

Fire Hero Families

You may have noticed that in the past year we have started using the term “Fire Hero Family” to describe survivors of our honored fallen firefighters. For many years we used the simple, but powerful word “survivor” to describe people whose firefighters had died in the line of duty. But there was some confusion about that word. People survive lots of different things—illness, war, abuse, natural disasters. Also, while “survivor” will always be part of your story, our goal is to help people create a life that feels like much more than just surviving.



We wanted to find a term that made it clear what we were talking about and that tied family members to the service and sacrifice of their honored firefighters.

Out of this conversation, the term Fire Hero Family was born. We hope it reflects the pride, honor, and strength you feel as a very specific kind of survivor.

2018 Family Events

August 2-4
Young Adults Retreat
Warrenton, Virginia

October 5-7
National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend
Emmitsburg, Maryland

December 7
Holiday Tree Lighting
Emmitsburg, Maryland

December 6-9
Spouses Retreat
Columbia, Maryland

February 2019
Parents and Siblings Retreat
Location TBD



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...



Sometimes as we go through life we put on “masks.” Not literally, of course, but attitudes and personas we may need to adopt in order to present a certain image to the world. When we go through a life-changing event, our masks may change, as we have changed. Some people find that they no longer care so much about presenting themselves in a certain way, and they “take off their masks” and let people see them as they truly are. Others may find they have to put on a certain mask in order to function without

exposing their grief. How did the death of your firefighter change your masks?

To submit a piece on this or another topic for an upcoming issue, please send it by July 20 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org 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.



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 83 ~ MAY/JUNE 2018

« When you teach your son, you teach your son's son. »
~ The Talmud

Part of a parent's job is sharing the sometimes hard-won wisdom they have learned from life. From the practical (Check your tire pressure.) to the philosophical (This too shall pass.), their words form a backdrop to our lives in ways we may not appreciate until much later.

Like so many other things, advice is something that may get turned on its head when a parent dies. What once

made us roll our eyes or groan, "I know! You've told me a million times!" may suddenly seem like a treasure. Those words of wisdom and love can become touchstones that we carry with us throughout our lives, long after that person is gone. In this issue, writers share the words of advice they carry with them and may already be passing down to the next generation.

By Liza Aunkst, daughter of Michael Aunkst (2005-NE)

I was nine years old when my father passed away. If you ask me any advice from my father before that age, I would honestly not be able to tell you. The best piece of advice that I received from my father, Michael Aunkst, came after his death on February 27, 2005. This advice came in the form of a letter that my fourth grade teacher had parents write to their children at the beginning of the year to be given to them at some point throughout the year. I didn't receive my letter until a month or two after my father's death, near the end of the school year. Though I have since lost the letter, there is one line that has stuck with me since receiving that letter over thirteen years ago. The best piece of advice I have received from my dad is, "Never be afraid to ask for help, and always keep trying."

I did not follow this advice through the rest of middle school, but really started to use it at the end of my high school career into my current adult life. When I was still



in high school, I had been denied multiple scholarships, usually due to my GPA or my essays. I often felt discouraged about being denied for the scholarships. Despite being discouraged, I never gave up but continued to apply. I was granted a NFFF scholarship throughout my years as a college student!

Fast forward into college. I have always been a reserved person and never liked to bother people for help at any point. When the Foundation released that they were going to be holding a Young Adults Retreat in 2016, it piqued my interest, but

I was a broke college student at the time. This is when I started to ask for help from my father's fire department and my mother, who told me that she would help me get to the retreat. At the retreat, I met many wonderful young adults and put faces to the names behind exchanged emails leading up to the retreat. I was nervous for my first Foundation event, but after a lot of helpful reassurance

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Liza Aunkst *continued from page 1*

from the staff, they helped me through my first event with no issues and not a lot of anxiety.

At the 2017 Young Adults Retreat, I took, “Never be afraid to ask for help...” to heart. I had been at my first full-time job out of college for eight months, moved in with a few friends, and actually started to have to pay bills. My depression and anxiety were starting to take over my mindset. Through different conversations at this retreat, I realized this, and Jenny Woodall from the NFFF told me that she could help me find a counselor in my area. I am not one to ask for help or talk about myself in general, but I told Jenny that it wouldn’t hurt to search. She connected me to a counselor in my area that specializes in grief, anxiety, and depression. I got her contact information in August, and it took me until the end of September to actually set up an appointment. I remembered the advice my father gave me and took a step and asked for help to

better my mental health. I have been in counseling since that time and even set up an appointment on the anniversary of my father’s death to seek help talking about it.

This year, for the first time, I attended the NFFF Wellness Conference. I was more nervous than I had been going to the Young Adults Retreat. I did not know what to expect and barely knew anybody at the conference. As a result of being nervous, I did not ask for help. This started to change as the days went on, and I slowly opened up and asked for help. By the end of the conference, I was so overwhelmed by the amount of love and self-compassion that I had opened myself up to, that I did not want to leave. This entire conference reminded me of the advice my father gave me to never be afraid to ask for help. I plan to use this advice for as long as I can and often use it in my own practice with work. I remind myself daily that it really is okay to ask for help and that, no matter how hard it gets, I always keep trying.

By Erin Kelly-McGuinness, daughter of Louis Kelly (2016-NJ)

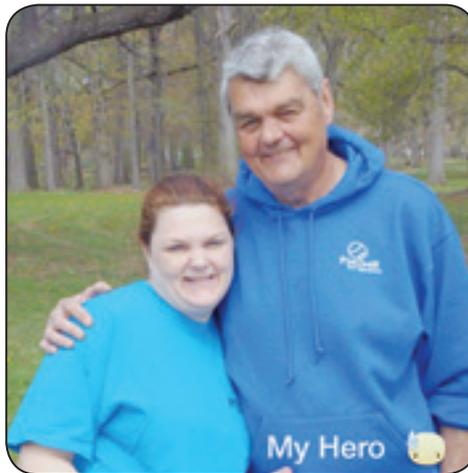
My dad was Chief Louis Kelly, Retired Chief of the Elizabeth Fire Department and Active Union County Mutual Aid Coordinator. He passed away in December 2016.

There is so much advice that my dad left me with that has formed who I have become today, 38 years of wisdom bestowed upon myself and my brothers. He was a very wise man and someone who came from nothing. He grew up in the poorest parts of the projects and had no running hot water as a kid.

The most important lessons I carry with me are:

1. Never give up on someone; never write someone off at first glance. You never know what lies beneath the surface, what put them in the position they are in, or what they are truly capable of.
2. Always try. I've had some crazy ideas in my lifetime, but my dad was always the one supporting me and telling me, “You won't know until you try.”
3. Always try again. A perfect example of this and all of the above—I have a friend who failed out of the fire academy more than once, but Dad always said this

friend would make a great firefighter someday. He took him under his wing, taught him, and encouraged him to keep going. My dad died just a few months before my friend started passing all his tests and ultimately graduated from the fire academy.



4. Treat others the way you want to be treated; you have to give respect to get respect. Ask my dad's "men." He led by example and showed his men the utmost respect; therefore, he was and is one of the most respected fire chiefs around.

One example of how I took my dad’s advice to heart is the Playball for Miracles Softball Tournament.

I wanted to find a way to raise money for Children's Miracle Network to help local hospitals that cared for kids. Many people doubted we would raise any significant funds, but Dad said, “You won't know until you try.” We tried, and 14 years later the tournament has grown and raised over \$135,000 for Children's Specialized Hospital. I guess Dad was right, and the “crazy idea” wasn't so crazy after all. It would have been easy to fail at our attempts or to just give up when the going gets tough



each year, but those words resonate year after year—ALWAYS TRY and ALWAYS TRY AGAIN. We've even added the Chief Kelly Memorial Match-up in Dad's honor, a sub-division of the tournament played by police, fire, EMS, and corrections teams.

I know all of these lessons in my heart, and they are what get me through every day. I hope that I made my dad proud in the things I did while he was alive—he always told me I did—and I know that I will continue to make him proud for the rest of my days. He was an incredible man.

By Jessamyn Delude, daughter of Richard Joseph Schaefer (2012-NH)

One year for my dad's birthday I found the perfect card for him. It read, "I was going to wash your car, but then I remembered what you always told me. If you want it done right, do it yourself." We both got a good laugh out of this. Dad and I were a lot alike. We were perfectionists to our own perfection. He truly taught me what hard work and being devoted to family was. With his death and having a family of my own, I realize even more how much he did for us growing up. His unselfish ways, doing the jobs no one wanted to do so he could keep his family happy and safe. He never looked for recognition for all he did.

Still to this day I am hearing stories of when my dad dropped what he was doing to help a friend or family



member with a project gone wrong or an unexpected problem. My dad wasn't one to give advice. Instead he led by example, showing me that you are only as good as your word. He showed me that, through determination and hard work, you could get where you wanted to be. He taught me to stand up for those who couldn't or didn't know how. And most of all, he believed in me and pushed me to be a better person. He supported me when I wanted to follow in his footsteps to be a firefighter. He never gave handouts, but he gave you what you earned.

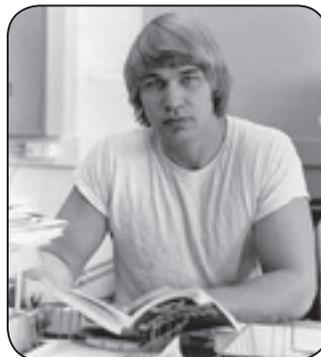
I am truly blessed for all the life lessons my dad taught me. Now to teach my little ones the same.

Remembering Fallen Firefighters

Alan Sondej (1988-MD)

Alan Patrick Sondej led a life of compassion and generosity. From his undergraduate days at Notre Dame University through adulthood, Sondej committed himself to helping others affected by poverty and hunger. He raised money for relief efforts and traveled the world to teach sustainable agriculture techniques.

Alan Sondej also gave his time and energy to helping his local community. A graduate student at the University of Maryland, Sondej was a live-in volunteer firefighter with the Hyattsville Volunteer Fire Department in Prince George's County, Maryland from 1977-1988. It was on his last night with the department before heading back overseas to teach that tragedy struck. While battling a house fire, Firefighter Alan Sondej sustained serious burns which eventually claimed his life.



In recognition of Alan's spirit for giving, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has established the Alan Patrick Sondej Memorial Scholarship Fund for Families of Fallen Firefighters. This new scholarship will be part of the Foundation's Sarbanes Scholarship Program and was made possible by a generous donation from a former volunteer firefighter from Prince George's County.

"We were overwhelmed when contacted about establishing the scholarship in Alan's name," said Chief Ron Siarnicki, Executive Director of the NFFF. "This year marks the 130th anniversary of Hyattsville Volunteer Fire Department. March 16 is also the 30th anniversary of Alan's death. To be able to announce the scholarship at Hyattsville makes it that much more special for everyone."

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