



# The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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Often, it's the deepest pain which empowers you to grow into your highest self.

~ Karen Salmansohn

This has been a tough year all around. Especially tough for some, who have experienced the death of someone they loved or faced serious illness, lost work, or financial instability due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been a hard year for those in the first responder and medical communities, as well as for anyone whose work involves serving people. It has been a challenge for families with school-age children who are balancing work and health and education. It has been a scary year for anyone with chronic health issues that put them at higher risk of illness and even more isolating for older people who

live alone. Whatever your situation, we expect this year has included extra stress and anxiety for most people who are reading these words.

We talk a lot about loss in these pages, about what is difficult and sad and unfixable. We try to balance that with stories that include growth, celebration, and hope. Life is always in flux, and seasons of growth often follow seasons of struggle. We thought maybe it would be good to end this year and welcome 2021 with a few stories from people who are entering a new season of their lives with hope and possibility.

## An Open Letter to my Dad in Heaven, Who Has Missed Sixteen Years of My Life

By Ryan Woitalewicz, son of Kenneth Woitalewicz (2004-NE)

### 2020–21 Scholarship Recipient

Program of Study: Elementary Education K–6/Special Education 7–12, University of Nebraska—Kearney

Ryan hopes to find a school district where he will be able to make a difference in children's lives. He plans to eventually enroll in a master's program in school administration and hopes to earn a doctorate degree at some point. At the University of Nebraska – Kearney, Ryan serves as a Chancellor's Ambassador and works closely with the University administration, conducts campus tours to prospective new students, serves as a Student Senator on behalf of the College of Education, and is a member of the Pi Kappa Alpha Fraternity.



One of the two biggest tragedies that a child could ever go through brought me some of the greatest life lessons I have ever learned.

To the Dad I didn't have the privilege of knowing very well, I am unsure on where to even begin. The first thing I can say is that I am doing well, and life is really good—but I

haven't moved on... at all. I adapted to change and grew up, but I never did "move on," and I don't think I ever will. It's very cliché to say, but I truly hate that phrase so much, and I understand why other people do, too. It doesn't matter how many "dead dad" grieving camps I attended throughout middle school and high school or how many heart-to-heart talks I had with my high school counselor. The term "moving on" is a phrase that should only

be used in a situation where someone is moving on to a new chapter of their life—not a death. When someone tells a child who lost their parent to "move on," you are indirectly telling me that my father's whole life and death is just a moment that soon shall pass.

I want to keep your memory alive; I really do. But, when I start speaking about you to my closest peers, I slip so easily into the present tense that I do not even realize it. "He is great!" "My dad would love to help out with that." You

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**Ryan Woitalewicz** *continued from page 1*

would think that I would learn by now, because you've been gone longer than you were actually presently a part of my life. I guess I've always thought that made me weird. Then I noticed, everyone else does it about their loved ones, too. And it is not because we are in denial or because we are forgetful; it's because the people we love, who we've lost, are still so present for us.

Things have certainly changed, and not the way you would've expected.

If you were still here, things would be different. You would be disappointed in some people who never kept their promises after that Valentine's Day house fire back in 2004. After you passed, we heard the typical, "We will always be here for you." or "Let us know if you need anything." Now, here we are sixteen years later, where are they? Those people are non-existent. These people that made those promises were your closest friends and colleagues. The reason is still unknown. I am not sure if the "kids" from sixteen years ago were supposed to stay little, but now we are all grown-up. We have families of our own. We are in our career jobs. We are finishing up our undergraduate degree. We are now adults.

Even though you are physically gone, it doesn't mean your memory is gone too. And that's the thing. Your memory is so much alive in your ol' friends and coworkers, but they fear to bring up the good times they had with you because they don't want to make us sad. What these people don't understand is that these memories I made with you are slowly starting to fade away the older I get. Your heart of gold and the love and affection you had for Momma is something I will never forget. However, it's the comical stories and pranks you pulled on your coworkers, the stories of drinking Budweiser in the garage with the neighbors, your constant helping hand towards others, and your laugh, smile, and your voice are all fading away from my memory. There is a fear of mine that I know I will have to face one day, and that fear is I won't get to tell your grandchildren how great you actually were, because I will not remember anything. The great memories will be gone from my memory; and all I will have is your name to cherish.

With losing you at such a young age, it actually made me a better person in the long run.



*Ryan (right) and his brother with their dad*

I will become the best educator. In ten short months, I anticipate having an elementary classroom that I will get to call my own. I'll have the greatest opportunity in the world to teach the next generation of our society. Most importantly, I will have the opportunity to be the positive father figure in a child's life, just like you were to me in the few years you were a part of it. As a senior undergraduate student, I have seen broken families in our public schools. These students are not just here, they are everywhere across the nation.

These students may not have a good home life. Their family is inconsistent. I want to be the one who makes that change and becomes their difference maker and motivator. Because of my past experiences, I am confident that I will be the best educator because of the lessons I have learned without you being present in my life. I can only do this dream of mine because your death has taught me not only an experience, but a new lifestyle.

I have a support system that I can't even describe. Your death has brought me closer to a network of a different type of "family." This family is not like any ordinary family. We are a family who all shares a similar story—losing a loved one in the fire service. I have met some of the greatest people in my life because of this "family," and I will forever be grateful. I have had the opportunity to meet young adults my age who have also lost their father in a very similar way. This established hundreds of friendships that are forever lasting. I have had the opportunity to travel throughout the country and share my story about you with strangers. I have gotten the opportunity to visit places that I would never even have thought about visiting in my lifetime. Your death brought me a new type of family that allows me to know that I am not alone, and I have people across the States that "get it."

Your death truly changed my aspect on life, and it keeps changing the older I get. Thank you for being my constant motivator for everything I do. I do everything because I want to make you proud. I know you are proud of me regardless, and that is my motivator to keep going. I've learned a lot of things throughout this past sixteen years, and I will learn so much more in the years to come. And there is one thing that will never change—I'll never move on.



To the ones who read this far, I want to leave you off with a few words of encouragement that I live by, and I hope you can, too. I encourage you to capture the photos while being in the moment with your friends and family. When the time comes, all you will have left are photos to hold their memory. I encourage you to record videos and make those home movies. You

will want to document these years of your life and share them in the future. I encourage you to tell the people in your life [friends and family] how important they are to you. You never know when the good Lord is going to call them Home. I encourage you to hug your loved ones close, and lastly, pray more than ever before, because all in all, tomorrow is never promised.

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### By Rachel Prouty

*Daughter of Roy Prouty (2003-NJ)*

**2020–21 Scholarship Recipient**

*Program of Study: Master of Social Work, University of Maryland*

**R**achel is pursuing her Master of Social Work degree at the University of Maryland while working full-time as a mental health rehabilitation therapist and serving an internship. She plans to work with firefighters regarding their mental health and wellness, because she sees this community as underserved in the field of behavioral health. She credits her passion for and dedication to social work to the passing of her father and her ongoing involvement with the NFFF.



housing availability, and overall experiencing financial hardship, I was pretty sure that I was going to defer school and/or just see what I could get done with my BSW.

After receiving this letter last night and seeing the very generous amount NFFF/Motorola Solutions Foundation was offering, I felt a rush of emotions including relief, thankfulness, surprise, and excitement. I am glad I never actually put in my deferral request, because now I will be able to continue school and finish out this last year.

I received the NFFF scholarship letter last night. I wanted to share my gratitude and appreciation for all of the work that you do regarding these scholarships (on top of everything else you guys do.) As you know, school is expensive, and when I made the decision to attend school at an out-of-state college, I don't think I really understood the higher rate of tuition at that time. Nonetheless, I've continued and (finally) made it to my final year of school. When the pandemic hit and people were losing jobs/internships,

NFFF and the friendly, helpful, supportive people I've met over the years continue to stand as a pivotal point in my life as to why I ultimately chose social work and why I've been able to be successful in social work. I wanted to say thank you for your continued support in many adapting ways, from when I was a kid and first became connected with NFFF to now. Thank you.

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### By Robin Hadaller

*Daughter of Matthew Hadaller III (2011-WA)*

**2020–21 Scholarship Recipient**

*Program of Study: American Sign Language, Western Oregon University*

**R**obin will graduate in June with her dual degree in Interdisciplinary Studies with a focus in American Sign Language, special education, and psychology. She will be accepted into Western Oregon University's American Sign Language 2-year certification program. Robin's career goal is to find a profession that will allow her to use her dual degrees.



This fall I was able to start my first year in the American Sign Language/English Interpreting Program at Western Oregon University. I've attended this school for the last two years and had applied for this program last spring. Thankfully, I was accepted and just finished my first term in the program.

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### Robin Hadaller *continued from page 3*

In Oregon, we are still doing remote learning, meaning it's all online classes. At first, I was beyond stressed. I was nervous my grades weren't going to be all A's. I was worried that my schedule was going to be jam packed. I was basically a ball of anxiety and stress towards the beginning of the term. The reason for the anxiety and stress was because I wasn't sure if it was going to be more difficult with it being a new program that I had just started, and it happens to be all online.

After the term ended, I passed all my classes with flying colors. I found ways that help my learning and was able to come up with a plan for my hectic schedule. I looked back though and remembered that not once this term did I have

to worry about my financial situation. I didn't have to carry that stress. I didn't have to worry about taking out another loan or finding a full-time job that would potentially be more time-absorbing than being able to use that time for schoolwork.

I really cannot thank you all enough. It makes me think of when I received the email about my award. To be quite honest, I thought there was an error in the email! My jaw dropped, and I yelled for my mom. I instantly started crying because I was set for this year. Of course, they were happy tears! So much stress had lifted off my shoulders, and I prayed and said thank you so many times. I hope you all know that I am beyond grateful for this opportunity you have given me. I wouldn't be here at Western Oregon still studying and planning to become an interpreter without this foundation and all of you that are a part of it. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I hope you all stay safe and have a wonderful holiday season.



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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

### The application period for scholarships for the 2021–2022 academic year opens on January 1.

For more information or to apply for a scholarship:

<https://www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources/programs/scholarships>

## We want to hear from you...



Everyone processes grief differently and at their own pace. While grief counseling and support groups have their place, sometimes it's something completely unexpected that people find helpful while they are grieving. What has worked for you? Sports? Art? Spending time in nature? A new hobby? Tell us about a surprising grief "go-to" that helped you the most. Maybe it will help

someone else who hasn't found theirs yet. To submit a piece on this or another topic for an upcoming issue, please send it by February 15th to:

[jwoodall@firehero.org](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org) (preferred) or  
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation  
Attn: Jenny Woodall  
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