



The Journey

For Families of Fallen Firefighters

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In case you ever foolishly forget, I am never not thinking of you.

~ Virginia Woolf

Death puts a period on a sentence or, as the English say, “Full stop.” Some conversations end when someone dies..

But death does not stop a relationship. When someone dies, all the history we share with them—the inside jokes, the memories, the special shared language of families—continues to live in us. You have probably had the experience when something funny or exciting happens, or you could use some advice or a pep talk, and you think, “I need to call and tell them about this!” And then you realize, again, that they won’t be able to answer the call.

Do you know about wind phones?

After his cousin died in 2010, Japanese artist and garden designer Itaru Sasaki installed a phone booth in his garden so he could “talk” with his cousin as a way of handling



Wind phone, Staten Island, NY

his grief. After the devastating 2011 tsunami in Japan, Sasaki moved the phone booth to a hill overlooking the Pacific Ocean. He welcomed people who wanted to talk with their loved ones to “call” them on the phone and speak from the heart. Their conversations traveled “on the wind” to reach their beloveds. The idea caught on, and there are now over 500 wind phones around the world. You can learn more about the concept and see where wind phones are located at <https://www.mywindphone.com>.

Another way to stay connected with a loved one who has died is to write that person a letter. It’s a way to say things that may have gone unsaid in life, to call up memories, or to share what is going on in your life now. Sometimes it helps to put the words down and to know how much they would have loved hearing from you. If you listen closely, you may hear them respond.

By Zoe Carnegis

Daughter of John N. Carnegis (2024-RI)

Dear Dad, I’ve been trying to figure out how to write this because there’s still so much I wish I could say to you in person.

A lot has happened since you passed in 2024. I graduated from college at the top of my class. I got a job at my dream school, something I wish more than anything I could tell you about face to face. I keep imagining what your reaction would’ve been, the hug you would’ve given me, the way you would’ve told everyone because you were always so proud of me. How you would have shown up

at every opportunity you could to teach my kindergartners about fire safety. I had your station come for a visit last week, and all I could see was you standing up there alongside the crew.

I think about you all the time. Not just on the big days, but in the small moments too. Sometimes something funny happens, and my first instinct is still to text or call you. Sometimes I just miss hearing your voice, talking to you on the phone on your way home, or getting one of your hugs after a hard day.

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Zoe Carnegis *continued from page 1*

It hasn't been easy learning how to live in a world where you aren't physically here anymore. Losing you to cancer feels unfair in ways I still don't fully know how to explain. You gave so much of yourself to help other people, and I hate that the job you loved is what took you from us.

But even after losing you, I still carry you with me every day. I try to find little signs of you everywhere I go. From feeling you in the wind to seeing a butterfly fly by. I keep a picture of us on my desk to keep you near. Whenever I'm having a rough day, I look at the picture, shake my head and say, "Give me strength."

Since you passed, I met two friends through the NFFF who also lost their dads. There's something comforting and heartbreaking about finding people who understand this kind of loss without needing every detail explained. I think you would really like them. In some ways, I like to think that you, Richard, and Chad brought me, Maddie, and

Will together. That the three of you are sitting somewhere, probably manning a truck and looking down on us, laughing at our shenanigans. I think you'd be glad I found people who help me feel less alone.

I wish you could see who I'm becoming. I wish I could hear your advice about adulthood, work, life, and all the things I'm still figuring out. There are so many moments where I still need my dad.

I hope you know that everything good in me started with the way you loved me. Your strength, your humor, your passion, your work ethic, the way you always showed up for people—those things didn't leave when you did. They live on in the people who love you, especially me.

I miss you every single day. And no matter how much time passes, I always will.

With love always, Your Little Girl,

Zoe



Zoe and her dad

By Karley Simmons

Daughter of Gregory Mack Simmons (2011-TX)

Hi, Dad. It has been 15 years since I last saw you. That number seems so crazy considering I can still hear your voice and your laugh. I see glimpses of you in my sister, my mom, and myself, especially when all three of us are laughing so hard together that we cry. You would be so proud to see where each of us has gone in life. Mom has really followed in your footsteps. She became an EMT and is always volunteering extra time at the fire department. Kate very bravely moved to Canada, where she knew almost no one, and created a nice life there. She gardens just like Gran used to, green thumb and all. I work in admin at a fire department now, too, which I know would just tickle you pink. I think you will rest easy knowing that your three girls are happy, safe, and healthy.

As I write this, tons of memories are flooding my mind. Like when you built us a skateboard from materials you



Gregory Mack Simmons

had laying around. When you would tell us ghost stories at night, then scare the tar out of us when our guard was down. When you would help me calm down if I was feeling angry or upset by taking me for a ride in the truck or lying on the trampoline to look at the stars. You taught me so much about life in the short time you were here. Even still, I look to you for guidance. I think, "How would Dad handle this?" Though I wish I could just pick up the phone and call you to find out.

There is so much I want to tell you and show you. I have missed you every day for the past 15 years. That empty space where you belong is painful, but I have also been able to have a life of my own alongside my grief. I got married to a kind and gentle man. I know you would love getting to meet him. He is quiet, but y'all would definitely bond over y'all's tinkering skills. We have a



nice house that we remodeled ourselves. You would be proud of me for graduating from “flashlight holder” to “paint brush wielder.”

Well, I won't keep you too long. I hope that wherever you are in the universe, you know how loved and appreciated

you are. Tell Gran that we love her, too, and ask if she has heard any barking spiders lately.

Love you so much, Daddy,
Karley

By Cathy DeFlumere

Wife of Al “Foxye” DeFlumere (1996-NY)

My husband, Al, also known as “Foxye,” died on October 26, 1996, our 11th wedding anniversary. He woke in our home to the smell of smoke. He led me and two of our three sons, ages 8 and 4, out a window to safety. He re-entered the house to get our son Matthew, age 6, but they never came out. They were found in each other's arms. Foxye did what he was trained to do, never expecting it would be to save his own family. He and Matthew will always be our heroes.

Dear Foxye, I know you have been watching over us and that you know all about my move from New York to South Carolina. So many “It's a small world” things have happened in this move. I connected with a woman named Cathy F., who was a nurse on duty in the ER the morning of our tragedy, and we made a plan to get together for lunch with two retired Haverstraw (NY) police officers. Before we met, I got a Facebook message from Keith, one of the retired police officers.

“Hi, Cathy! I am friends with Cathy F. I hope we all get the opportunity to get together. I moved from Rockland County, New York, to North Carolina about four years ago. You may not know me personally, but I remember you and your family and will always have each of you in my thoughts and soul. I retired as a Haverstraw police officer and still work as a paramedic, which I have done for 36 years. To this day, I often think about you, your boys, Al, and Matthew. You see...I was at your home with Rockland Paramedics after the first two police cars, before the fire department arrived. I took you and the boys off the roof and placed you in the police car after Al saved each of you. Despite numerous attempts, I couldn't access upstairs due to the heat. I would later receive

Matthew at your doorway and care for him for the duration of the time, even in the emergency room, along with Al. I remember each of you like it was yesterday.

I was so proud for you to see your boys follow Al into the fire service. I am so glad you are well and that Al's name carries on in the DeFlumere Award. Know that Matthew isn't forgotten either, and each of their names are still uttered in loving memory, not tragedy. I hope and pray that this isn't a painful message and that you understand that year after year you and your family are thought of with dignity, love, and respect. Al “Foxye” was a staple of Rockland, and being a paramedic and firefighter, I was on many fire scenes with Al. Later I would be on scenes with your boys, too. None of you know me, but I'm honored to know of each of you and glad you are well. I hope to meet you again for joyful reasons. Again, I pray this message isn't a difficult one. Bless you all.



Keith and Cathy

Well, Honey, the time came, and we did have that lunch. The meeting was tough. I hugged Keith, and I couldn't let go. We laughed and smiled, too. He remembers you and Matthew and always will.

I knew you were there with me at this meeting, because a cardinal showed up the day of that lunch in the living room window. I believe cardinals are a sign of a loved one.

Ryan and Travis are doing great! You would be so proud of them. Give Matthew a kiss and hug from us. I miss you with all my heart.

Love,
Cathy

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.



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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



Usually, our writing prompts begin with a topic or theme. This time, we invite you to begin with an image. Choose a photo that is meaningful to you. It could be a picture of your firefighter, of you, of a significant place, a special moment, or milestone in your life. Use the image

as a prompt to write about your relationship, loss, or your journey since your firefighter's death.

Please email your story and high-resolution photo(s), to jwoodall@firehero.org by November 15. Reach out if you have questions or would like assistance with submitting a piece for publication.

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