



# The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 113 ~ SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2023

*A happy marriage is a long conversation which always seems too short.*

~ André Maurois

**H**opefully by now, we have established that death doesn't end a relationship. The conversation between two people continues, even when one of them dies.

And yet...life moves forward. Even while part of our heart remains with the person who died. Even when we want to scream at the world to stop, because our life has changed forever.

When we are grieving, we live in two worlds—the world that was, and the world that is. And what we call “the grief process” is the path we take to learning to integrate those two worlds. If you are reading this, you are probably aware that there is no map. Each path is different, and the journey tends to be twisty, with detours, obstacles, triumphs, and surprises.

Along the path of grief, there are endless decision points.

*What do we do with our loved one's clothes? Should we stay in the same house or move? How do we want to memorialize that person? How do we help children grieve and remember? What do I say when people ask how many children I have? Do I want to try dating again? Who should I list as my emergency contact?*



Honestly, it's exhausting. And it's part of the process. It's how we get further down that path, creating the map as we go, one decision at a time.

In this issue, we are highlighting one of those decision points—when you are widowed, what do you do with your wedding jewelry? You will see that there are many possible answers and creative ideas, and that each person put a lot of thought and intention into making the decision that works best for them.

#### **Grief Myth:**

According to the Grief Etiquette Handbook, widowed people should do the following with their wedding jewelry:

- a. Continue to wear it.
- b. Stop wearing it.
- c. Switch it to the other hand.

#### **Grief Truth:**

There is no handbook.

Step 1: Do what works for you.

Step 2: That might change over time. If so, refer to Step 1.

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 By Ashley Smith
 

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*Wife of Austin Smith (2022-OR)*

**I** wear Austin's wedding ring around my neck. You can see it in just about every picture I take. It was the one thing he always had on him, including the day he died in the line of duty. The minute it was given to me, I knew I couldn't just leave it in my purse, and I have worn it around my neck ever since. It's on a beautiful gold chain and is just a part of the daily jewelry I wear.

I remember early on getting asked if I would turn it into a ring for myself. With tears in my eyes, I remember explaining that this ring was the size of his finger, and it brings me so much comfort being able to feel that ring and remember what his finger and hands were like. I also still wear my wedding and engagement ring.



Everyone has their own take on what a wedding ring is, but to me it was and always has been so much more than a wedding ring. It's a beautiful gift Austin picked out just for me. It's a symbol of our love and the love that created our beautiful daughter. What my ring represents goes far beyond marriage and doesn't go away with him dying. It's my widow ring now, and I have no problem talking about Austin or the fact that I'm widowed if anyone brings up my ring or asks me about my husband.

I always give myself grace in knowing that I can change my mind one day if I want to about our jewelry. For now, this is where it lives. It is an important piece of my life and, I think, a beautiful symbol for our daughter as well!

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 By Tammy McGarvey
 

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*Wife of Ron McGarvey (2021-NC)*

**W**hen Ron died two years ago, I couldn't just put our rings in a box, but I also felt strange continuing to wear mine. For a while, I put his ring on one of my (and his) favorite necklaces and wore it there. In time, I wanted to do something more permanent, so I started looking for inspiration.

My brother-in-law works for a jeweler that does custom items, so I sent my idea and our rings to them, and they created a beautiful pendant for me. As you look at the picture, the outer ring is my husband's wedding band, the heart is made with my wedding band, and the diamond is from my engagement ring. For about a year, I wore it every day.

I have since acquired a custom ring made by <https://chris-parry-handmade.co.uk/> that represents a special memory for us when we heard wolves while on a weeklong canoe trip in Canada. My son got a hammered silver ring as well. Both contain a small amount of Ron's ashes in a tiny compartment that is laser welded shut and marked with a



star. I wear my ring daily and only wear our wedding bands for special occasions.

Regarding the rest of Ron's ashes, I took about a cup of them and placed them in the hole of a memorial tree that we planted for him in our front yard. In February, my daughter, her husband, and one of my best friends took a weeklong trip to the island of Dominica. Ron had always wanted to go to the Caribbean, but COVID shut down our plans to get

there, and he passed away before that dream could be realized. It only felt right for his ashes to be laid to rest in the Caribbean. We chartered a boat that took us out into deep water, where we could release a biodegradable urn shaped like a sea turtle. It was an emotional but beautiful day which ended with a glorious sunset!

I miss him so much but know that God sees the bigger picture and will bring glory to His name through Ron's early homegoing!



## By Drenna Whetzel

### *Wife of Anthony Whetzel (2018-VA)*

**O**n December 25, 2011, Anthony proposed in his own way, by placing the ring on our dog's collar and having her come to me. He never asked me to marry him. His words were, "I don't need to ask. I know you are the one." The ring was a simple one, but it was absolutely beautiful in my eyes. On July 7, 2012, we took our vows. For better or worse, in sickness and in health, until death do us part. We placed our wedding bands on each other's fingers. Little did we realize that those vows were to come true and in such a short time. In April 2017, God tested our vows to each other. Anthony was diagnosed with terminal occupational cancer. We had a four-year-old son, and I was seven months pregnant with our daughter. During this time, my rings were removed due to swelling with pregnancy. Anthony made me take them off because he said he didn't want to have to cut them off of me. As soon as the swelling subsided, the rings were placed back on my finger.

Like most firefighters, Anthony refused to wear his wedding band when on duty, due to possible injuries. He wore it for special occasions only. After five years of marriage, he decided to buy a silicone band to wear all the time. When Anthony was passing away, we had difficult conversations—conversations that no couple, especially at our age, should have. He asked me to bury him with his real wedding band.

On September 15, 2018, at age 33, Anthony passed away from occupational cancer. I buried him with his wedding band. A month later, our five-year-old son found Anthony's silicone ring in his bedside table. I placed it in my jewelry box. The following year we attended the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Service, where I purchased a necklace to place the silicone ring on. I wear his ring around my neck now.

Another difficult conversation Anthony and I had was his blessing of me moving forward with my life. He explained



that I was still young, and I would need help raising our children. At that time our son, Rylan, was five years old, and our daughter, Callie, was 14 months old. The only request Anthony had was that the person would be good to his children. He wanted what was best for them, as we both did. About a year later I started dating Jodie. He always included my kids. He always

made sure the kids came first. He has stepped in and taken a huge load off my shoulders as a widow and with solo parenting. He has become that father figure to both my kids, not to mention how good he is to me. He keeps Anthony a part of our lives and never lets us forget. He respects the man Anthony was.

Since Anthony passed, I had not taken my rings off. Some people thought it was odd that I kept my rings on even while dating Jodie. Neither of us cared. Jodie respected this, as it was a bond Anthony and I shared. It wasn't something I was ever going to let go of. He was my husband, father of my children, and my best friend. As Jodie and I became more serious, we discussed marriage. I explained to him that I wanted the diamond Anthony gave me to be incorporated into it. He was the reason we were here, and I never wanted to give that up. I hadn't been able to get my rings off to clean them. One day they finally came off. I planned to get them cleaned and inspected but hadn't had the time. I left them in my jewelry box.

On April 14, 2023, Jodie proposed to me. The ring had a diamond in the middle, with sapphires on both sides and infinity rings of diamonds going down the sides. He explained that it was, in fact, the diamond Anthony gave me. He managed to sneak it out of my jewelry box and had it taken out of the original band and set in the new

**Whetzel** *continued from page 3*

one within a day, so I wouldn't notice it. Both Anthony and Jodie were born in September, so the sapphires represent both of them. The infinity ring of diamonds going down both sides represents the kids. It was a very well thought out ring. We are planning to incorporate the wedding band into the new one as well. We kept the original engagement band so one day it can hopefully become my daughter's.

I'm very thankful and blessed to have found a man who understands my past and cares about me to the point of being OK with me not giving that piece of my husband away. It's not just about him and me; it's about Anthony and the kids as well. I can honestly say that I know Anthony is looking down and smiling, knowing the kids and I are taken care of and that he remains a part of our life. The rings bonded us together. Now he continues to be a part of me moving forward.

**By Traci Adams Swartz**

*Wife of Tommy Adams (2009-LA)*

**F**or our 5th anniversary, Tommy bought me a beautiful Tanzanite solitaire set in a platinum setting. It was my pride and joy, and I wore it with my wedding band for our entire marriage. As soon as my daughter Kristen was old enough to talk, she was fascinated by that ring. She's loved it her entire life. Last year, as she prepared to graduate from LSU, I had the stone removed from the setting and placed into a gold pendant. I presented the necklace to her on the morning of graduation so that her daddy (or a small part of him) could



walk on that stage with her. There were tons of tears from us all, but they were tears of peace, not pain.

The year before Tommy died, on our 15th wedding anniversary, he surprised me with a beautiful new wedding ring. The story of that piece will come at another time, as I have two daughters, and my daughter Alex has asked for that ring when her time comes. I feel beyond

blessed that I had two beautiful wedding rings from their father to give to them.

**By Katie Page**

*Wife of Kelly Page (2007-MA)*

**M**y husband, FF Kelly Page, passed away on September 14, 2007, leaving behind three daughters ages 13, 10, and 5. One of my first thoughts was that their father would never walk them down the aisle or have a first dance. My eldest daughter, Kyleigh, got married on May 8, 2021. While her father was not

physically there to hold her hand, I surprised her by attaching his wedding band to her bouquet so she could put her finger through it while walking down the aisle. I also had his handwriting attached to the inside of her dress. We can do many things to always make sure our loved ones are present.





By Barbara Pelton

*Wife of James M. Pelton (2001-MI)*

**M**y husband died in the line of duty in August 2001. It wasn't until fall of 2019 that I felt ready to pass on those rings. I must first explain why Jim had two wedding bands. When he was fixing a plumbing problem for some friends, his original band fell off into a box of extra plumbing parts. Once he arrived home, he noticed it was missing, but couldn't figure out where it might be. He had left the extra parts with the couple in case they needed them. That Christmas, I got him a new band. Years later, when the couple was moving, they discovered the original band and returned it.



Now I had two bands, and my set of rings to figure out what I would do! An idea came to me. I wanted to entwine both of Jim's bands and have the diamond of my engagement ring centered in the loop the bands made. This would be put into a necklace. A dear friend knew a jeweler I could trust.

I have two granddaughters, Caitlin and Ann. The ring necklace went to Caitlin, and two others Jim had given me went to Ann. Both girls, their mom, and I were in tears on the day I did this. I am now at peace with what I chose to do.

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

### Something to Consider

**G**rieving people do surprising things sometimes. Even when we are grieving ourselves, we might look at other people's choices in grief and think, what were they thinking?? Why on earth would they (sell the house, date so soon after being widowed, pierce their nose, get a puppy)? Do your best to keep an open mind, stay curious, and avoid the temptation to get judgmental about it. Grief is hard enough without

other people criticizing our difficult choices. We might not understand the reason, but they probably have one, and it's part of their process. And if it ends up being a mistake, sometimes that's part of the process, too. Mistakes are how we learn. We all need compassion, listening ears, and a soft place to land as we figure out what comes next. We're all doing our best in difficult circumstances.

### 2023 Fire Hero Family Tree Lighting: Save the Date

**E**ach year during the winter holiday season, we remember and celebrate 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.

This event will be live streamed at [www.firehero.org](http://www.firehero.org) for those who cannot attend in person.

You can send an ornament in honor of your fallen firefighter, 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.

Please send ornaments to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation  
Attn: Fire Hero Family Tree Program  
PO 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/X3JMT93>

### 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](mailto: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



Nobody is fully prepared for grief before it happens to them. You can't really know until you know. What is something that has surprised you about grief, loss, and healing? If you'd like, you can start your piece with, "One thing that really surprised me about grief was..."

If you have a story you want to share, we want to hear it! 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 December 1 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

This project was supported by Cooperative Agreement 2020-PS-DX-K001, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.