

A Lifetime of Surviving as a Survivor

By Nicole Keller, L.C.S.W.

The year was 1971, January 22, to be exact. I was five weeks old. My mother, all of 21 years old, had the traditional uniformed police officer and the troop Chaplain arrive at her front door. They had to tell my mother that my father, an undercover state trooper, had died while *in the line of duty* that day at the fate of a drunken driver who had run a traffic signal. That was the beginning of the surviving journey not only for me, but also for my mother, my paternal grandparents, other relatives, and friends.

My account of the first several years of my life, of course, are a compilation of several stories and eavesdropping that I have acquired throughout my adolescence and early adulthood. As the story goes, my mother had an overwhelming support network during the first year after my father death. Then, due to part possibly to my mother's age and her friends' sense of responsibility, the dating game began. Although it been said that my mother had many good prospects for a new partner, my mother remarried when I was two. She remarried a state trooper. This man became not my stepfather, but the only father I knew.

I was maybe eight. My "new" sister was barely two. It was then I started to understand things a little bit better. I began piecing the stories together and began to consciously acknowledge my part of the surviving journey. I always knew that my "real" father was deceased, I guess. However, it was during the next few years I really started to feel, experience, and understand the impact of his death for myself. This new awareness created a whole new stream of thoughts, feelings, and curiosities for me. I felt a strong need to get to know my "real" father. I already knew the antidotal stories about him and my mother and how he related to others, but there had to be more in order to feel a connection to him. I found myself reading all the materials about him that I could. I would look at pictures time and time again. Soon, this memorabilia became my safe place. My safe place was a place where I could escape, feel, and start to talk to my father about all that was wrong with my life with out him.

Throughout my later adolescent years, I found different ways to develop my connection to my father, but also broaden my journey to include to development my own private memory base of who my father was when he was alive. During different life experiences, I found myself traveling at a whim to his gravesite an hour's drive away just to talk, vent my feelings, or gain insight and clarity into various situations. I also tried in various different ways to spend more and more time with my paternal grandparents to preserve their memory of my father as a part of me. This was or is still to this day, my attempt to keep my father alive for myself, my private memory base.

It was also during my adolescence and my early adulthood that I had many struggles with the "family" I had grown up around. I was a survivor of a first responder, a police officer. This in and of itself carries an entire subculture or "family" of people, feelings, situations, and events. Internal battles occurred around resentment and judgments against active duty police officers serving in the same state my father had served. Internally, I

constantly struggled with the media because it always seemed as if they made a mockery through their overwhelming intrusion of any memorial service that was given in remembrance of fallen officers. Ultimately, I also realized during early adolescence that I would never want to become or be romantically involved with a police officer. Although, this was a profession that my father served with the greatest of pride and pleasure, I would not ever consciously associate myself with active service officers.

At present, it is approximately five months until my thirtieth birthday. The journey continues. My paternal grandfather past away two years ago and for me, it felt as if another part of my father went with him. Last month, while in Washington, D.C., a week before the annual police memorial week, I visited the fallen police officers memorial. I thought I was just walking by to share the memorial with a close friend, but I felt the rush of feelings fall over me. I missed my father, a father that I never really knew, except in my own private memory. During my commute to different professional meetings, I drive pass or through the intersection where my father was killed and wonder what feeling I should be experiencing or should I feel something more, a connection perhaps. I try to visit my paternal grandmother as much as possible especially within the last two years. Our conversation always turns to my father eventually, and I still witness the hurt, sorrow, and longing in her eyes and sometimes, in her tears. For the last year now, when leaving she will send me away with something that use to be my fathers. Last Christmas, I gave my mother an album of old letters my paternal grandmother had saved all of which were addressed to my father from my mother. When I was putting together the album I thought to myself, I wish I could have known that part of my mother. My mother read them while she was alone. Later, she eluded that she felt different afterwards; maybe she became caught up in her memories in the part of her that was lost with my father. I am still faced with different facets of my father's death and his life. For me, my journey will last a lifetime.

This story could go on, could be more detailed, or it could lend more insight in particular experiences that were full of a broad spectrum of emotions. The point however, that holds true for me and possibly for others' is that surviving is a process, a journey that can last for many people, for most, a lifetime. And that is okay. Surviving in the family of a first responder means many different angles of confrontations throughout life of your loss from immediate family, friends, the "first responder family," during the memorials, during the time of another loss, or simply during a childhood classroom exercise, a holiday, or any day. The goal then is to realize that you are not alone. There are many first responder survivors. They come in all sizes and ages. They are mothers, father, siblings, children, other relatives, and friends of first responders. They all grieve in different ways. They all have separate journeys they are following, but they all share the commonality of loss of a first responder.

A personal goal: I grew up as a survivor of a fallen police officer age five weeks. I am still growing. My personal life experience and professional occupation as a mental health therapist will hopefully allow me to help other children and their families of fallen first responders. If nothing else they can share with me their journey and help to increase awareness for others. Any comments or questions may be inquired through Dr911.

©, **Dr911.com**™ California. All rights are reserved. Reproduction or use of is prohibited unless written authorization is obtained.