was huge for his brothers.

John Tippett:

Yes, yeah, absolutely.

Janey Puccia:

Although he didn't save a person in the fire or, you know, he did save his.

John Tippett:

The lives he has saved since, I think hopefully give you some comfort in whatever small way that can be, but if you think about that in the thousands of firefighters that have been through training, I think, I hope that that provides you with a little bit of solace and maybe brings a little bit of a brighter smile for what you have had to give to the world. We'd like to express our deepest gratitude to the Puccia family, and on behalf of my colleague, Joe Minogue, we want to say thank you to everyone for joining us.

This is John Tippett from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, and we hope that you will take this lesson to never forget our fallen.

(dramatic music)

Remember to pick up Part Two of this podcast featuring Captain Brendan Connolly and Lieutenant Brian McNamara of the FDNY Fire Academy Subway and Extrication Unit, accompanied by Retired FDNY Captain Ed Ireland, the firefighter Carmine Puccia relieved on that fateful night.

(dramatic music ends)

(quiet music)

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