



Grief *in* Progress

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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 4: A Legacy of Service in Her Father's Honor

Narrator When children experience the death of a parent, they sometimes feel more of an obligation to care for the people left behind. Jessica Seaburg remembers assuming more adult responsibilities following the death of her dad, when she was just 13 years old.

Jessica Seaburg I did go from that typical seventh grade teenage girl to I have to make sure that my mom is okay. I can't cry in front of her. She has so much sadness. If she sees me cry, then I'm going to have her cry. My sister was five at the time. I needed to make sure that my sister was well taken care of.

And I did so by making sure that dinner was prepared for my mom and my sister when we got home from school. The house was clean. I was making sure that my other family members were okay, but in the long run, I really neglected myself. It wasn't until many years down the road that I recognized time out. I need to grieve my loss.

Narrator Jessica continues to define and re-define what it means to be a daughter and a big sister. Not just to her immediate family. She has developed her own ways of being a sister to those in the fire service. And she has found sisterhood with other Fire Hero Family members. Her journey began 25 years ago.

Jessica Seaburg My dad died in the line of duty on February 5th, 1997, with the Selkirk Fire Department.

It was winter in upstate New York, so there was snow on the ground. My family was very close, and my dad was actually visiting my Nana. She had just made hamburger soup, which was one of his favorite things. I got off at the bus at my Nana's house, and my dad was there. The call was dispatched for a fully involved structure fire.

Narrator Kevin Seaburg dropped his daughter off at home before reporting to the fire station.

Jessica Seaburg He kissed me goodbye, said I'll see you later, and out the door he went.

Narrator Jessica and her family lived in a neighborhood known as Bethlehem Heights, so she could see the fire's smoke when looking out her living room window.

Jessica Seaburg I could see the smoke billowing. It was a black smoke, and I started to get a little bit nervous. It was five o'clock-ish.

My mom wasn't home from work. I called the fire station to see if anybody could tell me what was going on. Then moments later, I had that red chief's vehicle pull in my driveway. I was home alone. Our fire chief at the time came to the front door. Said, "Hey, Jessica. Just wanted to let you know your dad has been hurt. You have two choices. You can go to your Nana's house, or you can come to the hospital." 13 years old, "I'll go to my Nana's house." So I went to my Nana's house, and my Papa was there with my cousin, Amy, and my cousin, Megan. My Nana was getting ready to head out to the hospital. Again, 13 years old, not thinking anything about what's going on. Then again, as the evening progressed, people kept coming to my grandparents' house.

Jessica Seaburg

People kept coming. People kept coming. Then finally at 10:30 that night, my mom pulled into my Nana's house with my aunt. My mom got out of the car. My Aunt Flo got out of the car, my mom's sister. I said, "Oh gosh, dad must have just broke his leg, and it's icy out. He's just going to stay in the car. That's probably why he's not getting out of the car." We came in, and we sat on my Nana's couch. My mom, just in the kindest, sweetest way, looked at me. I don't even know where my sister was. Just looked at me and said, "Daddy is in heaven." My response was "Okay. Aunt Flo, you're going to live with us, right?" From that moment on, I resumed the role of making sure that my family was okay.

Narrator

Assistant Chief Kevin Seaburg collapsed from a heart attack while setting up equipment at a mobile home fire. He died at the hospital.

Jessica Seaburg

I did not cry. I did not show any emotion. I just remember taking a deep breath. Okay. I remember just very vividly saying to my aunt, "Please live with us" because I didn't want to be alone.

We were a very young, thriving family who had just had their whole world flipped upside down. The best way that I can describe it is my sister, who was five at the time ... My mom and I always recall her taking the game of Life, the night we found out my dad had passed, and she literally took that game and just threw it across the living room. We still remember that as, yeah, that's exactly what happened when I was 13. Our life was thrown all over the place.

I think because she was just so angry and didn't know what to do as a five year old. What do you mean our dad's not coming home? Daddy's in heaven? How did this happen?

My aunt stayed with us for quite some time. My mom and her sisters and brothers are very, very close and we all live within a few minutes of one another. My Aunt Flo never left our side. She still is very much a pillar of our family. I remember the first Christmas that we had, we didn't have it at my house. We had it at my Aunt Flo's house, and we wrote letters to Santa Claus saying, "We are here. We're at my aunt's house. We're not home." My mom's family really took the lead in making sure that my mom, myself, and my sister were okay.

Narrator Kevin Seaburg's colleagues at the fire department rallied to support his family.

Jessica Seaburg My dad's death was our first line of duty death with the Selkirk Fire Department. Our Fire Commissioner, Mr. Keller, our chief at the time, literally took everything by the reins. My mom didn't have to do anything. The fire department really supported us through my dad's death. Through graduation, through the years of trial and trivial, they have never left our side. I'll never forget one of the firefighters saying, Just call us.

I always refer back to the Fireman's Prayer, where it says, "And if I shall die, please continue to watch over my wife and children." And the Selkirk Fire Department has done that.

Narrator Even with the extra support from friends and family members, Jessica felt a duty to her mom.

Jessica Seaburg When my dad passed, my mom literally became my main priority. My mom, to this day, is my main priority.

When you go in that role of caretaker, you forget that you need to take time to grieve for yourself. The Foundation has provided so many outlets for me as a young adult to grieve.

Narrator Unexpectedly, one of the first opportunities that Jessica took to grieve the loss of her dad came at a time of celebration.

Jessica Seaburg I was graduating high school and the Foundation had scholarships that were available. I applied to the Senator Paul Sarbanes Scholarship, and I was awarded that scholarship. And from that moment I was with the Foundation. I went to a conference, I went to D.C., and I was presented a check from Motorola. I had to give my story in a Washington, D.C. firehouse. And it was at that point where I went back to my hotel room and I was going through some of the literature that was given to us in the classes, and you had to write the word dead or you had to write gone.

Jessica Seaburg And it was then that I was like, "Oh gosh, he's not coming home." And it's not that I thought he would be coming home, but I was so wrapped up in helping everyone else to make sure that they were okay on their grief journey that I didn't take that time to realize. So, after that conference when I was 18, I came home and I wanted to know "Mom, what did dad say? Did he try to come home? What really happened? Did the doctors try their best?" And it was then that I started to peel the layer of grief off because I wanted to know.

Narrator Starting that dialogue with her mom opened Jessica up to other connections with the members of her dad's fire service family.

Jessica Seaburg My great Uncle Ed was one of the founding members of the Selkirk Fire Department at Station Three. My grandfather was a member. My dad's brother, Craig, is an active firefighter in Green County, and then I have my Uncle Mark, who is the fire chief for the Elsmere Fire Department. So, we are definitely a family rooted in generations of heroes.

Narrator Grief specialist Jenny Woodall says children and other family members should explore volunteering or getting involved in the fire service if driven by their own personal passion.

Jenny Woodall We have lots of daughters and sons who go into service professions, whether fire service, teaching, nursing, social work. There's definitely a legacy of service to other people. I think the important thing is a legacy should allow you to be true to yourself first. If that's the case and if it feels good to you to continue with the service that your parent or sibling was in, that's great, but it shouldn't feel like an obligation.

Jessica Seaburg I started volunteer work first with the Selkirk Fire Department. And then as I started to get older, the Foundation had reached out to me to be a peer to peer liaison. So, I did training to help other children who have lost their dad in the line of duty.

Narrator That peer-to-peer training helped Jessica answer a call from the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation in 2007. That summer, the Foundation was looking for volunteers to help a South Carolina community reeling from a furniture store fire and roof collapse that killed nine firefighters.

Jessica Seaburg Because there was so many fatalities with this fire, there were so many families that were affected.

Narrator Here's Director of Family Programs Bev Donlon.

Bev Donlon We often call on our family members who have been trained in peer support to help us and we reach out to members who have similarities and they're happy to help and they're like, "Yes, I'm going to go."

 It's just a powerful experience for newly bereaved families to connect with somebody who has walked a similar path already and it even makes it more special when they have some similarities.

 If it's a mom who has little children, another mom who's gone through that maybe can have some advice or just be there, just listen and hear the needs. Maybe let us know what the needs are so we can help. Some people are too proud to ask and having ears and eyes on family members who are going through a difficult time really makes a difference. So, it's good to put them in touch.

Jessica Seaburg I had never been to Charleston. Growing up in a small town, we didn't go very far. So, a little girl coming out of Selkirk, New York, going to Charleston, South Carolina was huge.

Narrator Jessica started second-guessing herself when she arrived in Charleston and met other volunteers who were members of the fire service.

Jessica Seaburg I remember sitting in the hotel area where all the logistics were happening and I felt like I wasn't doing anything. There were retired chiefs from FDNY to provide assistance to the fire department. And I remember sitting there and telling them, "I feel like I'm doing nothing. Like I'm just sitting here not really helping." And I'll never forget what the one FDNY chief said to me. He said, "Jessica, he who sits still serves."

Narrator Those words resonated with her. When she realized that her personal experience and presence were all that she needed to help, she launched into her role as a peer and "sister" to the Charleston Nine families.

Jessica Seaburg

I remember working with a principal. I remember working with a guidance counselor, and I remember going to a church where we got to meet the actual families.

Jessica Seaburg

I remember being there with the families and just not really knowing what to say or what to do because this was the first time I was ever in this role. But again, I was reminded by that FDNY chief, "He who sits still serves." So, even my presence to them, as a survivor, it was my hope that they knew that it was going to be okay.

I was able to explain to the guidance counselor, encourage everyday behavior, encourage them to still continue doing what they did before, because that's what worked for me.

To be able to provide assistance to the school district on how to handle these nine families returning back to school. That was one of the most rewarding and most fulfilling tasks I have ever had to do with the Foundation. And it's a task that remains so special and Charleston always will have a special place in my heart.

Narrator

Jessica's also found ways to care for herself and make connections.

Jessica Seaburg

By attending the Wellness Conference, by coming back to volunteer at Memorial Weekend. There's just so many ways that the Foundation has provided those tools that as a child of a fallen firefighter, but now an adult child, I have those tools to help me in my grief process. I met my best friend, Marisa, in 2013, at the Phoenix Wellness Conference by the Foundation. I was going through a time in my life where there was a lot of uncertainty and I felt that I needed to go to this conference to get in check with my mental health and my spiritual health, and I was able to do that in Phoenix. Little did I know that after talking with this other survivor who lost her dad two years prior to mine, who lost her dad to a heart attack, we were both walking the same shoes with our relationships, with our family history. It was like I met my twin from Texas. I love it (laughs).

Jessica Seaburg

Marisa and I talk every day. We are in constant contact with one another and it has really built our relationship on everyday things like, "Oh my gosh, what is the price of gas in New York? Okay. So it's not so bad in Texas," to, "Hey, I don't know how to tie dye Jackson's T-shirt. How do you do that?" we help each other with the little things. We connect through our dad, but our dads aren't the reason we still thrive. We thrive because we are connected with one another through the sacrifice of our dads.

We have a group on Facebook. Children of the Legends. Fitting, right? Our dads are heroes, our moms are heroes. And so as adult children, we felt it was necessary to have this connection and Marisa and I developed the Children of the Legends Facebook page. And that's just what it is. It's children of fallen firefighters who are connected through the death of their firefighter, whether it be mom, dad. Most recently, one of our sisters had posted, "Okay, I'm going through some of my mom's stuff. What do I do? Do I get rid of it?" We use it as, this is what worked for me, but this is what didn't work for me, but it might work for you. And so we used that Facebook group as a sounding board.

Sisterhood through brotherhood. That is something that I developed based off of my relationship with Marisa Harris.

We are sisters through the legacy of our dad's passing through the brotherhood of the fire service.

We help and encourage and inspire each other to be better.

Narrator

And Jessica has learned that you don't have to be a firefighter to be part of the fire service brotherhood.

Jessica Seaburg

I first became involved with the Selkirk Fire Department right around when I graduated high school, which was back in 2002. I thought that I was going to be a firefighter, but that didn't work out very well. So I changed my role and I did a lot of work with the auxiliary. I first became our chaplain, which is an elected position through the organization. I currently am our president at the Selkirk Fire Company, Station Two in Glenmont, New York. I've held that role for several years and I really have a passion for the fire service. And I think that as a direct result of my dad's death, I want to ensure that every firefighter does go home. I want to ensure that our firefighters are safe.

In January of 2022, I decided to run for the fire commissioner within the Selkirk Fire Department. I am proud to say that I won this election I am the first female Selkirk Fire Commissioner in our history that is also the daughter of a fallen firefighter. My dream and desire for firefighter safety is now coming to life because I do have a say as a commissioner. I try my best to make our company the best. And sometimes going back to a firefighter fatality opens the eyes to the firefighters and makes them realize that what we are doing here, we're not here for me. We're here for we and we're here for them. And that's something that I'm trying to instill with our department.

When I told my mom that I was going to run for fire commissioner, she looked at me like I had ten heads and said, "What are you thinking? Why are you doing this? This is crazy." And my response back was mom, this is the highest level I can go. And what better way to honor Daddy and to make sure our firefighters are safe and they're healthy, then having me on this board. And I remember getting my paperwork that I had to have for signatures. And I said to my mom, "Mom, I would be honored if you signed my first signature." And she said to me, "I'll sign, but I'm not in agreeance with this." My mom always supports us no matter what we do.

My family has been so, so supportive. A lot of late nights at meetings. My significant other Sean, he has been my rock in this because I don't know what this engine does or what this truck does. And he's literally showed me the ropes on how to get it done and how to get it done the right way.

When my dad passed, I really felt it was my duty to make sure that I was living a life that my dad would be proud of. I think that's one thing that I'm trying to instill with my sister is live a life of happiness, live a life of holiness, and live a life of health because we know how quickly life can change.

Jessica Seaburg

It's bittersweet. I so would love to have my dad here on any given day. But the opportunities that the Foundation has provided are bittersweet. I had to sacrifice losing my dad to become a recipient of the scholarship. I had to lose my dad to stand in front of thousands of people at a Washington, D.C. firehouse telling them about my dad's story as we were presented a check from Motorola that benefits the scholarship programs. I had to lose my dad to find my best friend in Texas who lost her dad the same way. I had to lose my dad to be able to attend a wellness conference through the Foundation. I had to lose my dad to go to Charleston, South Carolina, to act as a peer liaison for the nine families that lost their firefighter that day. I had to lose my dad to have all of these amazing heartfelt opportunities to still carry on my dad's legacy and passion for the fire service and sense of community.

Narrator

Jessica and her partner Sean also made sure that her dad's legacy lives on in their son. They named him Kevin.

Narrator

On the next episode of Grief in Progress, we'll introduce you to Claire Veseth, a mother who found unexpected friends and adventures after losing her favorite travel companion.

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