

The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

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“Experience is not what happens to you; it is what you do with what happens to you.” ~Aldous Huxley

Grief is a big experience, overwhelming and all-encompassing. Emotional, physical, mental, spiritual—it reaches into all the corners of our lives.

But grief is also present in many small details of our lives. Once the tidal wave has begun to recede, and we can breathe again and look around a little, we begin to recognize all those little losses that remain. They are in the details of life’s daily rhythm and the habits we have created with that person who is now gone. And

sometimes those “small” losses don’t feel small at all.

Grief takes a long, long time. Many people believe it never really ends, but becomes a part of us, like a scar after a wound, faded, but still and forever there.

It’s especially important to notice those small, subtle signs of progress and to give yourself credit for those small victories and successes. You may not be where you wish you were, but still, there has been movement. Celebrate the baby steps, and keep walking forward.

By Jennifer DeVore Pfeiff

Wife of Terry DeVore (2008-CO)

On April 15, 2008, I lost my husband, Chief Terry DeVore, in a wildland fire accident. He was burned completely, and not much remained. I am adding this because it’s the part I have had trouble dealing with.

The people who cleaned up after the accident were able to give me Terry’s remains, and I have them in a beautiful firefighter’s urn. Last year, Terry’s family had been asking me to bury some of his ashes at the cemetery so they have a place to go to visit him. The thought killed me. If I even gave it a little thought, I would cry uncontrollably.

Finally, a few months ago, two years after Terry’s death, I was able to bury some of the ashes. I still cried through the whole thing, and my kids had a very hard time with it as well. But now we do feel a little better, and we still

have the rest of him here at the house in the urn. The kids said they would “freak out” if we didn’t keep some of him here still. It comforts them thinking he is here watching over them.

Other things are still hard, like birthdays and holidays. Our daughter Katy’s birthday was seven days after his death. She really struggles, since she was only turning six when he died, and he missed her kindergarten graduation. Also, Fourth of July was Terry’s favorite holiday, and the first two were hard to get through. Now we have been talking about having a big celebration just like he always did, and we are very excited to do it this year.

I’m glad we are finally starting to get through things without completely losing it. We miss him very much.

Today I Bought Bananas - By Jo Ann Tilton

Wife of Gary Tilton (2004-TX)

Today was a wonderful day. Today I bought bananas.

We can all remember where we were and what we were doing when certain events occurred. I know exactly what I was doing when I heard Kennedy had been shot. I was headed to a party when I heard Elvis had died, and suddenly a party just didn't seem appropriate. I was teaching a class when I heard about the horrors of 9-11. I knew that life would never be the same after that horrific day.

Today was one of those milestones that I will never forget. In my never ending quest to be healthy, I had found a new recipe that I just knew was the secret for the near perfect body. I headed to the local grocery with my list in hand.

When I arrived at the grocery, I realized that one of the items on the list was bananas. My first reaction was to omit the bananas from the recipe. After all, there were plenty of other fruits in the recipe.

No one would miss the bananas. But something told me that this was the day that I should buy those bananas. And so I did. And it felt so good that I went back the next week and bought more.

I know you must be wondering why I would be so excited about buying bananas. Bananas were one of my husband's favorite fruits. We bought them every week so that there would always be bananas available. At the time, I did not eat bananas. The bananas belonged to Gary. With Gary's death, I no longer needed to purchase bananas every week. In fact, I immediately began to avoid the banana section of the produce department. I did not want to face those bright yellow reminders of happier days which were gone forever. For five years and three months, there were no bananas in my kitchen. There were so many other reminders of Gary that I would not allow my mind to consider bringing back into my life the one thing that shouted, "Gary is gone. Why are you buying Gary's bananas? He is not coming to eat them."

To someone who has not been through the grieving process, this banana story probably seems just a little bit

wacky. But I would dare to guess that if you are experiencing grief, you understand. You understand that it's those little, ordinary, day to day happenings that present us with the biggest challenges. Maybe those outside the world of grief simply don't understand why something as insignificant as a banana could cause so much pain. We figure out a way to deal with the big things (holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, etc.), but the little things are our very own secret. We keep those hurts

hidden deep inside where no one can question our sanity or think that we are weird for having such thoughts. We become skilled at coping

with these secret hurts. We go to great

lengths to avoid the source of that pain. And we become so good at it that the world doesn't notice that we are avoiding the banana section of the produce department. If some well meaning friend should notice, we have a ready answer: "Oh, I really don't care for bananas." While that statement is actually true, it is not the

taste of the banana that I don't care for. It is what that banana represents that is so painful.

I always advise individuals grieving a death to get a big yellow tablet and start a list. I do this for two reasons:

1. When you are in the midst of grieving, it is very easy to forget the simplest task.
2. There is a certain satisfaction in being able to cross off finished items. Knowing you have completed certain tasks lets you know that you are going to make it, one step at a time.

What is not written on most of our lists are those secret hurts – the bananas of our lives. We know they are there, and when we can cross one off in our mind, the satisfaction is just as great as crossing off one of the written items on our list. In fact, there may be a greater satisfaction, because we have overcome fears and pain that only we can understand. I know that satisfaction.

Today has been a wonderful day. Today I bought bananas.



Cooking for One? Just Do It!! - By Sharon Purdy

Wife of Lee A. Purdy (2000-OH)

One of the hardest things I had to learn was how to cook for just me after my husband, Lee, died in the line of duty. There was no longer a joy in cooking, but I still had to live and, unfortunately, eating was part of that.

Peanut butter and eggs became my staples. I missed those great meals I used to prepare for the two of us, but just didn't bother. I threw out more milk and created more lab experiments with loaves of bread than I actually consumed. Soon, I no longer had milk or bread in my house. When I did cook, I either ate the leftovers for the next 54 days; or it, too, got tossed in time. I quickly tired of the McDouglas and other things that were just not good for me to eat regularly.

Freezing leftovers was a learning experience. I would put it in a container and forget about it in the freezer. When I did remember, it would be a challenge to figure out just what it was I had frozen. I would once again be on a steady diet of mystery meat leftovers until it was gone.

Grocery shopping was a nightmare. What was I going to do with a roast, a bag of potatoes, or even a pound of lunch meat? I either would have a steady diet of what I had purchased, or watch it spoil, and once again create job security for the garbage man.

Then I got smart, and I got creative. I learned to shop, cook, and freeze.

I don't drink milk, but cook with it on occasion. A half gallon or even a quart would spoil before it was used. I started purchasing the smallest amount I could. I knew that small amount probably cost more than a whole gallon, but I bought it anyway. At least it didn't spoil. I hate bread that has been frozen or refrigerated. I learned that green bread is not a good color; and, when that happens, I toss it and buy another loaf.

If I went to dinner with friends, I bought what I wanted and learned that doggy bags are a good thing. I would order a steak, knowing that I would not be able to consume it all. I ate what I wanted and took the rest

home. When I was ready to eat it again, I cut it into bite sized pieces and sautéed it with BBQ sauce or just heated thoroughly. Now I had two or more meals, and the price of that steak wasn't that bad after all.

Even leftover French fries come home with me. I found that if I diced them and put a small amount of olive oil in the skillet, I had instant hash browns. Crunchy and good.

When I make that pot of soup or pasta, I now immediately put some in a container. I mark what it is and the date on the lid and put it in the freezer on a shelf just for leftovers. I also immediately put some in a container and share with another widow friend in my town. She returns the favor to me when she cooks that roast or meatloaf.

I used to look at the price of prepared meals and think it was too costly for just one person. A friend was with me one day, and she told me to put it in the cart and move on. Now, that's what I do. If I want it, I buy it. A pint of potato salad, five slices of lunch meat, five or six slices of a specialty cheese I enjoy. I just do it. I pick it up and put it in the cart. Paying more for food that I will consume is more important to me than a bargain or a large quantity that I would throw out.

If I had to give advice on how to cook for one, I would say just three things:

1. Be creative with what you cook or bring home in that doggy bag.
2. Learn to immediately freeze in portion size containers that you have marked and dated and put on that leftover only shelf in the freezer.
3. Don't think too long about a purchase. Give yourself permission to cook and eat what you want.

JUST DO IT! If not, there's always peanut butter and eggs.



What If I Have No Surviving Children?

The loss of your only child or all of your children is especially difficult. If you are a parent with no

surviving children, here are a few resources that may be helpful:

Alive Alone (www.alivealone.org)

Founded by parents whose only child died, this group provides direct peer support, literature, and opportunities to connect with others.

First You Die: Learn to Live After the Death of Your Child

by Marie Levine

Written by a mother whose young adult son died.

Compassionate Friends (www.compassionatefriends.org)

Provides peer support, local chapters, extensive literature, and annual conferences for parents whose child or children have died.

What Forever Means After the Death of a Child

by Kay Talbot

Written by a psychotherapist whose only son died.

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Programs (PSOB)

Did you know...

In late August, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Office completely redesigned its homepage at www.psob.gov. The goal of the new site: to provide survivors, surviving departments, and other departments nationwide with streamlined information on how to file for PSOB death, disability, and education benefits, as well as offer vital resources regarding PSOB's three programs. Please visit PSOB's new online home and email the PSOB Office at AskPSOB@usdoj.gov with your suggestions or comments regarding how the space might be enhanced in the future.

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Programs are a unique



BJA
Bureau of Justice Assistance
U.S. Department of Justice

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.

Toll-free: 1-888-744-6513

We want to hear from you about...



Many people intentionally do good works in the world as a way to pay tribute to a loved one who has died. What do you do to "pay it forward" in honor of your firefighter? Do you reach out to others who are grieving?

Do charitable acts in his or her name? Keep an annual tradition that honors his or her service?

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 October 15. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

The Journey

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