

It's been nearly seven months since I lost my partner and the love of my life in a tragic ship fire incident. I didn't realize at the time of the tragedy that I was also losing my identity, my purpose, my motivation and half of my soul. After all of the distractions from the funeral process, the daily news coverage and the barrage of calls from well-meaning friends and family, life became abruptly quiet—painfully quiet. He wasn't in his favorite chair anymore watching *The Sopranos* with the volume blaring. No more texts or calls were ringing my phone. His boisterous laugh that could fill a stadium alerting me of his presence was no longer present. The silence was deafening.

Now what? Everything about my daily routine was disrupted. Any and all future plans were now canceled. Aside from continuing to raise my daughter, taking care of the dog and the cat and going to work, I've spent the last several months trying to figure out who I am now as just ME and not US. What is my purpose now, other than laying on the couch and marathoning the latest true crime series? The answer is that I'm still trying to figure that out. However, with the help of some exceptionally amazing people in the fire department, I was offered a way to possibly help others, and in turn just maybe help myself.

I was invited to a luncheon by a spouse of a Newark firefighter that runs a support group for spouses and significant others of firefighters. The purpose of this luncheon is to provide an environment where we can all get to know one another and have a safe space to share our experiences and our thoughts, and to also support each other in times of crisis. It was there that I met Captain Dayon Cobbs of the Newark Fire Department. Captain Cobbs is the team leader of a Comprehensive

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Peer-to-Peer Support team aimed to help firefighters open up if they are struggling emotionally or mentally with life stress, job stress, depression, substance abuse, suicidal ideations and any other trauma inducing situations. I was invited to join the team, and I made visits to local fire departments to share my experience and offer my support in any way necessary. I also did this to bring widespread awareness to the emotional and mental help effort.

This endeavor is a very recent development in my life, but it's giving me a new sense of hope and motivation that I still have a purposeful future. It's exciting to find a way to transform my painful experience into a way to give back. I'm also proud to show Tunnel to Towers that their kindness and generosity has taught me that it's possible to turn tragedy into triumph, and that paying it forward is not only the best way to make a difference in the world but may even help to heal a broken soul.

Cynthia Gulics

Surviving Partner of Newark Fire Captain Augusto Acabou

First Responder Family Home Program Recipient



I can now enjoy the sunrise...

As I navigate through this new journey of personal development, I find I'm being kinder to myself. I'm more forgiving of my shortcomings, and feel immense pride for my endurance.

It's taken me over a decade to return to a state of gratitude in my life. Through prayer, meditation and acceptance I have experienced growth and healing. There are blessings in the lessons, and I am able to restart and refocus as many times as I find necessary to get it right.

My motivation is knowing I owe it to myself to one day know the best version of me.

Chelsea McLain
Surviving Spouse of Army PFC Buddy Wendell McLain
Gold Star Family Home Program Recipient





When my husband, DJ, died from post 9/11 cancer on September 10, 2021 it was devastating. I was lost and uncertain of what would happen to me and our youngest daughter who was still in high school. We had just bought a home, but DJ was never able to live there. All of the plans we had made were suddenly gone. I had to figure out what to do and how we were going to keep going. Thankfully through the amazing Tunnel to Towers Foundation we were welcomed as a post-9/11 First Responder Home Program family. Through this program I was able to keep my home and help our youngest daughter graduate high school and begin taking classes at Missouri State University, where DJ was a professor.

In 2023, I was able to purchase a restaurant called Darla's Diner. It is operated and managed by myself and many of my family members. At 9:11 AM, Darla's Diner pauses for a moment of silence to honor my late husband, DJ, and all of the first responders and military to honor their service and sacrifices. Our family will "Never Forget" and we will continue to "Do Good" just like Tunnel to Towers. There is a QR code on the menu at Darla's Diner so that we can encourage our customers to visit the Foundation's website to learn more about Tunnel to Towers.

The diner is a ministry for us; it helps us focus on our relationships, and it is a place that can be used for a greater purpose. A place where kindness is shown, good food is eaten, and where friendships are made. We hope that we can share the mission and awareness of Tunnel to Towers with every customer and we are honored and humbled to be a small part of this mission.

PF Loves PH!

Darla Johnson

Surviving Spouse of David "DJ" Johnson, Team Commander, Pennsylvania-1 DMAT

Post-9/11 Family Home Program Recipient



ME – DARKNESS REVEALS LIGHT

Sometimes I feel like I'm living a second life. In my twenties, I had it all: I was a Navy helicopter pilot, living by the beach, married to the love of my life and a new mother to the most precious baby girl. Everything shattered when I was widowed at 27.

I spent many nights in meetings with my soul. Healing has allowed me to source my pain as fuel, conjure new dreams and fall deeply in love with myself. Self devotional practices tuned my senses to subtleties in this world and opened my heart to possibility again.

My journey has shown me the elegance in sorrow and how to alchemize the rubble. My hope is to help you tap into the beauty in your path and experience peace and healing along the way.

YOU – YOU ARE THE MEDICINE

Omessence is for anyone with a desire to restore their physical and mental vitality. You may be retired, working full time, a student, just beginning, starting over or completely lost. You are exactly where you are meant to be and I am grateful you are here.

Time is a limited resource. You're invited to prioritize your well-being and close the day with a 30-minute wind down flow.

If you have little ones who want you for bedtime, set up a pillow and blanket so they can join or cuddle up. Mine is likely to attend some nights.

LIFE IS A CEREMONY MAKE YOUR EVENING A RITUAL

30 minutes of gentle breathing techniques, movement and meditation in your home studio.

A sacred time to unfold the body and ease the mind.

Mondays & Thursdays at 9:00 PM ET/6:00 PM PT at www.omessence.life

Classes are donation based

Victoria King

Surviving Spouse of U.S. Navy Lieutenant Caleb Nathaniel King

Gold Star Family Home Program Recipient



Over the last year and a half our family has focused on several activities to keep us busy and get us through. Our 3 boys play multiple sports—baseball, football and basketball. They fill their time with practices and games. Our daughter has started gymnastics, dance and tee-ball. We have found that sports are their best and most helpful outlet. The discipline and focus has helped them immensely. Their coaches have helped keep them on track, healthy and happy. We spend a lot of our time at Snug Harbor Little League. So many people have stepped up and made this little league a truly special place. It is like a second home for our children. They love spending time there.

I have joined a gym and started training with Sal Toner from FC Chaos. It's been the biggest blessing to myself and my children. Our daughter loves to join me whenever she can. Boxing has proven to be the best therapy I've found for myself. It keeps me focused and helps clear my head. I've made some amazing friends, and I've had many wonderful experiences being there this last year.

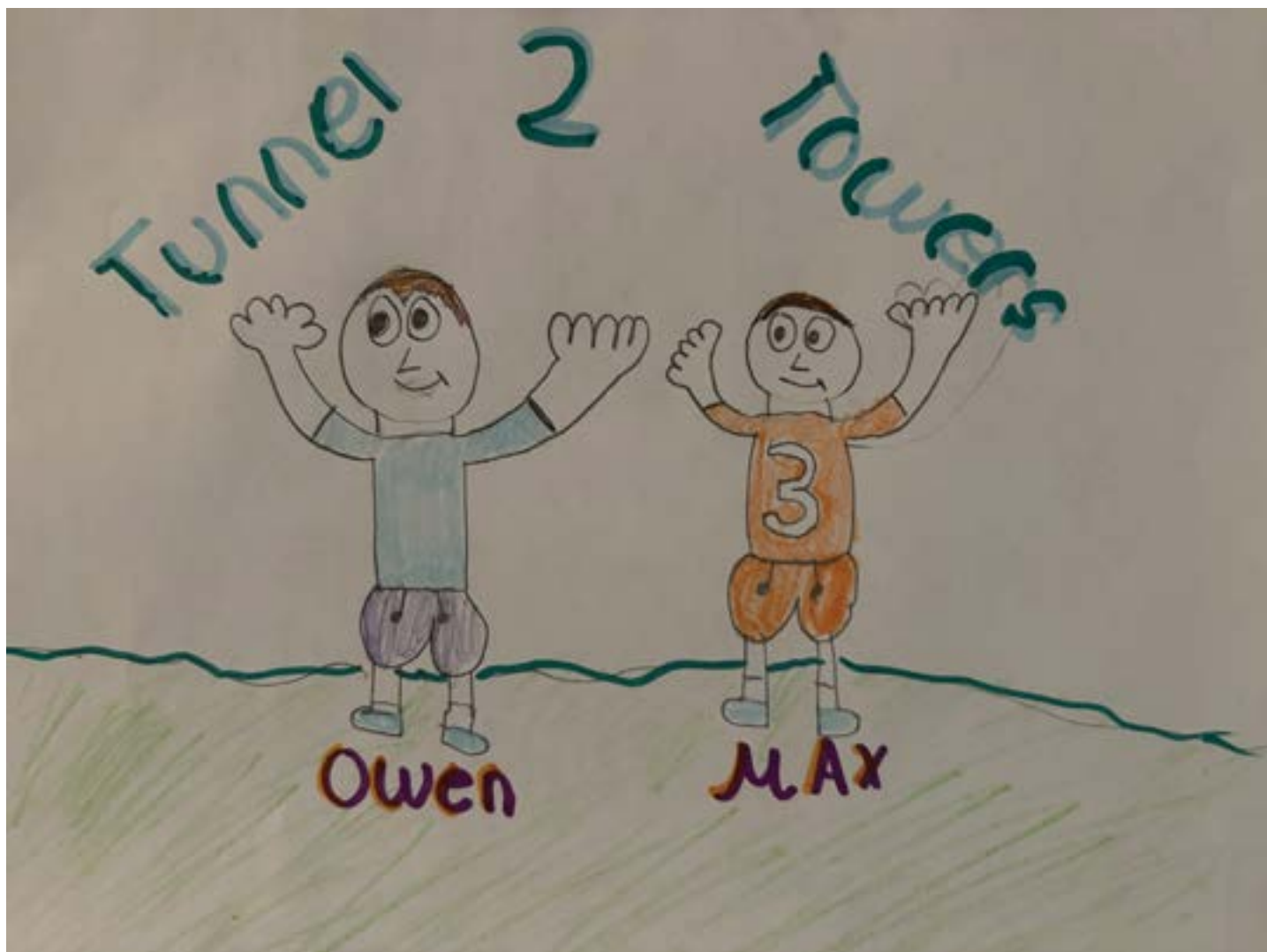
We have also started a not-for-profit in Anthony's name. We are currently spending time planning our first gala. We are hoping that this can be a way to continue spreading his love of helping youth sports in our community. We also want to use funds raised to help families who find themselves unexpectedly in tragic and difficult situations.

Although this has been the hardest year and a half of our lives, we have chosen to focus our energy on things that can help us get through in a healthy way. We want to live a life Anthony would be proud of and continue to do all of the things we planned to do as a family, although this is not how our future looked when we talked about it. It is important to us that we live for him and carry him with us every day.

Kerry Varvaro

Surviving Spouse of Port Authority Police Officer Anthony Varvaro

First Responder Family Home Program Recipient



As the New Year is underway, it is always a time where most think about the changes they want to make or how they will jumpstart their goals. It is a time of resets, restarts and refocusing of all that we want to change.

We, as recipient families, having been through such extreme loss and trauma, have been catapulted into restarts many times without warning. We have had an automatic reset on what life used to be and have had to adapt to what life is now.

How have we managed this while keeping our children afloat, keeping our lives in order, and yet still having normalcy in our day to day? We have perseverance. It is defined as one of the best indicators of success among people-not money, not intelligence, not even family history can predict success as well as perseverance can. We have been knocked down by life's losses and still get back up each New Year to focus again on what is important and learn how to push through.

This year, with almost 11 years since my husband passed away from a 9/11 related cancer, my sons and I (who are now 11) restart our year by stating what is most important to us in life. Feeling gratitude for what we have and being honest with ourselves about what we need to work on.

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What motivates me to do this work is this closeness I have with my children and the conversations we can have about how to keep going. I want to do better for them. I want them to see me as strong, striving and courageous. I also allow them to see me feel hurt and pain because that's the reality sometimes. The pain doesn't stop or go away. There isn't a timeline in which you feel better.

Individually, it has been more of a mindset that has helped with the coping of loss. These mindsets may change and grow with each passing year as I've changed and grown in who I am too. Asking yourself- who do I want to be and how will I get there? I feel making a realistic plan for any simple changes in your life is a plus! These are small steps that help you shift your thoughts and focus to something that is about living again in this new way. It's easy to fall into a slump so that's where the work comes in.

I have learned just in the last year that positive thoughts despite past loss have carried me through the most difficult times in these 11 years.

In terms of the pieces we have put into motion over the years and what that keeps us going- taking care of our health has truly become a priority in our lives. Cooking from home, sitting down for dinners as often as we can, making meaning in even a simple meal or having connectivity for that time is one of the most important goals for me and for my kids. The simplicity of life, family moments or a beautiful day just feel different now. It feels special as if it were created for us.

I am most grateful for this opportunity to write my thoughts and share them with families who struggle every day. No one can truly understand but one another.

We will have a gratitude for the Tunnel to Towers organization that goes well beyond a thank you. There isn't a thank you appropriate enough.

Luisa Cioffi
Surviving Spouse of NYPD Lieutenant Steven L. Cioffi
Post 9/11 Family Home Program Recipient

Illustration by Max and Owen Cioffi
Surviving Children of NYPD Lieutenant Steven L. Cioffi
Post 9/11 Family Home Program Recipient

Russell F. Siller Memorial Scholarships



Russell F. Siller was an educator for fifty years who believed in encouraging leadership, inspiring others, the importance of education and living a life of service.

The **Russell F. Siller Memorial Scholarships** strive to honor his memory by finding passionate individuals who share in Russell's love of education and selflessness.

The scholarship seeks to award the children of recipients of the Tunnel to Towers Foundation's **In the Line of Duty Home Program** who are doing good. Applicants chosen will demonstrate that they are contributing their time and effort to making a difference by spreading awareness to a community-based issue.

Applicants are asked to showcase community service to others by creating a meaningful act/project that is beneficial to spreading awareness to their cause and then creating a clear and concise video of themselves which is no longer than five (5) minutes, detailing:

- What the chosen project/act is and why they chose it
- What method(s) they used to spread awareness for their cause and its effectiveness
- What impact their endeavor had on others
- How this endeavor can be beneficial to them in the future
- How this endeavor helped them develop as a leader

Applicants are asked to focus more on the effort they put into their project and not the overall results of their endeavor.

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Eligibility:

Applicants must be the child of an accepted Tunnel to Towers Foundation In the Line of Duty Home Program recipient and should be a High School Junior or Senior with a GPA of 3.0 (B) or higher. Home schooled students of the equivalent grade and GPA average are also eligible to apply.

Deadline for Applications:

Entries for the 2024 scholarship begin **March 14th at 9:00 AM EST** and end **March 21st at 11:59 PM EST.**

Scholarship Selection:

The Tunnel to Towers Foundation has a panel of judges to view each video submission and deliberate to select a smaller group of applicants to be selected as finalists. In addition to eligibility, finalists must submit proof of schooling and two (2) letters of recommendation detailing why the applicant would be a fitting candidate for The Russell F. Siller Memorial Scholarships. Finalists will be notified with instructions by April 22, 2024 via email.

Scholarship recipients will be chosen based on the content and creativity of the projects/acts performed, how well the applicant articulates the importance of their mission, and how the chosen endeavor reflects the overall theme of social advocacy. The number of awards given can vary per year. Scholarship awardees will be notified by May 15, 2024 via email.

All information about the Russell F. Siller Memorial Scholarships, the official rules, and FAQs can be found [here](#).

