



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 5: A Mother's Love: Finding Support After Tragedy

Narrator

Claire Veseth remembers her daughter, Anne, as the type of person who loved trying new things. One of the family's favorite Anne stories is about the year that she set a goal to participate in the Junior Miss scholarship competition.

Claire Veseth

I can still remember the conversation we had. She said, "Mom, I'm going to do Junior Miss." And I said, "Anne, that's great. What are you going to do as your talent?" She said, "Well, I think I'm going to do break dancing." I said, "Anne, no offense, but you never have done any break dancing." "It's okay," she says, "I'll learn." And that was a year before. And she took lessons. She practiced, and it's a good thing we had a room that we could close off because there was a lot of frustration.

But come that night of the performance, she nailed it. She just nailed her performance. And I think that was the highlight of that year was just doing what she had put all this work into, and it came out good. And the crowd loved her, and she was just so proud of herself. And her siblings were too. They were yelling as loud as everybody else. But that was what she did.

When she went into seventh grade, she said, "Mom, there's no cuts in the sports. I can do anything I want." And I said, "What are you going to do?" And she said, "I'm going to play basketball." She didn't play basketball, but she did, and she did well. And again, spring comes around, she says, "Mom, I'm going to run cross country." "Really?" "Yeah." She said, "I can because there's no cuts. I can explore

whatever I want to." And that's

Narrator

how she lived her life. She just got out of her comfort zone and said she could. And she did.

Anne was the youngest of four children. She loved riding horses, rafting, camping, and doing just about anything in the beautiful outdoors of her native Idaho. So, it wasn't a surprise to Claire when Anne said she wanted to become a wildland firefighter.

Claire Veseth

When she was in her senior year of high school. Her brother was a wildland firefighter. And he told her the highlights of it. I'm not sure if he ever touched on the other half of it, but that's when she decided she would.

Narrator

Anne and her older brother Brian worked at opposite ends of the Nez Perce-Clearwater Forests, four million acres of national forests in Central Idaho. Their passion for the job outweighed any concerns Mom had about the risks associated with firefighting.

Claire Veseth

Firefighters go into it, and they give it everything they've got when they're in there. But at the same time, they are sons and daughters and husbands and wives. And that's how I knew them was as a son and a daughter, and yet to hear them talk, the whole world is wildland firefighters because they make this unit. They live for that camaraderie and trust in each other, and they give it everything they've got. And Anne looked forward to it both years, especially the second year because she knew what was coming and she just wanted to get back to it.

Narrator

In her second season working for the U.S. Forest Service, Anne and other members of the North Fork Ranger District responded to a fire that started during a local logging operation. On August 12, 2012, a 150-foot-tall cedar tree, weakened by fire, fell and struck Anne, killing her instantly.

Crews switched to a local frequency to prevent Anne's brother Brian from hearing the news on the radio. The Forest Service brought him into the office.

And so, Brian got called in off of his job, and he thought, "Oh good, there's a fire. I'm going to be called out." And then he got to the supervisor's office and all the higher up people were there, and his thought was, "What have I done?" And then they told him that Anne had been killed, and he thought they had said, "Your mother has been notified." But in reality, they said, "Your mother has not been notified." So, when he called me, that was the first I had heard of it.

It was a Sunday afternoon in August, and I was playing host for our office potluck, the clinic potluck, and Julia had been out there helping. And then she left, and the phone rang, and I answered it, and it was my son. He was just sobbing. And I said, "Brian, what's wrong? What happened? Are you okay?" And he said, "Mom, it's not me. It's Anne." I think I just wailed.

They drove Brian home. I called my daughter in town. I said, "Come home." And Brian had already talked to his oldest sister, and she was living in Boise at the time. And I was up in Moscow, and she said, "Mom, I'm going to start driving right now." And I said, "No, don't." I said, "I don't want to have to worry about you out on the road with deer jumping all over the place." So, she waited until the following morning to drive home. And then we met her in Lewiston where they had brought the body.

I still ache for those other firefighters that were there with her when she died. And it took a little while before how she died came out.

When the accident happened up on the hillside, they brought in a couple of sawyers, people who cut down the trees, to remove the part of the tree so they could get her body out. And they called the helicopter in to take her body out.

Then the firefighters hiked out and they let them all go home. They weren't going to keep him there at the work center. And I remember one of them saying, he said, "It was just surreal hiking out, knowing that one of us could be next. We're already down one." And he said, "Nothing's a sure thing out there."

It was just so unreal. One minute you're in the middle of your life and the next minute your daughter isn't there anymore. And it was a hard week. It was a very, very hard week.

You know what really touched me was someone was with her body Sunday afternoon, Sunday evening until we met them at the funeral home in Lewiston on late morning Monday. Someone was with her. A forest service personnel stayed with her. It was the very beginning of me believing when the forest service says, "We won't forget. We will take care of her." Because that afternoon the forest supervisor came and brought Cindy, who was the forest service liaison. And he said, "She'll be here for whatever you need." And I think I recognized it more later how much I appreciated them giving us someone to take care of us, because death of a loved one robs you of all practical thinking. We needed someone from the outside looking in. I appreciated someone looking after us that week because the children were as torn up as I was or more.

The forest supervisor came, and he brought Cindy Lane, and Cindy was pretty quiet. He introduced her and said she was going to be our forest liaison. And he talked about the process of there was going to be an investigation. Of course, he extended his sympathy. And I can't remember a whole lot more of what he talked about, but I do remember sitting across the table from Cindy thinking, "What is this lady going to do for us? I've just lost my daughter."

And Cindy bless her heart. She is not a still woman. She jumped in and said, "Claire, whatever you need, here's my phone number." And five minutes after they left, there were five messages on my phone all from reporters. And I called Cindy and I said, "Cindy, here's ..." I mean, they had literally left five minutes ago. I said, "Cindy, here's some names and numbers. Can you deal with them?" "I'm on it," she said. She came to the house every day for two weeks. And it was a two-hour, one-way trip for her to get from her house to our house.

She brought food. She brought logistical information. She brought solutions. She brought this person that just wrapped her arms literally and figuratively around us and took care of us. I found out later this was the first time she had ever been a liaison. She had called Burke Minor down at the Wildland Firefighter. She said, "Burke, what do I do?" His comment to her was, "Treat them like family." And she did. We were her family for two weeks because I'm sure hers never saw her for two weeks. And she was just an awesome person. We have been friends ever since. One of the best things that came out of the whole tragedy was Cindy Lane.

Claire Veseth Cindy was one of those rare people. She never knew Anne. She had not lost a child to fire, even though several of her children have been firefighters and are, but there was a connection between the two of us that I am just ever so grateful for, ever so grateful.

Narrator Grief Specialist Jenny Woodall explains it this way.

Jenny Woodall Strong bonds are formed in the trenches. That's something that's fundamental to the work of firefighters and first responders, who put their lives in one another's hands to do their work, and it's also true when we're grieving. The bonds that are formed between and among people who are grieving tend to be deep bonds, and people don't forget those who stood by them in their hour of need. It strips away the things that are unnecessary, the things that are shallow, and lays the foundation for really strong friendships. That's one of the things that come sometimes in the wake of loss.

The people we love most fulfill certain needs for us, and when one person dies, there are many different needs that are suddenly unmet. While we can never replace that person, we do have an opportunity to find other people who can show up for us in some of those ways. The person who was our confidant or the person who fixed things in the house or the person who was our travel companion.

Narrator Claire forged another unexpected connection with Ty, Anne's crew boss who was there on the day of the fatal accident.

Claire Veseth That young man has since become whom I call my adopted son. He was the one that took us back in October to the site of her death...

So, it was just a few months later. It had rained for the four hours driving over there. The road was just inches of just slogging through mud. There was no trail. We slogged up the hillside, fought our way through it was not the best of hikes by the time we got up there, our hands, our face was just sooty. I mean, here we were at the site of Anne's death, and a very gloomy, dark, dark day.

Narrator Claire's son Brian requested that he work with Ty when he returned to wildland firefighting a few weeks after Anne's death. Both men found it hard to distance themselves from the memory of the accident.

Claire Veseth

They were on a fire along Highway 12. And they said every time they heard a tree fall, it was just the shock through their system. In April, they both got the call from Boise Fire Department saying they had been accepted Ty also had applied. I was terrifically grateful that he was giving up Wildland.

Brian doesn't do anything halfway. I was very, very grateful that he was now in structure and in a town like Boise where, I mean, they don't have house fires every day. It's a lot of medical calls. He may wish for more house fires, but as mom, I'm grateful he switched.

Ty now has a wife and two little children.

He's like a brother to Brian. They do a lot of things together.

He now lives two miles from Brian up Northeast Boise. His mom is now one of my best friends. So that little ripple just went out from him being Anne's crew boss.

For me, I think grief it's a path. And at times, at the beginning, the path is hard. It's uphill, it's dark. There's a lot of rocks in the path. And as time goes on, you're still on the path. You won't ever get off the path. But after a while, as Leo Buscaglia said, "There are still beautiful things in the world." The flowers start blooming and the sun peeks out and the dew is on the grass. You're still on the path, but it changes over time. And hopefully, you move forward with the grief.

Narrator

Walking this path for the last ten years has given Claire time to consider the different ways that people connect with each other after a death—the small gestures that were so meaningful to her in the days and weeks following Anne's death. She also thinks about the encounters that were memorable because people often stumble when confronted with loss.

Claire Veseth

We have pushed death as something that shouldn't happen. I still think of this often. The nicest thing that somebody did... I had gone shopping. It was like two weeks after her funeral. I was putting the groceries in the car, and somebody tapped me on the shoulder. And I turned around, here's my dental hygienist. She didn't say a word. She just hugged me. And then she said, "Claire, I'm so sorry." Those three words, I'm so sorry, people don't realize how much they mean.

I know that we don't know what to say. I'm so sorry works perfectly well. I was at the farmer's market a couple weeks after her funeral. Two of the vendors, one said, "I'm so sorry about your loss." The other one said, "It's good to see you again." I went to the library weeks after Anne died to return some books. And I said, "I probably owe you a big fine." And he looked at me and he said, "No, we took care of renewing them for a couple months for you." It's the little things that make such a difference.

I really appreciated when one mom of one of Anne's classmates shared what her son had said about her. She said, "I don't know you. I never met Anne," but this is what my son had to say about Anne. And to hear stories that I didn't know about or hadn't heard before, it warms a mother's heart, especially after your daughter's gone.

I was in the grocery store, and I saw a friend of mine, and it was a couple weeks after Anne died, and she glanced my way and then walked out. I was very hurt by that. Me being me, I caught up to her in the parking lot. And her comment was, "I don't know what to say to you," because her daughter was a good friend of Anne's. And I said, "I just wanted to ask how your daughter's doing, handling all this." But she just felt awkward because she didn't know what to say. And having a daughter that's alive that was a friend of Anne's I'm sure made it hard for her. So, I think if you just say something, even if it's, "I don't know what to say."

A friend of mine, who had moved to California, wrote me a letter, and she said, "Claire, this piece of paper has been sitting in front of me for four days." She said, "I don't know what to say." And I think we all know that we don't know what to say, but to ignore somebody makes it worse.

One gentleman from church purposely waited until six months later to write a condolence card because he said, "You were overwhelmed with them." And it's true. I was overwhelmed with them. To have someone purposefully wait so that I could appreciate that he was still thinking of her and still had anecdotes about her, those things are priceless.

Claire Veseth

Her second-grade teacher for years afterwards would send flowers on her birthday every year. And people still to this day on her birthday or on August 12th when she died, I will get texts, "We're thinking of you today." It really means a lot that it isn't just me, her mother remembering her.

Narrator

Claire was reminded of the fact that others were remembering Anne when she received a card from Sylvia Kratzke, a volunteer at the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation.

Claire Veseth

Anne's death was in August, Sylvia's letter came in March. And she said, "Consider using the Foundation as a resource. It's there for you."

It was a very gracious card saying that she too had had a daughter who had died, and it gave us something in common. I liked her last line: "I wish you peace as Anne does. That you will let some of this grief go and that you can find peace." To someone who has just lost someone, peace seems so far away. And yet to say, "Anne would wish it for you." I could hear that, "Yeah, Anne would wish it for me."

Grief is for us the living, because those that have gone on to another life, they don't care I don't think about the life they're missing down here on earth. It's only us that miss them. And I appreciated the fact that Sylvia, who was ten years into her grief progress, could feel that.

She lives in New York, and I'm in the far West. So, we have communicated through emails and letters, mostly emails. I'm grateful for her.

The other person that connected was the mother of one of the firefighters that died in the Storm King Fire in Colorado in 1994. She wrote a card right after Anne died. She too wrote one six months later, a lovely, lovely letter. I have a feeling it was very close to Anne's birthday. And I came home from Easter Vigil and was just sobbing.

Claire Veseth Poor Jan. I emailed her I'm sure she read it and just wished she could have patted me on the back and given me a hug. she answered it. And she said, "Claire, the next time when you're in Lebanon let's get together." So, we do. When I go home, if I have time, I see Jan and we go for a walk or we go out to lunch and we talk about our lives now, not so much about our daughters. We just talk about our lives now. I'm grateful that she and Sylvia were two of the connections that I made through the Foundation.

Narrator Claire still has vivid memories of her first Memorial Weekend and the way she felt when she saw members of the fire service dressed in green uniforms.

Claire Veseth The majority of firefighters that are honored are structure firefighters, and I'm not a crowd person, and there was a large crowd there. We were each assigned a firefighter to be our accompanying person. The sidewalk was lined with fire personnel from all over.

Most of them were in blue and maybe a few black in there. And then all of a sudden, I see these people in green. And I just felt like it was family there with a hug, and they're supposed to be very stoic and very serious. And a couple of them smiled at us. My three children were there with me. They smiled at us and said, "Hello." I just felt like there was a piece of home there, and they came up afterwards and we had our pictures taken with them. The Forest Service Honor Guard is an amazing group of people. And one of my son's firefighter friends, Wildland, she joined the honor guard after Anne died because she said, "I just wanted to give something back."

Narrator Here's Director of Family Programs Bev Donlon.

Bev Donlon When families arrive on campus at the National Emergency Training Center, the home of the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial, members of the fire service stand in attention and honor as families pass through a sea of blue. It's quite magnificent to see. The memorial ceremony is the official national tribute to America Fallen Firefighters. So, it features the fire service traditions, including honor guard and a bagpipe procession.

Bev Donlon

During the ceremony an American flag that has been flown over the nation's capital and the Fallen Firefighters Memorial is presented to the family of each honored firefighter. And then fire service members from across the country attend to honor all the fallen brothers and sisters and on average, there's about 5,000 people in attendance.

We've always honored career, volunteer, and wildland firefighters.

The wildland firefighters stand out because they're not blue, and they look sharp. They look really sharp.

Narrator

Claire has written eloquently of the connections she's made since Anne's death for *The Journey*, the Foundation's bi-monthly publication for Fire Hero Families.

Claire Veseth

To me, connection is a link, and it can be anything from the connection in an electrical connection. But even that connection, something happens. There's a spark. There's a completion there. My interpretation of it is between people. And it can be anything from a glance, catching someone's eye. It can be a handshake. It can be a hug. It can be an internal connection of shared experience.

Jenny Woodall

One of my favorite roles at the Foundation is editing a publication called *The Journey*, where family members write their own stories in their own words, and it's one of the ways that we have to help combat that sense of isolation that people have. As they're reading those words across the country when that comes out, suddenly they're a little less alone.

Narrator

For one issue of *The Journey*, Claire wrote about her connection to the forest clearing where Anne died.

Claire Veseth

I go back every August. I just want to be in that place. There is something about that place that this is where she was for the last time alive on earth. And it's a special place to me. It's just something that pulls me back there. I can't give it up.

Jenny Woodall

Some places become touchstones when we've lost someone. It's a place you can come back to where you might feel that person's presence, where we get to officially mark that person's existence. It also allows us to sense how things are changing over time, and how we are changing over time.

It can be difficult in the day to day to sense our movement and progress through grief, but when we have a specific place or a specific date that is significant, as those come around or as we visit again, it's a way of marking our own progress, and how we have changed since we were there last.

Narrator

Claire has also written about Cindy Lane, the forest service liaison who's become a friend—a connection Claire never would have made had she not lost her daughter. Grief specialist Jenny Woodall marvels at this sentence from Claire's essay.

Jenny Woodall

Claire writes, "There will always be a huge hole in my heart for my daughter, but it is lined and softened with the friendship of someone whom I never would have met had the hole not appeared."

Narrator

Friends Claire and Cindy sometimes meet up with another forest district ranger, Kathy, for a summer road trip in Idaho's Backcountry.

Claire Veseth

This year we're going up to Northern Idaho up on the ... I think it's the North Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River and doing a little road trip through there. Cindy supplies the four-wheel drive vehicle or at least a high clearance. I drive a Prius.

We just have three days of fun and a little bit of hiking and a lot of driving, and we enjoy it. It's a balm for the soul.

Anne and I traveled a lot together. She was my favorite travel partner. She'd do it in an instant, "Yeah, I'll go, mom," because I always paid. And I have a hard time going back to the places that we went to because there's memories there that can't ever happen again.

Narrator

Still, Claire thinks Anne would delight in the new, everyday memories she's making with her children, grandchildren, and friends. She even tried something she'd never done before and signed up for a hiking trip into the Grand Canyon.

Claire Veseth

When I made the reservation to go down into the Grand Canyon, I could hear Anne ... I'm like, "Should I do this? Should I not?" I could just hear Anne saying, "Just do it, mom." And I think she'd be happy that so many things I've just done it. She would've given me her big smile, then her eyes light up. And she would've probably said, "Mom, I'm proud of you." And I'm grateful for that. I think she would be proud of where I'm at. And I am too. I don't want to live with regrets. So, if the opportunity comes up, just do it.

Narrator

When she's not traveling, Claire enjoys gardening and spending time with her two grandchildren. Though her two grandsons never met their Fire Hero aunt, Claire says the whole family loves to tell Anne stories.

On the Season 2 finale of the Grief in Progress podcast, Dawn and Mike Carroll talk about finding love again after the loss of a spouse or partner.

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