



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 105 ~ MAY / JUNE 2022

There is no hierarchy of suffering. There's nothing that makes my pain worse or better than yours, no graph on which we can plot the relative importance of one sorrow versus another

~ Edith Eger

Imagine the death of a person as a stone tossed into a pond. Radiating out on the surface of the water are ripples, extending further and further from the point of impact. Think of those ripples as all the people affected by the death of that one person. Although everyone who mourns and misses that person is connected, it doesn't always feel that way in real life. Rifts in families and among friends can become chasms in the wake of loss. We tend to allow more grace and time to certain people based on how we perceive their "rank" as a griever. Even those in the inner circle often aren't given much time to grieve; for those in the outer circles, their grief may not even be acknowledged.

Psychologist Dr. Kenneth Doka created the term **disenfranchised grief** to describe losses that are less understood or that receive less support. In his words, "Disenfranchised grief refers to a loss that's not openly acknowledged, socially mourned, or publicly supported."

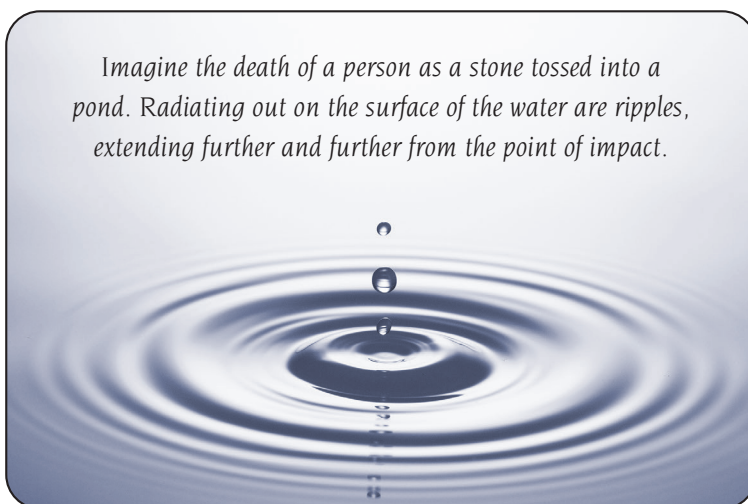
Who might feel disenfranchised in their grief? Adult siblings are often expected to step up to help spouses, children, and parents after a death. People may ask, "How are your parents doing?" but forget to acknowledge the sibling's own grief. Unmarried partners, in addition to often not qualifying for

death benefits, may be given less room to grieve since the relationship was not legally established. Former spouses or significant others, whose formal and legal relationship has ended, may still grieve the death of a person with whom they shared friendship, history, memories, and children. Fellow firefighters often have a closeness that goes far beyond typical coworkers. They may grieve the loss of both a colleague and a friend, even as they are expected to return to the job. If you have ever felt or been made to feel you grieved "too long" or "too much" for a cousin, neighbor, friend, or mentor, it may be disenfranchised grief you are experiencing.

How much better would it be if we could lift one another up and help one another heal? If we acknowledged that each person has a right to their grief, however different it may be from our own? If we could give up the idea that some people's grief is greater than that of others?

In case you need a reminder today, your grief is your grief, and you deserve compassion and support. You don't have to justify it or apologize for it or try to make it fit someone else's ideas about how it's supposed to look or how long it's supposed to last. Your unique, personal grief matters because your unique, personal relationship mattered and still matters. You have a right to grieve all that has been lost.

Imagine the death of a person as a stone tossed into a pond. Radiating out on the surface of the water are ripples, extending further and further from the point of impact.



Just a Fiancée

By Dawn Ruane Carroll, Fiancée of Jon Young (2011-NJ)

Ten and a half years ago, yet it seems like yesterday.

November 16, 2011, my life shattered, the black abyss opened.

The love of my life had died in the line of duty.

Jon and I met in 2003, as coworkers on NJ-TF1, New Jersey's USAR Team. Jon was in communications; I was one of the RNs for the team. At 6' 7", I have to admit he scared me a little. Fast forward six years, when I was promoting helicopter safety/landing zones for fire and police departments. The first discussion was a little tense, as there had been communications issues on a prior landing of the helicopter—the scene was definitely not safe to land! We had casual interactions after that, until one day someone told him the only time they saw him really smile was when he saw me. He asked me out shortly after, which took me by surprise. I was not initially interested, as I was going through an ugly divorce and had sworn off men! Little did I know what an impact Jon would have, not only on me, but also on my family. The love of my life, the man my children could turn to and talk to. He loved us dearly and protected us fiercely.

The day Jon died, I was working on the helicopter, he at the fire department. He had two fires the night before. On our call that morning, he sounded like a kid in a candy store. We were going to be spending the next four days together moving things from his house to our house, spending time with the kids and each other (which is precious in the world of first responders and healthcare providers), and planning our wedding with the kids. Unbeknownst to Jon,

my daughter and I had planned a huge surprise party for Jon for his 50th birthday that weekend! He was so happy on that call. His very last words were, "I am so in love with you."

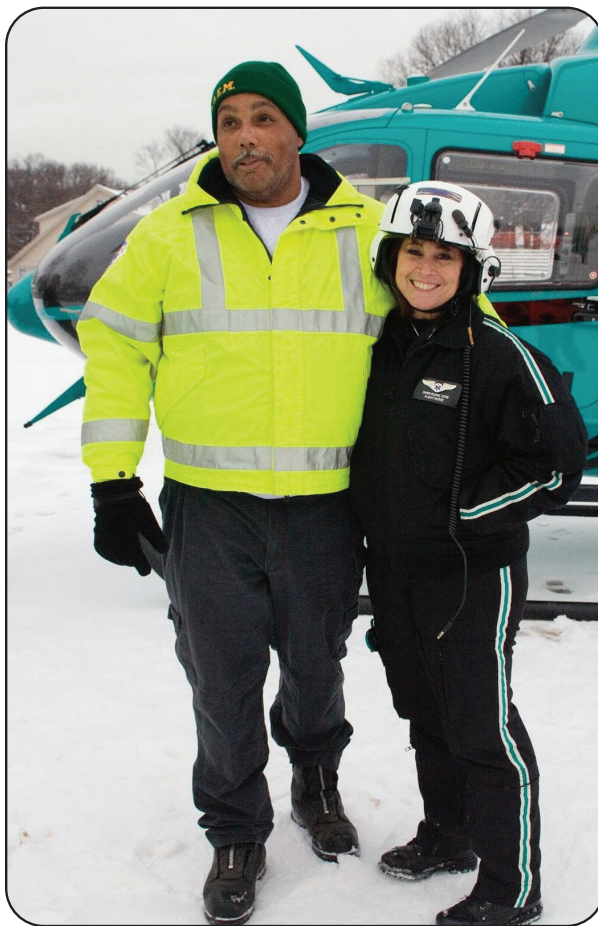
Little did I know that those would be the last words I heard; seventeen minutes later, he had a massive heart attack. His crew worked on him and got pulses back. He made it to the hospital but coded again on the way to the cath lab. And he was gone. The devastation and grief I felt that day was overwhelming. My life, my dreams, my love... gone forever.

In the ensuing days, as I was not his legal next of kin, "just his fiancée" became a sword into my heart. I was needed to give the particulars of Jon's service, his desires, plans should he die, but I was not in charge of making the decisions. I was "just his fiancée."

To say that year after Jon's death was tough is an understatement. Sadly, important friendships fell away, unless I took the initiative to keep them up. Many of the promises made when Jon died were not kept. I learned of the NFFF Memorial from my "brothers" on NJ-TF1. I timidly made the call to the Foundation;

after all, I was "only his fiancée." Bev Donlon answered that call, and I will be eternally grateful for the welcoming, caring, supportive way in which she greeted me on that call! I knew I had to be there to honor Jon, but as I was only his fiancée, was not sure that I could attend.

Memorial Weekend was very rough, but the love, support, and hope that I was shown gave me a glimmer of hope, a ray of light in that dark abyss. I was acknowledged as being the love of Jon's life, the person he chose to spend the rest of his life with. After watching and being encompassed by





all the families and dedicated firefighters, I decided that as long as I was able, I would be at that Memorial every year to honor Jon and to help the new families in their journeys. I have been blessed by the amazing friendships I have developed through the Memorial, conferences, and tree lightings. I have many “earth angels” in this survivor family, the Foundation, and the fire service that I know would be there for me in an instant.



My blessings continued at one special Tree Lighting. It came at a very rough time. Financially, I had to let go of the house Jon and I had bought. I had been on the floor crying the night before, looking at the ceiling, talking to Jon and God like they were really there, telling them I needed their help, their guidance, and to give me a big shove—because I don’t take hints easily—as to the path I was to take. I was too emotionally spent and decided I could not go to the tree decorating the next day. But I woke up the next morning, and something told me I needed to be there. I arrived a little late and was asked to help this firefighter decorate one of the trees. Little did I know, this was one of the many blessings Jon was sending me. That firefighter became my husband two years later! We learned through many talks after the Tree Lighting that neither of us intended to be there that day, but something told us to go. Neither of us ever thought of even dating again, much less falling in love. We had both given up on online dating, which we likened to reading the real estate ads. (Question the pictures, and you know if it says “fixer-upper” or “cozy and charming,” you have to knock that whole thing down!)

That firefighter, Mike Carroll, made my heart smile again, made me trust that when someone says something, they will do it and be there for you. Mike helped me to love again. He understands the sudden unexpected tears when I see a dragonfly or a cardinal or a rainbow, listen to a song, or for no reason at all. Mike’s wife died unexpectedly at home in Maine on August 4, 2003, when Mike was in Emmitsburg attending a class at NETC. He gets it, as I have found so many associated with the Foundation do.

I know now that, while I was “just his fiancée,” I had something else no one would ever have—Jon’s true and everlasting love. I know that he continues to watch over me, that he guided me to the NFFF and all the blessings, love, and everlasting friendships that accompanied that first step.



Support and Connection for Fire Hero Families

Join our private Facebook group for Fire Hero Families.

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


Find resources that support adults and children who are grieving.

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

Join one of our virtual support groups hosted via Zoom.

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/X3JMT93>

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



Many people find the company of animals to be comforting and healing, well worth the inconveniences that are inevitably part of pet ownership. Do you have a pet or companion animal that has helped you through grief and loss? We would love to feature a photo and a paragraph or two about how your animal companions have helped and comforted you during difficult times.

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

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

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