

On A Mission

By: Melissa Griffin

Whether you've lived in Charleston for years, or just moved to the area recently, you've likely heard of the Sofa Super Store fire in one way or another. I'm here today to tell you about the journey of the driver of the first due engine on that fateful day. My husband, my best friend...David Griffin. As we approach the 10-year anniversary of the tragic day that 9 firefighters' lives were lost in a furniture store fire, I am honored to have the opportunity to give you a brief glimpse of David's journey. And, in turn, our journey.

This journey began with days and even years of overwhelming silence, rage and depression following the Sofa Super Store fire. It was heart wrenching to say the very least. David turned to alcohol, pain killers, uppers, downers, a pink Mohawk and sleeve tattoos. Who was I to say how he should deal with his guilt? His anger? His emotions? David was absolutely lost. And I, in turn, was too. I couldn't even begin to imagine what was going on inside his mind, his heart, his soul, his being. I still can't almost 10 years later.

During this time, we were just approaching our one-year wedding anniversary and we were competing together. David within NPC bodybuilding and myself NPC then IFBB figure. After the Sofa Super Store event, it didn't take long for David to turn elsewhere. To MMA (mixed martial arts). 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.

Now let me give you a little history here. David played shortstop for The Citadel. During his senior year, he was hit directly in the face with a fast ball while going in for a bunt. David's face was shattered, eye socket broken and emergency surgery ensued. Against all odds, David came back and won the opportunity to play professional baseball in the Independent Frontier League. From there, David's next athletic endeavor was bodybuilding (as previously mentioned) where he was crowned overall state champion in 2006. Next up, MMA, which we will get back to momentarily. Then IRONMAN triathlons. Currently we primarily focus on yoga, CrossFit and David is on his paddleboard or surfboard every chance he gets.

Did I mention that David is focused? To the extreme? No matter what path lies ahead.

David chose MMA to "honor his fallen brothers". He plowed ahead. He dug. He dug deeper. He immersed himself in the sport, in the lifestyle, in the crowd, in the rage, in the whole experience. The highs. The lows. David became MMA as he searched his soul for answers. This guy, the guy with the pink Mohawk and dark sleeve tattoos, who jumped on the top of the cage at the end of his fights, was a guy I didn't know. It certainly wasn't the driven military gentleman that I had fallen for back in September of 2001.

All of that being said, looking back now, I suppose it was of no surprise that David moved quickly to his professional MMA Debut. In front of a live crowd at the North Charleston Coliseum against Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) veteran Houston Alexander. I will never forget that night.

Although, I've tried to for years. I now remind myself to look at the good that night brought. While that final match brought David to days of internal darkness, and his eyes swollen shut, it also allowed him to see the light. To realize that his fighting wasn't honoring his fallen brothers, as was his intention. He truly wanted to honor them in a positive way and to remind the world to 'Always Remember' the Charleston 9 or better known in past years as 'Never Forget'.

I will never truly understand the turmoil that David went through. But we both know now that no matter how much more he gave to the sport, no matter how much harder he trained or how much deeper he dug, to the point that it nearly cost him his life, it wasn't the answer.

What was that light that he found? A light that wholly shifted his focus to his first step, education. A Master of Science in degree in leadership which led to a Doctorate of Education in organizational leadership and development. From there, David was given an opportunity to present his story and his research at a national firefighter's convention. We never knew where that would take us. In fact, we had no vision or intention of where the road led. Here we are today, over 3 years later, where we've worked and spoken with over 300 organizations (fire service, police, military universities, conferences, law firms, charities) in 3 countries. David has since published 2 books, with one becoming an Amazon Best Seller and my new book will be out this spring. He is also a writer for FIREHOUSE Magazine, Fire Engineering Magazine, and Fire Rescue Magazine. This has become David's mission and in turn, our mission.

While this mission causes David to relive the event over and over, day after day, he makes that sacrifice to share his personal and professional message so that many can learn from others mistakes. Unfortunately, David teaches about a traumatic event that he was a significant part of. The professional mistakes made and in turn the loss of life. The personal mistakes made that lead the way through many chapters and to where he is / we are today. This tragic event is in his head and his heart all day, every day. When he goes to sleep. When he wakes up. When he gets on the fire truck. When he responds to a call. You name it, it's right there. David has since learned to control the emotion but it certainly doesn't go without its own turmoil. It haunts him with every step but genuine honor to him means getting back on the rig for each and every shift.

Spending over 175 nights per year on the road means almost half of the year eating alone, travelling alone, living in different time zones, and facing many language barriers along the way. Additionally, 100 plus 24 hour shifts at the fire station. I don't need to do that math for you to see the true dimension of what this means for David and in turn, myself. Is this challenging on us, yes. Nonetheless, David and I have dedicated ourselves wholly to this path. David finds his peace among the mayhem when he reflects on how big this mission truly is. The mission and passion to inspire, motivate, teach and most importantly, honor.

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