

Upcoming Fire Hero Family Events

May 17–20, 2020

**Peer Support Training/
Fire Hero Family Wellness Conference**
Branson, Missouri

June 26–28, 2020

Hal Bruno Camp for Children of Fallen Firefighters
Colorado Springs, Colorado

July 12–15, 2020

Men's Retreat
Estes Park, Colorado

August 2–5, 2020

2020 Young Adults Retreat
Estes Park, Colorado

October 3–4, 2020

39th National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend
Emmitsburg, Maryland

December 2–5, 2020

Winter Family Retreat
Fairfield, Pennsylvania

December 4, 2020

Fire Hero Family Holiday Tree Lighting
Emmitsburg, Maryland

Make a Difference in the Life of a Grieving Child

Support a grieving child by volunteering at the Hal Bruno Camp for Children of Fallen Firefighters, a weekend camp provided in partnership between Comfort Zone Camp and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. Volunteers serve in roles such as Big Buddies (mentors), nurses, Healing Circle Leaders (therapists), Healing Circle Assistants, photographers, or in logistics support roles. All volunteers need to attend a one-day training and pass a background check. Join us on Saturday, May 9, 2020 at the Denver Fire Department Fire Academy in Denver, Colorado. To fill out an application to attend this volunteer training or an alternate training session, visit <https://my.comfortzonecamp.org> to create a profile, e-mail Krista Collopy at kcollopy@comfortzonecamp.org, or call (201) 632-3520.



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

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...



What is one quality your loved one had that you try to (or would like to) carry forward with you? Was your firefighter especially generous? Funny? Creative? Hardworking? Tell us how you put those qualities into action in your daily life.

To submit a piece on this or another topic for an upcoming issue, please send it by April 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.

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

(301) 447-1365

firehero@firehero.org



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

ISSUE 93 ~ MARCH/APRIL 2020

The only cure for grief is to grieve.

~ Earl Grollman

One thing we see again and again in our work with Fire Hero Families is your ability to grow and change. Even many years after the death of your firefighter, the story continues to unfold. You share stories of doing things you never dreamed you would do. Sometimes it's big changes, like a new career or a move across the country. But just as profound are the smaller changes, the ones other people might not even notice, brave steps you take to reengage with life.

In 2019, we held our first Winter Family Retreat in conjunction with the annual Tree Lighting ceremony in the Memorial Chapel in Emmitsburg. After that event, several of you told us something that really moved us. You shared that, after your firefighters died, you pretty much stopped celebrating Christmas. Maybe you half-heartedly put up a tree or showed up at holiday events, but the joy had gone out of it. And after the retreat, you told us you were looking forward to the holidays for the first time in many years.

One of the things we try to build in to every one of our family programs is time for people to simply acknowledge and talk about their loss and to hear other people's stories. There's a reason for this. It's because acknowledging the pain of loss is a fundamental first step of grieving and the only way we can eventually get to healing, growth, and change. When someone dies, there is this tendency in our culture to try to push survivors back in the direction of

being who they were before the death. *"When are you going to move on, get back to normal, start (dating, shopping, working) again? You can't sit around and dwell on the past."* Most survivors have heard some version of this message. Of course, we are never the same after a significant loss. In the beginning, thinking and talking about our loss and our pain is how we process it and integrate it into our brains and our lives. It takes time. And sometimes, even years later, we need to take out that part of our story and examine it again, say the words aloud to another human witness, and feel the pain of our loss.

One family member put it like this... *All year, I'm strong and capable and have my act together. I'm the one organizing and encouraging and smiling at our family events and at my job. Everyone thinks I'm doing great. But when I come to a Fire Hero Family event and I'm surrounded by other people who understand, I can let down my defenses and just be sad. I don't have to explain it to anyone, or apologize for my tears, because everyone here "gets it." And then I put it away again and go back to my life. But while I'm here, with these people who understand, this is my time to remember him.*

Before we put the pieces of our lives back together, before we grow, before we start a Chapter 2, we have to acknowledge and feel the pain of our loss. It helps if we don't have to do it alone.

You cannot prevent the birds of sorrow from flying over your head, but you can prevent them from building nests in your hair.

~ Chinese proverb

Virginia Chervenyak Grecco

Wife of Stephen Chervenyak Jr. (1988-NJ)

I want to thank all of you for your organization. My husband, Stephen, was a firefighter who died in the line of duty in October 1988. I had three small children at the time, ages four, two, and eight months. I was well supported at the time of the incident, but as time went by, I felt so alone. It was the “firsts” that really got me—first birthday without him, first Thanksgiving, Christmas, seasons. Although I sat among friends and family, I felt so alone. No one knew the aching in my heart. From October through January is very hard. Even after 31 years, the ache of the loss is always there. Time has gone on, great things have happened in my life since, but I still ache alone.

Until...my son married into a family of firefighters. I am so thankful for his wife, Stephanie. She understands the first responder family connection and how important it is. She told me about the NFFF and, at first, I was devastated. I had to dig up newspaper articles that took me right smack back in the center of my hurt. Honestly, I was very upset with her, but I pursued it for the sake of peace, not realizing that I was the one that was going to receive the most peace.

In October 2017, my children, my husband’s family, and our extended family members all attended the memorial service which acknowledged Stephen and many other fallen firefighters. It was beautiful, peaceful, and very family oriented. I was very glad that my small children, now adults, had the opportunity to honor their dad and many others as well.



The Chervenyaks: Angela (2), Virginia, Stephen III (4), Jason (7 months), and Stephen Jr.

We went home, and to my surprise I received a card in the mail acknowledging my husband’s death anniversary. Wow! For the first time, I did not feel alone. I actually got down on my knees and cried out to God, “Thank you.” Every year now, I receive a card.

Then I read of the Christmas Tree Lighting to honor the fallen firefighters. I sent in an ornament and went to the service with my oldest son and his wife. I’ve been going with my family and sending an ornament ever since 2017.

It is so beautiful.

I feel free to remember how my husband loved to set up a village every year with the houses his mom gave him. We had six houses; we would add one every year. Six years of marriage, six houses. Well, I continue that tradition, and my family now has over 30 houses in our village for Christmas. It reminds me of him, my husband, Stephen. He also liked blue lights. I always have at least one area in our house with

blue lights for him. This year we started a new tradition. We have two Christmas trees, and one has all blue lights on it for my Stephen.

Thank you, NFFF, for allowing me, helping me to realize that I can forever celebrate my fallen firefighter and know there are others doing the same. A very special thanks to my daughter-in-law, Stephanie, who continued to pursue the task of getting my husband Stephen Anthony Chervenyak Jr.’s name on a plaque for the fallen firefighters.

It is so nice to be able to remember.

Eve Bucca

Wife of Ron Bucca (2001-NY)

Like you, I got the call that no one ever wants to get. I come from three generations of FDNY firefighters, and my son-in-law is on a local fire department. Losing my husband, Ron, on 9/11 was the biggest challenge I ever faced. A respected firefighter and soldier, he was a

great family man and my BFF, mentor, teammate, and the neighborhood go-to guy.

As you know, rebuilding is not easy, but life continues on, and I was lucky to have a support network. Being a



nurse, I had some pretty good coping skills, but around 2010 I was faced with some major surgeries, and it rattled me. Fortunately, around that time I was introduced to something called biofeedback. Biofeedback made me more self-aware of my breathing, body posture, thoughts, and triggers. This information helped me retrain my brain to take energy that wasn't helpful, like worrying, frustration, and muscle tension, and re-channel it into a healthier, more useful purpose, like healing. Using my mental and physical energy more efficiently, I noticed I made better decisions, nipped negative thoughts and behavior in the bud, and was able to bounce back more quickly from challenges.

Biofeedback was so personally effective that it became my mission to bring it to the 1st responder and military

community. That is how Stand Fast Alliance was born. We are a 501(c)(3), and our services are free to our mission community. Our goal is to help build resiliency using tools that are science-based, non-pharmaceutical, effective, and practical.



Bringing Stand Fast Alliance forward to other families has been tremendously challenging but also very rewarding. It has been a huge learning curve, and my skills sure do get a workout. Ron always looked out for those around him, and I know he would have been proud of this organization inspired by him.

Stand Fast Alliance offers one-on-one coaching, in person and virtually, as well as educational

presentations and workshops. For more information, go to Standfastalliance.org.

The pieces that appear in The Journey may not be reprinted without written permission.

Introducing Erin Browning!

The NFFF Family Programs team is very happy to have a new member, and we want to introduce her to you! Erin Browning is our new Family Outreach Assistant. She was born and raised in Westminster, Maryland, and graduated from Towson University with a bachelor's degree in Gerontology. Before joining the NFFF, she worked for 10 years for the Baltimore County Department of Aging in the Community Services and Senior Centers Division. Erin lives in Mount Airy, Maryland with her husband, Ivan, who is a captain with Montgomery County (MD) Fire and Rescue and a pipe major for Montgomery County Firefighters Pipes and Drums. Erin and Ivan have a 2-year-old son, Graham, and two dogs. Erin enjoys spending time in Ocean City, Maryland, watching football and hockey, and spending time with family and friends.

I am beyond excited and honored to be a part of the NFFF team and am so looking forward to developing relationships with all of you in the very near future. I have always found myself drawn to roles where I am helping others, not for the sole purpose of hoping to make a difference in someone's life, but for their presence to make a difference in mine. I like to face each day with a positive mindset while keeping this in mind:

"Sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths." – Etty Hillesum

