

My story of “that” day and today

Hello, Employees of Harris County. Did you know that on average a police officer is killed in the line of duty every 2 and a half days? As of this writing, the United States has lost 119; Daddies, Mommies, Sons, Daughters, Husbands, Wives, Brothers, Sisters, Grandsons, Granddaughters, Nephews, Nieces, Cousins, Friends and Co-workers in the line of duty. Their family, friends and co-workers never imagined that the shift they went on was to be their last, was to be the last time they saw them. What happened to them was impossible, unthinkable.

Many have asked me to share my own story of what happened “that” day. I have been reluctant as so many have heard it over and over again but I woke up this morning and thought to myself, ‘Maybe it is time for me to write it down.’ I honestly wasn’t sure how to begin because it is so very personal and the emotions are on the tip of the surface even nine years, nine months and twelve days later.

You see, it wasn’t supposed to happen to us. We had so many plans for the future and dreams yet to be fulfilled. Our children were still young and needed their daddy. I still needed my husband. I still wanted my husband. I didn’t know how to live life without him. I didn’t know how to be just me because “I” had always been the two of us.

I see my daughters and now my grandson and I smile with so much love in knowing his legacy has survived. We have all survived even when I thought it was impossible.

The weekend prior to the unimaginable was a sweet weekend for us. He called and talked to my mom for about an hour; he had a precious relationship with her and they would joke with each other unmercifully. She would always tell him he was her favorite son-in-law and in return she was his favorite mom-in-law. I would roll my eyes at them when this conversation would come up because their silliness made no sense - I was the only daughter and had never been married before! What I would give to hear them both say those words to each other again.

He called our oldest daughter, who had already embarked on her college experience in Oklahoma, and they had a good ole father/daughter heart to heart. That Sunday, we had his parents over for pie and coffee and they were able to spend quality time with their son for what they didn’t realize was the last time. That evening as we prepared to get our youngest ready for bed, he wanted to take on that challenge. He got her bathed and read to her before she finally closed her eyes. I remember walking in as he was praying for her beside her bed. Nothing more powerful than a daddy praying for his children. Our time alone will be etched in my memory forever. His words to me of how much he loved me and I knew without a doubt those words were true.

The events of the next morning were like none I ever fathomed to exist in our existence. He was working first shift for this rotation and was anxious to get to work for the start of another week, soon to be finished with this part of the training. He kissed me goodbye and told me he loved me for the last time. Had I only known, I would have held him longer and said so many other things to him that now are only whispers in my heart. I went on with my morning routine of getting ready for my own job. The moments that followed an hour or so later are forever etched in my memory to start the most devastating day of my life.

How I got the news that he was killed is not relevant anymore but I didn't get the classic uniformed deputies at my door nor did I get taken to the hospital to see him. The regret of not seeing him is still an ache I deal with to this day. My visions of what he looked like and what had happened to him could have been put to rest if only I could have seen him. My thought process of his appearance was far worse than he really was. I didn't see that until my private time at the funeral home. Anger filled my being that all those days I tortured myself over what wasn't to be true. I felt cheated and more heartbroken that I couldn't hold his hand or kiss his face before the effects of the preparation for his burial. What I saw in the beautiful ornate box that held his body was not my sweet husband who was lying inside. It was someone I didn't believe to be him. This body was appropriately dressed in a uniform supplied by the department, but the face I was looking at was not as familiar as I thought it would be. His hair was not the way I watched him comb it each morning. There was no smile that I realized I took for granted that I would see every time I walked in a room. I felt the chest but it was not the soft chest I laid my head on. As my hands made their way to his hands I then was hit with the tears that refused to fall. Those were his hands. The hands that held my hands, that held our daughters for the first time when they were born, that clapped the loudest when one of the girls had an accomplishment, that played the piano and guitar to either serenade us or play as our oldest daughter sang, the hands that held me. This was my husband lying in this beautiful ornate box.

The reality of the week was lying in front of me. Flashes of memories flooded my thoughts and conversations we'd had long before "that" day. It would only be a few short hours before the room would be flooded with many who wouldn't be able to look at me, others who would hug me and cry in my shoulder, all giving their condolences with their words or their hugs. Somehow we made it through those hours with the reality that tomorrow would come and our final goodbye would have to take place.

As the morning came and the preparations begin to make ourselves presentable for our journey of a funeral, it was at this point that our daughters and I became unable to function. As our oldest daughter collapsed in deep anguish in what had been the bedroom that was shared as husband and wife, the three of us huddled, holding each other and crying. We had no idea how to get through neither this day nor the rest of our lives. The pains of this reality that was now ours was almost more than we could bear. Had it not been for family and close friends staying with us, we might not have even attended this final farewell we call a funeral. The girls and I collected ourselves and became the women he had always been so proud of. We had mourners to face once again and a long day of ceremonial pomp to make our way through. We wanted to make sure that we were an example of the life he lived and knew all eyes would be on us for direction on how they should grieve.

As the cars arrived with the escorts to take us to the church, we were calm and yet not prepared for what was to come. As we drive those few short miles to our church we had attended, we arrive to a parking lot full and units everywhere. I was touched that so many would come to share in the celebration of his life. I saw many standing outside the doors of the sanctuary and knew that we had to face them, so I straightened my posture and the girls and I prepared for more brief words of condolences that we were going to have to accept before taking our place. As we stepped out of the car, I knew I was unprepared to speak to anyone else at this time and I couldn't get into the church fast enough. I needed to find someone familiar and hide. An uncle of ours was standing just inside and I couldn't hide far enough into his embrace. We made our way to the family room and was able to compose myself. It wouldn't be long now.

Our pastor came in and it was time. We lined ourselves up in the appropriate order and made our way down that long aisle. The sounds of hushed sniffles were echoing in my ears as we made our way to our

seats. As we took our place in the designated seats, I felt a peace wash over me that could only come from the Holy Spirit. I was at ease and the words that were spoken and the music that was sung spoke to me as if I were the only person in the room. I felt the presence of the Lord in that room. I knew without doubt there was no need for crying, only rejoicing. Naturally my heart ached for a loss but my heart also rejoiced knowing my husband was rejoicing in Heaven, his reward for being a good and faithful servant. As all those in attendance heard memories of this man I called my husband, it became abundantly clear that he was loved and respected by so many. Their memories were music to my ear and put a smile in my heart.

As with any line of duty death funeral, we proceeded with the ceremony due to him. I listened as his unit number was retired and watched the faces of so many hide behind a tissue or their hands as they tried to hide the sorrow they were experiencing.

The cars were all loaded and the journey to the cemetery was one that is ingrained in my memory to this day. The citizens not in attendance at the funeral but their presence standing outside their businesses or vehicles along the road were another testimony that there isn't all bad in our society. People were mourning with us the loss of a man they never met. This brief snapshot of each person gave me another boost of strength. My pride to be his wife beaming with each person we passed by. The cemetery offered its own ceremonial time to honor my husband. He loved his job and died doing something he adored, died doing his dream and the honors shown at this moment were deserving of the sacrifice made on "that" day.

The weeks and months went by and I experienced all the emotions of grief. The anger, the guilt, the sadness and pain, the questioning of why, every emotion you can think of - it was a part of my existence. I had to go through the garage and decipher what everything was in what was considered his room. I would become exasperated by what I couldn't identify. It took my father-in-law helping me before I was able to get through it all. I knew there were papers that had to be filled out and claims to be filed and I couldn't muddle my way through those alone. We as a family were overcome by the amount of cards and letters that were received. We opted to write one letter and copy it to every one of those that had sent their heartfelt condolences to us.

I still had to be Mommy and I wasn't sure how to do that without their daddy. I am confident I made some very unwise and stupid decisions those months to follow, but I made my way through it. Each storm that seemed to hang over us had to be handled and at times I wanted to just give up, to make it stop. But, I would always have gentle reminders that I could make it and that I could do this. I could survive each storm. I made a decision that I had to teach my children how to face the unbearable and unthinkable that come into our life. We knew what life was like when it was amazing and they knew how to live that life, but now they had to learn how to face this new experience, the death of their daddy. I learned to get out of bed every day and face it with as much dignity as I could muster. The three of us found ourselves smiling and laughing again more than we were crying. We would rejoice in our memories and the fact that we knew one day we would see him again.

Early in that first year, I received an invitation to a memorial service and conference to be held in Washington, DC. This week long event would take place in May. This invitation came from an organization called Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.). I knew upon receiving this information that I wanted to be anywhere that he would be honored. We had already been through many other random ceremonial events, so what was one more?

Our flight was uneventful until we landed at Reagan International Airport in Washington, D.C. and as we exited the plane at our gate, standing at attention in Class A uniforms, was a row of officers from different departments. I stopped dead in my tracks, not knowing what to do next.

As one broke formation to introduce himself and ask for my things, another did the same to take care of our daughters, and then one by one each approached us to gather the belongings we carried on the plane. I think we were all in shock and overwhelmed by what was happening. As we made our way to baggage claim I saw uniformed officers everywhere I looked. These officers had taken the task to be our escorts, to face families of officers killed in the line of duty. Shouldn't this be something they dread, the sadness of looking at a 7 year old little girl who doesn't have a daddy to tuck her in at night and say a prayer with? Maybe the knowledge that Daddy isn't going to be here when it is time to walk his beautiful daughters down the aisle to the new man in their lives, or get to experience the joy of being a grandpa?

We are moved through the airport with ease and the average citizen coming in from their various cities are oblivious to why so many officers are grouped together with what appears to be a normal family. If they only knew that we had no idea what normal was anymore. We were grasping to find a new normal and make sense of it.

Outside the terminal a chartered bus is waiting and as we boarded this bus we found seats so we are sitting as close to each other as possible. There are already others on the bus, some with the same fearful look in their eyes as we had, and others who seemed not to fit in because they had a smile and chatted with each other like their world was just fine. I overheard some of their conversation and knew my first impression was far from correct. They were fine, but they were just like me, they were family members of officers killed in the line of duty.

As I listened closer I put the pieces together and it had been so much longer in time than my short 5 months. I watched with interest, yet bitterness, as I heard them laugh and talk about their everyday life. It was soon that I was showered with hugs from these people and the introductions began. Who they were, where they were from and how long their loved one had been gone. They wanted the same information from me. I couldn't make myself indulge with that information because it was too personal and raw. If I said it, I would possibly burst into tears. But, the look in their eyes told me it was okay if I didn't want to talk about it.

The whirlwind of that week was what I now know to be the beginning of my healing. Naturally, it was very emotional attending a candlelight ceremony and seeing a wall that had the name of my husband forever etched in its granite. I was consumed with sadness as I traced his name with my finger and the realization that there were so many other names on this stone wall and the one on the other side. I couldn't bring myself to leave his name; somehow I felt closeness to him at this spot. I was taken to my seat where the ceremony would begin and the tears would flow listening to the speech and the music. The words spoken were personal and I identified with the speaker. I felt she was talking directly to me because she spoke of the same pain I was going through. It was something she too had experienced. I began to understand that there was more to this ceremonial event than I ever imagined. Each person sitting around me and on the grounds of this grandeur memorial was just like me. They loved someone whose name was on one of these walls.

The next day I hesitantly sent my daughters off with complete strangers to what they called C.O.P.S. Kids. I attended my own seminars that day and found myself in a room full of other widows as they shared the worst thing that had ever happened to them. Shared how their husband had died. I sat

stoic, secretly trying to convince myself that my story was *my* story and I wasn't about to share it with anyone. They didn't know me, they didn't know my husband and they didn't know our relationship. Why would I share with any of these ladies something so personal? As each went around the room, and it is coming closer to my turn the woman sitting next to me began to share her experience. As I listened to the words she spoke, I knew that I knew this story. It had just taken place a couple of years prior in my own city. This woman sitting next to me was the widow of an officer from one of the local agencies that I had followed the story of his murder. I remembered thinking how sad this was because they had two daughters and how terrible it was going to be for them without him. Now, here I was, sitting right next to her and hearing her story firsthand. As she finished she touched my hand and gave me a look that said it was safe for me to share my own details of "that" day. As I poured my heart out with the gruesome details of his murder I could feel the tension I had upon first walking into this room fade. I felt safe and the understanding that was shared by the other women in the room filled me with an empowerment that I had not experienced since his death. As time ran out for our session, my new friend stayed with me and she shared wisdom with compassion on how I was going to be okay. How I was going to make it through this.

The next couple of days went by in a blur and we were back on a plane home. There seemed to be a new found freedom and a few decisions had been made on my part. Decisions I do not regret and am thankful I made them. I truly believe that I would not have come to these decisions had I not had this conversation with what I learned to be a "seasoned survivor". I learned this term and wanted to be a survivor, not a victim. My husband was the victim but I would be a survivor. I had to make decisions to reflect this new role in my life.

As time passed I felt it was time to attempt to be that positive role model that had been shared with me. I was already a member of this group, Concerns of Police Survivors, by default but wanted an active role in the local chapter. I soon was elected as the Secretary and then a few years later assumed the role of President.

Over that course of time, too many new "survivors" have had to join this organization. There are some that I see more often than others but none are ever forgotten. There is a kinship we all share and it is that we lost someone we loved dearly in the line of duty.

Each year as I attend National Police Week, I have found that I am now one of the ones smiling and chatting with someone as a fresh bereaved steps on the bus and it is my turn to embrace them and be the example that was shown to me.

I have learned over the years that the wound will always be there, never to completely heal, but I have a support system that softens the pain of the wound. I have also found the greatest friends I wish I had never met through this organization. I reflect on what happened on "that" day and look at where I am today and am in awe that out of such pain came such a ministry for me. I am not the same person I was then; I am a strong, determined, surviving spouse. There are obstacles in my path occasionally, but I have learned how to deal with them and count it as another victory to make it through it. I don't care what people think of me anymore and I am not afraid of anyone. No one will make me a victim to their own circumstances.

Our daughters have grown to be the most incredible women I have ever known. I am in awe of their abilities to handle life after what they have been through. I feel confident that being able to take advantage of the programs from C.O.P.S. is a big part of their healing as well.

Over the years our family has been privileged to participate in not only the events at Police Week, but also the Hands-On-Programs for our relationship specific. Our youngest daughter and I attended C.O.P.S. Kids Camp for many years until she was too old to attend any longer. She then went on to attend Outward Bound. I get a good dose of empowerment when I join my other surviving spouse friends for the Spouses Getaway. My in-laws join other parents for their own retreat as well. There are retreats for the Adult Children, In-Laws, Siblings and the newest, Co-Workers. Each retreat designed to care for the challenges and issues the attendee is facing where they are in their journey of grief.

This past May, I joined the National Board of C.O.P.S. and have new responsibilities that affect the entire organization. I am honored to have been appointed to this position and want to do whatever I can to ensure the future of an organization that has given so many families over the years the help to Rebuild Their Shattered Lives.

So many of you have been instrumental in where I am today as well. Thank you for being there for my family and being an active participant in our lives. I know our loss was your loss too.

Please consider supporting C.O.P.S. with a payroll deduction or sending a donation. Be the Healing Hand to those that are in the organization now and those that sadly are to come.

I appreciate the opportunity to share a little bit of my story with you and pray that you will hear my heart through my words.

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