How to pay for college? It’s one of the big concerns parents have, and it can be a huge worry when one parent is suddenly facing the issue alone. The good news is that there are many sources of help available to children and spouses of firefighters who die in the line of duty. We encourage you to tap into the invaluable education resources that are available to you.

If the firefighter was your spouse, you may want to return to school in order to rejoin the workforce or move into a different field. If you have children who are a few years away from high school graduation, be sure to talk with them about the options that are available. Even if your children are still very young, please file the information away for later. It may surprise you how quickly they are all grown up and ready to pursue their own dreams.

In this issue, survivors talk about their experiences with the Public Safety Officers’ Educational Assistance program. Take a look at the list of sources of educational assistance so you can research further to see which benefits are available to you.

By Florence Foti

Ex-Wife of Robert Foti (2001-NY)

On September 11, 2001, my daughter, Alycia, and son, Robert, lost their father, Firefighter Robert J. Foti. Alycia was 12 and Robert was 11 years old. My biggest fear at that time was whether I was going to be able to send both children to college on only one income. The FDNY arrived at our house with so many papers for me to sign so that my children would begin receiving benefits from the Public Safety Officers’ Benefits program, as well as the City of New York. I was told that the PSOB would make a lump sum distribution to the children because their father died in the line of duty, as well as an educational benefit for college. But who could really concentrate on that? It seemed like such a long time off, and I had other immediate concerns to worry about.

As Alycia reached that magical age of 16 and was beginning to formulate her college choices, I thought, “Oh my God. How am I going to be able to afford the schools she wants to apply to?” I remembered those papers I received so long ago and started to do some research. I began with a phone call, and the person who answered could not have been more helpful. He looked up Alycia’s name and said that she was entitled to benefits, providing she attended school full time. Once she was accepted to UCLA, I knew that with the financial help she was going to receive from PSOB, her dream would come true. The same held true for my son, Robert. Once he decided to attend St. Bonaventure, they were there helping to make his dream come true as well.

I now work with a wonderful woman, Martha Williams, who helps me with the reimbursement process. We were continued inside
going to school has not always been an easy obstacle to tackle. Once you are done with high school and moving onto college you gain various responsibilities that you may not have had until this point. Rent, utilities, grocery bills, and cell phone bills are just a few of the many things added to one’s monthly task list. Loans are not always enough to cover the many expenses brought on by tuition, books, various fees, and living expenses.

With the help of the money provided by the Department of Justice, PSOB Program, I was able to work and pay for my schooling while taking all my prerequisite classes. Now that I have been accepted into a nursing program, the funds from the DOJ benefits program allowed me to quit my job and put all my attention towards this last part of my schooling. The event that led to my eligibility for the benefit program was a sad one; however, with the help of this program I am able to move forward and create a future for myself. I would encourage anyone who may be eligible to take advantage of this wonderful opportunity.

My name is Melissa Rogan. My husband, Firefighter Matthew Rogan, was killed September 11, 2001. Soon after that, former Governor George Pataki made available assistance through the State of New York if the children or spouses were to attend schools in the State of New York. Since none of my three children chose schools in New York, we were unable to take advantage of this assistance. Through the Public Safety Officers’ Educational Assistance program, Sarah, Matthew, and Monica were able to receive assistance for their colleges.

This was one scholarship fund that requires no essay to be written by the children, and because no essay is required, less nagging occurred. This scholarship can also be used for travel expenses. My son, Matthew, attends Virginia Military Institute, and some of this money was used to fly him home during the school year. My oldest daughter, Sarah, moved off campus her junior and senior years, and the money was used for travel expenses from her apartment to the school. The benefit can also help cover the exorbitant price of textbooks. I am extremely grateful for the amount of assistance my children were able to receive.
I never wanted to be a single mom. I did not have a father in my home when I was growing up. My life goal was to marry a great man, have two wonderful children, sing in Branson until I was too old to wear high heels, retire at age 85, and watch my great-grands play at Mimi and Grandpa’s house. Part of that dream came true when I married David Straub in 1980. Our daughter, Mandy, was born in 1982 and our son, Colt, was born in 1983. We were blessed with a great life. We had the sweetest little family. But on March 26, 1990, that dream came to a quick end.

The fact that you are reading this newsletter lets me know that you understand how it feels when you wake up one morning and all is well, only to go to bed that same night and your whole world has changed. After David was killed, I was very blessed with a support group around me—fire department, friends, family, and church family—but what would I do after they all went back to their lives? As you have done, I cried myself to sleep for many months, even into years. As the days and years passed, we began to get into our own groove. It was not easy, but we had to come to grips with the reality of losing David.

When I began to feel like I could breathe again, other things hit me, such as how would I make sure the kids had what they needed, how would I send them to camp, to college, pay for their weddings? Bob Hasbrook, our fire chief for Western Taney County Fire Protection District, came to me with hopeful news. He told me told about the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation and all the benefits they offered to those who had lost their spouse/parent in the line of duty. Benefits doesn’t really seem like an appropriate word for all the NFFF does for those of us left to carry on with our lives, but they truly are hope givers.

As the years passed and the kids graduated from high school, we found that the Public Safety Officers’ Benefits (PSOB) program has educational assistance available for spouses and children of fallen firefighters. This was a blessing for our family. Without PSOB, my children would not have been able to attend college at all. Our benefits administrator, Eric Martin, has truly been a friend to our family by helping guide me through the paperwork process and all the details throughout my children’s college career.

In 2003, I met my new husband, Todd Johnson. Our whole family fell in love with him, and he fell in love with us. He has been a great encouragement to the kids and is a wonderful asset to our family. A few years after we were married, he encouraged me to go to college. I contacted Mr. Martin with the benefits program, and he immediately set me up to receive the education assistance. I am one semester away from having my associate’s degree, and I plan to go on and get my bachelor’s degree.

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**EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANCE FOR FIRE SERVICE SURVIVORS**

See individual programs for more information and specific criteria for eligibility.

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When someone dies suddenly, survivors are sometimes left with regrets, unfinished business, and guilt. There may be no opportunity to say a final “I love you” or “Goodbye,” and sometimes people die when life and relationships are “messy.” But there are also things you did and said that let that person know how much you loved him, how proud you felt, how important he or she was in your life. Think for a minute about what you did “right,” something that comforts you to remember, and tell us about it.

If you’d like to share your thoughts on this topic or other aspects of your journey, please send a Word document or e-mail to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org by September 1. If you don’t do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
The Journey
PO Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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