



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 6: Love After Loss: An Unexpected Journey

Narrator

When a partner or spouse dies, you may feel for some time like all your dreams have died, too. You spend time looking back, because the present seems unbearable, and the future unimaginable. And yet, sometimes we discover that fate has connections for us that are beyond what we could have dreamed.

Dawn Carroll was a first responder who met the man of her dreams, Jon Young, on the job in New Jersey.

Dawn Carroll

I was a medic and a flight nurse on a medevac helicopter and also worked for New Jersey Task Force One as their medical personnel. We got deployed for building collapses, hurricanes, natural disasters. I was also on their whitewater or their swift water recovery team during floods and going out to assist people.

I met Jon in 2003 when I joined the team and he was on the same team as me, but at six foot seven, he was pretty formidable. I would say hi to him and that was about it for a while. He was a little intimidating. Came to learn that he was a six-foot seven teddy bear with a very, very, very big heart. That's how we met.

Narrator

Mike Carroll met his future wife, Cindy, in Maine.

Mike Carroll

Every year, we would have this family reunion where all of the aunts and uncles and cousins and brothers and sisters would all get together. We'd end up renting a hall to have this family reunion. So, one year, I'm at the family reunion. My twin brother comes in and he's got this girl with him that he supposedly said he started dating. I said, "Oh, cool, good for you. She's kind of nice looking." So, during the family reunion, we got talking and all that stuff and they left and the family reunion broke up. We went on our way and I was talking to my twin later on. He was telling me that she worked in the same company that he worked in and all that stuff. So, I ended up getting to meet her afterwards when they were going out and she decided to break up with him. I decided to go visit her.

Narrator

Dawn and Jon chatted during a couple of New Jersey Task Force One deployments. But they really didn't have an opportunity to get to know each other until she had car problems on the Garden State Parkway.

Dawn Carroll

I pulled into one of the rest areas. Of course, tried calling my son. Tried calling my daughter. She didn't answer. So, I'm like, "Okay, who am I going to call?" I thought of Jon. He had given me his number. I thought, "Well, at least he could tell me how to fix the car and get where I needed to go." So, I called him, and he was at the fire station. He was at work, and he got someone on the phone that knew about cars and we chatted for a while. They couldn't fix it for me over the phone. So, they said, "Bring it up there to where Jon lives," which was about 25 minutes away from where I was on the Garden State Parkway.

So, I called the tow truck and I'm just sitting in the pouring rain, in my car, waiting for the tow truck to come. Next thing I know, I see Jon showing up with his government vehicle with all the lights going. I'm like, "What are you doing here?" He's like, "I wasn't going to let you come down here and be by yourself."

We got the truck towed up to a car dealer near where he worked. I told him I was going to come pick me up. He said, "No, I'm taking you home." I said, "I live on the other side of the state," which to go across New Jersey and that part of the state is about 45 minutes. So, it wasn't a long distance, but it was enough and he's like, "No, I'm taking you home." So, he took me home.

Dawn Carroll On the way home, we started talking about things that we'd done during our lives. I had been in the trauma center in Oklahoma City when the Murrah Building was bombed. I told him about my experiences with that, which I said, "In no way compares to the experiences that you had at the World Trade Center." It was on a much smaller scale, but I did lose quite a few friends in that bombing.

Narrator New Jersey Task Force One was the first team to enter the World Trade Center on 9-11. Jon and Dawn connected while sharing their experiences as first responders on two of the country's darkest days.

Dawn Carroll It wasn't for probably another year-and-a-half after that that one day, he brought someone up. As I said, I was a flight nurse on a medevac helicopter.

He brought one of the council people up to take a ride on the helicopter. That gentleman is the one that told him on the way home that, "I think you're in love with her." He's like, "No way." Then he called me up and we started dating after that.

Narrator Meanwhile in Maine, Mike kept up with his brother's ex-girlfriend but never asked her out.

Mike Carroll We were in a pub one night and my friends looked at me and said, "If you don't go and talk to her, then I'm going to." I said, "All right." So, I left and knocked on the door and she was excited to see me. We started dating after that.

She had a two-year-old son. One day after I had got us both into trouble because I gave him a ride on my motorcycle when she was at work. She came home early and caught us pulling into the driveway on the motorcycle. So that evening, her son looked at her and said, "Mom, can Mike be my dad?" That sealed it for me that I wasn't getting out of this one.

So, a month or so later, I asked her to marry me, and we got married.

Narrator

Mike and Cindy were married for 28 years. During that time, he flourished in his emergency medical services career, working his way up to become a certified health and fitness instructor and fire safety trainer. He was at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland, when he received a call about a medical emergency at home.

Mike Carroll

It was Monday morning, the first day of class. We were sitting there introducing ourselves. I was sitting beside a deputy fire chief from Camden, New Jersey. We were needling each other about New Jersey. He was needling me about Maine and all that. At the academy, you have to stand up and introduce yourself and why you're there and all that, the first day of class. So, we did that. Then my phone rang and I looked and it was the fire department that I worked for. So, I'm sitting there going, "Geez, I've only been gone for the weekend. They know where I am." So, I walked out of class and called and I got the fire chief secretary. She said, "You need to call your wife's work. There's some type of medical emergency."

I said, "Okay. So, I did."

I said, "What's going on?" "Let me talk to somebody from the ambulance." The part-time paramedic that was on that day worked for me at the fire department he identified who he was, and I said, "What's going on?"

He said, "We got her on the monitor. We got IVs going. We got her intubated." I said, "Whoa, whoa. Time out. What?" He says, " Oh, nobody's told you." I said, "No." I said, "What's the cardiac monitor say?" It was this long pause. He says, "Mike, it says asystole," which is flat line. He says, "Let me talk to you when we get to the hospital." So that was it. She died then.

I have to say that the National Fire Academy, as the fire service does, by the time I left the classroom, got to my room and got my bags packed, they had an airplane ticket for me and a ride to the airport to get me home.

Narrator

In New Jersey, after two and a half years of dating, Dawn and Jon were engaged to be married. They were looking forward to a weekend of wedding planning on November 16, 2011.

I was on the helicopter that day. I was finishing up a reverse 24. I'd started the night before. So, I would be working until 7:00 that night. Jon was also on a 24-hour shift at the fire department. He'd had two fires the night before, and he had gone over to the OEM building. He called me while he was there, and he sounded so much like a little boy in a candy store because we actually had four days off together. We had bought a house. He was bringing things from his house up to our house in preparation to sell his house. He had things planned with my son and daughter and my grandson, and unbeknownst to him, we had a surprise birthday party planned for him that weekend.

Pretty much everybody in the fire department was coming to the party and he had no clue that it was happening. And he was talking about everything he wanted to do that weekend and all the good times we were going to have.

He was just so, so excited. And it was probably the fifth call that he'd called me that morning and as he got off, he said, "I am so very in love with you." And he hung up. And 17 minutes later, I got another phone call from his phone and I answered it and I said, "You just talked to me." And it wasn't him. It was one of his firefighters. He apparently had left the OEM building driving back to the firehouse because there was a call for another fire, had a heart attack, and crashed the truck. He was less than half a mile from the fire department and they had come and worked on him. They got him back, got him to the hospital, and as they were taking him up to the cath lab, he coded again and they were unable to resuscitate him.

I went to the hospital after that and couldn't believe that he was gone. He was always the first one on the scene. He was the most highly decorated firefighter in the state of New Jersey ever. He was just that go-to firefighter in the state. If you needed anything, had a question about anything, needed training on anything, Jon was the one you went to. And when I got to the hospital to see him lying there lifeless, being a nurse of course, I wanted to know what had happened, when it had happened, but I was still bargaining for him to come back. Didn't want to believe he was gone. And then had to sign the papers to donate his organs. And then I had to think about my daughter who was just absolutely devastated, as was my son, and also practical things like what was I going to do now because we had bought the house together. What was my life going to look like now? It was like this big abyss opened up and swallowed me in it.

Narrator

Following Cindy's death, Mike focused on helping his two grown sons grieve the loss of their mother. But caring for his kids and taking over life's practicalities—like paying the bills—were only temporary distractions from a regret that had been gnawing at him since Cindy's fatal aortic aneurysm.

Mike Carroll

In hindsight, she had just started exercising and she was complaining of having some pain in her upper shoulders and across the chest. I said, "Well, what are you doing for exercises?"

At the time, I was a personal trainer for firefighters and she told me what she was doing. I said, "Well, you got to back off a little bit on the weights and get used to it before you go pushing right through," and wrote it off as muscular pain. So then that happened, and I beat myself with some pretty serious guilt there.

I question myself as a paramedic and if I can't save my wife, what right do I have being out in public trying to save anybody? And I had a real good friend that was an emergency room doctor. We had a talk one day I said, "I think I'm going to turn in my paramedic license." He says, "What are you talking about?" I said, "I didn't even recognize this with my wife. She told me she was having this pain across her chest." And he says, "So what would've happened if you had brought her into the hospital?" I said, "Well, you would've picked up what it was." He goes, "No, we wouldn't. We would've done EKGs, it wouldn't have shown anything, and we would've sent her home and the same thing would've happened." that helped a little bit. I'll probably carry that guilt to my grave. And I use that in educating other paramedics and firefighters and first responders on self-help and understanding we're human.

Narrator

Grief Specialist Jenny Woodall has this to say.

Jenny Woodall

It's normal to question the circumstances around a loved one's death, to leave no stone unturned in trying to make sense of an unimaginable loss, and part of that is looking for what caused it, whether that's another person, an organization, a natural or manmade event, and sometimes that includes ourselves. It's part of the grief process for many people.

I think there are a lot of ways to work through it. You can talk with other people. I think it's a place where mindfulness, writing, prayer, meditation can all come into play. But if regret or guilt becomes a real sticking point in grief, that's an example where working with a therapist might be helpful. Therapy can really help tease out the beliefs that we have and the thought patterns that are keeping us in the belief that this was somehow our fault, or that we had control over the situation. We're very hard on ourselves, and ultimately, however we get there, we have to let ourselves off the hook and practice real self-compassion in order to continue to live. I think it's good advice to treat yourself as you would treat a dear friend.

Dawn Carroll

Grief is the feelings of ultimate irretrievable loss. And there's all different kinds of grief with how the person fits into your life. I had lost my mom. I had lost my sister. I had lost several friends. But Jon and I had that once in a lifetime true love that I had always dreamed of, had never experienced, didn't think I was ever going to have it, and we found it with each other. And when he died, I didn't know how to deal with that loss.

I didn't know how to deal with everyday life. I can remember days and weeks and months of saying, "What now? What's next?" We had all these plans, all these dreams, all these hopes and it was as if the chalkboard was wiped clean. I do believe in God and I had been told ever since I was growing up that God doesn't close one door without at least opening another window. But in the depths of that grief, I doubted God, doubted what he stood for and how could he take such a wonderful man away from so many people.

Had I not gone to Memorial Weekend and experienced the love, the support, the guidance, and the hope that the returning families, as well as all the firefighters that were there, I don't know that I would be here today. My grief was that deep.

Dawn Carroll

That weekend gave me hope. I saw people that had been in my same shoes the year prior or years prior, and saw that they made it and they encouraged me and gave me hope. They all kept in contact afterwards, checking on me, encouraging me. I had a firefighter, he lived out in Kansas. He knew I didn't get off until 11 o'clock at night, so at 12:30 every night he'd call me up and he'd go through my day with me and see how I was doing and I'd laugh and I'd cry and I'd ask him questions. "Okay, how do I do this now? How do I do this?"

After Hurricane Sandy, we had no power, no heat at the house for two weeks, and I was running low on wood. He's like, "Well, I can bring some from Kansas." And I said, "Well, that's hardly practical, but thank you for the offer." But just to know that there was someone there that if I needed to talk to someone, I could.

Narrator

Director of Family Programs Bev Donlon provides this high-level overview of how the Foundation takes care of the families who have someone being honored at the national tribute to America's Fallen Firefighters, well before Memorial Weekend.

Bev Donlon

We try to connect the families based on similarities, of course, such as the type of loss or the dynamics of the family. If there's a widow with small children, we'll connect her with another widow who was raising small children at the time of her firefighter's passing.

We'll connect fathers with fathers who have lost a son or maybe even they lost a daughter. So having families reach out to new families whose firefighter is being honored opens the door to a safe environment where families can talk about their firefighters with those who understand their pain, and this often forges a valuable relationship prior to the Memorial Weekend.

So again, it's about getting that connection. Maybe putting them at ease for when they make that trip for their firefighter being honored, they can have that support. They know somebody's going to be there on the other end that gets it.

We encourage all the families to attend the Memorial Weekend and to ensure that every firefighter being honored has family representation, we can assist with travel expenses, provide meals, and we provide a hotel room just to get those families there because it's important.

Narrator As a member of the fire service who had attended trainings near the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial, Mike began volunteering as an escort at Memorial Weekend. He'd signed up to be part of the Foundation's Winter Retreat one year but considered canceling his plans on the day of the event.

Mike Carroll I woke up and said, I don't want to because it's an eight-hour drive. It's raining out. So, after beating myself up, back and forth on, should I shouldn't I and loyalty kicked in and said, "You told somebody you're going to be there. You're going to go."

Narrator Dawn was having a similar debate with herself in New Jersey.

Dawn Carroll I had been going to the Christmas tree decorating for the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation since the year after Jon had been honored and met a friend who her husband had died the same year as Jon. And we would meet there and decorate the trees. We both looked at that as a very special and sacred event and a way to honor our firefighters, but also other families' firefighters.

That year I was in the process of getting our house ready to put on the market as financially I just could no longer continue working two full-time jobs. I wanted to be able to enjoy life a little bit and working two full-time jobs, you don't enjoy life at all. I wasn't being able to spend a lot of quality time with my family.

Just being at the tree decorating is very emotional, I thought I just can't handle it this year and had sat down on the floor and was crying and yelling at God and Jon, and at the end of my screaming and crying, I looked up to the ceiling and I told Jon and God, I said, "Listen, if you want me to follow a path, you need to push me along that path because I don't take hints real easy. So don't send me a butterfly, don't send me a rainbow, push me." Something told me to go, it was pouring down rain, I got there late.

The person that coordinates the tree decorating, Claudia, she was there and she's like, oh, come here, I'm going to introduce you to someone and you can help him decorate this tree.

Mike Carroll She came over and said, "Mike." And I said, "Claudia, I'm decorating a tree. I'm doing the best I can." And she says, "No, I want you to meet somebody." And I turned around, saw Dawn and a spark kind of went off when I saw her and said, "Okay."

Dawn Carroll She took me over and introduced me to Mike. And that was the beginning.

Mike Carroll We talked and as we decorated and gave each other a big hug before we left. And we communicated either Facebook and text messages and all that. And she told me she was selling a house and I said, "Well, what are you going to do when you sell your house?" And she said, "Well, I want to get a two-bedroom house on a lake.

I said, "Wow, that's funny. I just bought a three-bedroom house on a lake. And then I went to a, took a trip, and had to teach a class. I can't remember where I went, but I was flying back and had a stopped in...

Dawn Carroll LaGuardia.

Mike Carroll Okay. And called her and said, "Hey, I got a three-hour layover in LaGuardia, if you're in the area, if you want stop and we can have coffee or something." So, she did.

Dawn Carroll Before we actually had our first coffee date at LaGuardia. I said, "Before we get more involved here, I'm going to give you a list of everything, all of my quirks, everything I think that is wrong with me, that probably could use some improvement."

And if you go running that's okay and we can just be friends. That's fine, but I want you to know up front these are the things that I feel about myself. These are the things that I will not bend at. And these are the things that I expect from someone that should someone come into my life again.

And he laughed after I got done listing them all off, and he gave me his list and he said, "Well, if you don't run, I'll take you." And then we had our first date and I went up to Maine and it was the middle of winter, so I knew what winters were like up there. And it was a beautiful weekend, he has a dog, I had dogs and...

Mike Carroll Well, that was one of the tests.

Dawn Carroll That was one of the tests.

Mike Carroll If the dog liked you, you were all right.

Dawn Carroll (Laughs.)

Narrator A year after Dawn and Mike started dating, they attended Memorial Weekend together. Until then, they had been keeping a secret from their friend Claudia and her husband Jeff.

Dawn Carroll I said, "We're together."

And her eyes just got big and she started crying. And then, we went out later and told Jeff when we got engaged, we asked them to come up for our wedding because we felt they were such a pivotal part in introducing us. And they were also good friends of ours and they came up for our wedding. Claudia had made up this ornament for us that had the latitude and longitude of the exact spot where the Christmas tree was in the chapel where we had met and then, on the other side was a picture of the chapel. Underneath, she had written forever love and gave that to us as our wedding gift. That's the first ornament that goes on the tree every year.

Narrator Dawn and Mike say that experiencing the loss of a significant other connected them. And being able to talk about Jon and Cindy has been an essential foundation for their new partnership.

Mike Carroll She was my wife for 28 years and just, she died, but she's still in my heart.

And Dawn having a similar thing happened with her. I think it was more a bonding and helped us with each other's struggles moving forward and being in a relationship. I could talk to her about what I was feeling in that moment, and she understood.

Dawn Carroll

And we both learned that you can love many people. We have a great love for each other that will transcend for all time. And when we did get married, we did not put in our vows until death do us part because we know our love will go beyond that as it does for Jon, as it does for Cindy.

And I think because of what I've been through, and Mike's been through that it gives us a good perspective on how to help others that are going through it, which is why I've been back every year to the Memorial.

I volunteer in the peer-to-peer support. If I can make a difference in one person's life, that they feel that they have a little bit of hope to take that next step forward, that's my way of honoring Jon. You have to make a conscious choice.

Are you going to just continue existing and living in that grief or are you going to go on living and commemorating that joy and that love that you had for that person?

Narrator

Memorial Weekend provided Mike and Dawn two unique opportunities to honor a firefighter who helped him on the day of Cindy's death.

Mike Carroll

There's a few families that I'm still really close with. one of the families I'm close with was the family of that New Jersey deputy chief, that I was sitting beside in class when my wife died. When I got home, two weeks later, I get a box in the mail that had all the books, my certificate from class, which I didn't attend and class picture and shirts and all that stuff.

He had taken it upon himself to get the class together and gather all that stuff up and sent it to me. And we stayed in touch for quite a while. I hadn't heard from him in a while and I was going down to be an escort one year. And I was just going through the list of firefighters that died, just seeing if I knew any of them and saw his name.

I called the Foundation and said, "Hey, I don't know if anybody's from Paul Price's department is coming to be an escort," I told the story and they said, "Absolutely. You're their escort."

Bev Donlon

We have fire service volunteers and returning family members waiting to welcome those families upon their arrival and throughout the weekend. They are well taken care of. During the Memorial Weekend, each family is assigned a fire service family escort and that escort will provide support for the family and make sure that those family's needs are met.

If they need a wheelchair, we'll get them a wheelchair. If they need a car seat, we get a car seat. Whatever they need, we will take care of it.

Mike Carroll

Dawn has a tradition that every year, if she sees one of the families of one of the fallen firefighters at a restaurant, she'll buy their meal anonymously. So, we were sitting there one day and she did this. She asked the waitress for the check, and I looked at it and said, "Well, what family are you buying for?" And she pointed at the table, and I'm looking at the table and I'm counting and I'm looking at them and she says, "What?" And I said, "That's my family."

It was the family of that deputy chief from New Jersey that I was friends with. They came up to me during the weekend, his son looks at me, he says, "You were in the restaurant." I said, "Yep." "You bought our lunch." I said, "No, I didn't. My wife did."

Dawn Carroll

(Laughs.)

Narrator

Mike retired from the fire service after 47 years. He and Dawn are enjoying their house on the lake in Maine, complete with visits from the kids and grandkids. The life they've built together beyond the loss of their first loves compels them to teach others what they've learned about grief.

Mike Carroll

When they teach you about grief, it's in this nice, categorized order and that's no way near correct. I mean, it just bounces all over the place. And that everybody has their own way of looking at grief and dealing with grief.

Dawn Carroll

Like Mike, I had learned in nursing school there's these steps and they come in order and there's this premise that once you hit the last step, it's done. And it's not. And after losing several people in my life, I've realized that it's more like a merry-go-round and you just hop from one animal to the next hoping you don't fall off of one of those animals and sometimes you just sit in the little bench thing that's in there and ride the merry-go-round that way. People have this supposition that grief stops and it never stops, it changes and you adapt to it.

Mike Carroll

It's okay to show emotion. We're human, we're not expected to deal with stuff at this magnitude without showing some type of emotion, and we have to heal ourselves.

Dawn Carroll

It's not a feeling that you want other people to understand. I can remember having days where I pretty much didn't like me, so I wasn't going to expose anybody else to me, because I was miserable so I'm not going to expose this person to anybody. And other families and people were telling me that they'd had similar feelings and the crying in the shower so the kids didn't hear you, the sitting on the floor, screaming at the ceiling, as if the ceiling's going to talk to you, and crying until you couldn't cry anymore.

But I also learned in those days that I had many blessings. I had people that came into my life that I never expected and are still there for anything that I might need. I also had blessings with the Foundation, meeting this family that nobody wants to be a part of. We don't want them to be a part of it. But I couldn't have asked for better family had I picked them out myself. The firefighters that always lend support and always surprise you with the things that they will do for you. And then my amazing husband who I met through the Foundation, never in my life I had expected that.

Narrator

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.