



# The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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Anything is possible when you have the right people there to support you.

~ Misty Copeland

One of the hardest parts of the pandemic for us in NFFF Family Programs has been the cancellation and postponement of in-person events. Although we have grown to appreciate and promote online year-round support, we understand that there is nothing quite like being together in person.

We know that some of the most pivotal moments and long-lasting connections begin in those moments between the official events. Maybe it's a one-on-one conversation with a presenter after the workshop. Maybe it's a spark of friendship that starts over a meal or on a bus as you realize all you have in common with those sitting around you. Maybe it's a sense of being part of something bigger during an off-site excursion

or service project. For some things, you just have to be face to face.

So, one of our greatest joys, starting in the fall of 2021 and into 2022, was the return of in-person programming. If you joined us for the 2021 Winter Retreat or 2022 Hal Bruno Camp or any of the other events, it was so good to see you! Thank you for taking the risk, putting up with travel headaches, and being with us. For those who told us they weren't ready yet to attend large events in the wake of the pandemic, we get it, we really do. When you're ready, we'll be here, and we look forward to seeing you.

And if you've never been to a NFFF event and are wondering if it's something you'd like to try, here are some reflections from those who were there. We hope to see you all soon.

## 2022 Men's Retreat | Estes Park, Colorado

By Ed Ramos, Father of Garrett Ramos (2021-IL)

The Men's Retreat in Colorado was very healing for my soul! The retreat helped me to open up a little more to life in general, such as not feeling guilty about enjoying the things I like to do, which in turn changed my thinking about how our son would like us to live out our lives.

When I arrived at the retreat, I wasn't planning on talking too much in the



meeting, just wanting to listen mostly. But after listening, my thoughts changed, and I thought maybe I could help others to heal!

When I left the retreat to go home, I was looking forward to it, but I also didn't want to leave. I wanted more of our group meeting—getting to know all my new friends and their stories, learning more

Men's Retreat *continued on page 2*

**Men's Retreat** *continued from page 1*

about their lives and what they are doing to cope with the loss of their loved ones. I felt like I was on cloud nine; my energy was so far up that I ended up crashing when I returned home. I reached out to my friends and family, plus I received a special gift and note from Tony, who also attended the retreat, which lifted my spirits.

My favorite time in Colorado was getting together at our group meetings, trying to listen more and not hog the floor to talk. The meetings were very uplifting and so emotional it was a natural high. I didn't want to stop even if I was dead tired. I only wish we had more time to hear everyone's stories.

The retreat has helped me in my day-to-day life by knowing that I am not alone, and I have support not too far away. The memories of this retreat will last a lifetime. My attitude toward living every minute and hour has changed. The tears are still coming, just not as plentiful, thank God. You would think there was a limit to how many tears you can produce in one day. I am very happy that I attended the retreat, and I look forward to meeting all my new family at the next go-round.

I pray for you all, and I wish I could take away all your pain and suffering. I am here if anyone needs me.

God Speed, Ed

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**By Tony Helfer**
*Son of George Helfer (2019-CO)*

**B**eing a surviving son of fallen firefighter George M. Helfer, I saw the invitation from NFFF for the first ever Men's Retreat in Estes Park. I have to say, being a guy, I thought it was nice but certainly for someone else, as I was doing fine with things. Even after the loss of my father and several subsequent, hugely impactful losses within 24 months of his passing, including my mother, I thought I was being strong and doing well. I finally signed up for the retreat, as it kept sticking in my head. Up to the day prior to it starting, I still was considering backing out, but Eric Nagle from the NFFF gently kept me on the roster. Thank God!



This was by far the most impactful event of my life, second only to the Memorial Weekend. It's very true that you can't see the hole you are in until someone shines a light from

above and reaches down a hand. And that hand turned into MANY hands from NFFF staff on site, Dr. Joah Williams who helped us walk the path of grief, and the true angels on earth—the men who also put aside the “tough guy” facade, took a leap of faith, and attended the group. I'm

not too proud to admit that they all likely saved my life and gave me a new outlook to move forward. The meetings, outings, service project, and sharing were, as one member said, “not the touchy-feely group thing” many guys fear.

I would highly encourage any Fire Hero Survivors to allow the NFFF to involve you in their programs. It could

reaffirm your progress or help you to progress in dealing with the loss of your Fire Hero. And like me, you might get found when you didn't even realize you were lost!





## 2022 Hal Bruno Camp— Colorado Springs, Colorado

*This was our first year, and I can already tell how helpful and comforting it was to my children and myself. The youngest finally opened up at camp for the first time since her dad's death. This is HUGE!*

*There is valuable support at these events, and the connections made are so incredible. It is worth whatever it takes to attend.*



*At camp, kids get a chance to interact with other kids and adults who understand what they are going through. It's a safe place for them to talk and grow.*

*There is nothing better than being surrounded by others who can understand the feelings, both high and low. Everyone is welcome. The group of people we have met through Foundation events are the last gift our loved one could give us.*



*What's one word you would use to describe camp?*

awesome helpful hope  
comfortable rejuvenating love  
safe supportive  
comforting bond educational  
healing fun  
amazing energetic  
impactful wonderful enjoyable

## 2022 Wellness Conference—Rochester, New York

### First-Time Attendee

*By Brandi Clark, Sister of Michael French (2007-SC)*

This was my first conference, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I learned a lot from the ladies that were teaching and talking about grief. Hearing the stories from the other survivor families really let me know that I'm not alone or by myself in this process. I cannot wait to attend another conference in the future. From the history lesson from Ms. Gail at the old cemetery, to the trip to the fire department, the food and fellowship were amazing! Thank you for giving us this time with others who can relate to what we have been and are still going through.



### Dinner at the Spencerport Fire Department

*By Bob Wilson, Father of Kyle Wilson (2007-VA)*



My wife and I were touched by the sincerity of all the NFFF personnel we encountered during the conference. A highlight was the dinner provided by the Spencerport Fire Department. It was a chance to mingle with many firefighters, current and retired. They too were extremely sincere. Upon returning home, I happened to reread our NFFF Remembrance Card, and much to my surprise, our card had been sent to us by Mrs. Gail Fowler, from Spencerport, New York. Coincidence, or extremely thoughtful planning by the NFFF crew?

### Cobbs Hill Police Memorial

*By Arlene Zang, Mother of Robin Zang-Esterkamp (2008-OH)*

There were so many memorable moments in Rochester with my survivor family that it is hard to choose a favorite. The one that sticks most in my mind is the Cobbs Hill Police Memorial. I remember looking around at all the survivors attending, taking their own free time to attend. Their loved ones were from different states, different departments, holding various public safety positions, and yet they were all here, together, to honor other heroes' brave acts. To me, this was the ultimate reminder that NO ONE STANDS ALONE.



### The Reminders

*By Cathy DeFlumere, Wife of Al "Foxye" DeFlumere (1996-NY)*



My husband, "Foxye," died in the line of duty in October of 1996, along with our son, Matthew, 26 years ago. I made a life-changing move in March 2022 from New York to South Carolina. As much as I was so excited to move—loving every minute of decorating my new home, meeting new people—I was struggling. How could I not visit my husband and son at the cemetery? Going to the Wellness Conference was just what I needed. I needed to see my survivor family. I needed hugs. I needed to shed some tears. Two weeks after coming home from the conference, I received this gift from Helene Czerw, wife of Joseph Czerw (1982-PA). She was unable to attend the conference, but she knew I was struggling. Thank you to Helene, my survivor family, and to the NFFF, my boys live on in my heart. It is just the reminders that we need to get us through.





## 2021 Winter Retreat and Holiday Tree Lighting—Fairfield, PA and Emmitsburg, MD



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*We enjoyed seeing old friends and making new friendships. We are thankful to be part of this family.*

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*Your programs are so important to the families. They make you feel like you are not alone.*

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*Thank you for supporting us with your warmth and love. Winter Retreat is right before our Son's EOW, and being with our survivor families feels so good.*

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*This Winter Retreat is what my heart needed. Getting to meet people who truly understand my grief has been a life saver.*

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*Once again, the NFFF outdid themselves providing this opportunity for family members to just sit and share stories.*

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*The retreat was a great way to connect with other families in a small setting, while spending time helping the Foundation. Wonderful experience and would easily recommend to others.*

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*What fun!! Great to be around other Fire Hero Family Members without the "pressures" of Memorial Weekend. It was a slow-paced, lowkey event filled with love and fellowship.*

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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 a psychologist*

 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; professionally facilitated; 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](mailto:ebrowning@firehero.org).



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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



We focus a lot on your loved one's service as a firefighter, but we know they were much more than just that. We want to hear more about their passions, hobbies, skills, and vocations that had nothing to do with being a firefighter. What are the other ways in which they made their mark on the world and in your life?

If you'd like to write on this topic, please start with the sentence, "My firefighter was also \_\_\_\_\_." Include

a high-quality photo, if you'd like, and send it by December 31 to [jwoodall@firehero.org](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org)

If you don't use email, please submit your written piece and photo to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

Attn: Jenny Woodall

P.O. Drawer 498

Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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