



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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We read to know we are not alone.

~ C.S. Lewis

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive.

~ James Baldwin

Grief: a universal human experience. **Also grief:** a completely unique experience for each person.

How is it that something we all encounter in our lives can be the loneliest feeling in the world?

One of the primary goals of this publication, and really of all the NFFF family programs, is to remind people that they are not alone. Imagine issues of *The Journey* starting in Emmitsburg, winging their way across the country to mailboxes in all the corners of the U.S. (and a few outside the U.S.). Imagine that, as you are sitting wherever you live, reading the words and turning the pages, people all over the country are reading those same words, turning those same pages. Although we are far flung, we are part of the same Fire Hero Family.

The hope is that, as you read the words in each issue, you might see a little piece of your own story reflected back to you in the words of a fellow survivor. Or maybe you

read a story that is not like yours, and it gives you a better understanding of how someone else in your family might be experiencing their loss. And maybe, just maybe, you are inspired to write something about your own experience and send it winging through the ether back to Emmitsburg.

Writing and reading stories has the power to help and heal. It keeps memories alive. It reminds us that others have also suffered and have found a way through. It can offer perspective and clarity on our own situation. Words can connect us.

This issue features stories of how reading has helped people navigate their own grief journeys. If you read this and think of a book or a specific issue of *The Journey* or an essay or a blog that has helped you, pick up a pen (or a laptop) and tell us about it! And we can send it out to the community so it might help someone else.

You Will Sing Again

By Donna Piechura, Wife of Jeff Piechura (2021-AZ)

My husband, Jeff Piechura, also known as Chief Pie, was what I called a “two-timer.” He was a career fire chief for 27 years and flew wildland fires in the summer as an air tactical group supervisor (ATGS) for more than 20 of those years. Being a chief was the community job he loved. The ATGS job was what I called his hobby job,

although it was no piece of cake. It was a very serious and respected role in the wildland firefighting world.

When he died tragically in July 2021, our world fell apart. He was the devoted and loving husband, the person the adult

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kids called for advice, the teddy bear that the grandkids played with and listened to so intently when he told a story. As many know, the excruciating heartbreak of losing a loved one can seem unbearable, and you feel like you will never be happy again. All the firsts you must get through, the fears that come forward in your mind, the “what-ifs,” the future you planned is suddenly erased.

In the beginning of my new journey, I was given a stack of books. Why do people always think books will help? My initial thought was, there is no way I’m going to read these books. First of all, I cannot even focus on day-to-day tasks, much less comprehend what I’m reading in a book. Secondly, I’ve never had much patience to sit and read, I’m a mover, always doing something. But one book really did reach me. *Healing a Spouse’s Grieving Heart—100 Practical Ideas After Your Husband Dies* by Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD.

This book was simple to read, with 100 suggestions/words of advice and a *carpe diem* quote at the bottom of every page, to help guide you on this difficult new path. I started by opening the book daily, reading one of the suggestions, and I’d try to absorb what it said throughout the entire day. Eventually I would read more each day, and I ear-tagged ones that really spoke to me. I keep the book within reach, and occasionally I will flip through it again, especially when I’m having a difficult day.

A year and a half after Jeff’s accident, the morning after spending our 2nd wedding anniversary in a row without



Jeff and Donna Piechura

him, again shedding countless tears, I woke and said to myself, “I’m tired of being SO SAD all the time.” I needed to get out of this funk, try to start repairing this widow brain. (Yes, it’s a real thing.) I started putting movement and exercise back into my life, pumping positive endorphins through me. I also started playing music in my house again. You see, music was a big part of our life. Jeff always had music playing. He could sing along with old songs and new, sometimes grab me for a quick little dance. I stopped turning on the music after he died.

Then one day, as I was driving to the store with my radio on, I started tapping the steering wheel to the beat of a favorite song. I’ll never forget it, because I realized it was a happy gesture. I was almost shocked, and a wave of guilt came over me. Was this okay? I’m a grieving widow; is it okay to have this familiar sense of happiness with music? I realized this was a sign of emotional growth, something I learned from that book.

After the summer of July 2021, I never thought I’d get through the immense heartbreak I experienced. I lost my true love, my partner in everything. It has taken a while, but now I am able to smile with reflection on our life together. Every day is no longer filled with utter sadness and tears. Yes, I am still on my grief journey, but I have realized that I can carry him with me into the future and always remember our past and what he brought to our life. Some days it may seem impossible, but one day you will again find yourself singing along with a song and tapping the steering wheel.

Tethered

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

I recently read a book for my book club by the author Ann Patchett. It was a book of deeply personal essays about love, relationships, and loss. Every essay contained all these themes in various forms. I loved them all, but the one thing that keeps coming back to my mind is the author’s introduction, “Essays Don’t Die.” She went on to say that when she is writing a novel, all the characters live in her head, and she is so afraid of dying—being hit by a car, run over by bus, etc.—because then her precious characters

would die. But essays, you just ramble on about your thoughts until, voila, you are done. So here I am writing an essay that my brain is screaming at me to write down.

I have reached the age (older) when health issues seem to raise their ugly heads. I recently experienced one which sent me to the hospital for an overnight stay. My husband and I rarely spend any time apart, and this has been made even more so by the pandemic and our slow re-entry into



“normal” life. I somehow knew I would be fine, but he was very upset. At the hospital that evening, we were watching a football game and witnessed a player drop onto the field like a rag doll. As we prayed for his recovery, we agreed that we knew just how quickly life can be turned upside down. After I came home the next day, we talked about how much we depend on and care for one another. “It is,” I said, “as if we are tethered to each other by an invisible umbilical cord of love.” Our spirits, after so many years together, seem to resonate and vibrate at the same frequency. We were both relieved to be back together again, whole and happy. One is not half of two, but rather, two halves of one.

I began to think about being tethered together by love and when that tether snaps, how utterly painful it is, how lost we feel being separated from the one that we love. I thought about the parents of that young football player and knew their greatest fear. It is every parent’s greatest



Heather and Sylvia

fear—to face the death of your child, to have that cord severed completely, forever. Thank heavens that he seems to have survived. But many of us have not had that luxury of survival. We were thrust into the pain of loss, of grief so profound we thought we were dying ourselves. We cannot separate the pain into emotional pain and physical pain. Not for a long time. Then the resonating reverberations of love (spirit) take over.

We are, in fact, spiritual beings in fragile and finite bodies. This roiling, charged spiritual energy is always there. It is life. It is love. It is powerful. It is what allows us one day to realize, to really know, that the “cord” is slowly, carefully being knitted together by the love shared between you and one that has died. The energy that animated your beloved did not die. It changed. And love is the conduit that unites the two spirits once again. Then our healing journey can begin. It appears that spirit (love), like an essay, never dies.

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Reading While Grieving

As Donna mentioned in her piece, grief can affect concentration and focus. If you don’t feel like you can manage a whole book, here are a few options to consider:

- **Many titles are available as audiobooks.**

Sometimes it’s easier to listen while walking or driving or just relaxing. You can access audiobooks through many sources. If you have a library card, you might have access to free audiobooks through Hoopla, Libby, or similar apps.

- **Consider a book that offers one bite-size thought or concept at a time, such as:**

Grief One Day at a Time: 365 Meditations to Help You Heal After Loss (Alan Wolfelt, PhD)

A Time to Grieve: Meditations for Healing After the Death of a Loved One (Carol Staudacher)

A to Z Healing Toolbox: A Practical Guide for Navigating Grief and Trauma with Intention (Susan Hannifin-MacNab)

- **Maybe a grief-related blog or website is more your style. There are many. Here are a few.**

Modern Loss <https://modernloss.com>

Refuge in Grief <https://refugeingrief.com>

Speaking Grief <https://speakinggrief.org>

What’s Your Grief <https://whatsyourgrief.com>

Widow’s Voice <https://widowsvoice.com>

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.



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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



What is on your "grief resume?" When someone we love dies, we often have to develop new skills, information, and qualities to cope with a new reality. Those hard-won abilities can become superpowers as we move forward with our lives. What are some of the skills, knowledge, experience, and abilities you have developed as a result of your loss?

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 January 31, 2024, 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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