



For Love of Family & Brotherhood

A Letter from a Surviving Spouse

It is impossible to talk about myself and who I am without talking about him. I was a 16-year-old Sophomore and Russ a 17-year-old Senior when he sat behind me in the Waukegan West HS Consumer Ed class and would pull on my hair. After his HS graduation, my prom, my HS graduation, his move to Florida (“to find himself”), his move back, my first college degree, my second college degree, and six years of a mostly long distance relationship, I moved back, we moved in together, built our first house, and married in 1993. Russ did indeed “find himself” and his calling and began to take fire science technology and paramedic courses and to work for a contract fire/EMS service until being sworn in by Gurnee (IL) Fire Dept in 1989.

Being the wife of a firefighter can be a challenge given the schedule (he was on duty both times I went into labor with our children; we arranged my work schedule around his shifts and child care availability), the acceptance of holidays and events missed (remarkably he never missed a Christmas morning to be home with the kids thanks to the support of his fire family), the awareness of the risks involved (especially poignant on 9/11 as the guys already on shift—including Russ—were held back until the world knew what was going on), and quite frankly, his love of the job. I always said that my only competition for Russ’ attention and affection was when the tones went off on that pager...anyone who loves a first responder or military member knows of what I speak.

Loving Russ meant embracing his love of the job and his brothers and sisters in the fire service. It was so much a part of his identity that of course it also became mine. It has clearly done the same for my children Ryan and Lauren who have subsequently embraced a life of service. There’s Ryan, now a sworn firefighter/paramedic himself and part of the firefighter family, who worked incredibly hard and remained committed to finding his own way on the path to upholding the weight of family legacy. And then there’s Lauren, at the time of this writing a college student with a double major in Criminal Justice and International Studies, a police academy graduate, in Army ROTC with an upcoming Commission as a 2nd Lieutenant, and serving as an active member of the National Guard. Russ and I had not enough time together to be able to foresee this future for our children and while I have no doubt that his passing forever changed them I also have no doubt he’d be as proud of them as I am.

There was no way to prepare me for the day in June 2007 when I returned home with Lauren (age eight) from a sports practice to find Russ’ co-workers and the rigs at my house, learning Russ had had a seizure upon getting off shift, that it was Ryan (almost age 12) who had called 911, of driving to the hospital, then realizing Russ had lost his speech and ability to read. Then after days of waiting and not knowing, to learn that he had a brain tumor. And then later still, after speaking with the surgeon following the

first of two brain surgeries, having to be the one to tell him it was cancer. Thus, began a two and a half year hard fought battle.

Perhaps cruelest of all was the later understanding that it was indicated to be related to his 20 years on the job, that his greater exposure as the Quartermaster and handling of the gear may have been a contributing factor. As a firefighter's loved one you fear the bad fire call, or job ending injury, not what we now know with greater understanding are the carcinogens and other contributing factors compounding the higher risk of cancer for firefighters.

Those who have been through such a battle, whether won or lost, know how much of that struggle goes on behind closed doors. It is neither romantic nor pretty (brain cancer in particular often changes who a person is and how they function) yet there can be moments of beauty and grace. I remember that shortly after he stopped treatment, some of the guys came by in one of the rigs and invited him out for a ride. It was as if he was transported back into a little boy who just was so happy to ride that big red truck. The cancer robbed him of his ability to be a firefighter/paramedic, to drive, to read and write and even some of his speech, but he still hung on to be able to enjoy that ride.

And we were not alone in the battle. Many, many loved ones and friends and family and of course the brother and sisterhood of the fire family stepped up and in. It is not just as seen on TV or in the movies. It was—and is—real. The Foundation tag line "For Love of Family & Brotherhood" is actually what I chose for Russ' grave marker. It perfectly summed up how he felt and what I strive to maintain. The most memorable example of that, besides the offered rides to doctors' appointments and to radiation and chemo, and keeping Russ company, and the arrangements for child care, and the support of the children's activities, and the flexibility that allowed me to continue working and keep the health insurance and offset the mounting bills, was the Fundraiser that was held for us. It was profound how grateful and appreciative—yet even a bit embarrassed and shy—I was to receive such generosity. Acceptance of such help did not come easily to me at the time. At that time, it suggested we were failing somehow to provide, that we were unable to overcome what was happening, a weakness of some kind. Every time I wrote a check off that precious fundraiser account, I was frustrated that I even had to, yet humbled that this was what was allowing me to pay household bills, eventually pay off some medical bills, to support my children's activities and interests, to allow me to ease off work so I could be more there for Russ and then later be more present as a single parent. I share this here because this is what helped frame my feeling it was time to move forward with this Foundation, that it was time to find a way to 'pay it forward.'

It was ten years in November 2019. Those who are new to this journey often want to know what it is like to go through it, how does one handle it, get to the other side. I was at one point told by a friend during this time that I would often respond to inquiries about how I was doing with "It is what it is." I had no words to describe it then, it was too big to define, I had no good answer. Years on now, it is better, it is different, one does survive in one's own way, and eventually even thrive. How each person does it is theirs alone, and must be respected, and cannot be dictated or prescribed by others. I had to find my path to move forward to the 'me' after: heal from the role and toll of caregiver, focus on raising two kids as a single mom, manage my psychotherapy practice office, run a household, etc. So yes, there was the 'me' before, and now the 'me' after. My way included taking up horseback riding, becoming a Girl Scout

leader (now retired), getting a dog, surrounding myself with family and friends and creating my 'village'—because it does indeed take one.

My experience as a firefighter wife has influenced my professional path as well, and vice versa. As a psychotherapist with a focus on trauma work, my training and education was often helpful in supporting Russ in debriefing the stress of the job. He in turn was always supportive of my career interests. We could always share respect for what each other did for a living. Now I continue to focus on trauma work, particularly with first responders and military members. Yes my professional skills did and do help, and now when I have a client who is touched in some way by similar experiences, it is with a different depth of understanding that I can appreciate and hopefully support where they are at. It is this blending of life experience and professional experience that also supports my interest in helping the Foundation develop a Peer Support Program, so that we may help others because we have been there.

It is this life story and background that informs our creation of this Foundation. I wish there was no need for this Foundation, that there would be no firefighters battling cancer, no firefighters for whom the love of the job leads them to have to fight so hard to win this fight or, possibly lose the fight, no loved ones who have to find themselves in a caregiver role, or who have to worry about making ends meet, or children who lose a parent. But until that day, it is my hope that this Foundation can ease that suffering or lighten that burden. That truly from one who has been there, that we are here to spare as much as possible anyone else from having to go through some of what we did. The passage of time has made me realize we as a family are ready, that our healing is in a good enough place to take on this challenge.

So now is the time. There is the mounting research that has expanded the understanding of the risk to firefighters of job-related cancer. There are those hometown heroes in our community who are right now fighting the cancer battle and their families that need support. While Russ' story may not have had the happier ending we hoped for, we are dedicated to supporting those who are fighting like hell to have that happier ending. It is in this spirit that I wholeheartedly know the time was right to move forward with forming this Foundation and sharing what we have learned and helping others. And that, in turn, shows me a path to purpose as a surviving spouse.

For Love of Family & Brother—and Sister—hood.

Warmly,

Shenan

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