

The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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What do you do when the loss of a loved one is only one of several hardships you experience in a short time? We know that, even as you grieved the loss of your firefighter, some of you were also facing serious illness or other deaths in your family, major financial difficulty, and other personal adversity. You may have thought there was no way to survive the challenges

ahead. As one survivor put it, "I was stretched so thin that I didn't even have time to grieve." And yet, you somehow found strength you never knew you had, and you put one foot in front of the other each day until things slowly began to improve. In this issue, one survivor shares her story of how she made it through a time of great difficulty.

Sylvia Kratzke

is the mother of Heather DePaolo-Johnny (2002-CA)

In one day short of a year, I endured the near death of my husband and the deaths of my faithful cat, my mother, my father, and my two aunts. And then, the unthinkable: the tragic, sudden loss of my precious daughter.

It was July 29, 2001, 11:30 PM. My mother, the family matriarch, had died. Most of the family was in attendance through Mom's final days, and we all got to say our goodbyes. It was hard, but at 86 years old, she had seen her grandchildren graduate from college and get married and lived to hold and nurture two great-grandchildren. Death is the final act of our lives, and all was in order.

Both my children were grief stricken, especially my daughter, Heather. She and her grandma adored each other, as Heather mirrored my mother's rebellious spirit. Mom loved Heather all the more for her adventures and despite her changing hair color, tattoos and nose ring. They were two peas in a pod, separated by a generation.

In February 2002, on the day of my aunt's funeral, my dad died. On the day of Dad's funeral, my husband, Len, suffered a heart attack. Len thankfully survived, after having "parts in his heart" successfully installed. We all survived that "week from hell" and joked that things couldn't get any worse.

Five months later we felt that life was again on an even keel. I was back at work after having taken a short leave, Len was rehabbed, and all was well. Heather was happier than she had ever been, working in fire, and beginning a

life with the man she loved. She still grieved for her grandmother and confided in me that she dreaded the upcoming anniversary of her death. I packaged up a book of daily meditations for grieving to send out to her. The book lay on the counter, ready to go.



Two policemen arrived at about 1:30 that beautiful, warm, and sunny Sunday afternoon. Len was at work, and I was relaxing, reading the newspaper. I thought perhaps Len had gotten into an accident on the way to work. The words that my daughter, Heather, had died in an engine rollover while fighting a fire in the Klamath National Forest seemed unreal. It couldn't be! I just talked to her! She loved her job! She was an excellent driver, graduating at the top of her engine academy! It was so, they assured me. My heart broke. I screamed. I crumpled in a heap. It was July 28, 2002, one day before the first anniversary of the death of my mom. On the way to Heather's funeral, we were notified that my other aunt had died.

When we returned home after the funeral and burial, the reality of it all struck. Life had gotten worse. My husband and I clung to each other like survivors of a shipwreck. How were we to survive?

Grace. It's the only answer I can come up with. It certainly is not by any of our own strength or will. Grace. Grace in its many forms. We were blessed with the love and support of our family and friends. We were blessed with an outpouring of support from coworkers, and from fire service people we didn't even know. These blessings sustained our own faith that we could and would go on. But I think what helped most was the commitment we had from each other that we would somehow struggle through. We sought out a grief therapist and joined a group of bereaved parents. And there was the book on

the counter, the book of daily meditations for grieving that I was going to send to Heather. We began to read each meditation together the day after Heather died.

And I have survived, sustained by the love and commitment of my husband, the love and support of family and friends, professional help and by the great mysteries: the mystery of faith, that inner force that allows us to believe there is purpose; the mystery of hope, that allows us to believe there is a future; and the mystery of life—past, present, and beyond. The mystery of grace.



We look forward to seeing many of you at the Memorial Weekend on October 7-9. If you have questions or need more information about the Weekend, just let us know. Also, please remember that most of the weekend activities will be held on the campus of the National Fire Academy, which is a Federal facility. We need the names of everyone who will attend with your group in order to have the proper identification badges for access to the campus. Please let us know as soon as possible if there are changes in your registration information.

The Holiday Tree

It seems strange to be writing these words while it is still above 80 degrees in Maryland, but it's time to begin thinking about decorations for the holiday tree in the National Memorial Park. Family, friends, and coworkers are invited to submit tributes or send ornaments in honor of their fallen firefighters. Cards, notes, and photos will be laminated, and members of the fire service will help the Foundation staff decorate the tree. We are not able to return tributes to you, and they will be exposed to the weather, so please do not send anything that is fragile or irreplaceable.

Please address your tribute to the attention of Linda Hurlley at the Foundation's address, and send it to arrive by December 1st. If you live within driving distance of the Foundation and would like to help prepare the ornaments in late November/early December, please contact Linda at (301) 447-7693 or lhurley@firehero.org. A tree lighting ceremony will be held in mid-December.

We want to hear from you about... the holidays.



Many survivors tell us that the winter holidays are the most difficult time of year after the loss of a loved one. The holiday season can go from being a favorite time of year to being a season of prolonged sadness. For an upcoming issue of *The Journey*, share your favorite holiday memories. Tell us about the traditions you have kept, changed, or created to keep the memory of your loved one alive. Tell us how you handle the emotions that can resurface during that time of year and what you might tell someone who is facing the holidays without their loved one for the first time. Please send your stories, by October 31st, to:

The Journey • National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

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