



The Journey

For Families of Fallen Firefighters

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*You don't know how strong you are until being strong
is the only choice you have.*

~ Unknown

Starting in 2018, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation expanded its criteria for firefighters being honored at the National Memorial to include some occupational cancer deaths. From the inclusion criteria:

Deaths directly resulting from cancer, that are defined as meeting the criteria of the decedent's home state occupational exposure presumption laws.

Historically, the firefighters honored at the National Memorial had mostly died suddenly, from cardiac and trauma-related causes. Adding firefighters who died from

cancer expanded the demographics of the Fire Hero Family community. On some levels, death is death, and grief is grief—the end result is the same. But the path to death through illness is different than for sudden death, and the experience of surviving family members is impacted by that.

We wanted to dedicate space in *The Journey* to the voices of families impacted by occupational cancers. In the next two issues, we will feature four family members writing for *The Journey* for the first time about their journeys.

By Sarah Williams

Daughter of Ron Cato (2024-WA)

Firefighters are trained to run toward danger, to shield others from harm without hesitation. For over 30 years, my dad did exactly that. He served with unwavering courage as a captain with Spokane County Fire District 10 and later as a battalion chief with Pend Oreille County Fire District 2. His dedication to his crews, his community, and the mission of saving lives was second nature. But no amount of training could have prepared us for the fight he would face off the fire-line, a battle with brain cancer.

It started subtly. My dad began forgetting places he had driven to for years, places that had once been second nature to him. He struggled with simple tasks, such as spelling, and seemed frustrated by things that were slipping away. When he first went to the doctor, we were

told he was fine, that maybe we just wanted him to retire. But deep down, we knew something was wrong. A second visit led to an MRI, and that's when we learned the truth—glioblastoma, an aggressive and devastating form of brain cancer. He was officially diagnosed in October 2023. Even then, his first thought was about Mom. He wanted to be sure she would be okay.

When he met with the neurologist, we were told that without surgery he might only have six months to live, with a possibility of making it a year and a half with surgery. Dad was determined to try.

His goal was to make it to his and Mom's 50th wedding anniversary. He had surgery a week later, but they couldn't remove all of the tumor. What followed was months of



Ron and Debbie Cato

continued on page 2

Sarah Williams *continued from page 1*

rehab, chemotherapy, and radiation. Through it all, Dad never stopped fighting. He kept saying his favorite phrase—“Get-‘r-done”—right up until the very end. As a family, we took care of him at home, staying strong for him and for each other. And no matter how hard it got, his heart remained with the fire department. He would have gone back in a second if he could have.

The weeks following surgery were especially difficult. His mind became a foggy place, full of half-formed memories and misplaced fears. He believed the cancer had come from a meth lab he had once responded to on a call and that he had crashed an ambulance and passed out at the fire station, events that never happened but felt entirely real to him. Watching him try to make sense of a world that no longer made sense was heartbreakingly. The confusion was a cruel reminder of how deeply this disease had taken hold. But even in that haze, his firefighter instincts burned bright, always connecting back to a life of service, duty, and sacrifice.

Taking care of Dad during his battle with cancer was both physically exhausting and emotionally overwhelming. This was the man who had spent his life caring for everyone else—our protector, our rock—and now it was our turn to care for him. Dad taught us how to be the rock, how to be strong for others. But no amount of strength could have prepared us for this. On the outside, we tried to be strong just like he showed us. But behind closed doors, there were moments of deep sorrow, of feeling like we were losing our minds, of weakness. It was too much to carry all the time. That’s when we truly understood just how tough Dad really was—because somehow, he was that rock, always.

Watching his health decline was one of the hardest things we’ve ever experienced. Towards the end, he stopped talking, and even simple movements became difficult for him. Even after surgery, when things were confusing and his mind wasn’t always clear, his instincts as a firefighter never faded. He was convinced a wildland fire was coming and that the house needed to be prepared. He even asked for matches to make sure he could stay warm. Once a firefighter, always a firefighter, I guess. That drive to protect others was ingrained in him until the very end.

When the decision was made to stop treatment because it was no longer helping, it felt like the final blow. From that point, his decline was rapid. He passed away in May 2024, just four weeks shy of the 50th wedding anniversary he had fought so hard to reach. Less than a year after his diagnosis, we lost him. His strength, even in silence, will stay with us forever.

Though cancer took my dad far too soon, it will never take away the legacy he left behind. He was more than a firefighter. He was a father, a husband, a papa, a leader, and a friend. He lived with courage, served with honor, and loved with his whole heart. His battle with brain cancer was the final chapter in a life defined by strength, selflessness, and service.

As a family, we carry his memory forward—not just in our grief, but in our everyday lives. In the way we support one another. In the way we show up for our community. And in the way we keep his spirit alive. Through stories, laughter, and that familiar phrase we’ll never forget, “Get-‘r-done.” Dad may be gone, but the example he set and the love he gave will live on forever. His fire never truly went out—it just burns in a different way now, in all of us.

Talk to Your Family

By Mollie McCammon, Wife of Jim McCammon (2019-AR)

My husband, Jim McCammon, was a career firefighter on the Harrison (Arkansas) Fire Department off and on from 1977 to 2007, when he retired at age 52. Neither his parents nor his grandparents had a history of cancer.

In 2012, five years after retirement, at age 58, they found a mass in a scan while he was having a kidney stone event. He was diagnosed with clear cell renal cell carcinoma, Fuhrman nuclear grade G3. They removed the entire kidney, and he did not have to have any further treatment.

In 2016, nine years after retirement, at age 62, he was diagnosed with liver cancer. He did not have any symptoms. It had been a while since he had a scan on his remaining kidney, so he asked his doctor for a CT to make sure the kidney was good, and they found a mass on his liver. The diagnosis was multifocal intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma, a rare form of cancer, in the liver, bile duct, and lymph node closest to liver. The doctors said the kidney and liver cancers were unrelated. He was given one year to live.



We asked the doctors if the cancers were due to his fire service. While they would not put it in writing, they said it was likely. The liver cancer spread to his lungs, and he passed away in 2019, twelve years after retirement, at age 64.

We knew we were blessed to have five years after retirement without cancer, but we spent seven of the twelve years in retirement fighting cancer. I say “we” here, because we fought step by step, together.

Before he passed, Jim reached out to the Arkansas Professional Firefighters Association (APFFA). He told them about his health and said, “My wife will be calling you.” He gave them my name and phone number and sat me down with a file folder, the name of the contact person at APFFA, and a copy of the Presumptive Care Disability law for Arkansas.

It took me four years to gather and submit the claim. I did not have a lot of help with this process, and I had to push and follow up and harass to get the claim submitted with a lot of tears. The hardest part for me was proving exposure to cancer-causing agents. That’s crazy! All you should have to say is, “Firefighter,” and that should be enough. They wanted run reports, but run reports from the 70s, 80s, and 90s were logbooks without a lot of detail. So, I pulled from Jim’s box of fire history that included newspaper clippings and photos, and I dug for dates of the big fires in Harrison. I reached out to retirees and asked them to write letters about fires they remember working with Jim. I was able to submit five letters from retirees. For a couple of those, I basically interviewed them, typed up their conversation, and created the letters. It was a journey.

After all of this, in January 2024, Jim was approved for the Arkansas state death benefit to be considered a line-of-duty death due to occupational cancer. We feel Jim is a unicorn, since he was approved for this benefit even though his cancers came after retirement. His scenario gives hope to other retirees in Arkansas. Unfortunately, there is not any help for retirees fighting cancer, only this death benefit.



Mollie and Jim McCammon

Through the fight to submit the claim, I drew strength as I looked back on the time Jim sat me down with the file folder and the state law. He said, “I don’t think I will qualify for this, but I want you to try and see what happens.” I was not receptive to the conversation at the time, but I am so thankful he had that conversation with me. If Jim’s story brings awareness and helps one other person, it doesn’t give us a “why,” but maybe his death has a purpose. Jim wanted this for his family, and he wanted

to help firefighters in the future. I feel like Jim continues to take care of me. He would be grateful to the NFFF for taking care of his family through the Fire Hero Family programs. It was a hard journey, but it was a pleasure to take care of a man that took care of so many others as a firefighter and champion for fire prevention and life safety. Not a day goes by that I don’t miss him and wish I had him back as a healthy husband.

I was recently asked, “What would your advice be for others going through this process?” My advice for firefighters is, talk to your family about this. They will need encouragement in the hard journey ahead. If you are newly diagnosed, contact me so your family doesn’t have to go through this alone. I’ll help. And for the families who still have claims to file, don’t give up!! Keep pushing!

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 ongoing 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



When someone we love dies, we are often forced to learn new things or do things alone that we've never done before. Managing finances, single parenting, fixing the broken toilet, traveling alone, learning to drive, putting up holiday decorations, selling or buying a new home... The list goes on. Tell us about something you had to learn or figure out after your firefighter died, what you accomplished, and what you learned in the process.

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To share your story, please email the wording and a high-resolution photo to jwoodall@firehero.org by October 15, 2025. If you don't use email, you can submit by mail:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

Attn: Jenny Woodall

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