EPISODE 4: Thriving Amidst "Public Expectations

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: Firefighters lead surprisingly public lives. Certainly not on the scale of celebrities seen on award shows or social media, but they often live and work in the tight-knit communities that they serve and meet many different people on the job. And those people start to recognize them, even when they're not in uniform—say, when they're going to get pizza with their families on a Friday night. Then there's the nature of their work. Firefighters and EMS personnel respond to sometimes dramatic events that attract media attention.

Still, nothing is more public than a firefighter's line-of-duty death. Each one is a matter of public record, the US Fire Administration tracks and collects information on the causes of on-duty fatalities to prevent future losses. Family members who are left behind are rarely prepared for the sudden spotlight on their very private pain.

Syri Harris: I'm not going to speak for everybody else. And I think some widows may feel this way. You have to act a certain way as the fireman widow, you have to look a certain way. When you're in public, you have to talk a certain way.

Alison Law: In this episode of the Grief in Progress podcast, we'll meet Syri Harris, a woman who went to bed a young wife and co-parent and woke up to the startling reality that she was a firefighter's widow and single mom of six boys. Syri shares how she and her family navigated the public and private aspects of their grief journey and honored the dreams they shared with her husband, Walter, even after he was gone.

She met her husband, Walter, when they were in elementary school.

Syri Harris: I met him when I was in kindergarten, and he was in the first grade. So, we had the little elementary school puppy love, like you're my boyfriend, you're my girlfriend. We had that all through probably starting... I think it started around third grade on and off. So, not that we were boyfriend and girlfriend since the third grade, but one little bit he was my boyfriend. Then we would have a little tiff and break up. Then he was my boyfriend again in the fifth grade. So, on and off.

Alison Law: The two remained friends over the years, even though they saw other people. Syri became a mom as a teenager. And Walter was one of the first people to

visit her and her newborn son, Robert, after they came home from the hospital. Still, it wasn't until after high school that Syri and Walter graduated from puppy love and friendship to a committed relationship. They had a son Patrick in 1992 and married on Valentine's Day the following year. By that time, Walter had already become a firefighter, a job for which he was perfectly suited.

Syri Harris: It just fit him. Walter has always been the one that wants to help in some type of way. It totally fit his character. So, he wanted to do it and I was proud of what he was doing. There was a fireman that lived directly across the street that had talked to him about being a fireman. He was thinking about it while he was going to school, trying to decide what he wanted to do. And then just finally decided to take the plunge in and do it. So, I was proud of him. Like I said, it totally fit him.

Alison Law: Syri earned her bachelor's degree in social work in 1994. Walter encouraged her to go straight into grad school. But she knew their family needed the extra income—and she wanted to start working in her chosen field.

Syri Harris: I started off as a foster care worker—again, just wanting to help. I've always had the love for families, a love for children, a love for making the pieces fit together. So, social work was it. And then within social work, there are so many arenas and so many avenues that you can take that just seemed to fit, working with families in some sort of way. Seeing if there's anything, any resources that can be provided so that the kids can be safe at home, making sure they're safe while they're away from home, trying to get them back together. And so that just became my love. It's demanding, but someone has to do it. It's rewarding. And that's where I met my first son, James. James was on my caseload, just fell in love with him.

Alison Law: James was one of 10 children and the oldest of eight siblings to enter the foster care system. Syri knew something was special about James the first time she met him.

Syri Harris: He was just a different child. Kids in foster care, they have all these issues, of course, because of things that's happened in their life, right? And so, when people are looking to adopt or looking to help kids in foster care, most of the time, a lot of the times it's the younger children, it's the little cute children that have little issues or that are exhibiting little issues. So, the older children get left out a lot and James was 12 or 13 when I met him. And he was so serious, and he was so determined, and he had this idea of wanting to be greater and do greater. And that was all over his face. When you would talk to him, he would look you straight in your eye. And it was just something different about him.

Alison Law: When it looked like James would age out of the foster care system, Syri wanted to intervene, but she needed to make the decision with her husband and co-parent.

Syri Harris: I just went home, and I told Walt, "We have to do something." And he said, "Well, you mean do what?" I'm like, "Well, we got to do something. We got to help him some type of way. We got to bring them home." And I'm like, "Okay, well just meet them. You just got to meet them. And you'll see what I'm..." And he met him, and he felt the same way. It was just all over him.

Alison Law: The Harris's adopted James when he was 14 years old. Syri later gave birth to Caleb, Walter Jr., and Christian—completing their family of eight. Meanwhile, Walter continued to grow his fire service career at a station 15 minutes from their home.

Syri Harris: Walter worked at Engine 23 in Squad Three. He didn't have like one particular job on the squad or on the engine. And it was not the norm for fireman—well, in Detroit, at least, firemen usually stay at one station for a while and then after a while they go to another station. It was unusual for him to be at his place where he trained. He was at that place the entire career. But that was just because my Walter was special, and they loved him. That was home for him. He loved Engine 23 Squad Three. I remember the phone number. I remember the address. He just loved it there. Walter was the one that once he found something that works, he was just going to stick with it. And so that worked for him. He loved the people. He loved the neighborhood. He loved everything about it.

Alison Law: In 2000, 18-year-old James Hill Harris followed his dad into the fire service. While they did not work at the same firehouse, they experienced the firefighter bond.

Syri Harris: They shared that he was given a couple of medals of honor and Walt was able to attach the metal onto him. So, they had a lot of father-son moments that was very pivotal. He walked them through that part—being like the freshmen in high school, having a kind of senior relative that walk you through the school and show you things. They had that kind of connection.

Alison Law: As both a wife and a mother to a firefighter, Syri knew that her loved ones' line of work put them in harm's way. But that aspect of their jobs wasn't top of mind.

Syri Harris: At times you would think about it. When things just go on day after day, we kind of take things for granted. It was brought to the forefront when we would see something in the media, see some story where a firemen got hurt or a fireman almost got hurt, or hear stories of within the department where something happened. Then it's brought to the forefront, and you are more careful, and you give an extra tight hug or say an extra prayer before they leave. But no, I can't say on a day-to-day that it was something that I was overly concerned about or consumed with day to day. I can't say that.

Alison Law: That all changed on November 15th, 2008.

Syri Harris: I heard about Walt being hurt by a phone call. Someone called me around two o'clock in the morning. And I don't remember what official it was right now, it escapes me. I don't remember who that was, but I got a call and they said, "Walter's been hurt. He's at hospital. We're going to come pick you up." And I remember the first thing I said was, "What color car do you drive?" Because Walter, we have conversations all the time about people getting hurt: “And if something happens to me, somebody is going to let you know. If they come to get you and they're driving red car, it's probably very serious.” So, I remember the first thing out of my mouth is, "What color car do you drive?" And he was kind of taken aback. He said, "What?" I said, "What color car do you drive?" And he said, "Oh, it's the red fire department car." And I said, "Oh no, I'll drive." As if me driving myself would change something. But I just remember that so vividly. I wasn't going to let him come pick me up.

I have four kids at home. First, I remember going to tell the oldest in the home, which was Patrick, "Dad's been hurt. I need you to get up and be with your brothers because it's early in the morning, I'm getting ready to go." And he said, "No, I'm coming with you." So, now I have to think, okay, well now I have to get somebody else because he said he's coming with me. So, I had to call my mother.

So, she came over to be with the younger three while Patrick and I went to the hospital. As I was getting dressed, I was shaking, and I couldn't find anything to put on. And I finally decided to call him back, the person that called me and said, "Well, yes, you can come get me. I'll allow you to come get me." Because my common sense started kicking back in like, "It doesn't matter what color car he drives. If you ride in the car, it's not going to change whatever's going on. You probably don't need to be driving." And now the mom kicked in, like, "You're going to be riding with your son. If something happens to you and you cry, you need to be riding nobody."

I remember getting in the car. I remember the ride. It's probably about a 20-25 minute ride to the hospital. But it seemed as if it was two minutes. I don't remember why it seemed so short. As soon as he pulled up to the hospital, I remember seeing—it seemed like every fireman in Detroit, outside of the hospital. And I'm thinking... My first thought then was, "Who's working? Somebody's supposed to be working. What is going on?" And I saw two firemen hugging, two of our close friends were hugging and I knew it wasn't good, the way that they were hugging.

And I just remember seeing their embrace thinking, "Hmm, I don't want to get out of the car." But I got out of the car, and I walked in and it's just—all I see is fireman. I just see firemen. I don't see nurses. I don't see that. I see firemen. And I walked in and everybody kind of turned and looked at me and looked at Patrick. And one of our other close friends came walking up to me wanting to hug me. And I remember pushing him back like, "Don't touch me." If he touched me that was going to mean something had happened. I just didn't want him to

touch me. And I just kept saying, "He's gone? He's gone? Is he gone? Is he gone?" I wanted someone to answer, is he gone? They finally told me that he had passed.

Alison Law: Walter Patrick Harris Sr. died at the hospital. He was 38 years old. Information about what happened when Walter and Squad 23 responded to a house fire started as a trickle and came flooding in.

Syri Harris: The fire was put out and they were actually cleaning up. It was just the norm. It wasn't even one of the big fires that they're used to having. They were pulling the line, wrapping a line up, and getting ready to leave. And because the fire was intentionally set, one of the major supporting beams was really weak. They put the water on it to put the fire out and it was really weak. And it collapsed. When the guys saw the roof coming in, the bosses were saying, "Okay, come out, come out." And some guys were leaving out. So, they got outside and their thing to do is to call roll to make sure that they have everybody. So, they're calling roll, and everybody is answering, and they got to Walter's name and of course he's not answering.

So, they went back in and they're calling his name, and everybody has an alarm on. So, in cases like this, there's supposed to be going off when it's dark and it's smoking and you can't find someone, this alarm is supposed to be going off. His alarm wasn't going off. So, they went back outside and they're like, "Where is he? We're calling his name, not answering. We don't hear the alarm. I'm going back in." They finally found him and they're trying to get the rubble off of him and off chest. They found him and they brought him outside. So then, all-thorough Syri goes through: "What happened with the alarm? Who's supposed to check the alarm?" And that's the part that I did not want to do because I didn't want to be pointing the finger and putting the blame anywhere. But they're trying to tell me the story and trying to give me the pieces I guess that they would want. So, I got it right away. Didn't necessarily want all that right away.

Alison Law: Suddenly, the stories of a firefighter hurt or killed in the line of duty weren't happening to someone else, they were happening to Syri. Still in shock, her protective instincts kicked in.

Syri Harris: The next thing I remember, it was like bits and pieces. So, it wasn't consecutive. The next thing I remember is being in a small room and I remember being very protective, like I was with who I was going to be in the car with and who was going to touch me. I was very protective of this room for some reason. I just didn't want anybody, but my special people to be in this room. So, it was Patrick and myself, and I'm calling my other sons, James and Robert, the two oldest. And when they came, I wanted them in the room. And I remember anybody that wanted to come into the room... I had one of the nurses kind of—poor thing—standing there, like, "Who is it?" She had to report to me who it was that wanted to come into the room before I gave her permission to open the door to

allow them in the room. I don't know, this protection thing just came. It just came out.

Another thing that I remember is being honored and appreciative as well as annoyed that the mayor at that time, he'd stepped in to be the mayor, had come. I was just thinking this duality of emotions I had going on—I was appreciative and an honor that they would come. But I was also annoyed because I'm like, "You don't even know my husband. And why are you here?" I don't want all the political pieces. I don't want that. Just for your face... Because he's in here and he wants to he's in my protective room and he wants to shake my hand and he wants someone to take his picture while he's shaking my hand. It was just annoying. That really annoyed me. I remember that.

I remember having to call my mother who was at home with my three boys and telling her that he passed. And I remember her just yelling and I had to hang up the phone on her because that was her. She couldn't cope. So, that was her. She just burst out yelling. And I'm trying to handle all the things; I can't deal with the yelling. So, I just hung up on her. I couldn't call his mother. His parents were in Louisiana, and I did not want to be the one to call his mother and tell her that her son had passed. I think I told my sister to make that phone call. I just couldn't do it. I couldn't bear... I just couldn't do it. I couldn't do it.

Everybody processes differently. And I think that's just my way of processing, automatically jump into do-it mode, "What's next? What do I have to do? What's step 1, 2, 3, 4?" Whereas other people and not saying one way is better than another, some people are not able to do anything. And they're just frozen. I'm not frozen. I have to go the other way, but you need some time to just sit down and be able to just breathe and figure some things out. So, it's not always good to be the person that's just gotta go, gotta go, gotta go. But that's the way I handle it. Taking charge and kind of organizing, I don't know. That's the social worker, I don't know what all that is, but organizing who was going to actually go down to the basement of the hospital to actually see his body for the last time.

After I organized all the shifts and everybody going, I remember the hallway, again, just being filled with firemen and me saying, "I'll keep you posted on what's next. Somebody has to work now. You can go back to work, go back. We can leave the hospital." And I remember Verdine, one of our female firefighter friends, she looked at me and she says, "Syri, nobody's going anywhere until you go. Nobody is going to go anywhere. We're all here." And I'm just like, "Okay, well. Okay, well."

The ride home with our pastor at the time, the radio stations, because everything was so publicized, the radio stations were talking about the incident and, "A Detroit fireman's gotten killed." And him hurrying, trying to reach and turn the radio off.

Alison Law: In the days following Walter's death, Syri answered reporter's questions while wearing her husband's fire department jacket and making sure her church could accommodate the 3,500 people expected at the funeral. Investigators ruled the fire arson. A subsequent criminal investigation led to a man confessing to deliberately setting the fire in exchange for $20. He pleaded guilty and testified against the man who hired him to start the fire as a way to get insurance money.

Syri Harris: My husband was gone. It didn't matter whether it was intentionally set, it didn't matter if it was an accident. My husband was gone. Immediately, it didn't have this great big effect on me. The more time went on and as we were going through the court hearings for the criminal charges and all that, it was just like, "This is so stupid. A person's life is gone because of someone's greed because of insurance money." But then also the social worker and the other side of me is like, "Well, nobody was trying to... People do, and not that they should, but people do insurance jobs on cars. People do insurance jobs on homes, people do all types of insurance jobs and fraud all the time. Nobody intends for anybody to be hurt—but this is a reality, and this is what *could* happen when you do these types of things."

So, I had, again, the dual emotions going on all throughout the trial, anytime I would think about it. I decided to participate in the criminal trial. I think in the very beginning, there was no thought process to it. I talked about earlier, how we just feel we have to do these things and we got to jump in and be the correct grieving widow and do all the correct things. I think in the very beginning when the trial happened, I don't think that I took time to think about if this was something I really wanted to do. I just felt that I should be there again. Again, the firemen were at the hospital, the firemen were at my house. The firemen were there too. I don't know who was working during those times because every day—the trial went on for weeks—every day, you arrive up to the courthouse and it would be lines of firetrucks.

They had to tell some of the fireman not to come in because they filled the courtroom. They filled the hallways. I love my family. They were just there. They were going to be there. And so, because they were there, Syri who wants to take care of them, who wants to take care of her family, who wants to be the widow that's doing the right thing, I was going to be there front and center too. So, they're there in the hallways and I'm walking through the hallways greeting everybody. I'm just doing the right thing every day for weeks.

Yeah. So, there was no thought in the very beginning because the news cameras are going to be there and everybody's going to be there. And I have to be there showing—not that I wouldn't have wanted to be there, I'm just saying, I didn't even give myself a chance to sit and think about, "Is this something that's beneficial for me? Is it beneficial for my family? Is this what I want to do?" I was just the dutiful widow.

Alison Law: Jenny Woodall, grief specialist at the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, says Syri's story of wanting to do the right thing and put on a brave face in public, matches many other fire hero families' experiences.

Jenny Woodall: Public safety officer deaths are both public deaths and very private, personal deaths. And I do think that is one unique aspect of our fire hero family community, that everyone there understands what it is like to have all of the scrutiny, commentary, politics, gossip about their person who died. There are often lawsuits in the wake of traumatic firefighter deaths. And that can be very difficult for families. I've heard many people describe having to sort of put their grief aside in order to get through that. And so, the real cascade of emotions may come after the trial is resolved, which sometimes takes a long time.

Alison Law: The arsonist was sentenced in 2010 to 17 to 30 years in prison as part of a plea agreement. The person convicted of hiring him to set the fire was sentenced to spend at least 41 years in prison—the punishment that the judge said was part of society's duty to protect first responders like Walter Harris. The defendant continues to deny his involvement in the fire and has appealed his case many times as recently as 2021 when the court hosted a video proceeding. But Syri has modified her role in the process.

Syri Harris: The last Zoom hearing, I didn't even show up because at this point, I could be doing something else. My kids were out of school that day. I wanted to do something with them. And I was actually looking at my schedule to see, trying to guess when the hearing would be over. I said, "He's still affecting my life. I don't want him to affect my life anymore. If he gets out tomorrow, it won't bring Walter back. Whatever happens to him, happens to him. He has to deal with not accepting responsibility for things. He has to deal with that. I'm going to do what I want to do with my sons." So, I didn't show up.

Alison Law: Syri says the shift in perspective is just part of the twist and turns in her grief journey.

Syri Harris: I think grief is a journey because you never... It's all the emotions. It's the ups and downs. It's not a straight line. You can be feeling one way one day and that can be okay. And then another day you're feeling the total opposite and that's okay too. It's all about getting back to: what does your life look like now? And what is your sense of normal and what's working for you, what's not working for you? It's all a journey. It's all connected. That's why I call it a journey. It's not just one straight line and you just arrive and you're just there and you just get over it. It's just not that way.

Jenny Woodall: We have this publication that is called *The Journey*. And I have also read some really scathing pieces written by people who hate that term as an analogy for grief. I think it's an imperfect word to describe what happens. It is one of those polarizing words that some people really love and some people really don't.

Syri Harris: It just looks different along the way. It looks a little bit different. So, whereas in the beginning in 2008, it may have looked like me grabbing every single thing around my house that reminded me of Walter and taking it up to my room and closing my door and me having just one little pathway to my bed because I had to protect everything and have nobody except my children being allowed to sit in his chair for maybe three years. I don't know. If anybody made a mistake and came in and visit and sat in the chair, I'm like, "No, no, no. Nope. Get out of his chair."

So, comparing it to now—where now I can just find one piece of jewelry that reminds me of him. It looks different.

Alison Law: A trip has an itinerary, a journey I think is more of finding your way as you go. Grief changes us. Loss changes us. We do not end up in the same place where we started.

Syri Harris: I've learned to deal with it by just allowing the things that come up, just allowing them to come up and not trying to put them in a category of good or bad, just allowing. Identifying where they came from and just letting them be. Nothing has to be a certain way. And I think that I thought that way for a long time and that put a lot of pressure on me, that put a lot of pressure on my children. So, I've learned to deal with it through allowing, through prayer, through yoga, through forgiveness when people didn't say the right things—because most of the time people mean well. So, a lot of forgiveness and just acceptance of what is.

Alison Law: Syri founds the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation early in her journey.

Syri Harris: Everybody was great about giving me all the resources: “You may be eligible for this; check this out.” So, I remember the first event was when we were invited to the Memorial Weekend and that was October of 2009, they took care of everything. We didn't have to think about anything. They handled reservations for things. They handled food. They handled transportation from the airports and just setting up hotels. And my mother went, all the kids went, they just handled everything. It was beautiful. It was beautiful. And just being there with other family members, seeing honorary flags, it was just overwhelming. It was beautiful though. I think I've been to four of their wellness conferences. One of my sons, Caleb, came to one of the wellness conferences with me and the conferences they have for is not just spouses—but it's for spouses, for parents, for siblings. They do an amazing job about covering things for everybody. So, those are the wellness weekends.

The younger kids have been to the Comfort Zone camps. They were in the mountains and just being able to be around children and young adults who have gone through the same things that they have gone through, it means a lot. Grief has a way of bringing people together that would have never been brought

together at all. Different political views, different races. If you lose a loved one, that'll make you come together. All that other stuff just kind of fades away.

I've learned a lot throughout these years. I wish there were some guidebook. And that's why I'm actually writing a book. It should be out at the end of this year, sort of a guidebook that addresses little bits and pieces of all that because I wish there was one when back in 2008 because I looked for one. I looked for them. It is called *The Widow's Oil*: *A Guidebook for Young Widows* because I'm serious about when I said I was actually looking for something. Some type of resource just to give me... Make me seem somewhat normal in these thoughts that I was having, these dualities and trying to figure it out.

Because when you think of a widow, you think of an older woman most of the time. So, nothing related to me. I didn't feel that anything related to me. It was: you have all these years together, and so this is what you do. Although Walter and I did have a lot of years together, what they were talking about didn't address the things that I needed: the self-care, the financial stuff, the relationship stuff, children at different ages. It didn't address that. And so that's what I'm addressing in my book.

Alison Law: In addition to writing the book, Syri and her family have pursued some of the dreams that they shared with Walter.

Syri Harris: He always talked about me going back to school to get my graduate degree. I did that. We've talked about international travel with our children. They've been many places, many times, all of them. We did that. We talked about just being supportive for our sons so that they could achieve whatever it is that they felt they wanted to do. And I think I've done my best to do that.

Alison Law: That included supporting son James' decision to move into the arson investigation division of the Detroit Fire Department three years after his father's death. Robert is an attorney. Patrick is a personal trainer. Caleb is a massage therapist, and Walter Jr. and Christian are in high school. Syri says that part of what helped her redefine what it means to be a firefighter widow and single mom is remembering that there was more to Walter than his job.

Syri Harris: I think anybody that knows him or has read any of the stories or whatever knows that he was this... They called him the gentle giant. So, big teddy bear, loved people, loved his family, loved service. That's all true. Good man that became a great man. But what I would want people to know—and it's kind of out of the ordinary, I guess, as what a lot of messages would be—is that he was not a perfect man. And I think that that's important because when we're left as the widows, as the children, as the parents of the fallen heroes—and they are definitely that, so I'm not taking any of the hero away from it—the fact that they're not perfect and so we're not perfect, kind of gets pushed to the side sometimes. And because it gets pushed to the side and the hero part of them is pushed to the forefront, it kind of forces us sometimes to be in these positions

that we don't want to be in or feel uncomfortable being in and not being our genuine selves.

Jenny Woodall: He was a full-fledged human person to them. And all of the sudden in the news or in the press, that person is being talked about as a hero. And there's just really a disconnect, I think sometimes. It's very important to a lot of fire hero families that their firefighter be honored as a hero. But I think it's also important for us to remember that those are deeply personal losses.

Syri Harris: I think if we are reminded every once in a while that they weren't perfect, so *we* don't have to be perfect because there's no perfect people—that may help to relieve some of the pressure somewhere along the way and help somebody. So, that's what I would like to just remind everybody about.

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

Fire hero family members often continue their loved one's commitment to service. We'll explore the ideas of legacy and co-destiny and how they show up in big and small ways in those left behind—people like Liza Aungst and Rachel Proudy, two women who became friends at a retreat for young adult survivors and who are now both pursuing helping careers in social work.

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