



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.

~ Chinese proverb

Firefighter line-of-duty deaths, especially those that are sudden and unexpected, are quite public. The fire service is known for its proud traditions in honoring its members who die while serving. Firefighters may come from hundreds of miles to assist the department or agency, serve as members of the honor guard, and stand in tribute to their fallen comrades. News coverage tends to be intense. In high profile incidents, where multiple people are killed and the incident gains national attention, it is common for there to be memorial events on the anniversary of the incident for years to come.

All this attention can be a mixed bag for grieving families. On the one hand, most people appreciate the honor and recognition for their fallen hero's service and sacrifice. It can be comforting when the community pauses to remember and reflect on the life of the person you loved. Many families describe the overwhelming gratitude they felt seeing how many firefighters and fire apparatus came for the funeral or memorial service. For those who do not have a family tradition of firefighting, it sometimes brings deeper understanding of why the fire service is often described as a brotherhood, a calling, and a second family.

But when the community has gone back to business as usual and the apparatus and the firefighters have gone back to their work of protecting their communities, families find themselves at the beginning of a very long journey. The landscape of their lives has changed forever, and they must learn to walk a new path. It's a lonely place to be.

As families take their first tentative steps into this unfamiliar new world, they may be faced with the realization that, even in death, their firefighter—their beloved spouse or parent or sibling or child—belongs to a wider community. Families may feel like they are grieving under a microscope. Their very private grief intersects with the community and fire department's loss of a public safety officer, colleague, and friend. Not surprisingly, the loss experiences and expectations about how things should be done don't always align. The situation can be a perfect storm for misunderstanding, hurt feelings, and distance.

Grief changes relationships. Loss can pull people closer together or drive them further apart. Longtime friendships may fall away, while new connections may form, often around similar loss experiences. Sometimes, there is estrangement or conflict between the firefighter's first family and their second firefighter family. The people you thought would be there might end up not being the people who show up most in your hour of need. Of all the types of secondary loss that grieving families experience, the loss of and change in relationships is often one of the most painful.

In this issue, we feature one story of one family and how loss changed their world.

Grief Vocabulary

Secondary Losses are additional losses that result from the (primary) loss of a loved one. Examples include financial instability, changes in/loss of friendships, loss of faith, changes in social support.

Death In a Small Town

Nicole Hardy Schatzle, Wife of Stuart Gregory Hardy (2015-SC)

Death In a Small Town. That's what I have always considered naming my story if I ever choose to write it, or should I say, find the courage to write it. The loss of a loved one is never easy, and our ability to cope and process the events is a hard path to travel. However, I find that losing a loved one that you share with the community and public can make the path we travel for recovery much harder.

Stuart passed away responding to an accident that took place just outside our subdivision. The knock at the door came while I was getting ready to run to the store to get the last-minute list of dinner items he wanted me and the girls to bring to him at the station. My heart sank, and I knew that our lives would be forever changed. That feeling of despair hit harder as I was driven past the scene where Stuart fell to the ground, forever lost to us.

Stuart was a member of a fire department that had never experienced a line-of-duty death. For that matter, we are part of a town that had not experienced a firefighter death until Stuart. Our loss as a family was not just ours to shoulder; the whole town felt a loss, even if they didn't know him. Our town is a small town. Most people have known each other since elementary school and have grown up with each other. There are others who have made this their home after being stationed here. But no matter if this was always your home or became your home; it becomes a part of who you are, and the death of a firefighter is something felt by all.

At first, the town coming together to support the girls and me was inspiring and brought a momentum of strength. I knew that I could keep fighting for my girls, to be strong because I was not alone. Local stores had signs posted honoring Stuart. People I didn't know offered their condolences and support. However, it became clear that with all this there would be a price to pay. Stuart was no longer "ours." He belonged to everyone. Decisions that I

made were questioned, and everyone felt they should have a say because they had offered help in some sort of way. The day of his funeral, people that we didn't know came to give their respects. Our grieving was on display for the town to watch. As we drove from the church to the cemetery, the streets were lined with people watching, as if we were a parade of sorrow. We grieved with a town watching and judging every move we made.



Nicole and her daughters

It has been a hard lesson to learn and grow from. After Stuart was laid to rest, we had to find a new normal, a way to continue to live our lives. My girls were denied the right to have their dad be present in all future events. He won't see them graduate high school, get married, and become successful human beings. He hasn't been here to share in the ups and downs, to cheer from the sidelines for award ceremonies, sports, and plays. Our family has lost and has suffered, and on some days it seems the suffering starts over.

It did not take long for support to dwindle from the town and from the fire department that Stuart gave his life for, and this has been hard for me and our daughters. My decisions did not line up with what they wanted or felt was right. They continue to honor Stuart in their own way, and we continue to honor Stuart in ours.

As much as this is painful—and there have been moments of bitterness towards others—it has been part of the healing process to let it all go. To come to terms with the fact that we have separated and that our lives didn't have to be intertwined with the department forever. Living our lives in a way that would make Stuart proud is what matters. We know that decisions made may not always lead us down the path we were hoping for. There are times when we have to pivot and start over. However, it is about moving forward and being able to get up every day and choose to live a life that would honor Stuart. Learning to live a new life is never easy and always requires reevaluation and adjustments.



I hesitated to share my thoughts, because it is not the representation of what seems to be the norm. Most stories around the loss of a loved one are full of support from the department. However, I felt it was important to share a story that was far from perfect to show others that may have similar experiences that they are not alone. It is

okay to step back and say, I don't have to act a certain way because that is what is expected of someone in my situation. You are allowed to do what you need to do to take care of yourself and your family first, no matter what others may say.

Pieces featured in The Journey may not be reprinted without written permission from the authors.

Taking Care of Our Own®

Years ago, when the NFFF first asked Fire Hero Families what would help them most, one of the things they said was, "Help fire departments. They don't know what to do with us. Help them so they can help us." From this conversation, the NFFF created the *Taking Care of Our Own*® training class to help fire departments better understand the needs of families and plan for how they

would handle a line-of-duty death, should one occur in their department. This unique one-day class is co-presented by a chief officer, a Fire Hero Family member, and a behavioral health specialist who understand firefighter line-of-duty death firsthand. For more information on this class, visit <https://www.firehero.org/fire-service-resources/taking-care-of-our-own>.

2023 Fire Hero Family Tree Lighting: Save the Date

Each year, during the winter holiday season, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation remembers and celebrates the lives of our nation's fallen firefighters with a Fire Hero Family Tree Lighting.

Please save the date for this treasured annual event:

2023 Fire Hero Family Tree Lighting
National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Chapel
National Emergency Training Center
December 1, 2023, 4:30 p.m.

If you are not able to attend the Tree Lighting, you can still send an ornament, which will be lovingly

placed on the trees in the chapel by Fire Hero Families and fire service volunteers. Ornaments will be displayed throughout the winter holiday season in the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Chapel. This event will be livestreamed for those who cannot attend in person.

Please send ornaments to arrive by November 28 to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
Attn: Fire Hero Family Tree Program
P.O. Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727



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 or 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, encouragement, 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

open to adult Fire Hero Family members; during the anniversary month of your firefighter's death, join others who are also remembering their firefighters; facilitated by a grief specialist

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

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/PQF7X39>

If you have questions about these groups, please e-mail Erin at ebrowning@firehero.org.



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



There are a lot of analogies and theories about grief out there, some of which are helpful and some of which are not. What makes sense to one griever might not work at all for the next. Maybe you've heard that grief has stages or tasks or phases, that grief is like learning to surf or like a thousand-pound block of ice on your shoulders that melts gradually over time. We'd like to give you the opportunity to tell us about your own views on grief. Please start your piece with, "Grief is..." and—in a few sentences or paragraphs—tell us how it is for you.

We include a writing prompt in each issue, but you don't have to write on that topic. To share your story of grief, healing, and hope, please send it, along with a high-resolution photo, by October 1, to 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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National Fallen Firefighters Foundation • P.O. Drawer 498, Emmitsburg, MD 21727

(301) 447-1365 firehero@firehero.org