

## On A Mission Following Tragedy

By: Melissa Griffin

It's one thing to learn to live with the demands of a spouse with shift work. It certainly comes with its own set of challenges, but what about when tragedy strikes? Can you ever truly be prepared to be the support that someone you care about needs when they are faced with a calamity in the fire / emergency services industry? Can you ensure that your relationship is strong enough to weather the ferocious storm? Believe me, I speak from experience when I say....I don't think so. But I am here to share with you my story, *our story*, in hopes to show you that it CAN be done. Or at least to give you a point of reference if ever you find yourself on this tumultuous path.

Maybe you have heard of the Sofa Super Store fire that occurred in Charleston, SC on June 18, 2007. A day that changed countless lives and will continue to do so for years to come. It is certainly not my place to tell the story of what happened on that fateful day to nine brothers, their families, and the Charleston Fire Department as a whole, but what I can do is tell you about the experiences from a different viewpoint. My viewpoint. *The wife of the engineer on the first due engine that fateful day.*

June 18, 2007 started as a day like any other. My husband was off to another 24-hour shift. How many in a row did that make? I also had a normal day ahead of me at my career in the fitness industry. Quite a life we had started for ourselves just nearing our first anniversary. Little did we know that our "normal" would soon be long gone. It wasn't until hours after the Sofa Super Store fire had occurred that I even knew it had taken place. Nine firefighter's lives were lost in a warehouse fire, nine grieving families, a department and community forever changed.

I will be the first to say that I had no idea of what was to come. I knew that my husband, David Griffin, was "okay", or rather should I say had made it out of a deadly situation unharmed. "Okay" quickly became a relative word. The days, weeks, months, and even years ahead were nothing short of heart wrenching. Deafening silence. Hurtful rage. Misunderstood depression. Outward anger. Alcohol, pain killers, stimulants, downers, sleepless nights, MMA, a pink Mohawk, sleeve tattoos. Who could blame him? He just lost nine dear brothers, had an enormous sense of survivor's guilt, was resisting massive cultural change within his department, and had no idea how to channel his off-the-chart emotions. David was absolutely lost and in turn I, as his wife and best friend, was too. I remember feeling so devastatingly helpless and at such an extreme loss for what was going on inside his mind, his heart, his soul, his being. There had to be some way that I could help, to no avail, but definitely not for lack of trying. All I knew was that I wasn't letting him go. No matter where he went (physically and/or emotionally), I was determined to be there. Be strong Melissa. Hold on tight Melissa. Pray always Melissa.

I'm not sure that I slept over those years. But I know that many days were a blur and many of them followed by a nightmare to boot. This is just what I remember thinking back now. Surely there were some good times along the way. Some times where we tried. Some times where we looked at each other and knew that we would make it through. I pray that he knew back then what I wholeheartedly

know he knows now....that I never once faltered in my love or my faith in him and in US. No matter what. Maybe he did know. And maybe that helped in some way, shape, or form along the way. Whatever it was, I thank God for it each and every day. Believe me.

If you have ever had a loved one that is dealing (or not dealing) with their own personal struggles, you know what that means for you. I am not embarrassed or afraid to admit that I was scared. Scared for years. That constant pit, or should I say boulder, in your belly. That unsettled feeling that you wouldn't wish on anyone. Yeah, it ruled my world, my every moment.

As I mentioned, David turned to MMA (mixed martial arts) at this time. It was his "out", so to speak. And trust me, when he sets his mind to something he goes 1000% all in and nothing, I mean nothing, will get in his way. For that reason, it was of no surprise that he moved quickly to his professional debut. That is one night that I will never forget. The good, the bad, the ugly. Wait, was there good? Sure there was. This final bout brought David to the moment of realization. Realization that what he was doing wasn't what he intended, so to speak. He wanted to honor his nine brothers. Honor them in a positive way and to remind the world to 'always remember' or better known in past years as 'never forget'. We spent those next few days, after what we now know was his last fight, in utter silence as David's eyes were swollen shut and he relied solely on me to care for him as he could do very little for himself. Somewhere in that darkness, David found light. Light that has carried us to where we are today and to where our journey will continue to lead us.

Up until that point, I was the wife of a firefighter who lived each day in a numb haze. To the extent that it nearly cost him his life. But I am here to tell you that if you should ever find yourself faced with a scenario such as I have described, you CAN and you WILL make it through it. When David was "ready" he came back to me, back to himself. Whatever "ready" meant to him and in his own time.

People always ask me why I stuck around through "all of that"? Where would I go?! He may have never admitted that he needed me but I sure wasn't going to turn my back on him, no matter what life sent our way. Was it easy? I assure you that it was very far from it. While David was experiencing his own roller coaster of emotions, I held on for dear life and rode my own.

If you recall, we were just reaching our one-year wedding anniversary when we were faced with this tragic event. I suppose it goes without saying, but we were within a very delicate stage in our relationship and then adversity hit us like a ton of bricks. Whoa – now what? Could we erase the event that occurred to put us in that situation? No. Could we pretend it never happened? No way. It effected our every minute, personally and professionally. Could we fix the turmoil? Well, good question. Not overnight. Could the "we" that we had come to cherish ever be the same? Nope. But we sure could be better for it. It took more strength than we ever knew we had. Patience. Wow. Yes, patience. Growth. Individually and together. Courage. Courage to face our fears, admit our emotions, realize that we had the power to learn from a devastating time in our lives, and yes, courage to change.

I assure you that you have the very strength that you need within you to be the support that your loved one needs should your journey ever take this turn. Sometimes it means silence. Sometimes it may require being a listening ear or a voice of reason. Sometimes it means space, and a lot of it. But if I can give you what I learned most from my viewpoint, no matter what it takes, it can be done. No one said this was going to be easy. Not a relationship. Not this profession/industry. Take the time and have the faith & strength to know that your love will prevail. You can be precisely what your spouse needs to push through a tragic event. *Together.*

David and I are *On A Mission*. A mission for change and action.

**\*This is the original article that was published with Fire Rescue Magazine. It is included on our website in pdf form due to the firefiighternation.com link to the article not being available any longer.**