



Grief *in* Progress

EPISODE 1: Becoming a Change Maker After Loss

- Alison Law: Listeners note. Some episodes of this podcast include descriptions of violence, sudden death, and other traumatic experiences. We do not recommend this podcast for young listeners. Grief is universal.
- Syri Harris: Grief has a way of bringing people together that would have never been brought together at all. Different political views, different races. You lose a loved one. That'll make you come together.
- Alison Law: On the other hand, grief is also deeply individual.
- Sharon Purdy: I think everyone has their own definition of grief. To me, it's that missing of what I had.
- Alison Law: Here in the United States, we're not often great at talking about death or knowing what to say to comfort or support those who are grieving someone who has died.
- Ryan Woitalewicz: And I really hate that phrase so much. You need to move on. And I don't think I will ever move on. So, when someone tells a child who lost their parent to move on, you are indirectly telling me that my father's life and death is just a moment that soon shall pass.
- Alison Law: So, grief doesn't end or go away, but it does change over time because people change.
- Julianne Ashcraft: And I think I wouldn't have added to my definition of grief until more recently. That grief is a gift. It is a really big gift and it's not because it feels good and it's not because you want it. It's because it is an eye-opener. It is an absolute direct vision into the human condition that you can't have unless you lose everything.
- Alison Law: This podcast takes an unflinching look into the human condition of experiencing grief and loss as told to us from the unique perspectives of those who have lost a firefighter in the line of duty. These are not tragic before and happily ever after stories. Although we'll touch on both of these elements. Instead, these are real ongoing stories of amazing Fire Hero Family members who continue to find meaning and purpose as they move forward with their lives. From the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, this is Grief in Progress.

Hi, I'm your host Alison Law.

Jenny Woodall: My name is Jenny Woodall.

Alison Law: Jenny is a grief specialist. Who's been working for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation since 1998. I asked her how she became interested in this line of work.

Jenny Woodall: That question about how did you become interested in working with grieving families was one of the hardest ones for me to answer. And I think the best way I can put it is that I have a lifelong interest in struggle. Those points in life where we have to figure out something new to cope with the new reality. That's what grief is. It's sort of a big example of what we do every day in being humans.

Alison Law: In each episode of the Grief in Progress podcast, Jenny and I will introduce you to a fire hero family member and explore the remarkable way in which that person is finding meaning in one of the greatest points of struggle we all face. The death of a loved one. Sharon Purdy is an example of someone whose personal loss exposed a larger problem. A problem that she couldn't necessarily solve for herself but felt compelled to make right for future fire hero families.

Sharon Purdy: I was their show and tell lady, which basically we would go around to various members of Congress, and we would go visit them in their office. And I would tell them my story. What I figured out was if I had to hand them a tissue, I knew I had them every time. I never missed one.

Alison Law: Sharon Purdy never set out to lobby members of Congress. In fact, before she met her husband Lee, she had planned on teaching music.

Sharon Purdy: We were married in 1965 and oh, you'll like this. I graduated from high school on a Sunday, and I got married the following Saturday. I knew what I wanted, and I may just as well do the whole story here. I actually had an opportunity to have scholarships to college because I wanted to be a music teacher. But then I met Lee and I knew that's what I wanted more. And so, I graduated from high school. I wanted him at my graduation. He came home on leave. We got married six days later and went out to Colorado where we lived the first life as husband and wife. And then came back to Ohio. I never regretted it. Never.

Alison Law: Lee and Sharon ran an appliance repair business in Spencerville, Ohio, which is home to about 2300 people today. They both loved their community and wanted to give back.

Sharon Purdy: I became an EMT then a couple years later I went back to school and became a paramedic. And again, I was a volunteer, just like all of my volunteer EMS people. I did that for 31 years. And I like to think that I brought some comfort in people who needed some of assistance when we were transporting them. If I accomplish that, you can't ask for much more. And Lee decided as long as I was going to do this, he may just as well do the same thing. So, he took the classes

to become the firefighter. And I continued working as a paramedic with our volunteer squad.

Alison Law: Lee, Sharon, and the rest of the volunteer squad responded to a fire on January 8th, 2000.

Sharon Purdy: He had gone to bed, and I was downstairs doing some work on my typewriter. And the radios went off that gave us warning that we had a call, and we were throwing our clothes on. And we went out the back door together. He went to his vehicle, and I went to mine because the apparatuses were not parked in the same building. And he looked at me and I looked at him and we said, be careful. I'll see you there. If we got to the fire scene, Lee was working the pumper, which is the apparatus that provides the water for the firefighters. Because when you're away from a municipal area, you sometimes don't have that opportunity to just plug it into those fire hydrants. And even though you do that, someone has to control the flow of the water for all of the different hoses.

And that was his job. He was on top of the pumper. My job was to make sure that I kept the fire service members hydrated. And we were their "gofers." If they needed us to get something for them, we would do that. I went up after things were kind of down to a normal speed. And I went up to the top of the truck with him and we stood there and chatted a little bit. And I said, okay, I got to go make my rounds again. Do you want me to bring you anything to drink? And he said, yeah, I'll share a drink with you, a Pepsi, or a glass of water, bottled water or something. I went back to the ambulance, and I loaded up my coat with bottles of water. And as I was headed back to the truck, I heard the guy's yelling and I saw people running and I thought, oh, somebody is hurt. And so, I hurried up a little bit more. And as I got closer, one of the firefighters came up and said, Sharon, it's Lee.

And I thought, okay, he's fallen off the truck, he's broken a leg, he's injured or something. And I got up there and he was laying on the ground. He was unresponsive. He was still breathing. And my other EMS people were coming up with the back boards and the cots and the whole nine yards. I did a quick assessment on him. And then I said, okay, I'm going to run to the ambulance to start laying out equipment. You guys get him loaded up. So, I hurried quick, got into the ambulance. I called the dispatcher and said, please send another paramedic because I knew I was in trouble.

About that time, they opened up the doors and they wheeled him in. He had been breathing when I had seen him laying on the ground. I started to do an assessment on him, and I realized he did not have a pulse. He was no longer breathing. So, we started CPR. I put him on the monitor, and we did all of the things that we're supposed to do. And in the meantime, the other paramedic had shown up. And when she showed up, we took off to the hospital. I was at the head of Lee, and I was providing oxygen for him in a layman's term. I was using a bag valve mask and I was trying to breathe, and they were starting IVs

and trying to push meds and all of that kind of stuff. And I brushed the hair from his forehead back and I leaned down and I said, Lee, I think I'm going to lose you. But if you have to leave me, I will try to understand.

I can tell you the second he left me. I felt it in my heart. I truly did. It was the longest ride I've ever had to the hospital. And when we got out of the ambulances, the squad went ahead with Lee on the cot. Somebody was doing CPR. And I can remember them saying to the nurses as we went into the treatment room, they kept pointing and saying, this is her husband. This is her husband. And it was interesting because I knew all of these nurses because I'd been around forever. And so, everybody knew me. And I remember I stood in the room while they started their routine of what they had to do. And I recognize that everyone was very nervous because I was there. So, I left the room and 20 minutes later, they came out and told me that he was gone, and I knew it. And I always said I was one of the lucky survivors because I didn't get the knock on the door. I didn't get the phone call. I was there. And what a gift that was.

Alison Law: Lee Purdy died of a massive heart attack. As Sharon struggled to navigate life without him, she experienced another great loss.

Sharon Purdy: I lost my mother three months after Lee. Mother had Alzheimer's. And it's a terrible disease because you lose them every day. But she died three months after Lee. And quite frankly, I was so stressed with everything, trying to decide who I am, what I am, what am I supposed to do next? I'm talking to attorneys and you're trying to solve everything. And then mother went left us. And quite frankly, I went over the deep end. That night after she died, we all were together. My siblings and I, we were making the funeral plans and we had dinner. When we finished, everyone went home, and they went home with their spouses and their children and Lee and I never had children. So, I went home to an empty house. I went upstairs to bed and I started crying.

And then I kind of lost where I was. And the next thing I knew I was in my car, and I was driving around the highway in Indianapolis, Indiana, which is two hours away. Have no idea how I got there. I just got my butt home where it needed to be, didn't say anything. And we went through the funeral with mother and I just knew I was starting to have some problems. Cognitive thinking was difficult. I wasn't sleeping. I couldn't make decisions. And a friend of mine suggested that I go see a mental health worker and I fought him for a while, but I finally did. And I made an appointment with the psychologist, and he identified that I had PTSD.

Alison Law: At this point, it may be good for us to distinguish between grief and trauma. Here's grief specialist, Jenny Woodall.

Jenny Woodall: I think it is important to remember that grief is a normal reaction to loss. I think we sometimes pathologize it, but it actually is a very universal human

experience that has happened since the beginning of time. While it can be very disruptive for a time, it is not considered a disorder. A trauma reaction is a physiological instinctual response that is hardwired into our brains to keep us alive. In trauma reactions, which would include PTSD, really our survival instinct is stuck in the on position and we are trying to survive. Trauma is experienced in the brain, in the present. And so even if somebody is remembering an event from the past, having a flashback from the past, they are experiencing that as if it is playing out in real time. There are very specific therapies that are useful in calming that system and flipping that switch so that we're no longer perceiving a threat to our survival.

Sharon Purdy: This was 20 years ago. And at that time, when you went to get mental assistance, that was because there was something really bad with you and that people didn't want much to do with that. It was a stigma. Plus, I think it was my own pride that I could handle this myself and I soon found out I couldn't do that. A friend gave me a name of a psychologist and I made the appointment. He came and got me at the waiting room, went into his office. We shook hands and he was very young. And I looked at him and I went, oh, my word, you're 12 years old. Did you drive yourself to work? Or did your mother have to bring you? And that's how we started.

We argued. And I was so lucky to have this gentleman because there are different steps of grief and anger is one of them. There is no book that says you're going to go 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. There is a book that says, this is how it happens 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. But unfortunately your brain, your body, your mind says, no, I want to do it 1, 3, 4, 2, and you come and go. And I was just on a rip, and I was angry, and I was frustrated and it's very, very, very normal. I was mad at Lee, oh boy. How dare he leave me? Why would you do this to me? And I'm not the only one that does this.

Alison Law: Many popular books list the steps or stages that someone will go through when grieving. Jenny's not so sure that's the best idea.

Jenny Woodall: I understand why there are models of grief, stages, and steps and tasks. I understand why we want a structure around that experience. The concern I have with models of grief is that it begins to feel prescriptive. And so, people often have the experience of grieving, which is hard. And then feeling like they're grieving wrong because it doesn't match the model. So, I think a grief model is useful only in terms of sort of normalizing the experience. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about the models because people's experience with each death that they encounter is different. It's so individual.

Sharon Purdy: I hope that people that hear this, understand that it's okay to be angry with your firefighter. And if you want to have a bad day, and if you want to start yelling and screaming at them, go for it. They'll hear you up there somewhere. Trust me on this, just get it out of your system. Tomorrow's another day. You could start again. I think everyone has their own definition of grief. To me, it's that

missing of what I had. And so, I respond to that mostly by tears. Sometimes lack of sleep and you never get over the loss, but in your grief, you learn to replace it and put it where it's safe. You still carry the grief with you. You still carry the love of the person that you lost. But you're still allowed and able to go forward.

Alison Law: As Sharon moved forward, she closed the appliance repair business and tended to her husband's affairs as best she could. Through the process, she learned that she would receive no compensation from the state of Ohio or the federal government for Lee's death. The US Department of Justice runs the public safety officer's benefits program. Since 1976, the PSOB has provided a one-time death benefit to survivors of fallen firefighters, law enforcement officers, and other first responders whose deaths were the direct result of an injury sustained in the line of duty. Although Lee Purdy died of a heart attack caused by the overexertion and stress he suffered while on the scene of a fire, heart attacks or other cardiac events did not qualify as line of duty deaths.

Sharon Purdy: Had his death been any other reason other than a heart attack, I would never have known that firefighters who die of cardiac events do not receive that benefit. When I learned that it quite frankly made me mad, not because I wasn't going to receive any money because I didn't care, but because the federal government would not acknowledge his death as a line of duty death. And that's when I got busy and said, we have to fix this. I did my homework. And the first thing I did was I contacted fire departments all around the area and said, here's what's going on. I need you folks to help me. I need a letter from you telling me what you think about this. And I had a stack of letters and I had paper, I had articles and I had other things that I had learned. And I had a stack of papers that was probably three inches, four inches high.

Alison Law: Sharon took her stack of papers, complete with photos of fire scenes and data about first responders pulse rates, and cardiac events, and aimed it at her first target. The Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation. She appealed the state's decision to deny a workers' compensation benefit for Lee's death.

Sharon Purdy: What if during that night that Lee died, he went off the truck, had a heart attack and died. And also, there was another firefighter who died who was inside the building. And the building came down on him when he was killed. I said, now the state of Ohio is going to pay that benefit for the firefighter who had the building come down on him with no question, but you're denying my husband's death. And I said, remember this, they were both firefighters. They were both at same fire. And here's the important part. They would have both been dead.

Where's the equity with that? He said, that's something to think about. And I said, well, I'm going to let you think about it then. And I got up, shook his hand, and walked out the door. Two days later, I got a call from them. We set a precedent; they approved the claim. Well, and then I figured out that the federal government was doing the same thing. A cardiac event was non-compensable because it was not trauma based. I started making phone calls

again. I was working by the way. I was working for the state of Ohio, and I would get home from work five, six o'clock at night. And I would be up to one, two o'clock in the morning on my computer. And I was sending letters to everybody.

Alison Law: One of the people to reply to Sharon's letters was US Representative Steny Hoyer, who has represented the fifth congressional district of Maryland since 1981. He invited her to a meeting.

Sharon Purdy: So, we drove into Washington, and I sat down and talked with Mr. Hoyer. He said I think you got something here. And so, he worked with three other members of Congress, and they created the hometown hero's bill. I was their show and tell lady, which basically we would go around to various members of Congress, and we would go visit them in their office. And I would tell them my story. What I figured out was if I had to hand them a tissue, I knew I had them. And then the next thing you know, they make up a bill and then it comes into Congress.

Alison Law: The Hometown Heroes Survivors Benefits Act of 2003, amended the public safety officer's benefits program. A line of duty death now includes suffering a fatal heart attack or stroke within 24 hours of responding to an emergency. The law's passage becomes even more significant when you learn that cardiac events account for roughly half of all firefighter deaths each year. Unfortunately, Sharon was not eligible to receive the benefit, which retroactively covered public safety officer's deaths beginning in 2002, two years after Lee died.

Sharon Purdy: It gave me peace to know that this was the direction that we were headed and that his death was not going to be for nothing. And that his death was going to be able to allow other families to receive those benefits. And I never did. And that was okay with me. I never wanted it. I never wanted it said that I did this so that I could receive the benefit. I did it because it wasn't fair. Thank you, Lee Purdy. We have survivors today that have no idea that they could have easily not received that benefit. And that's always been my wish—that people would never remember that that happened. And I just smile and go, thanks, Lee. Good job. Good job. Yeah.

Jenny Woodall: Living through something difficult opens your eyes to issues that you might not have had on your radar before. Death is the ultimate loss of control. And it can be really important for people to find a mission, to find some way of making things better for other people.

Alison Law: Congress created the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation in 1992. The nonprofit has developed and expanded programs to honor fallen fire heroes and assist their families and coworkers.

Sharon Purdy: I was introduced to the Fallen Firefighters Foundation by a phone call from a survivor. And they informed me that I was now part of a very elite group that

they really didn't want me there because of the group being the wives or spouses or family members of firefighters who died in the line of duty. They told me what the foundation was about. They told me basically that from that point on, I was not walking alone and that there were always going to be people to assist me if I needed. I have never met a group of people more loving, more caring, and more energetic than the staff at the Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Alison Law: Sharon has volunteered with the foundation to help other fire hero family members get the support they need.

Sharon Purdy: Things that we don't want a survivor to do is to hide from the survivor community because we are there for you. They will partner you up with someone who is meeting the needs that you have. For example, I never had children. I would not be the person to be partnered with a woman with small children. I have no clue. But they would partner you with a young mother so that when you as the new survivor say, I'm having the crappiest day I've ever had. And I don't know what to do with it ever how you two got together, they're going to say, well, I'm right here for you. And I know how you're walking this path because I walked that path before you. And I'm here to help you walk that path because your friends don't even... If they haven't gone through the loss of a firefighter, they have no clue.

Alison Law: Sharon Purdy is now retired. She was a volunteer paramedic for 31 years. Retirement has allowed her some time to rekindle her love of music.

Sharon Purdy: I was kind of sitting around in my boring town and trying to figure out who I am and what I am. And it's been 10 years ago now. And a friend of mine said, well, I go to some singles dances in Fort Wayne, come on over. And so, I did and made a lot of friends. And in fact, there are several of them that are still... We've become a group. And at one point he said, you've got to come back over on this night because there's this man that's playing at one of the bars or one of the lounges. And you would love his music because it's '40s, '50s, '60s. So, I went to hear him. Well, his name was Paul Stewart. He played on the road, had his own band for 30 years and he plays all this old music. And it's just so cool.

And I just started bugging him. And one night I said, come on, Paul, put me in. I got this one. I know all I know all the words. Put me in, put me in coach. And he ignored me and kept on playing. A couple of weeks later. I'm going, Paul, you've got to let me go in here. I'm ready for this one. I know this, come on, put me in. And he just kind of laughed and ignored me. Finally, he said, okay, Missy, get up here. I sang this song. It was terrible. And I knew I really blew it, but I did it. And it was okay. And a couple of weeks later, he said, all right, get up here, try this song. And the next thing you know, I am now part of Paul Stewart and his partner, Charles Ren. They call him CR. Every now and then they would say, come on, Sharon, come on up and sing a song.

And so, I would, and strangely enough, they picked my music, which is funny. And what they liked to do is they'll call me up. And then they just start the music. They don't tell me what I'm singing. So, I've got like 10 seconds to figure out what the heck that song is. And they just think that's funnier than heck. Well, and just two weeks ago, Paul actually said, okay, it's Paul Stewart, CR, and the girl. They call me the girl. And I sing with them. And I am having the time of my life. I've never enjoyed anything so much more than doing this. It is so darn fun.

Alison Law:

You can see and hear the girl singing most Wednesday and Saturday nights at an Italian restaurant in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Because whether she's advocating on behalf of first responders, consoling those who are walking through their own grief journeys, or having fun trying to remember the words to the songs, Sharon Purdy has never turned down an opportunity to use her voice.

On the next episode of Grief in Progress, we'll introduce you to Fire Chief Chad Hoefle and Ryan Woitalewicz. These two men forged an amazing bond when Ryan attended summer camp for children of fallen firefighters, and Chad became his big buddy. Through the years, they've shown up for each other, celebrating many family milestones. And now they're both teaching others what they've learned about grief and loss.

Thank you for listening to the Grief in Progress podcast, a production of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. If you've enjoyed this six-episode season of the podcast, please consider subscribing and leaving a positive review. To learn more about the grief in progress podcast and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, visit firehero.org.

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