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Toll-free: 1-888-744-6513

Wellness Conference *continued from page 3*

How are travel and lodging handled for this conference?

Attendees are responsible for travel arrangements and costs to and from Portland. Official travel days for the conference are May 12 and 15. The hotel is located within 10 miles of Portland International Airport and provides a complimentary airport shuttle for hotel guests.

The NFFF will have a block of rooms reserved; *attendees are responsible for making room reservations directly with the conference hotel.* The NFFF will reimburse the cost of rooms for Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. Reimbursement is contingent on actual participation in the conference and will be handled after the event.

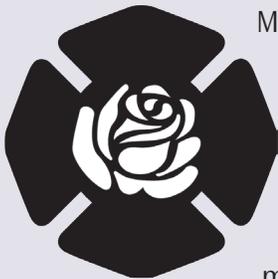
How do I register?

Online registration will open on February 15. You can access the link at www.firehero.org/event/wellness-conference-2016. There is space for 100 attendees, on a first-come, first-served basis. The deadline to register is April 15, 2016.

Questions?

Contact Bev Donlon at bdonlon@firehero.org or 301-447-1603.

We want to hear from you...



Maureen Santora reminds us to, "Ask about the person who died. Have the grieving person talk about them. Ask what things made them special. Keeping the memories alive really helps."

Please tell us about what made your firefighter special so we can feature those stories in an upcoming issue of *The Journey*.

If you would like to submit a piece on this or another topic related to grief, please send it by March 10, 2016 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

Attn: Jenny Woodall

P.O. Drawer 498

Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 70 ~ JANUARY / FEBRUARY 2016

I'm not really here to keep you from freaking out. I'm here to be with you while you freak out, or grieve or laugh or suffer or sing. It is a ministry of presence.

It is showing up with a loving heart.

~Kate Braestrup

What do you say, what do you do to help someone who is grieving? Since everyone will eventually experience grief, this seems like something we should all be prepared to do. Unfortunately, people often feel unprepared to deal with grief or to support others who are grieving. We want to let people know we care and to ease their suffering. We want to fix things for them. Perhaps the most difficult part is the realization that nothing we say or do will save them from this terribly difficult experience. Death is the unfixable problem. Grief must be lived.

One of the best, truest types of support we can offer to grieving people is our presence. Simply showing up to listen and provide practical assistance is often a huge gift. Many people will shy away from the griever. Unsure of what to do, some choose to withdraw completely. Those who can step forward and be with others during this painful time provide a special and much needed type of friendship. People who

have had a significant death loss in their lives are often especially sensitized and skilled in how to provide this supportive presence for others.

In terms of what to say, there are a few basic messages that many people find helpful when they are grieving. I'm sorry this terrible thing has happened to you. I am here and will continue to be here so you don't have to go through this alone. I cannot know exactly what you are going through, but I understand that you are suffering deeply.

In general, it's a good idea to avoid statements that try to interpret the person's experience for them or to talk them out of their experience. Words like "He wouldn't want you to be sad" or "At least you had a lot of good years together" may be motivated from a place of caring, but are generally not helpful. Often, the fewer words the better. Breathe deeply, listen, and be a calm presence.

In this issue, survivors share their insights based on what helped them during grief.

By Renee Elkins, Wife of Daniel Elkins (2004-CA)

As I sit here this sunny afternoon in southern California getting caught up on my mail and paperwork, I came across *The Journey* for September/October 2015. You see, I had a death in my family at the end of September, and I didn't realize until Thanksgiving just how it had affected me. My brother Sam, who was diagnosed with tongue cancer in January 2015, died September 28. He had struggled with addiction most of his adult life, and the cancer diagnosis hit him hard. He had never really fit into a system of any kind. Suddenly he was in a situation where he had to be at appointments each

day to receive treatment that had only a slight possibility of healing and at the same time made him feel so awful. It was easier for him to live in a state of denial for an extended period of time, therefore increasing the chances of the disease taking his life.

I did my best to support Sam and to encourage him to follow the doctor's orders and to take care of himself. But ultimately, he was in charge of making his own decisions, and I prayed that I could support him and love him through it all. I have to admit that at times I was frustrated, angry,

continued on page 2

Renee Elkins *continued from page 1*

and anxious as I watched him suffer the consequences of intense amounts of radiation and chemotherapy. He lost 100 pounds and, in the end, couldn't swallow his own saliva. It was heartbreaking. God took him on September 28th in a way that was not directly related to the cancer. His cause of death was a heart attack. We don't really know if it was caused by the pain killers, the addictions that damaged his heart over time, or if God spared him a painful, horrible death from the cancer. It doesn't really matter...he was gone. I have experienced much death in my life, but this one affected me differently than others. I cried, I wept and felt the anxiety and heaviness of death, but I also felt numb. I felt hurt and, in some ways, relieved, then guilty about the feelings of relief.



Renee with her brother, Sam Frees

I realized that I was grieving Sam's life more than his death. His life was filled with success in many areas and a sense of searching in others. He didn't have a sense of contentment or fulfillment in life. He was always looking for a big break or the gold at the end of the rainbow. I wasn't sure how to grieve this loss. When I read the article in *The Journey* that asked how to provide support for those who are grieving, I knew I had something to share. I feel like I am speaking to the choir here a bit, but here goes.

Each death, each loss is different! No death affects us the same, no matter how many people we may lose in our lifetime. Therefore, our response to the loss will be different each time also. There are some commonalities like depression, sadness, anxiety, and an inability to sleep well, but the answers about how to provide support vary as much as the grief and loss. If I could ask someone to support me, these are some things that I would say:

Don't say, "I know just how you feel..."

Don't say, "Things will be ok." They really may not be for a long time.

Just listen without opinions or advice.

Don't compare the death to anything else, not even another death.

Don't expect the person who lost someone to call you "if they need anything."

If you make a mistake by doing any of the above, just move on and don't do it again!

Love the person unconditionally. It might be hard, but just do it!

Don't bombard with Bible verses, sayings, or quotes. Less is more.

Food is good and practical, but make sure it's healthy. A grieving person may not eat often.

Encourage the person to seek professional help if necessary. There is no shame in this whatsoever.

As I reflect on the past couple of months, I realize that I didn't have the support that I had when I lost

my husband, but the things I have learned over the past 11 years about death and grief have helped me in this loss. I loved my brother, and his death leaves a hole and a void in my life even though our relationship was different and our time together was short. I do not regret loving him, supporting him, and even feeling the frustration that I felt over the past year. I have snapshots in my mind of him and who he was that I would not have had otherwise. I realized that it was ok for me to be kind to myself during this holiday season, that quiet and rest were a little more important than parties and busyness. I realized that the contentment I feel when I am sitting in my cozy home surrounded by those I love is a treasure that I will never take for granted. I also realize that life is short and has moments of intense pain with no reasonable explanation. It's OK. I don't like it, but it's OK.

I am who I am because of what I have been through in this life, and so are you. You can do it! Keep going! It's a new year, and it's going to be full of life, and life is messy and wonderful, ugly and beautiful, difficult and full of wonder all at the same time. Breathe it in, exhale it out, and put one foot in front of the other. There will be days when you can't do much, and there will be days when you feel like you can take on the world. Just do what you can, and be kind to yourself and those around you. For the love, we live on!

**By Maureen Santora, Mother of Christopher Santora (2001-NY)**

When someone you love dearly dies, friends and family want to comfort you. They want to make things better. They want you to return to your “normal.” They want you to be the way you were before the death occurred.

None of that can happen, of course. You eventually do feel better, but you never return to the way things were, because you are now a different person. You have emerged as a new person; you will never return to the old you. EVER!

That is very difficult to explain, but it is a fact.

Each one of us grieves differently. This makes it very hard on professionals who want a plan for recovery or healing. When my son Christopher died I cried a lot. I still cry at many things. The friends who were able to stick with me at my worst understand that. They do not try to make me feel better. They allow me to have my emotions flow. When I am through, I get a silent hug. These are the people I will be friends with for the rest of my life. Those that tried to “fix” me are no longer with me. I did not have the strength to explain. I was unable to hold my emotions in place to make them feel better, so we parted ways. I am sad about that, but this is what happened.

*Maureen Santora**Christopher Santora*

How do friends and family help? That is a really hard question. What I say may not work for others. However these are some of the things that worked for me and still work for me.

Silence is golden. Grief is all consuming. Sometimes just being there is enough to feel love and comfort. My dearest friends knew this. While I was an emotional mess, they made dinner. They offered to go shopping. They took action on things that I never asked them to do and probably would

never have asked them to do. They just knew I needed help in the everyday chores.

Ask about the person who died. Have the grieving person talk about them. Ask what things made them special. Ask what things made you laugh and later, in future conversations, what things were annoying. Keeping the memories alive really helps. I never thought I would ever laugh again. When I was asked about Christopher, I thought about many things that made me laugh. It helped.

Allow the person who is grieving to have space. Grief is a journey. Some days you are fine. Other days you are a mess. That is OK. Help the griever to understand that there is no time limit to grief.

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Announcing New Survivor Event in 2016!

The NFFF is pleased to announce a new event this year, a Wellness Conference for Survivors. This conference will be held May 13-14, 2016, in Portland, Oregon, and the theme for the conference is “Setting a Course for the Road Ahead.”

Grief can be very hard on your overall health and wellness and leave you feeling depleted and adrift. This conference is designed to address physical, mental, and emotional well-being. The focus will be on recommitting yourself to self-care and creating a personal action plan for moving forward in a deliberate, conscious way. If the death of your firefighter has left you feeling unsure how to move forward and you are ready to figure out the next phase of your life, this conference is for you!

Who is eligible to attend?

Adult immediate family members whose firefighter has been honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Emmitsburg, Maryland, are eligible to attend. This includes spouses, life partners, parents, adult children, and siblings. The focus of the conference may especially appeal to those whose firefighter died within the past five years.

What are the costs associated with the Wellness Conference?

There is no registration fee for eligible survivors to attend the conference. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner will be provided at the host hotel on Friday and Saturday for registered attendees.

continued on page 4