Grief is a fundamental part of human experience, universal and timeless. Those who have been there share an understanding that can only be gained by lived experience. But the individual experience of grief is as singular as a fingerprint. Each relationship is unique, and so is the grief that follows when one person in the relationship dies.

There are no rules. There are no stages. There is no definitive beginning or end. Perhaps the only constant is that the grief experience changes over time. It generally becomes softer, but with the surprising capacity to surge forward at unexpected moments, even after many years.

Loss transforms us; we do not go forward as the person we were before.

In this issue, accounts of grief from different perspectives, each story a world unto itself.

The Never-Ending Story

By Helen King, wife of Larry Joe King (1998-TN)

On August 16, 2018, it was 20 years since you left on the fire truck to heaven. Since you’ve been gone, our children have grown up to be strong and have done well for themselves.

There were times I thought I would not make it, but I remember you always telling me, “You can do it.” I am grateful for the time we shared together, even though our grandchildren will never get to know the grandfather that would have spoiled them rotten.

As time marched on, so did I, by setting goals in my life, pushing harder every day to reach my goals by going to college and getting my degree. I will not say that the days have been easy, for the roads have been tough, but through the help of the NFFF and determination, I did it.

Although I have met many people and made many friends, it still can’t replace your big smile and loud hand clapping.

The grandchildren keep asking me to tell them about your life as a firefighter. I share as many memories as I can, so they will know that the man they see in the picture loved his job and gave his all.

Watching the faces of these children as I talk with them, I see you in their eyes, because each one carries on the bloodline of the King family.

Each passing year, through them, I see your walk, your talk, even your big smile. I’ve been asked many times, “How did you make it this far having to raise two children by yourself?”

I just smile and tell them, by the grace of God and a voice saying, “You can do it.”

To every one of my survivor friends and family, your journey may start rough, but I promise you it will get better as time passes on.
What “Hero” Means to Me

By Carolyn Ransom, sister of Jimmy Randolph (2012-CA)

My brother, Jimmy Randolph, was a hero in my eyes. He knew the dangers in taking on this type of job. Even though he loved God and his family very much, I believe that’s what pushed him toward firefighting. The love he had from his maker and family gave him the strength to want to show that love outwardly to people he would never meet. When the call came to go, he went, not thinking of himself, but how what he did would help make someone’s life better. Whether it was animals or people, he was happy to do it. He loved what he did. When we visited Emmitsburg five years ago to see my brother’s name among all the other men and women heroes, it made me so proud that he was part of something great. I don’t think I would run into a fire. Selfless acts like that are called heroic!

Thank you, NFFF, for helping us heal and always remembering the unsung heroes who gave the ultimate sacrifice. To my brother, “Randy” “Dolla,” not a day goes by that you don’t run across my mind.

Sincerely yours, Big Sis Carolyn

Grief Hidden Behind Beauty and a Smile

By Tanisha Hall, wife of Jermaine Hall (2014-GA)

In 2014, I received the most devastating news I could have ever imagined. Never, in a million years, did I think I was going to be a widow at the age of 24. It was during that time that I realized I did not have life all figured out. I did not have the power to bring death to a halt for my husband, Jermaine. It was also during that time that I learned a thing or two about hiding behind my true feelings and holding on to a smile that was not authentic.

I can remember it like it was yesterday, the day after Jermaine had transitioned. I woke up and told myself, along with my mother, that I was not going to grieve. I knew of so many people who lost a spouse and maybe a few weeks or months later, the grieving spouse transitioned. I made a solemn pact to myself that I was never going to be “that spouse.” What I failed to realize was that I was making a pact that I had no control over. I could not control life or the simple fact that things just happen. I guess I wanted to believe that holding on to the notion of keeping myself intact is a way of controlling my pain and life.

I decided every week I was going to focus on being “beautiful.” My version of “beautiful” consisted of getting my hair and nails done and of course wearing makeup. The more that I decided to do those things, the more pain I felt. I would stare at myself in the mirror and peel off the layers of “beauty.” The true mask was still there.

What people—me included—fail to realize is that life is amazing, and the people placed in your life are to be cherished. As we go through life, we don’t realize just how frail we are and how, in one second, we are here, and the next minute, we are gone. Thus, the mask of keeping myself “beautiful” only made me feel worse. I learned through the process that masking pain is only temporary. Once the excitement is gone, you are still faced with reality. The reality that your loved one is gone and there are no do-overs or makeups. The reality is that it hurts, and it hurts a lot. I thought, this cannot be my life. Why me? Why my husband, brother, sister, friend? Why did this happen?

I knew that I had to find another alternative to help heal the pain that I was facing on the inside. I decided to try smiling and being happy, because I was so over being angry all the time. However, deep down inside I was crying and struggling. Struggling to keep it together because I did not want to be seen as a failure or show any signs of weakness. Struggling with the anxiety of Jermaine’s transition and struggling to keep afloat with my new reality of life.

I can recall one time when someone asked me how I was doing. My response was, “I am ok,” and of course with the response I had to smile to show that I was indeed ok. I wanted to be ok, and yet I knew that I was not. It was in continued on page 3
that instant that my methods were not working and helping me. I had to peel each layer of anger, anxiety, hatred, and depression so that I could truly heal and make some type of peace with my new journey of life.

I decided to write, and I mean write my entire life and feelings out. In the process, I wrote a book called Breathe to find some type of sanity through it all. It was never easy, and there are still some days when I have to remind myself to stop hiding behind how I truly feel. What I learned from Jermaine’s transition is that it’s ok to talk and express your feelings. It’s ok to be sad and sometimes not have life all figured out. It’s also ok to not be ok. Life is truly a journey where some days we are coasting in the breeze and other days we are truly struggling to keep afloat from what we define as “failure.” Yet, all in all, it is not ok to hide who we truly are, what we stand for, and how we are feeling on the inside. The more we continue to cover our authentic selves, the more layers we create that will one day change who we were never created to be.

Whatever your mask maybe through the journey of grief, I challenge you to sit with the pain in the healthiest way. Choose to talk about it when you are ready. But most importantly, choose to stop hiding behind the mask, and face the reality and the many possibilities that life has to offer. Life is beautiful no matter the challenges of loss and trauma. There are moments we may never understand or know the “why’s” to. However, just maybe, you are growing and stretching beyond your belief to your true, beautiful, authentic self, the person you were created to be.

**By Grace Gortsema, grandmother of Zach VanderGriend (2008-MT)**

On June 1, Zachary Jake VanderGriend would have been 35 years old. He died in Reno, Nevada, in 2008. I am his 96-year-old grandma, “Nan,” as he called me. Zach has a wonderful mom and dad, Steve and Marci VanderGriend, and sister, Andriana.

Zach was a thoughtful young man and called me often to tell me a funny story or just to connect. I miss those calls terribly, but I know where he is. One day while on his way to a different station, he called me to excitedly say, “God is opening new doors for me!” A few days later we heard of the accident, and I know that heaven’s doors were open wide that day. I just want to say that my only comfort in losing Zach is that he is with his faithful Savior Jesus Christ. I’m headed heavenward myself and will see him again.

My memories of Zachary, his fun-loving personality, and his kind heart bless me in my old age.

**2018 Illinois Survivors Conference**

By Steve Tullis, son of Arthur “Bucky” Tullis (1999-IL)

The Illinois Survivors Conference was held in September in Carol Stream, Illinois. This year’s conference was overwhelmingly positive and deeply emotional—which is good for all the survivors. We had a total of 21 people from across the state of Illinois attend our conference, 13 of whom were able to spend the night, thanks to a generous donation from the Metro Chiefs of Illinois, The Hinsdale Professional Firefighters Foundation, and the Pleasantview Fire Protection District. We also had five new attendees, who were very surprised and pleased to know this conference existed.

The day was filled with belly laughs, cheerful memories, and great stories about our loved ones. We put together a loosely organized program that generated a lot of discussion about how survivors are treated, the relationship between the fire service and survivors, and moving forward after the passing of a loved one, wherever you are in the grieving process.

In the end, we all walked away with a renewed sense of hope, ideas on how to better honor our fallen family member, and a much deeper relationship with each other. Great stuff all around.

If you are interested in attending a future conference or connecting with other family members in Illinois, please contact Steve Tullis at stullis@ameritech.net.
The Power of an Escort Experience
Submitted by Deputy Chief Rob Low,
Greater Naples Fire Rescue (FL)

On July 14, 2016, Joey De Marinis died in the line of duty. During the 2017 National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend, I had the honor of being assigned as an escort for the De Marinis family, and I was specifically assigned to Joey’s parents, Joe and Carol. Throughout the weekend we had the opportunity to get to know each other, and I had the opportunity to get to know Joey. A decorated military hero, Joey decided to join the Clermont Fire Department after getting out of the military. Joey’s family is deeply enriched with firefighters, and Joey was no different.

After a brief but impactful tour of duty with Clermont, Joey passed away. Since my time with Joe and Carol in Emmitsburg, I have stayed in touch with them, celebrating various recognitions for Joey along the way. Florida and Colorado’s memorials were special moments for the family and nation to honor Joey. While I was there in spirit, I was not able to attend these two events. In the spring of 2018, I received communication from Carol that Clermont Fire would be dedicating a new fire engine in Joey’s honor.

Once the plans were finalized, I made it my commitment to be there in support of Joe and Carol and in honor of Joey. On June 14, 2018, Joey was honored by the Clermont Fire Department as Engine 103 was dedicated in his honor. Sitting just behind Joe and Carol, I could see and feel how proud they were of Joey and thankful to the men and women of Clermont Fire for their unwavering support of a brother firefighter and his family. This is a moment that I will never forget, and I was honored to have been part of it.

Being a Memorial Weekend escort is a life choice, a calling if you will. You become part of the family. You cry, you share, and most importantly you care for each other. The bonds that are built are for a lifetime.

Submitted by his mother, C. Annette Cole

It brings me great pleasure to hand over to you the proceeds from our 7th annual Adam Cole Memorial Golf Tournament. The tournament was held on June 23rd at Caledonia Golf Course in Fayetteville, Pennsylvania. Nineteen teams joined us on that rainy morning. It was our biggest tournament yet!

Submitted by Deputy Chief Rob Low,
Greater Naples Fire Rescue (FL)
The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

Upcoming Opportunities and Events

2019 Remembrance Cards

The Remembrance Card program is one way we reach out to families to let them know we’re thinking of them. During the anniversary month of their firefighter’s death, families receive a Remembrance Card written by another Fire Hero Family. We often hear from families how much it means to them to know they and their firefighters are remembered.

It is time to set the Remembrance Card volunteer schedule for 2019. For those who have not helped with this project before, here is the process:

Let us know when you are available to send cards. Several weeks ahead of when you are scheduled to send the cards, we will send you the names of firefighters who died in the line of duty for your month, along with contact information for their families. We will provide cards, envelopes, and postage stamps for the mailings. You will write a short note and send a card to each person on the list.

If you are a Fire Hero Family member whose loved one was honored at the National Memorial and you would like to volunteer to send Remembrance Cards in 2019, please contact Ashley Whitmore at awitmore@firehero.org or 301-447-1365 to be added to the schedule.

2018 Holiday Tree Lighting

Each year the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation decorates holiday trees in memory of our fallen firefighters. These beautiful trees are on display in the Chapel, featuring ornaments from the families and departments of America’s Fire Heroes from around the country.

If you would like to include an ornament in honor of your firefighter, please send it to arrive before December 1, 2018, to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
Holiday Tree Program
PO Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

If you would like to attend the Tree Lighting, which begins at 4:30 on Friday, December 7, 2018, there will be a brief service featuring speakers and musical selections, followed by a reception in the Chapel and an opportunity to view the beautiful ornaments from around the country.

To attend, please contact Eric Nagle at enagle@firehero.org or 301-447-1431 at least 48 hours prior to the event to ensure that you are on the access list to come onto the National Emergency Training Center campus.
We want to hear from you...

Many people pay tribute to their fallen firefighters with memorial tattoos. We have seen so many over the years that reflect careful thought, affection, tradition, and pride, and we love hearing the stories behind the ink. Would you like to share yours with other Fire Hero Families in an upcoming issue of The Journey? If so, please send a clear photo of the tattoo and a paragraph or two about how you chose the design and what it means to you.

To submit a piece on this or another topic for an upcoming issue, please send it by December 15 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
Attn: Jenny Woodall
P.O. Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

2018 Memorial Weekend Thanks

The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation is deeply grateful to the returning Fire Hero Family members and the many members of the fire service who attended the 2019 Memorial Weekend to support the families of this year’s honored fallen fire heroes. Your dedication and hard work, your compassionate hearts, your flexibility and good humor despite sometimes challenging circumstances, help make this event a meaningful tribute each year. Thank you for bringing the best of yourselves to this tremendous effort once again.

Upcoming Fire Hero Family Events

December 7, 2018
Annual Tree Lighting
Emmitsburg, Maryland

December 6-9, 2018
Spouses Retreat
Columbia, Maryland

February 17–20, 2019
Parents and Siblings Retreat
Austin, Texas

May 5–8, 2019
Fire Hero Family Wellness Conference
Portland, Maine

June 28–30, 2019
Hal Bruno Camps
Indianapolis, Indiana

August 2019
Young Adult Retreat
Dates and Location TBD

October 4–6, 2019
National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend
Emmitsburg, Maryland

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.

We want to hear from you...

Many people pay tribute to their fallen firefighters with memorial tattoos. We have seen so many over the years that reflect careful thought, affection, tradition, and pride, and we love hearing the stories behind the ink. Would you like to share yours with other Fire Hero Families in an upcoming issue of The Journey? If so, please send a clear photo of the tattoo and a paragraph or two about how you chose the design and what it means to you.

To submit a piece on this or another topic for an upcoming issue, please send it by December 15 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org
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.

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation • P.O. Drawer 498, Emmitsburg, MD 21727

(301) 447-1365 firehero@firehero.org