



Grief *in* Progress

EPISODE 5: Following in the Footsteps of Service

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.

Rachel Prouty: Things don't get back to normal after a parent dies. You just find a new way. So, I found over the years, the ways I tried to deal with grief, and I tried to have my grief change and be healthy, were trying to relate things back to the good things with my dad or like who my dad was and imagining who he wanted me to be maybe.

Alison Law: The imagining that happens when a loved one's life is cut short leads many family members to follow similar career paths. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has many examples of people who pursue so-called helping jobs. They become firefighters, paramedics, nurses, teachers, and counselors.

Liza Aunkst: I have lots of family members who either are currently, or have been in the fire service. And just seeing how involved my family has been in the community and everything like they went through growing up has definitely influenced probably that decision to go into social work.

Alison Law: In this episode of *Grief in Progress*, we'll learn from Rachel and Liza—two daughters of fallen firefighters who connected through their losses, but discovered over time, they had much more in common, including a desire to serve others in their communities. One way to explain the phenomenon of fire hero family members continuing their loved one's commitment to service is with something called post-traumatic growth. It's an idea that the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation promotes through many of its programs. Post-traumatic growth is a psychological term for experiencing a life-altering event and finding purpose in the associated pain and loss. Dr. Joe Casper, a medical doctor who lost his son to a rare form of epilepsy and went on to study post-traumatic growth, coined another term that may apply here: co-destiny. As part of their grieving process, some bereaved family members strive to keep their loved one's impact on the world going after their death. As the Foundation's grief specialist, Jenny Woodall tells us these forms of growth or legacy show up in a variety of ways.

Jenny Woodall: There are big and obvious examples of legacy such as a son whose dad was a firefighter continuing to serve as a firefighter. And that is a very powerful tie in a lot of our families. But for every big legacy, there are a thousand little legacies and ways in which the people who died continue to live through those who loved them. And that happens in fire departments, it happens in families, it

happens in communities. I'm thinking of things like: I have many times heard a surviving say, " I can't believe how much she reminds me of her dad." As they see their children growing up, they see these flickers of that person who they loved who died in their children. And that I would say is also a form of legacy. Any spark that's left in the people who live, continues what was best about the people who we've lost. Sometimes legacy is intentional, but we also just carry with us the best of their qualities and the ways in which they touched us.

Alison Law: This doesn't mean that everyone who's experienced loss is required to go out and change the world. It just means that some people find solace and a greater understanding of their loved one by doing things that honor their memory.

Jenny Woodall: I think in its best forms, legacy should not feel like a burden or a duty. It should be a joy. It should be something that makes us feel proud and connected and a way to keep the people we love close.

Alison Law: As an example, we have the story of Liza Aunkst and Rachel Prouty. Loss forged their friendship, but service continues to connect them in remarkable ways. These two women have a lot in common. They both grew up in fire service families. This is how Liza describes it.

Liza Aunkst: Oh goodness. Growing up in a fire service family, I have lots of family members who either are currently or have been in the fire service, my father included. There was a lot of involvement with the fire department, different events, different fundraisers with the fire family, like at the fire department. It is basically one big family and someone that you do grow up with. And I had a lot of friends that their parents were on the fire department in some aspect. And so being able to share that with them as well.

And I mean, being in a very small town of less than 200 people, the fire department was volunteer, so no one was career. And so that made it, I think, a little more special as well, growing up in the fire service family, because everybody knew everybody. But there was also a lot of unknown, so to speak. Like a fire pager could go off at any time—in the middle of dinner, three o'clock in the morning. And it's a very distinct sound, at least back in the early two thousands, it was a very distinct sound.

Alison Law: Here's Rachel's take.

Rachel Prouty: Everybody was family, everybody was part of it. You didn't have to ask for help. You just had help, no matter what it was. I can remember my dad just like making stuff happen if people needed help, whether that was like, I don't know, babysitting for date night, or like, "how are we going to take apart this deck?" We just made it work. It was a nice togetherness, a good community. I remember spending so much time at the firehouse. I remember spending holidays, New Year's Eve parties. I know that like being a firefighter is a career, but it was really so much more than that at the firehouse. You worked together,

you were staying together because you loved and cared for one another. My father was the fire chief, my mom was not a firefighter, but she was fire police.

So, whenever there was a call, like in the middle of the night, she would go as well and direct traffic and make sure things were safe for the community while the firefighters were dealing with the crisis itself. I don't know the technical words because I'm still remembering everything as a kid. But we had the "fire grandmas" for lack of better words. So, I remember Jean, she was always taking care of me and my siblings if it was the middle of the night. She had a fire scanner, and she knew when to pick us up.

Alison Law: Unfortunately, Rachel and Liza also share in common losing a dad at a young age. Rachel was just seven years old when her father Roy Prouty suffered a heart attack while helping load a patient into a medical helicopter. He died at the hospital. Rachel has these memories of that time.

Rachel Prouty: I remember it being unexpected, I remember being sudden and I remember a whirlwind of next steps happening. But in the same tone with the firefighter family, I remember people being there, I remember the support. I remember family being around and not being physically alone. There was always somebody there for us. I remember a lot of time, again, spent at the firehouse, not really doing anything, but just existing as people that needed to exist together.

Alison Law: Liza was a couple of years older—nine—when she lost her dad. Like Rachel's dad, Michael Aunkst died in the line of duty. He was working a barn fire then had a fatal heart attack. Liza remembers her older brother waking her up in the middle of the night and her mom coming home from the hospital to deliver the news that her father was gone. Then—just a house full of people.

Liza Aunkst: There were people in our house pretty much every single day. I have a big family on both sides. So, family members there every day—coming from all over the United States, visiting with us. I still went to Sunday school the next day. I wanted to walk alone, but one of my uncles wouldn't let me walk alone. But I think at nine years old, I only wanted that normalcy of being able to walk to Sunday school alone, being able to attend Sunday school like nothing ever happened. But of course, living in a small town, news travels fast, because it was also the first line of duty death in the county. So that made an even bigger event aside from a normal death in a family or in a town. So, it definitely brought a lot of emotions on knowing that that normalcy was gone.

Alison Law: As time passed, both young women tried to make sense of their loss and felt supported by the adults in their lives.

Rachel Prouty: I think it was important for me to ask questions for closure, for understanding what was happening and also understanding—especially at seven—that I was safe because you tell a kid, a seven-year-old kid something like death and they become scared, right? Knowing some of those details of what happened made

me feel that this was a freak accident, but it wasn't like I had to fear anything, I had to be scared. So, I had the support there to make sure that I felt safe.

- Liza Aunkst: At a young age, I think there were times where I wanted to understand what was going on—but again, just push stuff so far back. But as I got older, and all these big events—graduation, prom, graduation from undergrad, graduation from master's degree—all these different events definitely hit differently and made me want to understand exactly what had happened. And if I could give any sort of advice to any first responder family that's gone through a line-of-duty death: as much as you want to protect the child and don't want to give them the details, I still think it's so important to give them the details of what's happening—in a developmentally appropriate way, but being completely honest with them because you don't want them to get years down the road still trying to put pieces together of what happened, and how it happened and why it happened.
- Rachel Prouty: Every couple of years I learned more. And then when I understood more about death and grief and firefighting, I could ask more questions. I'm very lucky to say that nobody ever hid anything from me. If I had a question, they did answer it.
- Alison Law: At different points, Liza and Rachel both found it difficult to relate to other kids their age.
- Liza Aunkst: I had people to talk to. I could talk to the teachers, I could talk to anyone in the community of the fire department, but I didn't really talk to my friends about it at nine years old, because I just wanted to be normal and not looked at like the "poor girl who lost her dad at nine years old." I just wanted to be Liza the nine-year-old who's in fourth grade trying to advance to fifth grade and moving forward.
- Jenny Woodall: When a child loses a parent, it's fairly common for them not to know anybody else their age who has lost a parent. From the outside, we think about grief as the big picture, but from the inside, there are all those little things that shift when your parent has died in terms of what your day-to-day life looks like, and in terms of what your surviving parent looks like; how that person is coping; the dynamics. And when you remove someone from a family, all the dynamics shift. And so, kids in some ways, I think, mature a lot. They know about things that a lot of kids their age don't know about. And so, it can be really hard to be surrounded by people who were talking about issues that suddenly seem very petty and unimportant when you've had this huge thing happened that changes your whole world.
- Alison Law: Jenny says something transformative happens when a child encounters another person their age who knows what it means to lose a parent.
- Jenny Woodall: They don't know necessarily have to talk about grief all the time. They might also really enjoy talking about the normal things of childhood, but they're

talking with other people who get it, who understand what that loss is like and what that feels like. And they don't need words to share that experience. I think it's a very powerful experience when you don't have to explain the whole backstory.

Alison Law: For Rachel, that experience happened when the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation honored her dad and other fire heroes during Memorial Weekend.

Rachel Prouty: Yeah. That's the first time I remember feeling a sense of belonging to a group of strangers. And I didn't know them, but I could hear what they were saying, I could see the pictures we were drawing, I could see how they were decorating these little lantern-bag things. Honestly everybody's favorite color was red because all the kids liked the firetrucks. And that at, like, seven was the first thing I remember, like, "Okay, there's something in common here, right? We got this." But just other little kids talking and just saying like, "this happened to me too." The Memorial Weekend was almost a whole year after my dad had passed away. And I was dealing with other kids my age in school who had both parents and either I was weird, or I was like a big interest because all the adults were talking about Rachel. So, there I was just a kid.

Liza Aunkst: One of my first outside of Memorial Weekend events with the Foundation was the very first Young Adults Retreat. I think that was in 2014, where I got the bracelet that I'm wearing. And it's an Everyone Goes Home bracelet. You can't tell that anymore because I mean, it's been going on seven years, and everything's rubbed off—but I just haven't really taken it off.

Alison Law: Everyone Goes Home is not just a slogan, it's the name of Foundation programs, training, and resources for members of the fire service—aimed at reducing the number of preventable line-of-duty deaths and injuries.

Jenny Woodall: The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation was created by Congress in 1992, with the original mission to honor and remember America's fallen firefighters—firefighters who die in the line of duty—and to provide resources to help their families in rebuilding their lives after that death. The mission has since expanded to include efforts to reduce firefighter deaths and injuries. If we can reduce the number of deaths, we reduce the need for serving grieving families. And that really would be a good outcome for everyone involved.

Alison Law: Rachel also attended the Foundation's first Young Adult Retreat in 2014.

Rachel Prouty: I think I struggled with wanting to identify as *Rachel* and not as a *unit*. So, I was very against going to things with my sister or my mom for a while there. So, when I could go to something that was just me, I went to the Young Adult Retreat and it was really good.

Liza Aunkst: It was a huge step for me. I had never been to any of like the Kids' Camps or anything. I knew literally no one at the Foundation—they knew me, but I didn't

know them. I think that event specifically with the Foundation was a really pivotal moment in my grief journey because I realized: these are my people, they're people around my age. So the Young Adults Retreat is, I think, 18 to 25. Being able to realize that there are people my age that have been through what I've been through was such a good moment.

Rachel Prouty: So, I think I wanted just the same thing I did when I was seven. Just like for someone to look at me like I was just like a normal kid and that me losing my dad wasn't like the only thing that's ever happened in my life. I wanted connection.

Liza Aunkst: So, I met Rachel at the Young Adults Retreat, and that's where we made that connection of our losses and became pretty good friends.

Rachel Prouty: I definitely saw it like Liza out at the first conference I went to, and we made a lot of fun memories there. It was really fun.

Liza Aunkst: It was definitely a fun environment and took away that stigma around why we were all there—I mean, we all knew why we were there—but it took away that harsh reality. And I mean, ever since then, that was kind of my buy-in to the Foundation. I don't think—with the exception of COVID—I don't think I've missed any Foundation events that I could go to since then, which is really nice because it's really wonderful to be able to have those people.

Rachel Prouty: They didn't sit us down and make us all just like, talk about our feelings and hope that helped. They connected people, they connected people based on age, and based on like different activities, and they really put in that work and dedication to make sure it was going to mean something. And while it sucks that you're there because of *why* you're there, it's good to know you're not alone.

Jenny Woodall: We have so many examples of people who were introduced to one another through the Foundation's events. While the loss is the point of original connection, they form friendships that have to do with much more than just that loss. They create memories together and they create histories that are shared. And so, we are very fortunate to be able to put people together with one another, knowing that we're playing just a tiny role in what they are going to do going forward, and the ways that they will stay connected to one another.

Alison Law: Since the Foundation serves families all over the country, staying connected often means posting in private Facebook groups or checking in on other social channels. Liza lives in Nebraska and Rachel lives in Maryland. Both young women applied for and received scholarships from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, which along with its partners, has awarded close to \$4.8 million in educational funds to spouses, children, and stepchildren of fallen firefighters. Both scholars were excited when they learned they had something else in common. They both pursued graduate degrees and careers in social work.

- Rachel Prouty: I think it's great. I love social work. It's always interesting to me to see how many people in the National Fallen Firefighters or who go through something traumatic as a kid want to go into the helping profession.
- Liza Aunkst: I've always been a helper. And like one of the pieces of advice that my dad gave me in a letter in fourth grade was, "always ask for help, even if it's really hard." And truthfully, I don't have the letter anymore. I'm not sure what happened to it. But in fourth grade, that was also the year that he passed away. The teacher had all of the parents, or at least one of the parents, write a letter to their child at the beginning of the year that they would get out at some point during the year. And my teacher held onto mine for obvious reasons because he passed away in February of my fourth-grade year. And she gave it to me at the end of the year. It was just like words of encouragement, different pieces of advice. And so that's something that has made a really wonderful impact. And I implement it with a lot of the families that I work with. It's not easy to ask for help and always keep that in mind.
- Rachel Prouty: I am finishing my master's of social work at University of Maryland—and I focused on grief. I think that my mom and dad and my whole family really instilled a need for giving back to the community in any way that I could and being a part of something, being the person to look for in a crisis. Once I finish my degree, I'm hoping to be able to give back to my community, which right now is Baltimore City and help children—and also adults—better understand their own grief that they're going through. I first got into social work, because I was very interested and thankful for the National Fallen Firefighters to be a welcoming face during such a difficult time in anybody's life, but especially mine at seven.
- Liza Aunkst: I really like where I work and where I'm at professionally, and I work with families that are post adoption or looking to build their families through adoption, or with birth mothers that are looking at their options of parenting or adoption. And unfortunately, with me having lost a parent through death, there are some kids that I've worked with that have lost their parents to death. So that brings me a little bit of different perspective for them.
- Alison Law: Liza recently completed her master's degree in social work, where she concentrated in mental health and trauma. Her graduate studies opened her up to the possibility of focusing on first responder mental health in the future.
- Liza Aunkst: One of the studies that I found, it was just over like first responders' mental health and PTSD rates and suicide rates—and one of the statistics that really startled me and made me realize that this is much more of a problem than the media and everything is reporting. In 2017, 103 firefighters were reported to die by suicide, and then 129 law enforcement officers were reported to die by suicide. And that is—I'm a social worker I don't do math—over 230 individuals that didn't have the hope to hang on and had witnessed—who knows what they

witnessed—something that they really took to heart and shook them to their core.

And that just kind of made me realize that there's stuff that can be done and more research that needs to be done to help these individuals—these men and women that are in the fire service, that are with law enforcement, because their life matters. And when they're in those critical moments where there's a whole lot of darkness, a whole lot of secondary trauma, they're not thinking that their life matters. And so if I, at some point in my career with my licenses, my experience as a fire hero/first responder family member, can help them and provide any sort of guidance—I will do my best to do that because there's just way too much loss and not enough services directed to the first responders. Yeah, I just want to do my part to help them out as much as possible.

Alison Law: Here was Rachel's response when I talked to her about Liza's interest in first responder mental health.

Rachel Prouty: I'm so glad you said that because I'm attending virtually a conference tomorrow about mental health for first responders, and I'm going to send her a link now—so, it's sweet. I'm really, really hoping now that I'll be a real-life social worker, I'm hoping to like give back to the Foundation. Being the therapist there with the kids, right? With the adults, saying like, "I have also been here, and now we can go through this together." I think that grief does change over time. I remember thinking about my dad and other losses I've had to deal with that I couldn't wait for things to get back to normal, and something I had to sit with was that like, there's just going to be a *new* normal, there's never going to be... Things don't get back to normal after a parent dies, you just find a new way.

Jenny Woodall: There used to be this prevailing notion that the goal was to sort of wrap up and put away the relationship with the person who died. And we know that it's actually much healthier for people to find ways to continue that relationship in some way. That sounds a little odd on the face of it, but what is it about the person who died that you want to carry forward with you? Maybe it's a quality, maybe it's a motto, maybe it is a sense of humor—but what are the things you treasure about the person who died that you really want to incorporate into your life? Again, to integrate into who you are going to be going forward. We now encourage people to really not feel self-conscious about continuing to have a relationship with their dead loved one. That's healthy, and it takes different forms for different people.

Alison Law: Here's Rachel's take.

Rachel Prouty: So I've found over the years, the ways I tried to deal with grief, and I tried to have my grief change and be healthy, were trying to relate things back to the good things with my dad, or like who my dad was and imagining who he wanted me to be. For instance, when I went to college, I got really into baking because my dad in college, he worked at a bakery. So, I also worked at a bakery, partly

because I love baking, but what piqued that interest was that like, "my dad could have taught me this if he was here, but it's still important for me to know, because I'm his daughter."

Alison Law: This is how Liza describes it.

Liza Aunkst: I try to memorialize as much as possible and try to provide as much light as I can into his life, because he was definitely a helper. He was always there; he was the first one on the scene. It's definitely somebody that you can rely on. And I try to be that person for a lot of different people, that's why I went into social work. Last year on his 15-year anniversary, I had a little bit of extra refund money. So, I was like, "I'm going to use this to really celebrate my dad and what he would want to do in passing joy on to other people." And I went to a local coffee shop here in Kearney called Baristas. And prior to going there, I had printed off, oh, probably 30, maybe 40 like postcard-type things with a picture of my dad explaining like a little bit of his story and that "This is for you, and I just ask that you pass it forward because that's why he would want."

And then I also provided my contact information. If they wanted to reach out to me, I put like \$200, maybe \$300 on a gift card for the Baristas to use for whoever was in the drive-through or in the actual cafe itself. And then, when they purchased their drink—with the gift card, that's when they would get the card. And I actually had some people reach out saying like how thankful they were like that that's what they needed in that moment. And so, it was a really humbling experience being able to do that.

Rachel Prouty: I heard it quote one time that said that "Grief was misplaced love." And I've stuck to that because I think anytime I felt grief it's because I loved something and something in that changed, right? I loved my dad, and because of the love I had, I felt grief when he passed. I just try to be true to the values that he instilled, which was really about community. And I think I'm realizing like right now today, how much of that community he did instill in me, and how it just like feeds into the other part of my life—*all* of the other parts of my life.

Alison Law: In 2021, Liza joined the Advisory Committee to the board of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Liza Aunkst: When they announced that I was appointed to the Advisory Committee, a lot of people, even people I didn't know were saying, "Your dad's looking down on you, he's very proud of you." So, I definitely try to pay it forward as much as possible and even volunteering for whatever I can in the Foundation—if I'm not too busy, I definitely will. And that's a really good way to really move along with my dad's legacy.

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Alison Law:

On the next episode of *Grief in Progress*:

It's the season one finale. Juliann Ashcraft's husband, Andrew, was one of 19 wildland firefighters who died in the line of duty. Overwhelmed with gratitude for the strangers who sent letters and cards and offered support, she found creative ways to process her grief and transport her family from *bitter* to *better*.

Thank you for listening to the *Grief in Progress* podcast, a production of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. If you enjoyed the six-episode season of the podcast, please consider subscribing and leaving a positive review.

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