



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 80 ~ DECEMBER 2017

We weren't that different after all, our souls laden with the same ache of loss, our hearts bursting with the same longing to save what remained of all we loved.

~ Rachel L. Schade

One of the comments we hear most frequently at events for fire hero families is, "It's so nice to be with people who get it." It is a powerful experience being heard, feeling like you don't have to explain all the backstory of grief or apologize for your tears. Some things must be lived to be truly understood.

One of the primary goals of our programs, including *The Journey*, is to remind people that they are not alone and they are not forgotten. There are others out there across the country who "get it" and who live with grief every day, just like you do.

Some of you come to our events so you can meet with others in person, make memories, touch base with the

friends you have bonded with through shared experience. Many others do not attend any events after the Memorial Weekend, but you let us know how much you appreciate receiving remembrance cards and reading the stories in *The Journey*. You tell us how a NFFF scholarship helped you or your child achieve educational and career goals.

This is a thank you to everyone who participated in 2017. Thank you for attending events, writing articles, sending remembrance cards, representing and speaking on behalf of the NFFF, volunteering during the Memorial Weekend, contacting people who needed support, sending donations that help pay for our programs, and showing up in so many ways. We could not do what we do without you. We look forward to seeing you in 2018.

Traveling on My Journey

By Donnella S. Hardee, wife of Rodney C. Hardee (2013-SC)

My journey has brought me to the fourth anniversary of Rodney's death. July 9, 2013, is a date etched in my mind forever. As I reflect, has this journey been easy? Absolutely not.

Year One

I have little memory, only that I made it. I functioned from automation. Slowly but surely, I realized my situation was a permanent one. I think my subconscious continued to think Rodney might walk in. I returned to work at the bank because that was the only thing still normal in my life. My children and I struggled to make some sense of what had happened. We started the Rodney C. Hardee Memorial Scholarship in his memory. I took over the food distribution

program for the needy he had started at our church. I mostly stayed busy every minute so I didn't have to think about my grief or unhappiness.

Year Two

I am still trying to adjust to being without Rodney. All the fanfare is over; family and friends have gone back to their normal lives. What is normal for me now? Learning to pick and choose events that I am comfortable with is my new normal. Outside, I think I appear to be doing pretty well. Inside, still trying to make sense of what has happened. Holiday depression is very real.

continued on page 2

Year Three

I am a survivor for sure. The positives in my life: making the decision to continue working, continuing to coordinate a monthly food distribution for the needy in our community, and presenting scholarships to high school seniors each spring. My family and I have volunteered at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend and met others just like us. Then I volunteered to send remembrance cards to other families on the anniversary of their deaths. I worked with wives at Loris Volunteer Fire Department to form an auxiliary; they asked me to be the president. I also hosted the annual family day for the fire department at my house. I appreciate the fact that even though my firefighter is gone, I am still included. Many firsts are still happening. Learning to take control and make decisions takes time.

This journey is one that does not come with directions or instructions. I am the first to admit, being left a widow never actually crossed my mind. I have come to understand that grief is an incurable disease, a disease that can control your very being if you let it.



Donnella (2nd from right) with her family.

Year Four

To make the fourth anniversary easier, my children, their families, and I traveled to Chimney Rock for the weekend. We hiked up the mountain, logging in five miles. The serenity and beauty of the mountains helped us deal with this anniversary much easier. My faith in God has been the key in keeping me grounded. Friends and family can only do so much. At some point we have to take control of our lives.



At the top of the mountain!

Some people deal with grief by spending huge sums of money trying to be happy. Some turn to drugs, especially prescription drugs and alcohol. Some look for a new love or someone that reminds them of the person they lost. I have chosen helping people and trying to be a better person. If you get out of your own cocoon of grief, people all around you are hurting and need help. My neighbors just lost their sixteen-year-old son in a senseless shooting. I can reach out to them because they are just starting their journey, and I am farther down the road.

Are you still at the beginning of your journey, or are you traveling along, making worthwhile stops along the way?

What Would I Say?

By Dreama Floersch, wife of Richard Floersch (2013-TN)

I was asked to speak at the annual Tennessee Fallen Firefighter Memorial in Bell Buckle, Tennessee, on September 9, 2017. My fallen firefighter husband, Captain Richard Floersch, was honored there in 2014. Richard was a career captain for the Milan Fire Department for 36½ years. I am thankful we have the Tennessee Fallen Firefighter Memorial, and they continue to honor our fallen firefighters.

I didn't know what I was going to say. I thought that I might talk so fast no one would know what I said, or what if I just froze up or got emotional? I started to figure out what I would say, and I finally got my speech written up.

That Saturday evening, with cooler temps and a breezy wind, the memorial service started. When I was introduced

I got up, took a deep breath, and walked to the podium.

I told them my story about what happened to Richard on October 2, 2013, while on duty on a 24-hour shift. His last phone call to me at 12:56 a.m., what he said, telling him I loved him, rushing to get to him at the fire station, and a firefighter and me finding him unresponsive. He was transported to the ER. At 1:54 a.m. the ER doctor called it, and my world came crashing down. Richard had a massive heart attack and passed away.

I was alone, lost and heartbroken. I began looking for help to get me through this difficult time. I contacted the NFFF, and with the Survivor Network they have, I was matched with a lady who had been through a similar situation to mine, losing a firefighter husband to a sudden heart attack. She too had walked in my shoes 14 years ago. She told me from the start she wasn't going to sugarcoat anything or tell me it would be easy; she would tell me like it is. Believe me, she did exactly that! Today she still does that with me, and I thank her for that.

We are survivors, and we are on this journey together. Each year since Richard was honored in 2014, I have returned to Emmitsburg and helped with the Memorial Weekend. Helping others helps me. Being with other survivors and



Dreama Floersch

seeing how they can get through it helps me to know that hopefully I can do it, too.

We are not alone in this. The NFFF staff, other survivors, some of those that were at the Tennessee Fallen Firefighter Memorial, and God have helped me get to where I am now. I am stronger. I am a survivor.

October 2 marked four years since my fallen firefighter, Richard, passed away. We were married for 33 years. He is my loving husband, my best friend, my soulmate, my rock, and my hero! It has been the

hardest four years of my life. I miss him so much. It's minute by minute for me. It will never be easy for me, and I will never get over it, but I get through it with the help of others.

I was able to get through my speech without a Kleenex. I surprised myself. As I ended, I took another deep breath and returned to my seat. Later during the memorial service, the bell was rung for my fallen firefighter, Richard, as it was done for others, and I was escorted down the walkway to place a red rose by his name on the plaque.

I could now breathe a sigh of relief. I had talked in front of a crowd and told my story. I placed my red rose for my Richard on the plaque as we honored all our Tennessee fallen firefighters.

May Our Fallen Firefighters Always Be Remembered and Never Forgotten!



The pieces that appear in The Journey belong solely to the authors and may not be reprinted without their written permission.

2017 Parents and Siblings Retreat

On November 2-4, 2017, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation hosted a weekend retreat in Baltimore, Maryland, for parents and siblings of fallen firefighters. Twenty attendees came from as far away as Texas, Kansas, and Michigan, representing firefighters who died from 1998 to 2016.

During the weekend, attendees explored the emotional and physical aspects of grieving and discovered techniques to help them manage the daily stress of grief. But these two days provided more than classes or seminars for these fire hero families. They shared stories about their firefighters, created memory boxes and ornaments, and cried and laughed together.

As Aaron Cheek of Texas explained, being in a small group made it easier to talk and interact than if he'd been in a much larger group. "I'm with seven other people who lost a brother. The small groups help a lot because you get more

one on one interaction. We can talk about our memories. It makes it more comfortable and easier to share."

His mother, Tracey Hague, agreed. She's been to several workshops and conferences in the past, but feels having a group that is just for parents and siblings is beneficial. "We all have the same kind of loss and this group is very special."

Jenny Woodall, bereavement specialist with the NFFF and one of the coordinators of the retreat noted that everyone at the retreat was generous, insightful, and supportive of one another. "There was so much resilience and wisdom in the room. It was a joy to see people connect with one another over their shared experiences."

Tracey felt the retreat was worthwhile. She and Aaron said they would definitely come to another Parents and Siblings Retreat and encourage others to register. "This has been good for him (Aaron)," Tracey said. "And watching him and the comfort he's getting is good for me."



Dads



Moms



Brother and sisters



A Mother's Memories

The next Parents and Siblings Retreat is planned for early 2019.

2018 Peer Support Training

On April 8, 2018, in conjunction with the annual Wellness Conference, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation will be hosting a one-day training for family survivors who are willing to do outreach to others through our Fire Hero Family Network. This Network makes direct contacts with the recently bereaved and others who have requested peer support. Network members also represent the NFFF at events, speak on behalf of the organization, and facilitate peer support groups during NFFF survivor events. To be eligible for this training, you must be an immediate survivor of a fallen firefighter who has been honored at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial in

Emmitsburg, Maryland. The training is open to spouses and life partners, parents, siblings, and adult children. We also have a need for ex-spouses/former partners of firefighters who are raising children and would be willing to do outreach to others with similar circumstances.

There are a limited number of openings for this training, and they will be filled according to where the need for outreach is greatest. If you are interested in attending, please contact Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org with your name and relationship to the firefighter and your firefighter's name and year of death.



Are you ready to be in a peer support role?

Grief requires our full attention and effort for a time. Before we can be present to the needs of other people, we must attend to our own emotions and needs. As we come out of the most intense period of grief, we often have a greater empathy for those who have suffered a similar loss. How do you know if you are ready to help support others who are grieving?

Before agreeing to provide peer support to others, please consider the following:

- Can you listen to someone else's story without needing to tell your own?
- Can you control your own emotions even when someone else loses composure?
- Can you offer encouragement without giving advice?
- Are you comfortable with another person's silence, tears, and anger?
- Are you comfortable talking honestly about your feelings and experiences with grief?
- Are you able to respect other people's decisions, judgments, and beliefs, even when they are different from your own?
- Will you keep the details of your contacts with survivors confidential?
- Are you willing to maintain the boundaries of the peer support role, as established by the NFFF?
- Can you keep your personal, religious, and political views to yourself?
- Are you able to care for yourself first, stepping out of the peer support role when you need to focus on yourself and your own life?
- Do you have the time and energy to devote to this endeavor?

2018 Survivor Events

April 8–10

Fire Hero Family Wellness Conference

*For adult spouses, life partners, parents,
siblings, and children*

Blue Ash, Ohio

June 9–15

Outward Bound

For children and stepchildren ages 18–25

Appalachian Trail, Pennsylvania

June 29–July 1

Hal Bruno Camp for Children of Fallen Firefighters

For children and stepchildren ages 4–17

(18 if still enrolled in high school), with parent/guardian

Johnsonburg, New Jersey

August 2–4

Young Adults Retreat

For children, stepchildren, and siblings ages 18–25

Warrenton, Virginia

October 5–7

National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend

Emmitsburg, Maryland

December 7

Tree Lighting in Honor of Fallen Firefighters

Emmitsburg, Maryland

December 7–9

Spouses Retreat

For spouses and life partners

Emmitsburg, Maryland



BJA
Bureau of Justice Assistance

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



Kindness is a powerful force, especially when we are going through a difficult time. Tell us about a kindness that was done for you that really made a difference at a critical time. Were you able to pay that forward to someone else in their hour of need? Are there things you do intentionally in honor of your loved one to put kindness back into the lives of others?

To submit a piece on this or another topic for an upcoming issue, please send it by January 30 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

Attn: Jenny Woodall

P.O. Drawer 498

Emmitsburg, MD 21727

This project was supported by Cooperative Agreement 2016-PS-DX-K001, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.