



Grief *in* Progress

EPISODE 2: Finding Meaning via “Found Families”

Alison Law: A 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.

Chad Hoefle: One of my favorite things that I get to do in life besides being a dad and being a firefighter, and being a paramedic is the fact that I get to teach. I never would have considered myself to be a teacher, I just like to talk. Being able to talk about my experiences and what works for me, and what doesn't work for me is amazing to me.

Alison Law: What's even more amazing is that Chad Hoefle answered his career calling as a 16-year-old student, who wanted to get out of turning in an incomplete homework assignment.

Chad Hoefle: I was working nights and going to high school during the day, obviously. I was very tired. By chance, I happened to fall asleep in one of my classes, unfortunately. I had an assignment due in class. At the end of the period, I happened to wake up from my much-needed rest, and I didn't have my assignment done.

The announcements came over the loudspeaker and said, "Anybody interested in being a fire cadet, please report to the office." It was the end of the day announcements, so I proceeded to hastily get to the office, just to get me out of getting in trouble for not doing my homework that period. I started as a cadet on Stillman Fire Department.

When I started here, we were 100% a volunteer fire department. We got paid a steak dinner once a year. That's what we got paid, which was great. Over the years, we advanced to a paid on-call fire department. Our volunteer paid fire department essentially, then a paid on-call fire department.

Alison Law: Chad worked his way up through the ranks. Now, more than 25 years later, he is chief of the Stillman Fire District. The district responds to hundreds of emergency calls across a 65-square mile area of Northern Illinois. About 600 miles east in Kearney, Nebraska, Ryan Woitalewicz is just beginning his career.

Instead of training and mentoring firefighters, Ryan is squaring off against an even tougher audience: elementary school students.

- Ryan Woitalewicz: I am full of energy, and I want to do so many great things. Those fifth graders, those fourth graders are right where I want them. They already know how to read. They already know how to write. They're at that stage in their life where they're eager to learn new things.
- They're eager to go outside and to explore and to learn about anything, and the way that you teach those things keeps their engagement.
- Alison Law: Ryan is a substitute teacher now but plans to lead his own classroom when he earns his degree in education in 2022. There's little doubt that fire chief Chad Hoefle will be there for the graduation ceremony. You see, Chad is Ryan's big buddy. The story of how these two different teachers came together is the subject of this episode of the Grief in Progress podcast.
- Ryan Woitalewicz's father Kenny was a captain with the Wood River volunteer fire department in Nebraska. A dedicated member of the fire service, Kenny earned the department's Firefighter of The Year Award in 1996. He was also a devoted husband to Melissa and dad to sons Ryan and Matt. Kenny died when Ryan was just four years old.
- Ryan Woitalewicz: Somebody asked me, "What's a memory of your dad that *you* can remember? It has to be one that no one has ever told you." I sat there and I sat there, and I just froze because I didn't have an answer. I have none of my own memories. Everything that I know about him is just what I've been told the past 17 years.
- Alison Law: Here's what Ryan has learned about his father's line-of-duty death.
- Ryan Woitalewicz: The early morning hours of February 14th of '04, that was just Valentine's Day. The department was dispatched to a structure fire in a single-story residence. Upon the arrival, the firefighters discovered that there was a working fire and receive the reports of an elderly woman that was trapped inside. My dad and Bobby took action into the residence's search and rescue.
- Alison Law: Without warning, the roof collapsed. Fire captains Heminger and Woitalewicz were trapped inside for approximately 17 minutes before crews were able to remove them and transport them to the hospital. Bobby Heminger succumbed to his injuries the following day. Kenny Woitalewicz died two days later.
- Ryan Woitalewicz: I really didn't start asking questions until about the end of my elementary school years, beginning of my middle school years, because I was to the point where I could remember. I was to the point in age where I begin to wonder what it's like to have a dad. What was he like? I was at the age where I could remember what happened.
- Alison Law: Jenny Woodall, grief specialist with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation says that grieving a loved one's death evolves as people do.

Jenny Woodall: We talk about this with children a lot, but I think it's true with adults as well, that grief becomes part of personal development. If you're four, when you lose your dad, you grieve as a four-year-old, but when you're 12, you grieve what it means to be a 12-year-old whose dad died.

When you're 20, that means something different again. It becomes part of the developmental process over a lifetime—that that loss is part of the story.

Ryan Woitalewicz: My mom has always been the one to help with those difficult questions and those memories that she shared with me, and when we had those talks, that's what's with me still today.

Alison Law: In Illinois, Chad Hoefle learned about the Foundation from an email.

Chad Hoefle: One day I was in my office, it was early on as a fire chief, I got a whole bunch of emails and there was one that said NFFF partners with Hal Bruno Kids Camp. Anyone who knows me knows that I am a kid fanatic. I have everybody on the fire department brings their kids to see me. I'm most enthusiastic about being a father.

Every kid that comes to the fire station gets a new Hot Wheel car or something. I just liked being around kids. I read the title to this, and I opened it up. At first, I thought it was a spam email because it said, "We'll pay for your training. We'll send you for this training. Then you can go to this camp for kids who have lost a loved one in the line of duty."

It spoke to me in a way that I thought somebody really either knows me deep down and is trying to fool me that this is a real thing, or I just hit the jackpot with something that I think will be amazing. I opened up the email and I signed up and I was within minutes, I was signed up. I thought this was going to be the greatest thing.

Sure enough, I got a message back that said, "We're going to send you this training. Then, we're going to put on the first ever kids' bereavement camp for just kids who have lost a parent in the line of duty." I ended up flying out to Virginia for a six-hour training course. Flew back the next day and I was set to go to our first camp.

Jenny Woodall: We hold a training each year for volunteers, specifically designed to recruit members of the fire service, so that our camp has a real flavor of fire service. I was at the training when Chad came to be trained for camp. I do remember that he really stood out as someone who is going to be an incredible mentor to a young person.

Alison Law: Volunteers train with bereavement specialist before camp starts. This was an eye-opener for Chad.

Chad Hoefle: I expected that children that were grieving were just going to be sad. I just went in thinking, "These kids are going to be sad and I'm a happy guy, so I'm going to be able to fix them. They're going to tell me that I can't fix these kids, but I'm a pretty happy guy. They're going to like it."

I really got taken back by the fact that I was wrong, and I expected something that didn't happen. It was a great learning experience for me just to be there, to learn about what I didn't know.

Alison Law: Ryan and his family first came across the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation when they attended Memorial Weekend in Emmitsburg, Maryland in 2005. Ryan's mother, Melissa, whom he often endearingly refers to as Mama Wo signed him up for the first camp for children of fallen firefighters.

Ryan Woitalewicz: The whole process works out with Comfort Zone Camp. They basically match you with a buddy so that you have a mentor over the weekend.

Chad Hoefle: Filling out the profile, when you fill it out, they want you to be honest what your interests are. I had to be very honest about what I was into, and it turns out that Comfort Zone knows what they're doing. I don't think there could have been a better match with our personalities and what we do, so their process works.

They encourage you to call the parent, introduce yourself, letting them know that you've been paired with their child. Then, if the parent feels comfortable, then you can talk to their child. I talked to Ryan's mom for probably a few minutes. Then she said, "Hold on, Ryan's right here. Let me get him for you." At that moment, I just locked up.

I was like, "Oh my goodness, I'm actually going to have a conversation with this kid. What if he asks me a question and I don't know the answer? I was—for probably the first time in a long time in my life—I was really nervous because I didn't know what this kid was going to say.

Ryan Woitalewicz: I got to talk to Chad briefly before we came to camp. He called about, I don't know, probably three or four weeks before camp. Talk to my mom for a little bit, just to have some background and then, we talked for a little bit.

Chad Hoefle: We just chit-chatted for a few minutes. I said, "Are you excited about camp? Do you think you're going to enjoy it? What are you going to bring with you?" and so forth. Some kids don't want to go to camp. Their parents tell them, "I think this is something you need."

I'm sure Ryan's mom told him he needed this, but he's a pretty social kid. Well, he *was* a social kid. Now, he's a social adult. Going through that process and having a conversation with the child, and the child's parent, is really humbling if you don't know what to expect.

They encourage everybody to do it. It was a pretty amazing process. You make that phone call and say, "We'll see you in a couple of weeks." That's the last time you talked to him then until you meet at camp.

Ryan Woitalewicz: That conversation is very vague. That was a long time ago. Just realizing that we had that conversation and that conversation led to a lifelong friendship.

Chad Hoefle: The interesting thing about this camp is these kids all had a tie to the fire service, and the fire service is a family. So, us as big buddies all got together in lengthy waiting anticipation about meeting these kids who were already our family, they just didn't necessarily know it yet.

Jenny Woodall: One unique thing about our program is that a lot of the volunteers are members of the fire service. For that weekend, our campers have access to a lot of goofy, fun-loving, supportive firefighters who are in their element, being big kids at camp.

That big buddy really is the camper's "person" for the weekend. They have them fully to themselves as a role model, a mentor, an anchor. Someone to lean on as needed.

Chad Hoefle: It's not like camp where you would have the first half of your day you can pick what you want to go do, and then you have lunch and then you can go pick what you want to do, and then we'd have story time and the campfire at night, and we'd go to bed. Camp is very scheduled and it's for a great reason.

We do games and fun stuff to get kids—and the adults, honestly—really ramped up and ready to engage. Then, we moved to some healing circles, where we all sit around and those are led by trained healing circle leaders—counselors, usually—that facilitate the grief process. Facilitate conversation amongst the age group of kids that are in their healing circle.

Ryan was wearing a robotics T-shirt, and at the time he was way shorter than me because he was 11 or 12. We started to have a conversation about robotics and so forth. Then, he decided to teach me or attempt to teach me some board game that I had never played before. It called me out for not knowing what I was doing.

Ryan Woitalewicz: Yes, I remember that he was taller than me. Then boom, the next year I was taller than him. It was just the interaction right away—this bald guy is my buddy for the weekend, and we kicked it off. We played Connect 4. Oh my gosh, there was a photo of us from many, many years ago at our first camp, of us playing Connect 4.

Chad Hoefle: I still have the picture in my office, but him sitting down and humbling me that I didn't know what I was doing was a great start to how that relationship was

going to go for the rest of our lives, of him sitting down and saying, "Why don't you know this?" He's by far smarter than me.

Thinking back to when he was a preteen explaining to me that I didn't know what I was doing was pretty funny. That was my first interaction with Ryan. It was a great one and I remember it to this day. I still don't know how to do whatever game he was trying to teach me to do.

Ryan Woitalewicz: Yeah. He surely was playing that game wrong. Just to see the growth from that photo to where we are now in 2021—that was almost 7, 8, 9 years ago. That connection is still as strong as what it was when I beat him at the Connect 4. I am just astonished and forever grateful for that connection.

Chad Hoefle: Ryan and I clicked. When those kids get there, they're anticipating things that they don't know. The very first camp, none of us knew what to expect. Within the first day, we were playing a game where we had to lead each other around with the person you were leading had their eyes closed.

They had to trust where you were taking them, just based off of what you were telling them. I remember I had a name badge on that was around the lanyard. Ryan was walking me around by my lanyard. I had to trust where he was telling me, and we were building trust within the first hour.

Ryan Woitalewicz: Just the jokes that we can say on each other—the things that we did with each other over the weekend—just allowed that new connection of sincerity and trust just to form. It was that weekend, that very first weekend of us together just made it felt like I've known him for a whole year already.

Then, it just gradually got stronger and stronger and stronger, and it still stands true today. When I attended that first camp, the last day of camp was my birthday. We left that camp, and it was a big hush-hush surprise. They bused us out to this fire station, just southwest of the camp. They had a surprise party there for me.

The people of Hanover in Virginia, they gave me a badge. They gave me a challenge coin. They had a cake, they had balloons, they had fire trucks out. They had the flag in the air. I was like, "This is what it feels like to be appreciated and to know that this is what a fire service family feels like."

After that first year, I was like, "You know what, mom? Chad was pretty cool. I want Chad again." Then, when we preferenced to have Chad again, and I don't know if that was like a thing—but we made it a thing. I had Chad again for that next year. Then, we had him in the next year and then the next year, and the next year. I was fortunate to have Chad all of the years I was there.

Alison Law: Ryan and Chad maintained their little buddy-big buddy friendship between camp experiences.

Ryan Woitalewicz: I never really knew what it felt like to have a fire chief look out after us. Just those small things that you would have thought that picture-perfect fire family would have been like, we never had that and I never experienced that.

Chad Hoefle: We've looked at why firefighters do that because if they stay involved with people like Ryan, it sometimes makes them relive that incident. It's not that they're bad people, it's that they don't know how to cope. They don't know how to deal with seeing Ryan's face every day and knowing that maybe they could have helped that day.

Maybe they decided not to go to that call when they should have gone to that call. For any number of reasons, it might settle with somebody in a different way.

Ryan Woitalewicz: They were there for you, but now they're not. It feels it's very bitter to say that, but that's just the truth. That's just how it is. It's really unfortunate because it's not just with me and my family, it's with fire service all across the states that people that have lost a firefighter in the line of duty that it's like this everywhere.

My friends I have made through the Foundation, their hometown department does not talk to them. They don't socialize with each other. We experience this all the way across the states and it's really unfortunate.

Jenny Woodall: I work primarily with Fire Hero Family Programs, but I also have a hand in the fire service side of the house. I can tell you that for firefighters who lose a fellow firefighter, it is excruciating. When somebody dies in the line of duty, what comes up for them is guilt. Both for having survived and for having let down the family.

It's a personal loss for them because they are often close friends. They literally put their lives in one another's hands. It's something that they take very seriously.

Alison Law: Chad has learned from Ryan's family's experience of losing not only their husband and dad, but their entire fire family.

Chad Hoefle: It makes me think that if anything ever happens like that here at my fire station, I don't want anybody's family member to ever think, "Man, the fire station just wasn't there for us." Ryan's side of that story, Ryan's aspect of that story is something that he's learned and grown from, from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation—that we are there for people's families, that the group just gets it.

Jenny Woodall: I think what I want people to know about the fire service is that at their best, they are helpers and fixers. They are brave and resourceful, and generous. They

feel things very deeply, and they are human beings who work under enormous occupational stress.

They have limits like all of us, they need support. We are really working to change the culture in the fire service to allow people the space to seek support. To help people mitigate that stress through ongoing wellness programs that keep them emotionally and mentally fit for their jobs.

Ryan Woitalewicz: I think people just can't accept the fact that that colleague, that fireman, that firefighter, that first responder—they're gone. But even though they're gone, you need to take care of your own, and taking care of your own is the family that they left behind.

I think that that part of, "We have to step up and take care of this family," is just so, so hard for them. It's even harder on us knowing that you guys said that you were going to help us through this and you're not.

Jenny Woodall: Many of the programs that we have developed have come directly from what the community has told us they need. One example is the Taking Care of Our Own Program, which is a training program for fire departments on how to plan for and handle line-of-duty deaths. That really grew from a request that came from families.

When we asked them, "What is it that you need?" One of the things they said was, "Teach fire departments what to do when a firefighter dies, because they really don't know quite what to do with us."

Chad Hoefle: I can go to the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, and I can say, "This is what I'm experiencing. This is what I'm dealing with as a department. And not only as a department, but personally—what do I do?" And the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation will be there for me. They will be there for my family. They will be there for my fire department.

That is so comforting—not only as a fire department leader, but as a father, and as somebody that's been to these camps, that's been to Memorial Weekend. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation just is amazing at handling those families and those questions that everybody has to deal with when there's a line-of-duty death.

Alison Law: Big buddies and other Foundation volunteers often serve as surrogates and sounding boards for children who have lost a firefighter parent. Not solely out of a sense of obligation, but because of a true connection that they formed with their little buddies and their families.

Ryan Woitalewicz: We've seen each other many times on outside of camp and it's been interesting just to see the things that we've done outside of the camp. You never would've thought that would have happened from that connection.

- Chad Hoefle: His mom made me a scrapbook for every year that we went to camp together. It started out with like the scrapbook with sliding pictures in and putting little things in there. Eventually, she had the books made, so they got sent to me, they were hardcovers. Pictures of our trips, pictures of our adventures.
- Ryan Woitalewicz: Mama Wo has definitely made some scrapbooks. She is a big scrapbooking queen. They always took photos at the camp. There was also a photographer there every single year and they publish these photos afterwards. My mom took out all the good ones and made some photo books out of them. That was always his little surprise.
- About two months after camp, it took my mom about two months to get everything put together. He sends me a Snapchat sometimes of just sitting on a shelf just saying, "Thinking about you. Look at this photo." It's just some good memories.
- Chad Hoefle: His family actually came up—the entire family, took their Thanksgiving vacation week and came and stayed with me. They surprised me: knocked on my door on Thanksgiving Day and said, "Surprise!"
- Ryan Woitalewicz: Found him down on Facebook. We got all the inside scoop of him, and we planned this surprise visit.
- Chad Hoefle: They all just came barreling into my house, which was absolutely amazing. We ate a whole lot of food that couple of days. Ryan came to my office. I gave him a tour at the fire station. He wrote some notes on some sticky notes and posted them all over my office. I still have those notes.
- Ryan Woitalewicz: I was the lead in the musical my junior year of high school. He drove all the way to Nebraska for a two-hour performance and drove all the way back, just to see me be the lead of the show. It's remarkable. Just the relationship that we have. He came to my high school graduation and that was probably the coolest thing I've ever seen in my life.
- Chad Hoefle: One of the most humbling experiences I've had was being at Ryan's graduation and seeing Ryan graduate. Being in full dress uniform in a spot where his dad may have sat and seeing him walk across that stage, graduating knowing his dad would have been here. Seeing the other people that came with and we all met in Nebraska and went to be there for Ryan.
- Ryan Woitalewicz: The hardest thing that I've ever went through now on my whole life was graduating from high school, and being in that same gymnasium that my dad's funeral was in. People that came that were fire service people were from the Comfort Zone camps that were from the NFFF.
- They drove, they flew all the way to a smallest town in Nebraska to watch me and my 28 other classmates graduate. That meant the world to someone that's

never experienced that whole fire service family before. Having Chad at my graduation was knowing that I had a mentor that helped me get to that point.

I had obviously rough days. I had rough weeks. I had hard exams. I had big finals that I just needed that extra support, knowing that "You can do this. You got this buddy. Just keep going, study a little more. Take a break, take a breather. Walk outside."

Just knowing that that constant support was there all the time. I got to that finish line because of that support, and that finish line was walking across that stage with diploma in hand.

Chad Hoefle: Ryan became a huge mentor of mine. Although, he might look at it differently. I find almost every day I use something that I learned from knowing Ryan and talking to Ryan is something that I teach or pass off to our firefighters, or our staff on a daily basis.

Ryan Woitalewicz: Knowing about Chad is he's the mentor and a lifelong friend that I thought I needed. He came into my life at a time that I didn't feel like I needed anybody else. I was content, but that changed. He gave me more confidence in my life, confidence to share my story with other people.

I've shared my story with people that are complete strangers. I have shared my story with people in a group of young adults. He's just always been that constant encouragement that I've always needed that I never thought I would need. Like I said, he was always there in that corner and would always send that message to me at the right time when I needed something.

I was having a rough day and I just got a message that said, "I'm thinking about you." It was just a weird thing of events that just sparked, and they still happen to this day. I have a big test coming up and I got a message, "Just have a good day, or just thinking about you."

That confidence boost or that encouragement is just something that's so rare that you find in people. It's his heart of gold that this keeps going.

Chad Hoefle: We have that friendship and relationship that we don't call each other every day. We don't text each other every day. We just see a cool picture of a sunset or a snowy day or something. Ryan was getting ready to take a big test and he just sent me a picture of getting ready to get ready to cram this test. It's his first day of substitute teaching, I got a picture of his ID badge.

Ryan Woitalewicz: On my first day of substitute teaching, I got a lanyard from the school district I work at and I said, "Mr. Woitalewicz is coming soon." He opened it right away and he just responded with a bunch of smiley faces and said that he was so, so proud of who I was becoming.

Chad Hoefle: It never ceases to amaze me that I learned something through every single time I talked to Ryan, after the third or fourth year, you'd think, "You've heard his story enough times now, are you really actually helping him?" Every single time I came out of camp, and I went, "Wow, that kid just surprised me again. I learned something new."

It wasn't even so much that I learned more about the incident that brought us together; it was I learned more about Ryan becoming more of his own person and having his own identity, other than Kenny's kid.

Alison Law: "Kenny's kid" says he's continuing his father's legacy of service in a different way.

Ryan Woitalewicz: He was always there to help people, help people in the community. I'm also doing the same thing, but in a different type of way. I feel like I'm helping shape the future of our next generation within the four walls of a classroom. You never know what group of kids you're going to get in that classroom.

It's how you shape them into letting them leave your classroom at the end of the school year, knowing that, "I helped these students. They came from ground zero to the highest point possible and I did that." I feel like I helped them achieve something. They didn't give up on themselves.

That's like what my dad was. He never gave up on himself. He was always there for someone else, and just kept going. Just kept pushing through.

Alison Law: In the next episode of Grief in Progress, we'll meet Carol Jones. She followed in the footsteps of her dad and brothers and became a firefighter. One of the first 10 women to join the department in Fort Worth, Texas. She also knows all too well what firefighters and their widows go through when they lose someone in the line of duty.

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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