



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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Grief is in two parts. The first is loss. The second is the remaking of life

~ Anne Roiphe

The myth that grief unfolds in neat stages has been pretty well debunked, although you may still see that model referenced from time to time. Instead of stages, it may be more helpful to think of grief as having seasons that unfold over time. These seasons aren't perfectly defined, aren't the same for each person, and don't have a checklist of symptoms or signs. But you may find over time that you come to new seasons of your own grief where you can feel something shift. Maybe it's realizing, in a new way, that this loss is forever, and that you are changed by it. Maybe it's letting go of something you had been clinging to—an idea or a pattern that doesn't serve you anymore.

Sometimes we won't even be aware we have entered a new season of grief until we are already there.

How will you know? Maybe something feels lighter in your body, or the world looks slightly different through your eyes, or you find yourself smiling at memories that once brought only tears. You will know it when you're there. And it's a good time to stop and acknowledge that you have entered something new. Not the way you planned or the way you wanted, but still something significant and worth noticing. You are still here, discovering who you are now, finding your way in a new world.

Following Someone's Legacy

By Anne Truman, Daughter of Randy Hiti (2015-MN)

There are moments that change your life. Ours happened eight years ago, February 18, 2015. My dad was responding to a call for our volunteer fire department. He had a massive heart attack and died before he left the garage that he worked from. I never dreamed when it happened how different things would be.

The first few days were like a movie scene. Things are happening, and you don't even comprehend what is going on. You wake up hoping it's a dream and will all go away. For some, the grief and reality hits soon after the trauma. For others, like me, it took months. The grief, when it hits you, can feel like a ton of bricks burying you alive.



Randy Hiti

They say that there are stages of grief and that it gets better. The reality is that grief is a constant. When you lose a loved

one, it's about the journey that it takes you on. It ebbs and flows. Sometimes you are drowning in despair and pain, other days you are laughing at fun memories, and other days you cry over a simple song. Grief is a process, and it's lifelong.

It changes. You miss what you had, and you miss the memories and events you were denied—my dad walking me down the aisle, holding his first grandchild, and many other moments that you cannot

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share with them in person. You grieve those moments that you crave to share with them. You learn from your grief. It changes you, and it affects your life.

Here's the challenge of being someone's legacy: Do something with that grief. Your firefighter was a hero and did amazing things. Take that drive, love of others, and service to a greater good. It doesn't need to be huge, but find ways to honor their memory. We as a family have

taken the memory and anniversary of my father's death to do something to honor him. Each year we volunteer in my dad's memory for some group we are drawn to. We give our time to serve others as our father did. In those moments, we honor his memory.

As each of you approach your anniversary this coming year, I encourage you to do something in honor of your firefighter, even if it's a small thing. It honors them, and it is something you do for you.

Grief, A Mother's Experience

By Joyce Lopez, Mother of Edward Stringer Sr. (2010-IL)

I'm not sure how to describe grief, as it has been 11 years plus some months and days since my firstborn son, Edward, died. How does a mother describe the unexpected death of any child? Time supposedly has a way of easing the loss of her child.

Edward was a character throughout his 47 years on earth. He was "Special Ed" in so many ways, a name he definitely earned. His life was adventurous, and he certainly had a smile that let you know he was probably up to something. Edward succeeded in life, and his becoming a Chicago firefighter proved how determined he was to succeed.



Edward Stringer Sr.

Edward and his fellow firefighter, Corey Ankum, lost their lives on December 22, 2010. That was devastating to me, along with my other children, Michael, Joseph, and Jeannette.

Edward will live on in our lives, and we will never forget what a special human he was. His death may have been unexpected; however, his life was always adventurous.

Heaven has him now, and I'm sure he's smiling down at us every day.

RIP, my beloved son, Edward J. Stringer Sr.

Twenty Years (But Who's Counting?)

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

My beautiful Heather,

How can you be gone twenty years? TWENTY YEARS! The fact of the matter is that on some days, I still think, "I'm going to call Heath....uh, no, I'm not." And at least once a day there is something I would like to talk to you about or ask your opinion on a semi-important topic, like whether you think the blue (whatever) or purple (whatever) would look better, even though I know you'll say purple.



Heather at Sylvia and Len's wedding.

And then, there are those other days when I remember so very clearly the moment I realized you were gone. And that time three years later when I realized you really weren't coming home, ever. So many tears. Tears of sadness and loss. That was a hard time. But, despite the years, maybe even because of the years, it is somehow better now. Life is good.

Twenty years is a long time. So much has happened in those twenty years. Happy



Heather holding Rachel.

times, sad times. Your brother Jeremy got married and adopted two boys. Your nephew John is now a handsome teenager, and Stan is still a stinker (like you). Len and I had a trip of a lifetime, a cruise to the South Pacific (Easter Island! Tahiti!). We went to Europe, to Poland, the birthplace of your great-grandparents. And Marc's girls—Kristen, who was just a toddler the last time you saw her, is getting married this summer, and Rachel, who you held in your arms when she was only hours old, just graduated from Rensselaer, smartie that she is (just like you). Michelle (who was still stardust when you left us) is in pre-med, on her way to being a pediatrician. We're their grandparents now that all their own have joined you, wherever (whatever) that may be. I like to think of death as a kind of continuum, you know, like on Star Trek. Our spirits just move on to....continue.

My hair is mostly gray, and I look like Babcie now that I am old(er). Len is balding, and the hair he does have, he buzzes off. Do you remember the first time he came for tea? You asked me who that man with the long ponytail was. I told you he was a friend from high school, and you said, "That long ago?!" And, oh, how you cried at our wedding seven years later. Tears of joy.

That's the thing about time; you can't stop it or turn it back. You have to go with the flow and continue living,

even though your heart is broken and you feel like you're being dragged along. You continue living until you're not. I wonder often and even fantasize about what your life would have been like. Children...three, maybe four? I pretend they're all girls—revenge is sweet. You would have been a great mother. A forest service professional, maybe teaching at a college. You would have been an awesome teacher. And you would have been here, with us, for all the important and not so important events of the last twenty years. Though in reality, you have been here, just differently.

It has occurred to me that in eight more years you will have been gone from us for as long as you were alive with us. While it was initially a very sobering thought, it is and will be a miracle of sorts—that you will be remembered not only for the awful, sudden way you died, but you will still be talked about with love and affection by us all.

Memories of your immense and totally unforgettable presence are alive in all of us. Always. Forever.

Love, Mom xxxxxxxxxxxx



Len, Sylvia, and Heather

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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



Is there a time of day that you find yourself feeling your grief more intensely? For many people, nights are hard. Sleep may be difficult to come by. Worries and sadness may creep in especially when the world gets quiet. Or maybe it's first thing in the morning when you realize again that the person you love is missing. What have you done to help you through those difficult hours? What can you offer to those who may still be struggling with this?

If you'd like to share your thoughts on this or another topic, please send them by **October 31** to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
Attn: Jenny Woodall
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