



The Journey

For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters

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*I'll find you in the morning sun
And when the night is new
I'll be looking at the moon
But I'll be seeing you.*

~ Irving Kahal

When we grieve, we are yearning for what has been lost. We are mining our memories for significance. We are wishing for one more moment, one more conversation. We are looking for signs. A life has ended, but the relationship goes on.

Do you have one—a special sign that comforts you, gives you a sense that your loved one is walking with you and keeping an eye out? Something that keeps you feeling connected? Something that shows up at just the moment you need to be reassured?

Maybe, for you, it's a cardinal or a penny or a rainbow. Maybe it's the full moon. Maybe it's that one song. Maybe it's something that makes you chuckle and shake your head—rain at the wrong moment, a flat tire on the way to an event—yeah, that's him alright. Always the joker... Maybe it's something personal that you've never shared with anyone.

Or maybe you have no sign at all. But you do have your loved one's helmet or ring or flannel or keys. Something they touched that you can still touch and carry with you. A tangible way of bringing them along with you as you continue to live. It might be in your purse or in your truck, or maybe it's something you pull out in private moments when you want to feel that person is still with you.

In case you have ever felt kind of weird about this, or anyone has ever raised an eyebrow about the ways you stay connected to your loved one, we just want to reassure you that this is part of grief. It's part of being in a relationship with someone who has died. It's OK, it's even healthy, to stay connected, to look for signs, to carry them forward with you. And you are most definitely not alone. Here are a few powerful stories of connection from members of the Fire Hero Family community.

#444

By Juliana Bonomo, Daughter of Frank Bonomo (2001-NY)

Being only one year old when my dad passed away as a firefighter on 9/11, there isn't much that reminds me of him on a personal level. Besides the obvious—a firetruck or seeing 9:11 flash on the clock—I was too young to have a specific memory that I associate with him. While this sounds awfully sad, it gave me a purpose to seek out my own connections I could have with my dad.

Over the past two years I've been seeing the number 444 everywhere. From mailboxes, to order numbers, to the time on a clock, and more. You name it, I've seen it. Over the past few months, it's stood out to me more and more, leading me to look up the significance of these numbers.

444 is an angel number. It's a sign that someone is trying to connect with you. It's a sign of protection and encouragement, and that you are following the right path. When I read this, I nearly dropped my phone. I couldn't help but laugh at the fact that I was making a connection with my dad over three numbers. While this could easily be a coincidence, I'd like to believe it's not.

Sometimes things make instant sense. After reading the meaning of this angel number, I knew it was my dad. I could feel it.

So, what do I do? Get a tattoo of it! Sorry mom!

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Juliana Bonomo *continued from page 1*

Juliana is a four-time recipient of NFFF and partner scholarships, spanning from 2018 through the 2021-2022 academic year. She attends Drexel University in Philadelphia, where she is studying graphic design. This past summer, she participated in a six-month co-op program at Drexel, where she worked as an intern in her field pre-graduation for



school credit. She recently completed an internship with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, with a focus on marketing and social media. In her spare time, she continues her service work with Phi Sigma Sigma, where she assists in fundraising efforts to support children in need. She plans to pursue a master's degree in brand management.

The Resurrection Angel

By Sylvia Kratzke, Mother of Heather DePaolo-Johnny (2002-CA)

My mom loved angels. She read angel books, watched angel television shows, and acquired a collection of decorative plates depicting a variety of heavenly guardians. They quietly kept watch over my parents and all who visited their home. Her favorite piece was a beautiful porcelain bisque figurine given to her by my daughter, Heather. It was about seven inches tall, with her wings extended to a full, gleaming white, heavenly magnificence.

Heather and my mom, Lillian, had a special bond. They were cut from the same cloth, two peas in a pod, both rebellious as young women. In the 1930s when my mom was young, trousers were unheard of for young women. Mom wore them proudly. Heather's teenage escapades are a book worthy of themselves, but my mom loved her all the more for her green or purple hair and her red Doc Martin boots from London—the first to appear in Buffalo. Heather bought the angel for my mom when she suffered with her first bout of congestive heart failure in her early 80s. Heather told her she bought it to watch over her precious grandmother when she could not be with her. Mom cherished that angel and kept it close until she died in her 86th year. Refusing dialysis and choosing hospice, we all had a chance to say goodbye and to be with her when she passed, the angel keeping silent vigil on her nightstand.

Heather returned to her wildland firefighting job across the country, sorrowful and grieving. After she called, crying, a few weeks after my mom's death, I carefully packed up the angel and sent it to her to provide comfort and fond

remembrance. The healing power of that angel lightened Heather's heart, and she was happy to have it close by.

Heather's firefighting career was going well. After fighting fire for five years, completing the Wildland Firefighter Apprentice Training Academy to become a firefighter specialist, and finding and marrying the love of her life, she began the application process for a job in fuels management and looking into graduate programs in forest management. Then, on July 28, 2002, while fighting a fire on a night shift, her engine slid off an old logging road and plunged down the side of a mountain. Heather and two others died. It was one day before the first anniversary of my mom's death.



Heather and Deb

I was bereft, having buried my dad five months earlier and my mom a year ago. How could I now bury my daughter? Parents are not supposed to bury their children. How would I ever survive this terrible turn of fate? It took three months before I could

return to California after her burial there. Her also bereft husband wanted to sort through some of her belongings, and among those things was the white angel. I brought her home with me and placed her in my curio cabinet, a symbol of all that I had lost.

Healing following great loss takes time, but it does come. One day, your first thought upon waking is not "She's dead," but "Thank you for one more day." Joy returns. By what means I may never fully know, but I do know that seeing that angel every day began to remind me not of the loss in my life, but the grace. The gratefulness for having had loving parents and a daughter that brought great pride and joy.



Heather's sudden death left grieving not only our family but also her friends. These young men and women went about their lives feeling invincible, powerful, armed with knowledge gleaned from college and/or experience on the job. This caught them by surprise. Heather collected good friends like moths to a flame. She was open, outspoken, and genuine. If her light could be extinguished, what about theirs? For many, it was their first experience of the death of a loved one, and all were unprepared. One of her very best fire girlfriends was a smokejumper. Deb, like all wildland firefighters, was lean and muscular, strong and fearless. Heather's death left a hole in her heart that was slow to heal. This was complicated by the subsequent deaths of other firefighters that she had worked with or known. Deb called me one evening, very sad and missing Heather so very much. After that call, I was walking by the curio, and there was the angel, practically heralding me with those wings. I very carefully packed her up the next day and sent her to Deb with a letter detailing her travels and her healing powers. I hoped that some of Heather's loving spirit would go along with her.

After a few years and 102 jumps into fires, Deb traded in her boots and chute for her new nursing shoes and cap. The angel accompanied Deb to each of her homes until she settled in Paradise, California, where her parents lived and where she grew up. Her job at the hospital there led to a job as a trauma flight nurse, which also afforded her time to do medical missionary work in the Marshall Islands. While she was there in 2018, the Camp Fire tore through Paradise, burning everything in its path, destroying 11,000 homes, and killing 85 people. Miraculously, Deb's parents were able to find safety, but her parents' house and her own house on the ridge burned to the ground. She lost everything she owned but the clothes she had with her.

Unlike other residents, she wasn't home to collect important items to take with her. It was months before she was allowed back to find her home reduced to a pile of ash and melted metal. In 2019, Deb was at the site of her home, sifting through the area she knew was her bedroom, hoping to find something, anything. She found a few shells, fossil rocks, not much of anything. The next day she returned to do some more clearing and, in the area she was sure she had sifted through with a fine tooth comb, sticking out of the ash was the angel. Or what was left of her. The

bottom was cracked and missing, as well as the back of the statue. Her head and one outstretched wing were intact, and a section of her other wing was lying next to it. There she was, literally rising up out of the ashes. There she was, a phoenix, offering healing and hope in the midst of destruction.

Deb did not tell me this right away. She waited.

Deb and I have remained in contact all these years. I attended her pinning ceremony at her graduation from nursing school. We became Facebook friends to follow each other's lives, hers a truly amazing one. She is a mountain biker, kayaker, runner, a triathlete who has completed the

Ironman race. She escorted a blind runner in the Boston Marathon and organized another medical mission to bring supplies, neonatal lifesaving equipment, and training to the Marshall Islands. She created a foundation to raise money to build a pediatric intensive care unit, after a friend's young daughter died because of lack of available care. All this while working and living out of her van. Having no home after the fire, she had a Sprinter van outfitted to hold all that she owns, and she lives a mobile life in her time off from flying. We have grown to love one another. I am her East Coast mom. She is

my strong and beautiful adopted daughter.

In March 2021, Deb called and asked if we would like a visitor for a couple of days. It was the middle of the pandemic, but because she is a health care provider, she was among the first vaccinated. Oh, my heavens! How exciting! I hadn't seen Deb and hugged her for years, but I hadn't seen or hugged ANYONE in over a year. I said, "Yes!" I wondered, "Why now?" She said she had a surprise for me.

Deb drove across the entire country, in the middle of a pandemic, to gift to me the angel that rose from the ashes. As she held the angel reverently in her cupped hands, she related the story of the angel's miraculous reappearance and of her subsequent dream. Heather came to her in that dream, holding the angel, and clearly said to her, "You know what you have to do." Deb placed the angel gently in my hands. The angel has comforted and brought healing to a full circle of women. In a journey that started in 1996, until now, 19 years after Heather's death, here she is. Broken, with ash from the fire burned into her and clinging to her crevices, she is once again risen to new life. The resurrection angel.



Heart of a Hero

By Phyllis Bielefeld, Mother of Larry Gressett Sr. (2011-MS)

Memories of your life
Make Momma's tears fall
Been ten long years since
You took that last call

Once an Army soldier,
Now a hero angel on my shoulder
Larry Jr. and Waylon are growing
Into young men
Wishing you could have had
More time to spend

Gone too soon,
You had a hero's heart
I keep the lights on so
You're never in the dark



Emmitsburg, Maryland is where
You will be remembered and honored
Forever, by our new family and friends
Proud but sad, until our next
Life together begins.

I am blessed to be with
Your brother Kevin
Now that you're a fallen firefighter
Angel in Heaven
We all miss you here at home
Not the same, your laughter is gone.

Larry, born with the
Heart of a hero.
Momma knows, without hesitation,
When you got that call
You just had to go.

Angel wings
Took you away
We will fly high together
When I join you some day.

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Write About Your Journey



We are always looking for stories from Fire Hero Families about their experiences with grief, healing, and hope. You do not need to be an experienced or polished writer, just a grieving person with a story to share. If you would like to submit a piece for publication:

Tell us about a place that has been significant to you since the loss of your firefighter. This could be as close as a special spot in your yard or as far as a distant country you have visited. It could be a place you and your firefighter spent time together or somewhere you

traveled alone for the first time after their death. Tell us about this special place, why it is significant for you, and how it has helped you in finding peace and healing.

To share your thoughts on this or another topic, please send them by December 15 to:

jwoodall@firehero.org (preferred) or
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
Attn: Jenny Woodall
P.O. Drawer 498
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