



# Grief *in* Progress

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## EPISODE 3: Paying It Forward to Other Fire Hero Families

*Listener's 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.*

**Alison Law:** People in the fire service often refer to their coworkers as brothers or sisters. Even strangers meeting for the first time say they form an instantaneous bond when they realize they're in the presence of other firefighters.

**Carol Jones:** I tell them people that if you're not a firefighter, there's not enough words in the English language for me to explain to you what it's like. But if you *are* a firefighter, then you know who I am, you know what I've done, and you know what I'd be willing to do to save your life. And it's just a brotherhood and a bond that is unbreakable.

**Alison Law:** Human beings need social interaction to survive, especially in times of great stress or loss. Unfortunately, human beings are not always skilled at connecting with each other when someone has died. We may show up for the funeral and offer our heartfelt condolences, but we aren't sure what to do next. Jenny Woodall, grief specialist at the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, offers these insights.

**Jenny Woodall:** Many people describe the fire service not as a job or a volunteer opportunity, but as a calling. A lot of families who are involved in the fire service consider the fire department a second family. And so when you lose a firefighter in the line of duty, it affects not only the first family, but that second family of the fire service. So when there's distance between those two families, that adds to the pain of that loss.

**Alison Law:** One survivor represents both sides of the equation. She was an active member of the fire service whose first family included other firefighters. Now she offers her unique understanding of grief and loss to others. That story is coming up next on the Grief in Progress Podcast.

Carol Jones grew up in a family of career firefighters.

**Carol Jones:** My dad joined the fire department when I was about six years old, so I've always been surrounded by firefighters. And then in the '70s, my two brothers joined the same fire department—the Fort Worth fire department—and they both rose through the ranks becoming battalion chiefs for that department.

My dad was really my champion. He always supported me and encouraged me.

He raised me, really, to be a firefighter along with my two brothers. Around the house, there were chores. There weren't boy chores or girl chores. There was just work that needed to be done. So, my dad always had us work as a team and we worked until the job was complete. He was really a big influence in my life and taught me how to just take care of myself and be independent and work as part of a team.

Alison Law: The Fort Worth fire department first started hiring women as firefighters in 1983. A year later, Carol became one of only 10 women in a department of 700 employees.

Carol Jones: My dad wanted me to become a firefighter. He knew that I had what it took, and he encouraged me all along the way. Now my two brothers were initially very hesitant. Even though they had been raised with me, even though they knew I could swing an axe and cut wood and haul hay and everything else we'd done in our lives, they were concerned about having a woman at the fire station. Part of that may have been for my own safety, part of it may have been because they knew the men were not going to be accepting of me initially.

It *was* challenging. The men that we worked with—they had some reservations. They were concerned that women aren't as strong either mentally or physically as they were. They were concerned that if we get to a fire or get into a hazardous position, that they would wind up having to rescue us instead of taking care of the citizens.

But I kept my head down. I did my job. I trained hard. And eventually the men that I work with grew to trust me and they forgot I was a woman in many regards, which was one of the biggest compliments they could pay me. They treated me just like any other firefighter. They felt free to talk around me. They knew that I wasn't going to betray their confidence. And no matter how rough the ride got, I was never going to leave their side. So, I matched them step for step all the way.

Alison Law: Carol gained the trust of her fellow firefighters and relished driving the truck at a busy station.

Carol Jones: In fact, my favorite assignment on the job.

Alison Law: So she hesitated when a captain in charge of emergency medical services asked her to consider moving into the EMS training division.

Carol Jones: No, I'm having fun doing what I'm doing. I'm enjoying my job and I don't want to work in an office.

Alison Law: Then the captain sweetened the deal with weekends off and opportunities to attend out-of-town trainings.

Carol Jones: And I love to travel so I thought, well, that would work out pretty good. So I'm there for about two weeks maybe. And the captain comes to me, and he says, Carol, we're supposed to be going to an EMS conference in Atlantic City. And one of the guys that's scheduled to go has had a family issue come up. Would you be interested in going to Atlantic City? Well, yes is the answer—of course I would be. Well, we walk into the reception, they've got a reception going on the first evening, and my captain says, "Hey, y'all hang out here just a minute. I see somebody I know." And he walked across and saw Louis and he brought him back.

Alison Law: This was Louis Jones, a veteran of the Roswell fire department.

Carol Jones: And here he is, six foot four, with starch jeans, the cowboy hat. He was a tall drink of water. And something in my mind said, take a look at this guy. And I knew the instant I met him that he would be the man I would marry. In fact, I was so sure about that, that seven weeks after we met, I proposed to him.

Alison Law: Carol and Louis married in 1998. They took turns driving the 473 miles between Carol's home in Fort Worth and Louis' place in Roswell, New Mexico.

Carol Jones: 473 miles—yes, a way. And I had offered to leave my position with the Fort Worth fire department to move to Roswell because Louis was the deputy chief there and he still had about three or four years before he was eligible to retire. But we discussed it together and he felt strongly that I should have my own career and my own retirement. And so we said, let's do this long distance. We'll make this work. And we did. So, we were really just on a very extended honeymoon.

Alison Law: The honeymooners canceled their normal travel rotation one weekend in 2002. They had plans to meet up at a convention in Las Vegas the following week. So Carol was in Texas the morning of March 16th. Her doorbell rang at 6:15. It was her brother accompanied by a battalion chief and chaplain.

Carol Jones: So, I just said a quick prayer. And I said, God, just be with me. Help me face whatever comes next. And I walked back into the living room, and I sat back down on the sofa. My oldest brother kneeled down in front of me, and he said, "Carol, it's Louis." And I said, "Okay, I'm waiting for the rest of the story." And I could see the pain on his face. And he said, "He's been shot." Well, no. I mean, that's not right. What fire chief do you know that's ever been shot? You have totally messed this up. And then I looked back at my brother, again seeing the pain on his face and the tears in his eyes. And I thought, this is it, Carol. He's been shot. And I said, "Is he still alive?" And he said, "I don't know."

And I said, "Where is he?" And he said, "I'm not sure. They're talking about sending him to Albuquerque or to Lubbock." So, at that point I switched into Lieutenant mode. I needed answers. I needed to take command. I needed to find out what was happening. I needed information. So, because Louis had been

the deputy chief when I first met him, I knew that phone number by heart. And I knew wherever Louis was, his deputy chief, Mike Matthews was going to be as close to him as they would possibly let him be. So, I called. He answered the phone. I said, "Chief Matthews, this is Carol Jones calling from Fort Worth, Texas." And he said, "Mrs. Jones." And my heart broke because in all the time I knew Mike, he had always called me Carol.

Alison Law: Everyone in emergency services knows the "scene size up." Carol asked Louis' deputy chief for this report as she prepared to make the five-hour drive to the hospital in Lubbock.

Carol Jones: A call came in that a house had exploded. He had a small department, 82 personnel. So, he knew that they would need to do emergency call backs. And there was also a report of a burn victim at the scene.

So Louis put on his clothes and responded knowing that he could help. And as he arrived on the scene, the incident commander asked him to go and check on the burn patient that was being treated by Roswell EMS personnel. As he stepped up on the front porch, the burn patient brandished a nine-millimeter handgun. He shot Louis one time in the head. He turned the weapon on the EMT that had been providing first aid and he shot him. The father of the house had grabbed up his two children, a five-year-old little girl and a three-year-old boy. And he was running out of the house with his children when he was struck in the back with some bullets.

This went through the father and paralyzed the three-year-old boy. He then went over and shot the father in the head. So, he shot all three men. The gunmen then took the little girl as a hostage and used her kind of as a shield. Eventually he let the little girl go and he took his own life there on the scene.

The police officers got Louis off the porch and his paramedics began working on him. One of the men told him, "Chief, I need to get this coat off of you so I can start an IV." And Louis was able to respond and roll over so that he could get his arm out of the coat. And then I'm told that he reached his hand up for somebody to hold.

Alison Law: Fire service families understand the life-or-death nature of the job. In fact, before getting married, Louis told Carol that he didn't believe he'd live long enough to grow old with her.

Carol Jones: And he said, "I need you to know that I won't be around to take care of you when you get older, but I'm in love with you and I want to marry you and I will love you for all of my life." He just had a premonition really that he'd end up on life support. And he said, "when I get to that point, I want you to make sure that I stay clean shaven and that I smell good." I bought cologne for him and made sure he had cologne on while he was at the hospital.

And he said, "I want you to know that when I can't hold you and I can't hunt and I can't hide that I want you to let me go and I promise, I'll meet you on the other side." And I said, "Okay." And he said, "No, I need you to say, 'I give you my word.'" And so I said those words: "I give you my word. But in return, you have to make that same promise to me." He survived for 10 days on life support until I had to keep my promise and signed the necessary papers to take him off of life support and end his life.

Alison Law: Louis Jones died on March 26th, 2002. He was 46 years old. After holding vigil at his bedside for 10 days and making it through the funeral services, Carol could no longer fend off grief.

Carol Jones: The first time it really hit me was when I got in the car to drive back to Fort Worth, Texas from Roswell, New Mexico. And that's a seven-and-a-half-hour drive. I was all alone. I had a folded flag in the front seat next to me and I had tears streaming down my face because I knew the next time I came back to Roswell, my husband wouldn't be there to greet me. So, it was difficult. The silence was just deafening. I got back to my house in Texas and here I am, and I could see Louis walking out of the kitchen. I could see him in my bedroom and in my living room.

And of course, I had a lot of his artwork and taxidermy work adorning my home in Fort Worth. So all these memories and mementos and treasures that I still have were hard to look at. And there were days that I could look at his picture and I would be so filled with love and joy and just really feel blessed to have had him in my life. And the next day I would look at it and I couldn't stand it. It was so hard to be separated, but firefighters don't cry. So, when you go to work, you had to put on a brave face. And even with my dad, I didn't let my dad see me crying.

Jenny Woodall: There are going to be moments where grief comes to the forefront again. And it might be an event, it might be another stressor in your life. It might be a song. There are so many reminders of a relationship, and so as those things come up again, grief comes with it.

Carol Jones: One of the things Louis loved to say is the Jones family never quits. Whether we're lost in the wilderness or we're trapped in a fire somewhere, there's always one more step. You keep moving forward. You have to participate in your own rescue. We never give up. We keep pushing forward. And so that really resonated with me and I knew that I had to keep going.

So every day I made myself get out of bed and brush my teeth and put on a uniform and go to work. And at that point, again, compartmentalizing, I focused on the job at hand. I focused on serving others. I focused on the needs of my community and my firefighters. So, I was very guarded with my grief, but there were many days I was face down in the carpet.

- Alison Law: Sometimes Carol's fire department family struggled to find the right things to say. She recalls one friend who avoided her and would not make eye contact after Louis' death. Grief specialist Jenny Woodall says this is a universal challenge.
- Jenny Woodall: People sometimes struggle so much with what to say to people after a death that they don't say anything at all. And I would say that's the worst choice. Presence is really important. If you can show up and be present with someone who is deeply in grief, that is a real gift to them just to be there.
- Carol Jones: And then of course, then you've got the guys that really think they're being sweet. I had a man that I'd worked with for years who saw me after Louis had died and I'd returned to work. And he said, "You're a good-looking old gal and you'll be married again in no time." And I said, "Well, thank you, chief. I appreciate you thinking of me." I mean, what do you say to that? You just go around the and cry your eyes out. But you know, he was trying to encourage me. He was trying to do the right thing. It just—it hurt.
- Jenny Woodall: I think things that are *not* helpful are unsolicited advice, treating a grieving person as if they are fragile and can't make any decisions, sort of taking over for them when maybe that's not what they need. Firefighters are by nature helpers, fixers. They're good at problems. They literally put their lives in one another's hands and it's something that they take very seriously. The other thing that is true with firefighters is they have to continue to do their jobs. And so, in order to do that, they have to have a certain level of composure. That's hard to do if you fall apart.
- Carol Jones: Firefighters don't think about their own death every day. If we did, we would lose our edge. We wouldn't be able to push through and risk as much as we do if we worried about getting hurt every time we got on a truck. So, when they find someone who has suffered a line-of-duty death, they don't know what to say to them because "it could have been me." You remind them of their own mortality in many ways, and they're not comfortable with that and they don't know how to acknowledge that.
- Alison Law: Carol reserved her true feelings for conversations with her best friend, until she attended the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Weekend. She and Louis' sons attended the national tribute to all firefighters who died in the line of duty the year that Louis was killed. There, she found a safe space to grieve.
- Carol Jones: It's so healing, or it was so healing for me after a long line of memorials that I attended for Louis. This one was probably the most beautiful, the most healing and the most geared towards families, I believe. I went to workshops that I spoke with other spouses, and I attended some grief counseling with them. And for the first time I felt like somebody really understood my pain and what had happened to me—because of course we'd all suffered the death of our husbands or wives, someone that we love. So that was very good for me. And I

was so happy that the boys could be there to see it. All the pomp and the ceremony, the sea of blue when you step off the bus coming into Sunday's memorial service, and uniformed personnel just stretched out as far as you can see standing in honor of your husband and standing shoulder to shoulder with you to show their admiration and their respect. And just that silent promise that they will always stand guard. Overwhelming.

Alison Law: She volunteered in 2004 to escort the family of a fallen firefighter, joining her brothers and sisters in that sea of blue.

Carol Jones: I knew I had to be a part of it. I knew I needed to pay it forward. I knew that I had to help the next family coming through. It's also such a rewarding event for me and such a great opportunity for me to be there that I couldn't pass it up.

For the last few years, I've had the great honor of being a branch director. I have a group of family escorts that are responsible to me, and I am responsible for them, and I am responsible for all of their family members. You've got to think about having 100 families on this campus, and each family needs to get to the chapel, and each family needs to have dinner, and each family needs to go up to the Memorial, and then each family needs to have the opportunity to make a brick rubbing etching of the brick that may have been laid for their firefighters.

The family escort organizes all this chaos, and they do such a spectacular job that no one event is overcrowded. They coordinate everything so that the families have enough time without feeling rushed. And they're escorted from area to area so that they can get the full benefit of what's available to them that weekend. The escorts know that every family on that campus is the most important family there.

Jenny Woodall: When people come back to the Memorial Weekend to volunteer, they get to see how far they've come. They get to see people taking those early steps and think, oh, I'm not there anymore. I really have come a distance. And by the same token, it allows that new survivor to see someone who used to be where they are and is now smiling and functioning and capable again. So, I think it's a really nice, reciprocal relationship in that it allows people to have a broader perspective.

It's almost like a step in the healing process when you get to the point where you feel like you're ready to think about somebody else's needs and how you might be helpful to them. And also to realize that you have this really hard won wisdom from having lived through this experience that people need.

Alison Law: In addition to providing her leadership each year at Memorial Weekend, Carol has served as a Foundation board member and volunteer on the peer support team.

Carol Jones: A peer support team is a system set up by the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation to put surviving family members together. And they sometimes lump us by geographic area. For example, if someone were to die in the state of Texas, I would write a letter to the spouse and reach out to them and let them know what the Foundation does. I would encourage them to go to the National Fallen Firefighters memorial service in October. I would tell them about all the resources that were available to them.

Alison Law: There may not be enough words in the English language to describe what it's like to be a firefighter, to explain the commitment to service that led Carol Jones to break gender barriers and join her father and brothers in creating her own distinguished career. To form an unbreakable bond with someone, lose him and willingly use the knowledge of that loss to find new ways to save lives. But that's just what a firefighter would do.

Carol Jones: For me, though, I would say the most important thing the Foundation represents to me: they are the guardian of my husband's memory.

Because long after I'm gone, long after I've left this earth, the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation will remind the world of the life of service and sacrifice that my husband made for his community. That is powerful and I can never, ever thank them enough.

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Alison Law: On the next episode of Grief in Progress:

Syri Harris went to bed a private citizen, wife, and co-parent of six kids. She woke up a firefighter's widow who had to navigate the public aspects of her husband's death and years of criminal proceedings for the people responsible. She tells us how her grief journey and identity have changed over time as she and her sons continue to fulfill the dreams they shared with their fire hero.

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](http://firehero.org).