Fire Hero Families Explore Grief Through a New Lens

If there is one word to describe the overall spirit of our Fire Hero Families during the pandemic, it would be resilience. This is also true of the National Fallen Fighters Foundation’s Family Programs approach to supporting these families.

Generally speaking, life during the pandemic has required finding new ways to cope and move forward—whether for education, work, social interaction, or basic day-to-day tasks. When you are also navigating grief after the loss of a loved one, this type of isolation can be especially challenging. So, when NFFF’s annual Wellness Conference could not happen in person this spring, the NFFF Family Programs team committed to making the event happen anyway—and that’s how Through a New Lens was born.

NFFF’s skilled outreach and support team created a weeklong virtual event designed to provide families with vision for the way forward. This free event was open to Fire Hero Family members of firefighters honored (or approved to be honored) at the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

Timely Workshops plus Valuable Support Groups
Throughout the week, Through a New Lens sessions intertwined new topics with existing support group gatherings. A mix of new presenters and long-term, beloved workshop leaders crafted hands-on sessions designed specifically for this unprecedented time. For example:

- Practical strategies and tactics related to self-care, self-esteem, and stress management
- Audience-specific sessions like navigating the loss of a parent and understanding how gender affects grief
- Integrated topical sessions for existing virtual support groups
- A “That’s a Wrap” closing gathering where families could unwind, chat—and even join in a Scavenger Hunt and Virtual Bingo

In all, 56 Fire Hero Family members attended chosen sessions, which were offered in the evenings and on the weekend for flexibility and to accommodate time zone differences. Afterward, 100% of the attendees agreed that the virtual event helped them feel connected to the Fire Hero Family community.

Attendee Feedback: Top Three Answers
When asked, “What did Through a New Lens provide you with?” the top three most common responses were:
- Information on grief and loss
- Meeting and connecting with other surviving family members
- Seeing friends who I have met through past events

“I appreciate all the work that went into making this possible. The NFFF has really become a lifeline this past year and I look forward to accessing the recorded sessions that I missed. Thank you all.”

“...”

“I truly enjoyed all the presenters. It is a nice way to connect with survivors and receive some positive input. I miss the in-person conferences and look forward to going back one day soon.”
What’s Next?
The NFFF Family Programs team eagerly awaits the day when its annual conference and retreats will once again be held face-to-face—in person. But, after looking through its own “new lens” at the benefits of virtual programming, NFFF will continue to offer these opportunities throughout the year.

Regardless of when we are together again, the resiliency attained throughout 2020-2021 will continue to inform future programs. As this spring’s Through a New Lens demonstrated, Family Programs is—and will continue to be—here for the families, no matter what.

“After attending Through a New Lens, I feel …

Hopeful and stronger

Able to look at my grief differently

More at peace with my healing journey

Reassured

More connected to other survivors

Empowered

That I have some new ways to take care of myself

“My Most Helpful ‘Takeaway’ Was:

- We all struggle with grief, no matter the time frame.
- Grief DOES NOT END...it shifts.
- Regardless of how much time has passed, support is there if and when needed.”

“It was helpful seeing how other families that have experienced the same as me are okay—and have found many ways to deal with grief.”

“Because of Through a New Lens, I now feel that I could and should attend more peer support groups. I’ve always felt distant from activities and events over the years, not being as involved with the Foundation as some.”

“As a ‘long out there’ spouse (after 26 years), I found it wonderful to see newer spouses and family members being taken care of. Thanks for the opportunity to be a part of Through a New Lens!!!”

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