

# The *For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters* Journey

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**W**hat do you do with your grief during a season that is “supposed” to be a time of joyful celebration? How can you include sweet memories of your loved one in the holidays without being overwhelmed by

their absence? In this issue, survivors share their stories of grieving and celebrating through the holidays, as well as some thoughts on what has helped them.

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## Frederick and Mary Lou Gouckenour

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*grandparents of Jason Gouckenour (IN-1999), better known as “Papaw” and “Mamaw Lou.”*

It was Christmas Eve 1998. As was our custom, we were at our son’s home to celebrate Christmas. We had our gift exchange, and our grandson, Jason, had to leave to take his daughter to her other grandparents’ house. We said our goodbyes and Merry Christmases, never dreaming that this would be our last memory of Jason alive. On January 9, 1999, Jason perished in a house fire. He is our son’s only child.

Needless to say, our first Christmas Eve without him was a trying time for all of us. His two children were two and four years old when Jason died, and Jason lives on in his children. They both have so many of their dad’s mannerisms and actions. Having them has helped to ease the pain of our loss. We will never forget Jason, because

we have so many great memories of him. He loved to spend time with us on the farm.

He also loved his hometown of Worthington, Indiana. And they must have loved him also, because we were comforted by the great outpouring of love shown to the family when he died. And now he is being greatly honored again. They are building a Habitat for Humanity home in Worthington, and it is to be named “The Jason Gouckenour House.”

By the time you will be reading this during the holidays, we will be attending the dedication of the home. It will be a time of mixed emotions—feeling proud, honored, happy, and sad at the same time. Life goes on, and when life ends for us, we will see Jason again. We live each day with faith and hope.

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## Sandra Vrabel

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*mother of Scott Vrabel (PA-1997)*

When our precious son, Scott, was killed on November 14, 1997, our whole world changed. The life was sucked out of us. We sort of felt we were in a shell living in a different body. How unbearable it all was!

It was Scott’s favorite time of year. He loved bow hunting. He loved riding his motorcycle on beautiful fall days. He loved the snow. Christmas was his favorite holiday, and December 28th was his birthday. It is extremely hard for us when September rolls around.

We couldn’t bear to do all the same things at Christmas

we did before. He especially loved the lights and wanted them in and out of the house, decorating the house and shrubs. We don’t do the Christmas tree anymore, because he always put up the train set under it. Now we put up a small tree with all the things he loved on it. A blue light is set on top. We also put blue candles in all the windows and a blue ball of lights high up in the red maple tree that was planted for him when he was born.

Our holidays are changed and are centered around Scott. Everything is different, but with all our special memories.

## Marty Cropper

wife of Leroy Cropper (MD-1995)

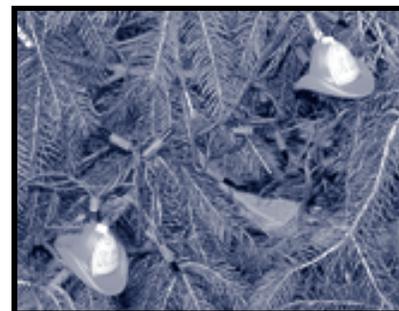


The first Christmas after my husband died, we decided to get a balled tree so that, after we had it in the house, my sons could plant it in the front yard. It is a spruce of some sort, and each year at Christmas, we

string it full of Christmas lights. Originally, it was probably 5-6 feet tall. It is now 12-14 feet tall. When it's lit, it lights up the whole yard. I tell Leroy his tree is now

lighted for all to see. Neighbors look forward to seeing the tree glowing.

Last year I was able to find a string of lights with fire helmets on them, so on the tree they went. My grandson, who is seven, treasures the stories of his Pop-Pop, even though he never knew him. I will never forget all the good times that Leroy and I had together, and looking at "his tree" brings back wonderful Christmas memories. It's easier now. Tears are here, but not as many.



### Here are some thoughts from other survivors

- Remember that all those images of holiday joy you see on TV and in the mall are just images. There are many people who are also grieving during the holidays.
- There are no rules about what you have to do. Listen to your heart and do what helps you.
- Some people take comfort in continuing old traditions. Others can't even think about celebrating as they did while their loved one was alive. Do what feels right for you.
- The presence of family and close friends is essential. Accept offers of support. Allow your loved ones to care for and help you through this time.
- Consider having a small gathering of those who knew your loved one well. Include his or her favorite food, share memories and stories, and let the tears and laughter come.
- If it will help you, visit the gravesite or another special place where you feel connected to your loved one.
- Have a "safe retreat"—somewhere you can be alone for a while if the celebration gets overwhelming for you.
- Create a new tradition as a way of remembering your loved one. One family buys a special ornament for their fallen firefighter each year. Another raises a toast to their firefighter.
- Children often want to celebrate the holidays even when the adults around them do not. If you are not up to celebrating, ask a friend or family member to help buy and wrap gifts and make the holiday special for the children.

## We want to hear from you about... parenting after the death of your spouse.



You never wanted or planned to be a single parent. When your spouse died, you were suddenly thrust into a new role with no guidelines or map to guide you. You were grieving, your kids were grieving. And boy, was it unfair! Whether your children were unborn, preschoolers, adolescents, or adults, tell us about parenting after the death of your spouse. What was most difficult? What helped the most? What hard won lessons can you share looking back? Do you remember any especially funny or poignant stories? What can you offer to those who are just beginning this difficult journey? **Please send your stories, by January 31<sup>st</sup>, to:**

*The Journey* • National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

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