



Grief *in* Progress

Disclaimer / Listener's Note

A listener's note: Some episodes of this podcast include discussion of death and other traumatic experiences. Please use discretion when listening and take good care of yourself.

Grief in Progress Podcast – Season 2, Episode 2: Mary Hollis

- Narrator** A 2022 psychology study showed that people often underestimate the power of reaching out to others. Small gestures like sending a text message, making a phone call, or mailing a handwritten note have a big impact on the people you're contacting.
- Mary Hollis understands the value when she calls members of her Next Chapter Widows community.
- Mary Hollis** I spent a lot of time just picking up the telephone sometimes and said, "I'm checking on you. How are you doing today?"
- Whenever I call them, they said, you just don't know how much this call means to me, because I was really at a low point. I was really feeling very emotional and alone. And when you called me, it meant so much to me.
- Narrator** Mary knows what her widows are going through because she's been there. And she learned just how much connecting with others meant thanks in part to the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.
- Mary Hollis** I was first introduced to the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation the year after my husband passed, in 1992.
- It is so important to have that support, because sometimes, you're feeling alone, that no one cares and the emotions that you keep coming up with is that, from time to time, you remember something about your spouse or a song or anything, just to know that someone cares. And there are family and friends, but the Foundation just makes all the difference.

Narrator She learned the significance of these connections when she received the first Remembrance Card from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Director of Family Programs Bev Donlon has this to say.

Bev Donlon On the anniversary of the death of the firefighter, the family members receive a card of remembrance written by another family member who has lost a firefighter. So true to our word, we are never going to forget those firefighters. It's important for families to know that someone's thinking about them and most importantly, remembering their firefighter.

Mary Hollis And for the first time, when I start receiving these cards, I just knew that it was true what they said, that they are always there for their family.

Narrator Grief Specialist Jenny Woodall explains it this way.

Jenny Woodall I think it's nice for people to have something tangible that they can hold in their hands, and so receiving a handwritten card is something that you can put aside if you're too overwhelmed to deal with it and then come back to as needed to remind you that someone was thinking of you on the anniversary of your loved one's death.

Narrator Alfordia "Al" Hollis was a career firefighter and truck operator for Atlanta Fire and Rescue.

Mary Hollis He was with the Fire Department for 24 and a half years.

Narrator Mary knew something was wrong when Al was late coming home from an overnight shift on June 9, 1991.

Mary Hollis

It was a Sunday morning.

7:30 on a Sunday morning, and he was supposed to be getting off at 7:00 AM. And there was a knock on the door, and it was three firefighters from his fire... Well, from the station that he worked- When I opened up the door, they told me that Al had just recently had a heart attack and they wanted to take me to the hospital. And I went upstairs to get the kids ready. I couldn't seem to get the kids ready. I just couldn't seem to get the clothes together to put on them. My nerves were getting the best of me. And all of a sudden, one of the firefighters said, "Do you need some help?" I said, "No, I'm okay, I'll be right." And they said, "Maybe you need to call someone." And I said, "I'll call my girlfriend." And my girlfriend came and got the kids and then we went on to the hospital. And when I got to the hospital, I saw all of these firefighters there, standing there looking at me and I knew something bad had happened.

During the time when I was at the hospital, they sent the chaplain of the fire department in, and he told me that he had just had a heart attack. He never had symptoms of anything, so it was very confusing that he had a heart attack.

He had just come back from a fire and he was getting ready to get off at 7:00 AM, and he was in another room by himself and they found him. They tried to revive him, and they took him to the hospital but they couldn't revive him. He died there at the hospital.

At that time I started screaming and I wanted... I said, "I wanted to see Al. I wanted to see my husband." So they took me to the room where he was. And I just kept... I started pushing on him, "Wake up. Open up your eyes, Al. Open up your eyes." And I was just screaming hysterically, because I didn't want to believe that he was gone.

Narrator

Al Hollis was 44 when he died. He left behind Mary and two children, Alexcia and Allan. More than 200 firefighters attended his funeral.

Mary Hollis

It was hard for me because I was only married to my husband for six years. So, it was very difficult to deal with this because so soon in my life, in my marriage, and now, I had two little kids to take care of . . .

But one thing special that happened.

My husband was the driver for that station, and they wanted his casket to be on top of the firetruck that he drove. So what they did, they built a box so the casket will not fall off, and there were several of his close friends that did this. And that was so special to me. That they showed their love by making sure that his body was secured on that fire truck.

Thinking about it now and talking about it and knowing how special it was on that day, what they did and having his truck that he... the firetruck that he drove, to put his casket on top of there, that was special, very special to us.

Jenny Woodall

The fire service is steeped in tradition and rituals that bind that community together and really define it, and those traditions become very important to families of firefighters who die in the line of duty. They have very specific ways of marking those deaths, honoring those deaths, and continuing to remember those people who they lost. I know we talked in the previous season about how the fire service is like a second family, and that family does a really wonderful job of remembering its people, taking care of its own people, and it's a way of keeping surviving families as part of that family.

Narrator

With Al's funeral services behind her, Mary devoted herself more than ever to her kids and her career in banking.

Mary Hollis

It was important for me to be strong because I know they needed a strong mother to get through. They didn't know their father long. Alexcia remembered some of him, little things about her father because she was four years old. Allan didn't remember anything because he was only ten months old.

I went back to work several weeks later, went back to work a little bit too early. And I would drop them off at the daycare and I would cry all the way down the expressway to work. And when I got off from work, I would cry all the way back to the daycare. I know people on the expressway probably thought I was crazy or wondering what was wrong with me, because I would always have tears running down my eyes.

Jenny Woodall

I loved Mary's description of crying on the freeway on her way to and from picking kids up and going to work and all of that. I don't think there's a one size fits all answer to this. Some people are criers. Some people aren't. Some people are comfortable crying and expressing sadness in front of others, and some like to keep it more private. I don't think it's unhealthy to compartmentalize grief in that way. It's okay if it works for you to do that in the shower or in the car. But I will say this. If you're trying to stop yourself from crying altogether when you really need the release of that, that's not particularly healthy or beneficial. Trying to keep emotions completely under wraps tends to complicate things, but we still have choices about how and when we express our emotions, and I think people find the way that works for them.

I also think we do want to be mindful around children. On the one hand, we want to model for them that sadness and crying are normal and healthy. We want them to know that we are also sad and that they can express their sadness with us, that we are a safe place for that. On the other hand, it might be scary for children to see their adults crying uncontrollably, and I think we have to find the balance that works for our particular situation.

Mary Hollis I didn't grieve at home because I was so busy with them, getting them ready, feeding them, getting them ready for school the next day and just different activities that they were in. So I didn't have time. And when I did go to bed, I was so exhausted, so I did go to sleep. So pretty much the expressway was my grieving time, thinking about the situation and just pouring my heart out, back and forth from work to daycare. But one day, my tears dried up and I felt better. I didn't forget, but I felt better after a while.

Narrator Mary says she also felt better because she had a support system keeping her engaged and connected.

Mary Hollis I had such a wonderful, large village, a support system, my friends, my neighbors. Al meant a lot to them, so they wanted to be there for us, and they were. My church community, I had so many people and also the Foundation.

They have been a great... Like a surrogate family to me and my children. They gave us the hope for tomorrow, and also, ways to cope with the grief process.

Narrator But Mary discovered that not everyone had the same social connections and support systems to deal with their loss. In the first six months following Al's death, she met many customers who were widows in her job at the bank.

Mary Hollis They were talking about their banking, and then all of a sudden, they would start talking about that they had just lost their husband. And it seemed like this continued on for months, within that six month period. I kept getting these people coming to my desk, talking about, they just lost their spouse, and I would start encouraging them. And I told them that I had two little babies and they said, "Well, I should be encouraging you, instead of you encouraging me, because my kids are grown, and you have two babies to take care of."

And this kept happening. And I started asking God, I said, "What is this? Why am I meeting all these widows?"

Narrator I guess that's how The Next Chapter Widow's Ministry was birthed. Mary co-founded the group with her friend Sheila. Over the years, their community of widows has grown to more than 200 members who stay connected via phone, social media, and events. Mary and

Sheila also started a weekly

podcast, tailored to the unique needs of those who have a lost a spouse.

Mary Hollis

My co-founder, Sheila, she was researching ways that we could help the widows, ways that we could support them even more than what we were doing before. And she came across this Blog Talk show. And she told me about it, and I said that was a great thing because we could reach them on a weekly basis. Because most of the widows they do not sleep at night. And this Blog Talk show, we decide to do it at night instead of during the day. And we decided to do it at 10:00 PM. And that was a perfect time for most of them trying to get to sleep. And with us starting this Blog Talk show with spiritual messages, this could help them maybe to be embraced and giving words of wisdom, words of encouragement to help them to sleep better.

Jenny Woodall

Grief can have profound effects on sleep. A lot of people struggle to fall asleep, struggle to stay asleep, maybe sleep enough, but still feel exhausted. A lot of people find nighttime especially hard. We tend to use busyness during the day to avoid having to think too much, and so when things get quiet outside, things can get loud inside our heads. There's a tendency to ruminate on things, think about all the what-ifs and the whys and "How will I make it forward through this?" Especially if you lived with a person who died, their absence may feel more pronounced at night. It's tough, because sleep is critical to physical and emotional health, so it can become a bit of a vicious cycle with grief complicating sleep and lack of sleep complicating grief. If it's problematic and ongoing, it might be a good time to consult your doctor or a therapist to work through some of the issues that are causing that sleeplessness.

Mary Hollis

In 2021, we had such a large number of widows who joined our ministry because that was during the pandemic. And they felt alone because really they could not be around their family.

So a lot of them were alone at home. So it was really good for them to be a part of us.

Narrator

Mary and her family also stayed connected to their National Fallen Firefighters community. Mary's daughter Alexcia and son Allan both benefited from Foundation scholarships. It's just another way to connect to their father Al, who often told kids in their neighborhood or near the fire station to work on their grades and become good citizens.

Mary Hollis I didn't realize all the things that he did talk to them about, about their grades. Every time they would get good grades, he would always give them some funds to say, "You did great. You did great." So he rewarded them with some money, too. Just give them encouragement to continue to do that.

Bev Donlon The Foundation offers financial assistance for post-secondary education and training to spouses like partners, children, and stepchildren who have firefighters honored at the memorial. The scholarships are awarded for undergraduate and graduate studies. They can be in state, out of state schools, private schools, and applicants can receive up to five scholarships from the foundation.

We have been able to award over \$5 million in scholarships since 1997. That's 1,480 scholarships.

Yeah, I'm pretty excited about our scholarship program. The last couple of years we've enhanced the program. We've gotten more funding from different sponsors and partners, and we've been able to award full scholarships the last couple of years, which we haven't been able to do for a while.

Narrator Mary edited a book of essays written by her Next Chapter Widows and wrote a widow's manual. She shared some of her storytelling tips in a workshop called "We All Have a Story to Tell" at the Foundation's virtual wellness conference.

Jenny Woodall

What I really remember was how encouraging Mary was to those newer to grief and how brave she was in trying out this new format. We were really missing in-person events, and people appreciated being able to see one another's faces. We joked a lot on those early calls about how we were all going to make mistakes. We were all learning it together. Someone's dog was going to bark, and someone's internet was going to drop, and it was all just fine. If your kid runs into the room ... It's been a really nice thing that we've been able to see people in their home environment and just relax a little bit about those boundaries we have in place. It's definitely one of the things that is positive that has come out of the pandemic, is the use of virtual platforms to connect people across the country.

Narrator

And though she retired from the bank in December 2019, Mary's making more connections than ever.

Mary Hollis

I have a passion for encouraging widows and others who have lost a special loved one. That's my new job. I've always had that job, but this is my full-time job, is more being there for widows and others who have lost a special loved one. And my children, as well as the grandkids. I do a lot with my grandkids. So that gives me happiness because I am doing something positive to help someone else.

It is so important to be connected, really, to a support group, to be honest with you. And also, being connected with people that knows how you feel and what you're going through. And the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has displayed that. They're there for us. And that connection has really helped me and my children in every way. Have supported us with financial information, family resources, and just receiving those cards every June 9th.

Bev Donlon

Those families look forward to getting those cards and let me tell you, if they move and they forget to send us their address, we hear it. They know right away. Update my information in your database because that is something they look forward to.

And you see them thanking each other on Facebook and they'll send us thank you. Thank you I got my card. So they're important and like I said, we're not going to forget. So those remembrance card, that program's going to keep on going. And it's so wonderful because all the families say, "I want to volunteer to write cards."

They want to write cards. Some of them want to write cards every month. Every month.

Mary Hollis

Even after 31 years, receiving that card from the Foundation, knowing that they're still there. And even though my children and I have gotten through this journey and we don't hurt. We are not emotional like we used to, but just still receiving those cards. This means such a great deal to all of us.

Narrator

Mary Hollis and her co-founder Sheila Coley celebrated the 19th anniversary of The Next Chapter Widows' Ministry at an event in Georgia in September 2022.

Narrator

On the next episode of Grief in Progress, we'll hear from an aunt who stepped up to help care for her nieces and nephews when their Fire Hero mom died in the line of duty. Carole Chisholm and niece Laurel Van Auken talk about intergenerational loss and the importance of family traditions in staying connected.

Thank you for listening to the Grief in Progress podcast, a production of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. If you enjoy this podcast, please consider subscribing and leaving a positive review. For transcripts and other episode extras, visit griefinprogress.com. To learn more about the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, visit firehero.org.