



The Journey

For Families of Fallen Firefighters

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*To me, you will be unique in all the world.
To you, I shall be unique in all the world.*

~ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, The Little Prince

The death of one person creates loss for many people. We think first of the inner circle—immediate family, close friends. But like a pebble tossed into a pond, the rings ripple out larger and larger. The people we grew up with, knew from church, met through work or volunteering. It's hard to know where it ends and just who will be affected. Know this: whoever it was who died—your brother, your godchild, your sister-in-law—that relationship you shared was unique in all the world, and so is your loss. As one Fire Hero Family member put it, “We all lost the same person, but we didn’t all lose the same thing.”

In the pages of *The Journey*, we try to feature stories that highlight individual experiences, as well as the universal aspects of the death of someone we love. Our writers include all types of people and relationships, and there is room here for your voice and your relationship as well. We hope that, in reading the words of others, you see some aspects of your own story, even though it is different from yours. And we hope the stories here help you realize what

it can be like for other people. Maybe it was your child who died, but you can empathize with someone whose spouse died, imagine things through their eyes.

When we honor firefighters for their service, we honor the best in them, the brave first responders who helped protect their communities and fellow citizens in their hour of greatest need. We call them heroes. We also recognize that each fire hero was a complex and flawed human being just like we all are. Not every action we take is heroic, not every relationship is smooth, and not every memory is a good one. On our private Facebook page for Fire Hero Family members, we have been featuring stories called “More Than Heroes,” where families have a chance to tell the stories of everyday life with the people they loved. Who were they when they were not on duty?

If you ever want to tell us more about your firefighter, yourself, and your unique relationship, please know that there is a place for that. We’d love to hear from you.

Siblings

By Janice Butler, sister of James “JB” Butler (2016-CT)

My sister would say that my brother and I were oil and water, and she was the emulsifier. My brother was the eldest and I am the youngest. We were eight years apart. Growing up, my brother and I were at different parts of our life due to the age discrepancy. Some people have referred to my brother as a big teddy bear, but there was also a grizzly bear.

My brother was James “JB” Butler, who died in the line of duty on February 7, 2016. It was Super Bowl Sunday, and

my father was going to be making dinner. My brother lived with our father, and when I got to my father’s house my brother was not home. I did not even know there was a fire. I was dreading having the conversation with my brother about his tax return that I prepared. His reaction was not going to be good when I told him the amount of his refund.

We never had that conversation.

continued on page 2

Janice Butler *continued from page 1*

Particularly when we were growing up, JB would tease me nonstop. Knowing blueberries were one of my favorites, he told me they came out with blueberry flavored Pop Rocks. When I put them in my mouth there was no fizz. He just laughed and told me he picked out tiny blue rocks from the driveway. You never knew if your bed would be short sheeted. He would lick his finger and chase me, knowing I would freak out if he touched me with his germs. I now realize we never hugged, even as adults.

We were opposites in most ways. I was studious, and he was not. He would call me a nerd. JB was able to rattle fire codes from the top of his head. I had a book collection, and he did not. It was strange once to borrow a book from him to read. It was written by one of the survivors of the Station Nightclub Fire. I think JB heard the survivor speak, most likely at a fire-related training. I will not know for sure. It is one of those things you do not think to ask. Now that JB is gone, I have kept the book.

As adults, our lives took us on different paths. JB married and had children, and I was more career oriented. Sunday dinners at our parents' house were frequent, and it was never known if JB and I would get into it during dinner. Teasing as children became bickering as adults. We all had a good laugh one time when we both purchased cars



The Butler Siblings, JB, Barbara, & Janice

within the same year. I was already at my parents' house in my shiny red convertible, and my brother showed up in his minivan. We both laughed, and this time JB was able to take a joke. One of the hardest things is not having those Sunday dinners.

After JB died, my father and I realized some things about JB. He was married and divorced twice with children, and after his death we quickly learned how difficult the dynamics were.

Estrangement within the family led to additional losses, which felt almost like another death. It is easy to be hard on our loved one or think they could have done better. We did not offer JB the benefit of the doubt. After he died, we also learned about some of his good deeds. I do not understand why people wait until someone dies to tell you.

Although we disagreed frequently, JB and I always had each other's back. When he died, one of my thoughts was that he got to see Mom again first. Our mother had died four years previously. Now that our father has passed, I wonder if JB and I would have grown closer or drifted apart. On the anniversary of his death and his birthday, I bring something to his grave. The first year, it was a childish balloon. The flowers are always pink. I thought, "I get to laugh now." One birthday, the grass had grown over his grave. As I pulled a clump of grass out, all the ants came running out. I just looked up and said, "Thanks, JB." It was true JB style.

What Makes a Hero?

By Maureen Santora, mother of Christopher Santora (2001-NY)

I have never met a firefighter who was comfortable being called a hero. No matter what heroic act they made, their response was always, "I was just doing my job." They seemed to be embarrassed being called a hero or being singled out in a special way.

For the rest of us, they were heroes. They were always the people who stopped the car to help someone in trouble, on the street or the highway.



Christopher Santora & friends

That was the quality that defined them. For their families, however, they were just ordinary people. They sometimes got angry, had hissy fits, overreacted to situations. They were not perfect. They knew lots of things but sometimes did stupid things and made mistakes. They were human. We loved them anyway. It didn't matter. We loved them dearly and still do even though they are no longer with us. We still think about them every day. They are still a part of us.



When my son was murdered on September 11, 2001, in the attacks in New York City, he was 23 years old. I could not comprehend him perishing. As everyone who reads *The Journey* knows, losing someone you love dearly is probably the most difficult and saddest event of your life. Many called Christopher a hero. I didn't want him to be a hero. I wanted him to be alive. I had no words for them except to thank them for their kind words. He had never been a hero to me before; he was my son. He wasn't perfect. He often angered me. He often made me proud. I loved him no matter what. He was my boy. I loved him.

Twenty-three years have passed since that horrific day. Christopher has been

called a hero thousands of times. We learned later that he helped get people out of the Marriott Hotel before it collapsed. Christopher's entire engine company perished that day. So did all the firefighters in his firehouse, Engine 54/Ladder 4, Battalion 9. Fifteen men. Christopher was a hero, and so were the 343 FDNY firefighters who died on September 11, 2001, and the more than 370 FDNY firefighters who have since died because they worked at Ground Zero.

I suppose he was always a hero growing up. He helped a lot of people just because it was the right thing to do. I just didn't recognize it. He was my son. I loved him and still do. That was enough for me.



Christopher Santora

By Vicki Riley

Wife of William Riley (2004-MO)

I wrote this poem after the explosion on November 29, 1988, which killed six of our friends. My husband and I purchased Bibles, and inside each one I wrote this poem for the families of our fallen brothers.

Thank you for all you do to help all of us through loss. May we NEVER forget...

Our Friends

When they heard the call they answered.
When help was needed they were there.
Comforters, friends, protectors,
They entered places no one dared.

Saving life was their profession.
Meeting danger their routine.
What they faced was never known to them
When they pulled up on the scene.



Sometimes the call was nothing.
Sometimes the nothing more,
Yet they never would give up until
Life and safety were restored.

Some may call this bravery foolishness.
Others bow in awed respect.
Their reward will be in Heaven,
Where they know what to expect.

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

Want to read more about the firefighters whose stories are featured in *The Journey*?

Search for the firefighter's name on the Roll of Honor at <https://www.firehero.org/fallen-firefighters>.

Want to organize or share a tribute or memorial in honor of your firefighter?


Visit <https://www.firehero.org/fallen-firefighters/firefighter-tributes> to see examples of how others have remembered their firefighters. You can use the same link to share tributes and memorials dedicated to your firefighter.

Support and Connection for Fire Hero Families

Join one of our virtual support groups hosted via Zoom. These groups are provided for family members of firefighters honored or approved to be honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

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 who specializes in providing trauma-focused support

 **Weekly, Tuesday, 8-9 PM (Eastern Time)**

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; hosted by NFFF staff

 **Weekly, Wednesday, 8-9:15 PM (Eastern Time)**

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; hosted by NFFF staff

 **Monthly, 4th Saturday, 3-4:30 PM (Eastern Time)**

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 behavioral health specialist

 **Monthly, 2nd Sunday, 3-4 PM (Eastern Time)**

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



In recent years, the criteria for firefighters eligible to be honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial has expanded to include firefighters who die from certain occupational cancers. We would like to hear from families of these firefighters about their experiences and the unique challenges of facing cancer related to service as a firefighter.

To share your story, please email the wording and a high-resolution photo to jwoodall@firehero.org by July 1, 2025. If you don't use email, you can submit by mail:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
Attn: Jenny Woodall
P.O. Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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