



The Journey

For Families of Fallen Firefighters

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*Traveler, there is no path. The path is made by walking. By walking you make a path,
And turning, you look back at a way you will never tread again.*

~ Antonio Machado

You can read a lot of books about partnership and parenthood, about life and death, about love and about grief. You can borrow wisdom from those who have gone before into these seasons of life. You can consult all the resources for a general sense of direction. Professionals can tell you what they've learned in their studies and their practice.

But in life, the journey rarely goes as planned.

Sometimes you set out for a trip with your maps and your itinerary, and along the way there is a detour, an accident, a hazard in the road. You know that moment when

your GPS announces, "You have arrived!" But you haven't arrived anywhere. You are in the middle of the road, and nothing looks familiar, it's dusk, and there's no cell signal. Sometimes you have to just point the car in a direction and drive. And it may be a while before you begin to get your bearings, find someone who can help, figure out an alternate route.

In the beginning, it can be difficult to find a path forward. Sometimes, the destination changes. And, as always, your mileage may vary. But eventually, with time and effort, we begin to find our way.

Carried Through the Fire Until Joy Came Again

By LeeAnn Koval, wife of Jeff Koval (2003-ID)

There was a day I thought my life had ended. My husband Jeff—firefighter, best friend, and the father of our children—was suddenly gone. I was pregnant, and three little ones were already counting on me. The weight of that moment felt unbearable, like the air had been knocked out of the world. I remember asking myself, "How do I breathe again? How do I take another step? How do I walk into a grocery store and do ordinary things when my heart is completely shattered?"

In those early days, hope felt impossibly distant. The days stretched endlessly and the nights even longer. I didn't know how to parent through grief or how to explain to my children why their daddy would never come home. Every distant siren was a piercing reminder of what we had lost, and the life we had built was gone in an instant. And yet, through tears and prayers, life went on, even when I could barely form a thought.

Hope did not arrive all at once. It came quietly, in small acts like packing lunches, helping with homework, driving to soccer practice, tucking the kids in, and showing up again the next day. It came in laughter returning to our home. It came in realizing that love does not vanish when someone dies; it simply changes form. And it came in seeing Jeff's legacy and heart living on in our children.

It took years before I could say I had a "life" again. One ordinary day, I was driving with the kids chattering in the backseat when an unexpected feeling washed over me. I realized I had been doing it, really doing it, for years. Bills were paid. The house stood tall. The kids were laughing. Somehow, we were okay. A deep peace settled in my heart, and I whispered a quiet thank you to God behind the wheel. I call these tender moments "Life is Good" moments. Life wasn't the same, but it was good again.

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Twenty-two years later, I can see what I couldn't see then. My youngest, born just three weeks after Jeff died, is now

22. I remarried briefly and had another child, who is now 18. All my children have grown into remarkable adults with kind hearts, a strong work ethic, and compassion for others. They are living proof that something beautiful can rise from heartbreak. And though I raised them on my own, I

was never truly alone. Jesus carried me through every tear, every fear, and every uncertainty—like the poem about the footprints in the sand. I remember begging Him to hold me a little longer when life felt too heavy. And in those moments, I realized, He never let go.

To the widow, the single parent, the one staring at a future you didn't choose: this is not the end of your story! The pain may feel endless, but so is your strength. You

will laugh again. You will see beauty rise from the ashes. One day, you will look around and realize you have built something incredible from broken pieces. Life, even after

loss, can be good—not the same, but good—in a new, tender, and beautiful way.

I want to be a picture of that hope for you. A reminder that joy comes again. I am living proof. My life continues to evolve. I've finished the season of raising little ones and stepped into adulthood without children at home.

I am single, but I am not lonely. I am living, growing, and discovering joy every single day.

I could not have done it without Jesus. He has been by my side through it all, carrying me when I couldn't walk, holding me when I was too tired to stand, and reminding me that real love never ends. That is the message I want to leave you with.

You are not alone! Hope is real! Joy will return, I promise!



LeeAnn with her family.

My Superpowers

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

I don't want to brag, but I have had a few superpowers at different times in my life.

The first one I recall is when, after my divorce, I became a single mom to two young children. Me, the chief cook and bottle washer, was now the one who brought home the bacon and fried it, too. Working, going to school, and taking care of my kids brought out the hidden "Supermom" in me. Wearing so many hats left me exhausted but satisfied, knowing that I would be able to provide for my children's needs on my own.

The next superpower that comes to mind is when my parents got older and needed me to help them. Then my parents asked that I take care of three aunts who had no one else to look after them. My children were in

college at this point, so I juggled work and helping the oldsters, all five of them. My daughter, Heather, told me that my angel wings had sprouted and, in time, would grow. Indeed, they did, and they grew to hold each one until it was their time to leave this world.



Sylvia

Then came the hardest superpower to attain. It appeared sometime after Heather died in the line of duty fighting a California wildfire. It came in three parts—survival, finding joy again, and giving back.

I never thought I could survive the death of one of my children. Journeying through grief is painful and difficult, but indeed I have survived. One step at a time, one grace at a time. (Thank you!)



Finding joy seemed impossible until, again, one step at a time, one grace at a time, there came a day when I did feel joy. I was able to conjure a Heather memory and found myself smiling, even laughing. (Joyful, joyful!)

I have been able to give back, to pay it forward, to share my good grace. I have worked with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation as an advisory board member, a presenter for the *Taking Care of Our Own* team, and a

returning family volunteer. And all along my journey I have been able to share my thoughts, experiences, and stories with all of you through this remarkable publication, *The Journey*.

My bragging aside, I recognize that each one of us has a superpower. We have survived what we thought was the worst thing that could happen to us. And here you are, reading this, and here I am, writing it, and we have survived. (Joyful, joyful, thank you, alleluia!)

After John Jumped

By Eileen Bellew, wife of John G. Bellew (2005-NY)

“Wait, you don’t know this already?” This was my response to my daughter, Katreana, as she interviewed me for her screenplay, *Black Sunday—Trial by Fire*. How could she not know this? Her father, John Bellew, an FDNY firefighter, heroically died in the Black Sunday fire in the Bronx in 2005. Why wouldn’t she know all the details?

She was only two years old on the day of the fire, along with her five-month-old brother, three-year-old brother, and six-year-old sister. Of course, we have discussed the fire numerous times in her lifetime, but never the real details, never the minute-to-minute account of that horrible day. The day that started like any other in January turned into a horror for both John and me.

Seventeen years later, Katreana wanted real details, ones I have protected her and her siblings from. Now she was ready to hear it all. When your children are young, after a line-of-duty death, you protect them from many things. You create an age-appropriate narrative, and then time passes. Life keeps moving, and the last thing you want to do is revisit the worst day of their lives by giving them more details. I should not have been surprised that Kat did not have the whole story.



Eileen

This made me wonder, should I start writing down their history so they will know what really happened to their father and how their mother became broken? That is what happened when John was forced to jump out of a fourth-story window after getting caught in a flashover. Their “old” mom might as well have jumped with their father. I changed. I developed serious anxiety and PTSD, which

affected my life from that moment on. I went from a loving mom to a hypervigilant, anxiety-driven mom who vicariously placed her fears onto their impressionable lives.

I started writing about our journey for my children. Two years later, that story was ready to be a book. I worked with an editor to write *After John Jumped: The True Story of a Family's Rise from the Ashes*, which was published in April 2026.

It is a book that will hopefully help widows, children, and firefighters understand what a line-of-duty death can do to survivors after all the ceremonies are done. Though life can bring sudden trauma, we can heal and experience positivity after tragedy. Through courage and resilience, there are endless lessons we learn from our day-to-day struggles.

You can read more about Eileen and her book at eileenbellew.com.

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.



BJA
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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



Our Fire Hero Family volunteers are the best! Having family members who understand line-of-duty death firsthand and have lived through loss and healing makes all the difference to those newer to grief. If you are a Fire Hero Family member and you volunteer with the NFFF, we want to hear from you! We'd like to include a variety of volunteer roles—Memorial Weekend escort, camp Big Buddy, remembrance card writer, stair climb

or golf tournament speaker, Peer Support Network member, MW returning family volunteer. Tell us why you volunteer, what it means to you, how it has helped you, and the connections you have made.

Please email your story and a high-resolution photo to jwoodall@firehero.org by August 15.

If you have questions, please contact Jenny Woodall at the email address above.

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