

December 5th, 1997, a Friday night at the firehouse, working my 24 hour shift as a Cincinnati Firefighter. It began no different than the ten years of Friday nights I had worked before. I had gone on to bed around 10 p.m., knowing that I needed to get some sleep before the craziness of the weekend started. We were usually awakened to a run by the sounds of the bells, but not this time. It was around 1 o'clock in the morning, and our engine driver came into the dormitory and turned the lights on. He walked directly to my bed and sat down, and said to me, "Danny's been shot"...the darkness of my night shattered by florescent lights ~ I had no idea how much the darkness would consume my life after just one bullet erased my entire future...

The phone call from the hospital had been to our district chief. The firefighters who had been on the scene called him and told him to get me to the hospital as soon as possible. I will never forget that ride for as long as I live. The murder scene was in between my fire house and the hospital. I did not know for sure if Dan was dead or alive. On our way, we were stuck in traffic with the scene cordoned off. Police cars, fire and ems personnel were everywhere. Sitting in the car, all I could think about was maybe he was just shot in the arm and he was okay, because believing that he could be dead was just too much to think about. But in my heart I knew he was. The two mile ride seemed to take an eternity, but once we arrived at the hospital I felt like I was suffocating, that someone was sitting on my chest and was making it very difficult for me to breathe. As I entered those emergency room doors, which I had done hundreds of times before, all I could see was a sea of blue and white. Chaos was everywhere with lots of talking, until they turned around and saw me. The hush that overcame the place was eerie. Through the crowd of people, Lt. Chris Ruehmer approached me and stated "Danny didn't make it". I heard the words, but what exactly did they mean? I was having trouble comprehending what he was saying to me. He was extremely distraught, but still, it just couldn't be true. My Danny, who always told me not to worry, that he would always come home to me...dead?

The next few months were a whirlwind. The different fire companies in the city took turns bringing food and visiting. The police officers came daily to check on me. My days and evenings were filled reminiscing about Dan, telling funny stories about his life on and off duty. But when everyone went home and I was left alone, the sadness would overwhelm me. My sense of loss was so deep, that I didn't feel like I would ever get out of the hole that had become my life. When I would lie down to sleep at night the deafening sound of silence was so loud, my head felt as if it would explode.

That was the beginning of my new life, a life from that point on forever changed. Imagine working for years on a puzzle. You are on a role and the pieces are fitting together easily...then someone comes into your life, takes the puzzle and throws it into the air. You pick up the pieces to start to put it back together again, but nothing fits. It is the same puzzle but with different pieces. Some are missing and others are changed, but you must put it back together again no matter how difficult a process it is.

For many months, I was surrounded by so many people, yet no one could fully understand the depth to my sadness. They had all lost a friend, a co-worker, and a lot of the people who came to visit didn't even know Dan. They brought me some comfort, yet as time slipped by, people seemed to become uncomfortable with my grief. I suppose I wasn't "getting over it" quick enough. It was funny, of all the people who came to visit me, I never once met another "police widow". Over ten years had passed in the entire Cincinnati area since a law enforcement officer had been killed in the line of duty. I did receive letters from a few of these older widows. But these letters were filled with advice:

some telling me to give it time and my pain will heal, or that he is with god now and I must learn to believe. It was definitely not the words of encouragement that I needed to hear. I had never felt so alone in all of my life, all at the same time being surrounded by so many people.

May of 1998 came around, and we rededicated the Cincinnati Police Memorial. They decided to include all of the names of the fallen officers in the county and an eternal flame was incorporated. It was a beautiful ceremony and then we were headed to Washington, D.C. Here in D.C. I learned of National Police Week and the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Wall. Here was the first time since Dan's death that I actually met face to face with other police survivors. For the first time since his death, I didn't feel "abnormal" or like I was crazy. Here I met people in all stages of grief, and it actually looked as if some of these people had "made" it through the loss of their officer. There was a multitude of emotions, people were laughing, crying, hugging...it was if they each knew what the other was feeling even when no words were spoken. For the first time, I didn't feel like I was losing my mind, but that I actually fit in. I sat in a group of first year survivors of felonious death, and we all shared a common bond. No one turned away from me because they either couldn't understand or didn't want to hear what I was saying. We listened eagerly to one another, sharing our experiences. Here, in this circle, was understanding and a new found hope that I could survive the worst tragedy of my life.

During National Police Week, I learned for the first time of this national organization called COPS (Concerns of Police Survivors). I learned they had chapters all over the country, but none in the state of Ohio. I learned that Ohio ranked fifth in the nation for losing the most officers to line of duty death, with nearly 700 names etched on our memorial wall in London, OH. The Ohio chapter of COPS needed to be. I never wanted another survivor to go through this event in their life without immediate support from other survivors. We can be surrounded by so many people, yet the bond formed by survivors is instant and lasts a lifetime. No one knows what this is like unless you have done it.

In May of 1999, Ohio COPS became a reality. As with any new organization, we had our "growing pains". Getting the message out to law enforcement agencies was our first primary goal. With no budget or any fundraising experience, this was a challenge. But we never gave up. Our first line of duty death occurred when we were gathered in Washington, DC for Police Week 2000. Ohio State Highway Patrol Officer Robert Perez was killed during a traffic stop. On the same day of his death, Dayton Police Officer Mary Beall was critically wounded by a gunshot wound to her neck. She would die of her injuries two years later. What Ohio COPS does for these families is to let them know that they never have to go through the journey of grief alone. That there are those of us out there that have gone before them, and we will walk side by side with them on their journey. We have attended many visitations through these last few years, but the most important thing we do is stay with them. After the funeral, after all the memorials, after the first year has come to a close, we continue on their journey with them. We know we can't fix them or take away their pain, but just knowing that we are here, and always will be here helps them. When we look into each others eyes, there is a connection of understanding. We bring them hope that they too can heal from this pain. It has been one of the greatest privileges of my life to watch a new survivor, with no idea of how they will continue on with their life, grow to be a strong, healthy person again. And many times these survivors are there to hold out their hand to those who are repeating their

journey. Our family continues to grow. We cannot change that. But what we have changed is how we help one another.

We are also constantly working to better benefits available to our survivors. We have worked with the Attorney General's office to make Ohio's law enforcement survivors eligible for Victim of Crime Compensation monies. This law was changed on July 1, 2003. We are now fighting to gain health benefits for all law enforcement survivors. Under the PERS retirement system, in order for a spouse to be eligible for health benefits, the officer must have had ten years of service on the department or the officer must have had children. If the officer gets killed in the line of duty not having met these criteria the spouse is denied health benefits until he/she reaches 62 years of age. This hardly seems fair, especially if there was a perpetrator who murdered the officer and during his incarceration will be entitled to any and all health benefits all at taxpayer expense. This is just a small sampling of the work our chapter does for survivors. Our work will never be done.

Ohio COPS shares the Mission Statement of National COPS. We are here to help in the rebuilding process of shattered lives. We know that the grief process has no boundaries nor is there a time limit. Everyone goes through the process in their own way. There is no right way or wrong way to grieve. It just is. We also know there is no perfect sequence of events that will take place, but it is more like a cocktail with no recipe. The ingredients change daily. There is no such thing as "closure". The meaning of closure is "bringing to an end ~ a conclusion". How do you bring to an end the thoughts and memories of our loved ones? We will always remember them from our heart. These memories help to mold us into who we are becoming. Our lives can be good again. It takes much work, for there is no way to avoid the grieving process. For some it may take just a few years, for others, a lifetime. We are not here to judge. We are just here to offer a hand. The retreats sponsored by National COPS are also a valuable resource for survivors. It takes great courage to board a plane and go face the unknown. But the challenges that await us at these retreats and the friendships that are born can help to speed the process along. Just knowing there are so many others helps. I have seen first hand widows scared to death of heights and frozen with fear, climb a fifty foot tower. They are able to do this because of the support of others encouraging them to push through the fear. They get to the top, look down and become empowered. Empowered to go home and face the day to day life without their loved one.

Ohio COPS is here for all law enforcement. We offer a **Line of Duty Death Manual** that is available on line at www.ohiocops.com. Much more information is also available on this website. We also have www.ohiofallenofficers.com that lists every fallen law enforcement officer in the state of Ohio. For more information about Ohio COPS, you can reach us at 888-367-2130 or Ohio COPS, PO Box 55, Harrison, OH 45030. National COPS also has a website at www.nationalcops.org. You can visit this website to learn more about our parent organization and also about the three day event "The Traumas of Law Enforcement"; a free workshop to law enforcement to learn more about the traumas associated with law enforcement (line of duty death, suicide, etc.).

In Peace and Healing,

Linda Pope, President