

TWO MORE CHAINS

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Suicide in the Wildland Fire Service

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Dear Reader,

A while back I got a phone call from a researcher who introduced himself and said: "I'm working on a project and I need data on suicide with wildland firefighters." I stumbled a bit, and then replied: "I'm sorry sir, we don't have any data on wildland firefighter suicides." His reply: "But you're the Director of the Lessons Learned Center. You must have some data." I suggested a few other folks that he could contact and wished him a good day.

That phone call prompted many thoughts—and significant questions.

After a few long and emotional meetings with my LLC Team, we've decided to address "Suicide in the Wildland Fire Service" in this issue of *Two More Chains*.

We don't have the data and are not the experts on this matter. So we reached out to several subject matter experts in this field and asked them to share their perspectives and efforts to tackle the stigma of suicide in our culture. To see their much appreciated and insightful input, please go to this link: [SME Insights and Info for Two More Chains](#).

As you will see, the heart of our Spring Issue is found in the true life experiences that several people shared with us, with you. We are deeply grateful to these folks for enlightening us with their heartfelt stories, their compassionate lessons.



Brit Rosso,
Center Director

Are You Uncomfortable Addressing the Topic of Mental Health?

In researching suicide in the wildland fire service for this issue of *Two More Chains*, it has been brought to our attention that, in some cases, a stigma regarding employee suicide has been observed not so much among young firefighters—who, it is said, are more open to addressing their emotions—but among some more senior wildland fire and agency managers who are apparently uncomfortable addressing the topic of mental health.

Unfortunately, we have learned that, in at least one instance, a fire manager believed that a firefighter who had died by suicide should not be entitled to an honor guard or a memorial stone in the Wildland Firefighter Foundation monument at NIFC, "because it would dishonor those who died innocently." Similarly, we have heard about fire managers who have declined offers of free critical stress debriefings for their staff after a coworker suicide—without even asking their staff.

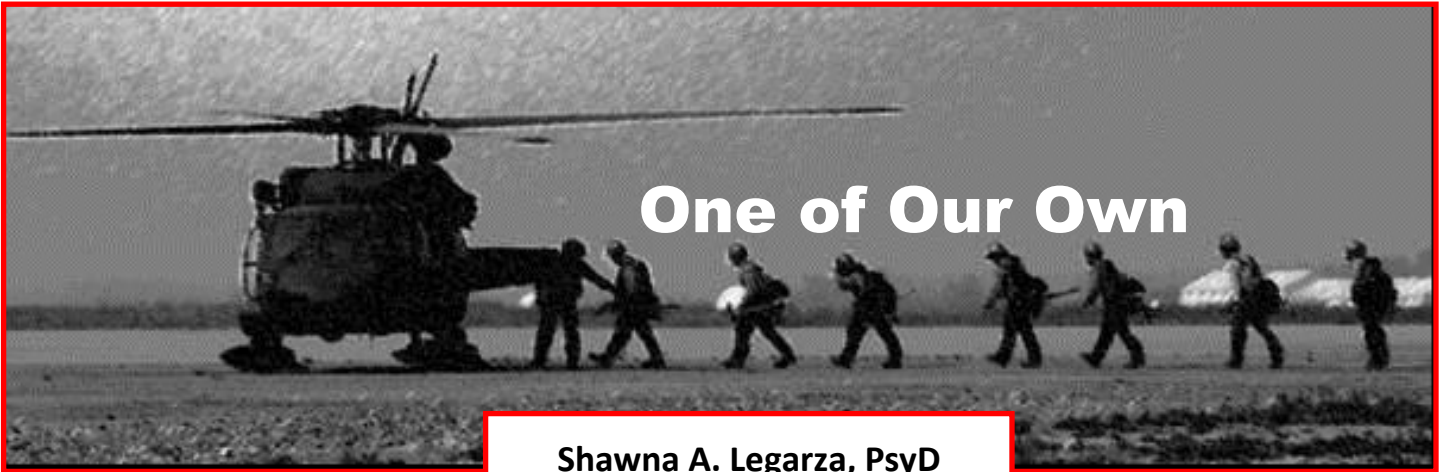
It's also been brought to our attention that employees have been directed not to send emails that contain information about someone dying by suicide or to mention it in staff meetings—even though the victim's family has been open about their family member's cause of death.

We hope and believe that these are isolated incidents. That they are exceptions to the positive efforts that our fire agencies are currently pursuing—reflected throughout the input from our agency SMEs that is shared in this issue's "[SME Insights and Info](#)" document. (See explanation about this companion report in box above.)

By openly addressing the topic of mental health among our employees we can embrace the notion that this issue is no different than any other injury or disease.

We need to help ensure that all of our managers and senior leaders are on board with this enlightened perspective. We should not blame the victim, or treat the person in pain as "weak," or otherwise refuse to acknowledge their mental health problems.

To be sure, if safety is truly our top priority, then it is our duty to take care of all of our people.



Shawna A. Legarza, PsyD



Husband and Wife—Firefighters Marc Mullenix and Shawna Legarza met in 2001 when they were both assigned to the World Trade Center Recovery Effort incident. Marc ended his life by suicide in January 2008.

[Editor’s Note: We wish to express a grateful and sincere thank you to Shawna for her openness in sharing her story of losing her husband Marc Mullenix to suicide. Shawna’s candor in revealing how she was able to continue with her own life in the aftermath of Marc’s death provides us all invaluable lessons in the importance of positive perseverance, determination, and hope. As you will see in this article, Shawna’s continued efforts and dedication to mental health awareness and suicide prevention reveal how she was able to transition this personal tragedy into a successful concerted effort to help others in need.]

Sharing Her Suicide Story

By Paul Keller

Shawna Legarza often remarks, “I am just an overeducated hotshot.”

Raised on her family’s cattle ranch at the base of the Ruby Mountains outside Elko, Nevada, she launched her wildland fire career when she was 18 on a BLM Engine. Next, Shawna worked on a Helitack crew before joining the Hotshot ranks, starting as a crewmember on the Black Mountain Interagency Hotshot Crew, and eventually becoming the Superintendent of the San Juan Interagency Hotshot Crew.

Initially, during her fire years, she was hitting the books big time during the off-season. First, Shawna pulled down a Bachelor of Science degree in Exercise Physiology from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas and, also, her Master of Science degree in Kinesiology from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, as a GS-05 Squad Boss. (“Kinesiology” is the scientific study of the human body movement that addresses the physiological, biomechanical, and psychological mechanisms of movement. Translation: You learn the keys to optimal health and disease prevention by studying human movement and its effect on health. “The psychology of the mind,” Shawna explains, “is connected to the physiology of the body through your nervous system and it helps keep your immune system functioning.”)

Even though she was totally at home in academia and could have followed either of her degree paths, in Shawna’s case, the pull and love of wildland fire proved to be a bigger career influence.

Shawna ended up continuing to pursue leadership roles in fire by becoming a District Fire Management Officer on the San Juan National Forest in Colorado and then a Forest Fire Management Officer on the San Bernardino National Forest **[Continued on Page 3]**

GROUND TRUTHS

Travis Dotson’s “Ground Truths” column that normally appears on this page will return in our next issue.



Shawna Legarza, Superintendent of the San Juan Hotshots, on the 2002 Trinidad Complex.
(Kari Greer Photo)

[Continued from Page 2] in Southern California. She then bumped up to become the Deputy Director and was later promoted to be the Regional Director of Fire and Aviation Management for the Pacific Southwest Region.

Last July, this former hotshot's skills and savvy took her to the top of the agency's leadership food chain in fire. Shawna was named the national Director of Fire and Aviation Management for the U.S. Forest Service.

They Meet at the World Trade Center Recovery Incident

Back in 2001, in the aftermath of the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks, while working on the Alaska Type 1 Team, Shawna spent one month at Ground Zero helping with recovery efforts at the World Trade Center. During this time, on this incident, she met fellow

firefighter Marc Mullenix. "Marc was an amazing person," Shawna says today. "And he was an amazing leader. He was such a wise, forward-thinking individual."

These two firefighters found they had a mutual attraction. They became sweethearts. They became husband and wife.

Marc's fire resume included working as the Wildland Fire Division Chief for the Boulder (Colorado) Fire Department and the Fire Management Officer at Mesa Verde National Park. He was the IC of a Type 2 Incident Management Team. In 2007, he served as a Type 1 IC Trainee on Kim Martin's Team.

Shawna confides that she talked to Marc about seeking professional mental health counseling because she "couldn't provide the help that he needed." She says she kept asking him to get help. "But, you know," she reflects, "often in our firefighting culture, you don't want anyone outside your circle of loved ones to know that you need this type of help."

"If people reach out to me who might be having a difficult time, it's so important that they realize they can make it. They just have to really take care of themselves—and make it through."

Shawna continues, "That's why today I really try to talk about that with folks. If people reach out to me who might be having a difficult time, it's so important that they realize they can make it. They just have to really take care of themselves—and make it through."

Marc Takes His Life By Suicide

In January of 2008, when Shawna was the Superintendent of the San Juan Interagency Hotshot Crew, Marc took his life by suicide.

By the second day after Marc's death, Shawna says that she had "cried and cried" so much that her head literally hurt.

She confides that she experienced the "survivor's guilt" that loved ones typically experience after a suicide. "You start to second-guess yourself: 'I should have said this. Why didn't I do that? Or, how about this?'" Shawna believes that, in her case, she was lucky to have parents who had raised her with the strong belief that, ultimately, we are the ones in control of our own decisions.

"I was aware that some people took this survivor's guilt a little too far," Shawna says. "That's why I knew that I needed to take care of myself and stay on the path of life."

Shawna says that she will always be grateful to her hotshot crew, her family, many Forest Service employees, and "a couple key people in my life" for helping her pull through.

"I was aware that some people took this survivor's guilt a little too far. That's why I knew that I needed to take care of myself and stay on the path of life."

At first, Shawna took some time off from running the hotshot crew. "I was pretty much a wreck. I knew that I wasn't mentally fit to run my crew." During this time, Shawna confides that she "got into a pretty depressive state of mind."

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“I knew that I didn’t want anyone else to have to go through what I had gone through. So I made the decision to start the Wildland Firefighter Foundation’s ‘The Life Challenge Program’.”

[Continued from Page 3] Always one to be proactive and pursue learning, Shawna started doing her own research into suicide survivors.

“The books I read warned of survivors who turn to alcohol and drugs. I refused to be that person. I knew that I needed something to keep myself focused and goal-oriented.” This quest for knowledge introduced Shawna to the book “No Time to Say Goodbye –Surviving the Suicide of a Loved One” by Carla Fine.

She Starts the “Wildland Firefighter Life Challenge Program”

Shawna read Carla Fine’s book four months after Marc’s suicide. “This book had stories of suicide survivors who lost their jobs, went bankrupt, got addicted to drugs and alcohol—their entire lives just got completely out of whack,” she says.

“It was like this lightbulb went off in me. I knew I had to do something for myself to be challenged. I knew I had to do something in my after-work hours. I needed to do something positive to fill that space. And I knew that I didn’t want anyone else to have to go through what I had gone through. So I made the decision to start the Wildland Firefighter Foundation’s ‘The Life Challenge Program’.”

“My vision for the Life Challenge Program is to have a place—hosted by the Wildland Firefighter Foundation—where we can take care of our employees,” Shawna explains. “Where doctors of psychology and practicing mental health clinicians can be available for our people—in addition to the Employee Assistance Program. We will absolutely always need the EAP. The Life Challenge Program can provide another place where our employees can go to get help and work through some of their challenges.”

Motivation to Pursue Her Doctorate in Psychology

Back in 2009, Shawna started to pursue her Doctorate in Psychology. “To go back to school and get that degree was probably the biggest, most important decision I made back then,” she points out.

Excerpts from Shawna’s 2008 ‘Coping With Change’ Article

“As we balance our fate and ideology as an agency, we need to allow time for personal reflection and remember our fundamental priorities. I believe we need to be the leaders of organizational and systematic change. We need to continue to develop the wildland firefighting culture within our doctrine to take better care of ourselves, our families, and our employees.”

“During your career, the connection between challenges in your personal life and organizational changes in your professional career may evolve into a complex web of confusion that could become highly stressful and profoundly unhealthy.”

“With the competitively based subculture of firefighting, we often forget to take care of ourselves and others because we, too, have become obsessed with trying to understand and keep up with all the changes that make us uneasy and, sometimes, outright unmanageable.”

“As leaders in Fire and Aviation Management, we need to continue to embrace change while educating our employees about taking effective care of themselves and their employees.”



In July of 2016, Shawna became the national Director of Fire and Aviation Management for the U.S. Forest Service.

“One of the main reasons why I went back to school in psychology was because I wanted to know more about how the mind works—and how we can help. The brain is a very powerful organ. I wanted to learn more about how we help control our mind to help control our life. For a lot of folks, that’s a never-ending feat.”

Shawna worked toward this degree at night and attended classes when she could. “Pursuing that degree gave me something to really focus my energy on in a positive—rather than negative—way. I’m proud of the gift of genetics that my parents have given me to be able to see that I needed to continue to move forward in my life. I’m really proud of being able to do that.”

Shawna graduated with her Doctorate of Psychology in 2013.

Fire Management Today Article

In the summer following Marc’s death, Shawna also penned an article for *Fire Management Today* entitled [“Coping With Change.”](#)

“I wrote that article because I had seen so many cases in our organization where people were becoming addicted to ‘the speed of change’.”

Shawna said she realized that people were constantly going so fast in—and were so preoccupied with—their jobs. “It’s like that speed becomes its own drug,” she explains.

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Shawna believes that when it comes to fireline strategies and tactics we want our firefighters to be the best in the world. But we also need to think about their tools for mental fitness. (Kari Greer Photo)

[Continued from Page 4] “You just keep going and going. The inputs are coming in and you’re constantly responding to them. It’s almost like you can’t turn that faucet off.”

Shawna said she became aware of how people were neglecting their families and their personal lives. They weren’t taking time out from the pressures of this “speed of change.”

“If we let our jobs control us,” Shawna warns, “they will. So how do we manage that? We can’t let our jobs stress us out. That was one of the main messages in my *Fire Management Today* article.”

It’s OK to Ask for Help

Shawna says she believes that we’ve made a lot of progress regarding suicide prevention awareness since her husband took his life.

“When Marc’s suicide happened,” she says, “people were afraid to even say the word ‘suicide.’” Shawna explains that for several months after Marc’s death, she’d go into offices and people couldn’t look at her. “And I couldn’t really look at them,” Shawna acknowledges.

“I think that there’s more awareness of taking care of each other now—and taking care of ourselves—than there was in the past. But I also realize that we still have a long way to go.”

Shawna continues, “As wildland firefighters, we’ve always been people who like the hard assignments. But, you know, over time these tough assignments, these things that we see and do in our careers, can start to wear you down. What I think we can do moving forward is have more awareness about the fact that it’s OK to ask for help if you think you need help.”

Shawna admits that she’s not sure if, as a culture, we’re truly there yet.

“We’re still this ‘Can Do’ workforce and we don’t want to be seen as a weakness

in this workforce. We don’t want people to think that we’re ‘weak.’ So we keep going and going and going in the trenches.”

“Regarding fireline strategies and tactics, we want our firefighters to be the best in the world. We teach our firefighters how to dig line, how wide the fireline should be, how deep the brushing needs to be, how many ladder fuels we should take down, what types of tools to use on the fire. But we don’t help them take care of their inner soul. We need to also think about their tools for mental fitness.”

Addressing Your Demons

Shawna says she believes that some of us encounter our “demons” at some point in our lives and we must learn how to manage these negative emotions.

“Everyone may have their own demons. You have to be able to address these demons. If you don’t, over time, they may overcome you. That’s why I think it’s so important to break down the barriers that prevent people from asking for help if they need it.”

Shawna says that she believes that Marc is always with her. “He’s probably out there watching and knowing that I’m doing well. He sees that I’m still trying to take care of myself as I move through time—and he’s aware that I’m trying to help other people who might now be going through what he went through.”



Marc Mullenix

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Addressing Our Suicide Stigma Begins Within the Wildland Firefighter Culture Itself

By Lisa Johnson, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor;
Wildland Firefighter Foundation

Lisa Johnson, a licensed clinical professional counselor who works with the Wildland Firefighter Foundation, has advanced training in trauma, PTSD, depression, anxiety, peak performance and critical incident stress management. For nine years she partnered with Idaho State University's suicide prevention program, a nationally recognized program geared toward helping families and professionals implement suicide prevention strategies and reduce the stigma of mental illness as well as treat trauma in children, adolescents, families, and communities.

In our wildland firefighting culture, help-seeking is often perceived as “weakness” to be avoided at all costs—while rugged individualism is seen as a highly desirable trait across the board. The “Go It Alone Culture” is often characterized in a single sentence: “Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.”

Stigma, by its very nature, promotes secret keeping, discourages treatment seeking and hinders recovery. Research by SAMSA (the Substance Abuse Mental Services Association) shows that stigma tends to be worse in rural areas, the very environment that wildland firefighters operate in, work in, and live in.

Addressing this stigma begins within the wildland firefighting culture itself. Reducing stigma—making it OK to not be OK, and OK to seek help—is the first step. A person can physically train to become stronger by themselves. However, a person cannot emotionally train alone when the issue is suicide.

It begins with a cultural shift in the hearts and minds of the entire wildland firefighter organization to become more open-minded, non-judgmental, compassionate, and educated regarding suicide.

Education about Suicide Facts

Creating a culture where there is open dialogue about suicide requires education about suicide facts. The National Strategy for Suicide Prevention has identified suicide as being multidimensional, which includes biopsychosocial, environmental and sociocultural.

Biological Risk Factors for suicide include: males are four times more likely than women to die from suicide. Wildland firefighting tends to be a male-dominated workforce. The National Center for Disease Control (CDC) reports that in 2013, suicide was the second leading cause of death nationally among persons 15-25 years of age and the second leading cause of death among persons 25-34 years of age.

Environmental Risk Factors for suicide include: job/financial loss, relational losses, easy access to lethal means. Wildland firefighters and their families often face financial loss with the end of fire season. Wildland firefighters spend lots of time away from family and significant others.

Sociocultural Risk Factors associated with suicide include: lack of social support/isolation; stigma associated with help-seeking behaviors; barriers on access to quality health care, especially in the areas of mental health and substance abuse treatment. Often times, wildland firefighters do not have health insurance, or they have health insurance that has poor coverage.

Effective Suicide Prevention

Suicide is a public health crisis that leaves a painful, lasting legacy on individuals, families, and communities.

While the causes of suicide are multidimensional, the goal of suicide prevention is a simple and effective one. Reduce factors that increase risk and increase factors that promote resilience.

Effective, comprehensive suicide prevention programs focus on risk and protective factors, including coping skills, access to mental health treatment, substance misuse, and social support.

Wildland firefighters need a culturally relevant and effective program. Shawna Legarza developed and gifted to the Wildland Firefighter Foundation the “Wildland Firefighter Life Challenge” program for wildland firefighters shortly after her husband, Marc Mullenix, died from suicide. “Life Challenge” specifically addresses these needs for wildland firefighters and their families:

1. The warning signs and symptoms of suicide.
2. What to do when a fellow firefighter is exhibiting warning signs.
3. Teach coping skills and life skills.
4. Awareness, education and implementation of resilience factors for the individual, family, and wildland firefighting community.

Wildland Firefighters Can Reach Out for Help and Assistance

Today, wildland firefighters can reach out for help and assistance by contacting **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**. This is a national hotline for suicide prevention.

There is also **SAFE CALL NOW 206-459-3020**, a hotline staffed by public safety officers, retired public safety officers and mental health professionals who are familiar with the culture of wildland firefighting.

There is hope. It is important to remember, when you feel like giving up, just remember the reason why you held on for so long. You are not alone and help is available.

Lastly, an important part of the care that the Wildland Firefighter Foundation extends to families of the fallen is Family Day. Family Day is a safe, supportive place for families to share the memories of their fallen, just like Arlington National Cemetery. The Wildland Firefighter Foundation cares about its fallen who lost their lives. It’s about having a place to honor the dignity, the worth and the lives of our wildland firefighters. **If you, a family member, or a fellow wildland firefighter need anonymous assistance, call the Wildland Firefighter Foundation at 208-336-2996.**

A Personal Account and Reflection on Losing a Coworker to Suicide

By Renae Crippen

[Editor's Note: Vicki Minor, Executive Director of the Wildland Firefighter Foundation, contacted Renae Crippen for us and asked if she would be willing to communicate her personal story about losing a coworker to suicide for this issue of Two More Chains. We are sincerely thankful to Renae for sharing her insights and revelations on this difficult subject. We know that our readers also thank you, Renae.]

I received a phone call one day from my supervisor. He told me that my coworker was dead.

My immediate reaction was “Oh, My God!” what cliff did he fall off of or road did he drive off of? He was in great shape, so whatever happened had to be an accident.

My coworker friend ate green stuff for lunch, ran before breakfast, and enjoyed it all. He was younger than me. So, all I could think was it must have been some type of stupid accident. All of this ran through my head in a split second.

What *didn't* run through my head was what I was about to hear.

“Renae, he killed himself.”

“What do you mean he killed himself—I just talked to him!”

He Chose Not to Reach Out to Anyone

We had just made it through fire season and he was making plans for the winter. Yes, he had plans! People who make plans are NOT supposed to be the ones who kill themselves. I can't claim to be a “close” friend of my coworker as far as knowing his personal life. But he was someone I talked to daily throughout fire season. And throughout the winter we spent time together in meetings preparing for the fire season.

We then spent time all during fire season working through issues—and giving each other more grey hairs than either one of us deserved! I would like to believe he felt that he could count on me. But this time, he chose not to reach out to anyone—friends, coworkers, family or those he loved.

Those people who he worked with most closely were the most impacted. They found his body. They notified his parents. And they planned his memorial. They had to navigate a non-line-of-duty death and figure out what could and couldn't be paid for. They had to determine what to do with all of his stuff at his house and at work. They had to figure out how to navigate the unimaginable.

They were at the “bullseye” of the event, the site of impact. They saw him, ran with him, fought fire with him, and worked with him daily. Their loss was huge. And this loss was also felt by the members of his Type 3 Incident Management Team, his Dispatch Center, and his coworkers and friends from the Forests where he used to work. This man truly impacted all those he met. I believe—based on his sense of humor—people he worked with are still trying to figure out some of his jokes.

Forced to Memorialize Their Life Based on How They Died

There is always a ripple effect of a critical incident. It doesn't matter how it occurred.

There will be those who will be impacted—sometimes more—than those who are actually on the scene of a critical incident. These are the people who are forgotten in the after care. If you are a member of this group, chances are you may feel like an “outsider” because you weren't part of the incident or part of the unit. But, nonetheless, the loss of this person has impacted you deeply. I know.

We don't talk enough about suicide. We don't talk to each other about how it makes us feel when someone we care about takes their own life.

I'm not sure I have yet forgiven my coworker for taking his life. I'm not sure I have forgiven myself for not knowing how to read the signs, how to be a better listener. I'm not sure I have forgiven myself for not finding my voice and telling my leadership that we need to talk about suicide and continue to talk about it.

If one of our firefighters is killed in the line-of-duty they are given an honorable goodbye, people line the streets, flags are flown at half-staff, and dignitaries show up. If a firefighter takes their own life it's a silent goodbye. We don't celebrate the many years they dedicated to firefighting. We are forced to memorialize their life based on how they died.

I'm not sure I have yet forgiven my coworker for taking his life. I'm not sure I have forgiven myself for not knowing how to read the signs, how to be a better listener. I'm not sure I have

forgiven myself for not finding my voice and telling my leadership that we need to talk about suicide and continue to talk about it.

But what I do know is the suicide or line-of-duty death of an employee is going to impact his or her coworkers at many different levels. While it is imperative to reach out to those most closely impacted, we can't forget about those people who are on the outside ripples. These people will also be dealing with the empty chair at meetings, missing the daily phone calls, the friendship from their coworker, and maybe even their really bad jokes.

Trust me, I know.

They had to navigate a non-line-of-duty death and figure out what could and couldn't be paid for. They had to figure out what to do with all of his stuff at his house and at work. They had to figure out how to navigate the unimaginable.

What Do the Numbers Say?

Distinguishing the Difference Between ‘Structure’ and ‘Wildland’ Firefighters in Suicide Statistics

“Where’s all the data on suicide in the wildland fire service?” This is a question we’ve asked—and been asked—here at the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center numerous times in recent months.

After digging around for some answers, the stark realization is this: There is no solid, scientific, peer-reviewed data on suicide in the wildland fire community. Sure, a number of folks close to this issue can point to a perceived “increase” in the incidents of suicide in our business, but there could be several reasons for this.

Suicide Studies Typically Focus on Structure Firefighters

As far as the science goes, several studies have examined suicide in “firefighters.” Most of these studies focus on those firefighters best described as “municipal” or “structural” firefighters. Wildland firefighters are a segment in some of these studies on suicide. However, no data is available on firefighters that have only (or primarily) wildland fire duties. (For instance, in a study on “firefighter” suicide research published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research* this January, 2.4 percent of the “firefighter” studies were described as being from “Military & Wildland” departments. From this, we can presume that less than 2.4 percent of these studies’ participants could be described as wildland firefighters: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ipsychires.2016.10.014>.)

Structure Firefighters Encounter Different Situations

Why all the hair splitting? Isn’t a firefighter a firefighter? Not so fast! Each segment of the firefighting workforce is exposed to unique stressors and the potential for trauma. A busy structure department likely responds to as many medical situations as they do fires. Many of these folks see things that those in the purely wildland fire realm don’t encounter on their incidents: the effects of drugs, violence, as well as massive physical (and emotional) trauma associated with car crashes, just to name a few.

Suffice it to say, these are situations that wildland firefighters have most likely never seen and never will.

Patty O’Brien’s Research Focus

Enter Patty O’Brien, a longtime wildland firefighter and current fifth year PhD candidate in Clinical Psychology at the University of Montana.

Prior to trading her boots and yellow in for that white lab coat (Patty confides that she hates the white lab coat bit), Patty worked for 10 years on the Lolo Interagency Hotshot Crew for a total of 15 years’ experience as a wildland firefighter.



Patty O’Brien

Patty’s PhD research aims to explore a number of questions related to physical health, mental health, traumatic stress, and risk for suicide in wildland firefighters.

“Very little research has specifically examined the health risks and needs of wildland firefighters,” Patty says. “Because we see elevations in health risks across many emergency response occupations, it’s reasonable to infer that wildland firefighters may also face higher than average risks. However, the work environment, mission, culture, and hazards of wildland fire are unique compared to other emergency response occupations that have been studied in the past. For this reason, it’s likely that wildland firefighters face a profile of physical and mental health risks that are distinct from other emergency response occupations.”

Patty’s PhD research aims to begin to fill in the gap in research in wildland firefighter health. Her study will assess a broad range of physical health and mental health variables, including factors associated with what’s known as “suicidality” (the likelihood of an individual completing suicide). Patty explains that these factors—such as post-traumatic stress, substance abuse, and depression—are important to address as stand-alone health issues, and that they have also been linked to an increased risk of suicide. Patty’s study will begin during the fall of 2017.

“Patty and I have spent copious hours discussing the intricacies of behavioral health needs in our wildland fire community,” informs Kim Lightley, Critical Incident Response Program Management Specialist for the U.S. Forest Service. “Most recently, we represented the wildland fire community at a Fire Service Behavioral Health Management meeting in Baltimore with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation. Patty was also a member on our *Stress First Aid for Wildland Firefighters and First Responders* focus group. She assisted in our efforts to bring forward the “Stress First Aid” model from the military to the wildland fire community.” Kim believes that Patty’s research into the behavioral health needs of wildland firefighters “is timely and extremely important in furthering our cause of suicide awareness.”

“The work environment, mission, culture, and hazards of wildland fire are unique compared to other emergency response occupations that have been studied in the past.”

Patty O’Brien



Kim Lightley

Kathy Clay, Battalion Chief, Jackson Hole (Wyo.) Fire and EMS
From Clay's "Firefighter Behavioral Health" article in *Wildfire Magazine* May/June 2013

"Kim has been very involved helping the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation translate some of the new behavioral work for the wildland community. Her wildfire experience, years of post-traumatic stress and her road to recovery inspire us all in the necessity and value of taking care of our own.

. . . Kim has endured suffering unknown to me. She stands tall and strong to tell the world her story, to spread the taking-care-of-your-own message. She sees and has accepted her destiny—determined that fateful day atop a mountain of raging fire, that fire which spared her life. She is with us today, ready to help us support those we work with, side-by-side in a world of fire and death and sadness.

. . . We can only hope to stand as tall, as brave, as committed and focused as this Prineville Hotshot who is ready to tell her story and inspire those of us she has touched."

Kim Lightley: An Important Voice Dedicated to Helping Others in Need

By Paul Keller

We're lucky to have Kim Lightley.

She's been there. She's an important voice. And she also knows how to listen.

What's more, she knows—firsthand—the pain and relentless grip of post-traumatic stress.

And she's dedicated herself to helping others in need.

Kim was one of the 11 members of the Prineville Hotshot Crew who came home from the 1994 South Canyon Fire. Nine of her fellow crew members' lives were taken by that infamous incident on Colorado's Storm King Mountain.

Stabbed Me in the Heart

We shared Kim's "Journey to Recovery" story in our "Taking Care of Our Own" [Winter 2013 Two More Chains](#). As she confided to us then about the aftermath of that tragedy fire event, "I was in a lot of grief at that time. It was terribly painful. To have something like this happen pretty much stabbed me in the heart."

During that first year following South Canyon, Kim experiences nightmares and flashbacks. She has an ongoing compulsion to visit the gravesites of her fallen comrades. "That's where I would let down my guard and sob. I was carrying around a fake smile—so folks didn't know I was in so much pain. I had a lot of survivor's guilt," she explained. "I believed 100 percent that I should have died on that mountain with my friends."

"We all need to make observations and be aware when folks are not doing well. Know your people. Know when you see someone deviating in behavior—excessive drinking, anger, irritability. The physical and mental stress of firefighting can have negative impacts on individuals. The cumulative effect of difficult decision making, physical demands, potential threats to safety, long durations away from home, can adversely affect the wildland firefighter."

As Kim also pointed out in that *Two More Chains*: "I got accustomed to the pain. I couldn't imagine living without the hurt. Therefore, every time I laughed, I felt guilt. Every time something good happened to me, I felt guilty."

Two years after South Canyon, Kim said "I had the courage to say that I need help." Unfortunately, the first two counselors she went to didn't really help her. But the third counselor successfully started Kim on her road to recovery. Like Kim explained in that *Two More Chains* issue: "She was awesome. She knew what 'trauma' was. She knew what Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is. We set to work working out the grief. After a while, I didn't have to go back to the grave sites all the time. I got rid of some of that survivor's guilt. Together with my counselor, we were working through all these things."

Don't Lose Hope

In that *Two More Chains* issue, we asked Kim what's the most important thing someone who is suffering can do?

"Don't lose hope," Kim assured. "Humans can't survive without hope. Keep ahold of the belief that you will persevere, that you will feel joy again, that there is a tomorrow. When I was in my darkest hours, there were times I almost lost sight of hope. I never want to go there again."

[Continued on Page 10]

Kim Receives Department of Agriculture 'Unsung Hero' Award

On May 3 of this year, Kim Lightley was one of 12 people to receive an "Unsung Hero" award at a special ceremony in Washington D.C. These annual national awards are given to U.S. Department of Agriculture employees who have *"unselfishly shared their time and expertise and consistently and willingly extended a helping hand."*

They are presented by the Organization of Professional Employees of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, who spoke at the ceremony, expressed how *"incredibly proud, honored, and touched"* he was by all of the awardees.

"Don't think for a second that if you bring in a Critical Incident Stress Management team directly following an incident, that you're done. You've just started. Physical wounds last a long time. Mental wounds can last a lifetime. You have to find a way to stay connected with your people—especially seasonal firefighters."

[Continued from Page 9] In 2007, Kim signed on as a facilitator with the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation in this organization's "Taking Care of Our Own" training program.

"When I was in the depths of PTSD—because I had *all* the symptoms—it would have been really awesome if somebody would have come up to me

and said: *'Hey, what you're experiencing right now is normal. Because what you experienced is very abnormal'*. If I had heard that, I think I would have felt less crazy."

"Everyone has a story," Kim said. "But not everyone is willing to disclose their deepest, darkest fears. I guess when I open up and pour my soul out in my talks, it makes it OK for others to share. That's the first step to healing."

Be Aware When Folks Aren't Doing Well

"We all need to make observations and be aware when folks are not doing well," Kim continued. "Know your people. Know when you see someone deviating in behavior—excessive drinking, anger, irritability. The physical and mental stress of firefighting can have negative impacts on individuals. The cumulative effect of difficult decision making, physical demands, potential threats to safety, long durations away from home, can adversely affect the wildland firefighter."

"Don't think for a second that if you bring in a CISM [Critical Incident Stress Management] team directly following an incident, that you're done. You've just started. Physical wounds last a long time. Mental wounds can last a lifetime. You have to find a way to stay connected with your people—especially seasonal firefighters," Kim explained in that 2013 *Two More Chains*. "Find a way to follow up at three months, six months, one year after a traumatic event. There is no magic timeline when folks will recover. Be prepared. Have resources in your back pocket (trauma therapist, clergy, the Wildland Firefighter Foundation, Employee Assistance Program [EAP], and peer support)."

Today: Kim Helps with Continuous Support to Our Firefighters

Today, Kim works as the Critical Incident Response Program Management Specialist for the U.S. Forest Service's Fire and Aviation Management program.

Her role entails examining the scope of continuous support provided to our firefighters. This ranges from Pre-Incident Stress Preparedness, to the near-term response of the CISM Peer Support Teams following an incident, to the long-term "follow-up" support in the aftermath of critical incidents.

Currently, Kim has been working toward introducing *Stress First Aid for Wildland Firefighters* to our ground and aerial firefighters. With assistance from the National Fallen Firefighter Foundation and the National Center for PTSD, *Stress First Aid for Wildland Firefighters* was adapted from the original *Combat Operational Stress First Aid Field Operations* of the U.S. Marines and U.S. Navy.

"This ongoing peer model offers a flexible set of tools for addressing stress reactions in firefighters and emergency medical responders," Kim explains. "It is intended to help prevent the progression of stress reactions and—if needed—to bridge affected individuals to a higher level of care."



"We were having fun," Kim Lightley (on left) says of this photo—taken on Idaho's Dunnigan Creek Fire in 1992—with her Prineville Hotshot buddies Bonnie Holtby (middle) who perished on the South Canyon Fire, and Ellen Hollander.

Don't Lose That Grip – A True Story about Hope

By Kim Lightley

A human being can live days without food, days without water, and minutes without air—but only a second without hope.

It is the summer of 1995. My parents invite me to go fishing with them in Alaska. It is one year after surviving the South Canyon Fire on Storm King Mountain. I wasn't fighting fire anymore. The effects of trauma and grief had robbed me of wildland firefighting and my Prineville Hotshot Crew. Knowing this, Dad asks me to come up to Alaska, and *"we'll go fishing."*

We set off in our 23-foot Bayliner Alaskan Bulkhead on Lynn Canal south of Haines, Alaska. Unfortunately, we are unaware of the predicted weather. Lynn Canal is big water, influenced by the glaciers towering above. On this afternoon, the canal waters are calm, fishing is great. We are pulling up an occasional king salmon and many small halibut.

But late that afternoon, the U.S. Coast Guard comes over the radio issuing a double Red Flag gale warning. Winds in Lynn Canal can produce monster waves, especially coupled with the extreme tide changes that we were currently experiencing. My Dad decides that there isn't enough time to return to Portage Cove in Haines. So we tuck ourselves into a cove behind Sullivan Island to spend the night.

That Awful Roar

Nobody sleeps that night on the boat. The roar of the wind and waves screaming down Lynn Canal makes any sleep impossible. Our vessel pitches relentlessly. And that awful roar. It was coming to get me again. Flashes back to the sounds of South Canyon haunted me. As I lay there in the boat's sleeper, I could almost feel the fire's heat. Safely tucked into that little Alaskan cove, *The Roar* had returned again.

In the wee hours of the morning, we try to shoot the gauntlet of a two inlet conversion. The waves are coming over the bow and stern. Everywhere I look, the water wants to swallow our boat.

My Mother, poised, sits behind my Father, who is at the wheel. He clears his throat constantly, holding that damn coffee cup in one hand. *"Both hands on the wheel!"* I scream. I beg. I even plead for my Mom to take his coffee cup from him. As we navigate the angry black waters, Dad never gives up his *grip*—on his coffee cup. And, of course, that grip is just as strong as his tenacious grip on ensuring that he saves us all in that boat.



The 1994 Prineville Interagency Hotshot Crew shown just two days before they are assigned to Colorado's South Canyon Fire that will take the lives of 14 firefighters, including nine of Kim Lightley's (circled in white) fellow crew members.

On that same morning, nearby, a vessel of similar size with four souls on board vanishes in the roar off the coastline of Sullivan Island.

Brought to the Door of Suicide

Years later, my Dad is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and lewy body dementia. This once Pillar of Strength, Korean War Navy Veteran, navigator of both land and sea, becomes a prisoner of a crippled body and mind.

The phone rings. It's my Mother. It's late. I will always remember her words that night: *"Come get the guns."* Dad's evolution into the disease had brought him to the door of suicide. I remember driving as fast as possible to my parents' home, in the dark, in the middle of a snowstorm. As I approach their home, I see that the front porch light is on. My Mother is standing on the front steps, strong and poised as usual. She clutches a large bag against her chest. The exchange is made.

The next few months hold many challenges. Every sharp object must be removed from my parents' household. We hide the scissors in the dog food container.

I sit with my Father and shower him with love and conversation. Some days my presence is met with kind eyes, and other days, accusations and anger. *"Don't lose your grip, Dad. Remember that coffee cup on Lynn Canal? Don't lose your grip."*

Four years ago, we bury my Father at a peaceful graveside ceremony. We get him to the grave without the pain of suicide. His disease had taken away his mobility. Had it been different circumstances, it could have been a different ending. I am very aware of that reality.

My Tarmac Friend

The two Learjets glide effortlessly from Grand Junction, Colorado to Redmond, Oregon. They hold the surviving crewmembers of the 1994 Prineville Interagency Hotshot Crew. The pain we carried in our souls—the loss of our nine brothers and sisters—is unsurmountable. As the planes land and taxi toward the Redmond Air Center, we know that our loved ones are there, waiting.

[Continued on Page 12]

***We do everything in our ability to make sure our firefighters come home safe at night.
However, how do we ensure our firefighters return to work the following day?***

[Continued from Page 11] As I depart the jet, my boots are heavy. Eyes peer through the doors and windows of the Air Center as we all descend from the airplanes. I only expect my family to be there. Suddenly, a District firefighter breaks out of the blur, rushing across the tarmac toward me. I can still see her smile, her red Engine Crew t-shirt, her Nomex. I still can feel her embrace—almost a *grip* that wouldn't let go.

As the years pass by, from time to time, I'd see my tarmac friend. Her contagious smile is etched in my mind. She would beam with excitement as she shared with me the joy of raising her babies. She had a gift at horticulture, gardening, and landscaping with beautiful plants and herbs.

How it hurt my soul when I am told that she had lost her grip on hope. How she had chosen death by suicide to snuff out her light. I would have been there for her. I could have been there for her. I should have been there for her.

To this day, my thoughts frequently return to my tarmac friend. She was there for me in my darkest hour, embracing my brokenness. How I wish I could have returned the favor to her. Goodbye my tarmac friend. I so wish I could have given you that mere second of hope, a hand to grip.

Death By Suicide in the Fire Service

Death by suicide in the fire service rocks us to the core. We do everything in our ability to make sure our firefighters come home safe at night. However, how do we ensure our firefighters return to work the following day?

Our greatest service to humankind is to ensure that the grip on hope—on life itself—remains intact. Although, sometimes—despite our greatest efforts to help someone—tragic endings happen. A person, a friend, a loved one, takes their own life.

"Hope" is defined as a positive, action-oriented expectation that a positive future goal or outcome is possible. Hope comes in many shapes and sizes. From the rising and setting of the sun, to the cry of a newborn baby, to the first glimpse of a tulip leaf breaking the ground after a harsh winter.

Be watchful. Check in with folks in the off season—when the snow flies and the adrenaline and comradery, found in wildland firefighting, is absent.

Hope can be the sound of an elk bugling on the opening day of archery season, the tug of a fish at the end of your pole, or catching the perfect wave on a Southern California coastline. Hope to the wildland firefighter may be the sound of the Lead Plane guiding in a retardant drop; a cold, soggy roast beef sandwich delivered to the fireline in the middle of the night; or a phone call home on a child's birthday.

Be watchful. Check in with folks in the off season—when the snow flies and the adrenaline and comradery, found in wildland firefighting, is absent.

Invite to include. Social connectedness is one of the strongest protective factors. This vital bonding is linked to emotional well-being and recovery following traumatic stress and loss. The effects of stress and an emotional injury can bring a firefighter to his or her knees as surely as physical trauma can.

Be ready to assist.

Be ready with those words: *"Don't lose that grip!"*

Shop Talk

Helpful References and Resources to Always Keep in Your Tool Kit

[National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#)

Call 1-800-273-8255
Available 24 hours every day, from anywhere.

[Online Chat](#)

[Suicide.org](#)

Suicide Prevention, Awareness
and Support

❖ For a wallet card that lists the signs for suicide risk:

<https://store.samhsa.gov/product/National-Suicide-Prevention-Lifeline-Wallet-Card-Suicide-Prevention-Learn-the-Warning-Signs/SVP13-0126>

❖ This hotline is staffed by public safety officers, retired public safety officers and mental health professionals who are familiar with the culture of wildland firefighting:

SAFE CALL NOW at 206-459-3020

❖ If you, a family member, or a fellow wildland firefighter need anonymous assistance, call:

The Wildland Firefighter Foundation at 208-336-2996

Additional Resources

- ❖ National Fallen Firefighters Foundation – <https://www.everyonegoeshome.com/16-initiatives/13-psychological-support/>
 - ❖ Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance – <http://www.ffbha.org/>
 - ❖ Active Minds – www.activeminds.com
 - ❖ National Alliance on Mental Illness – www.nami.org
- ❖ The National Wildland Fire and Aviation Critical Incident Stress Management Website – <https://gacc.nifc.gov/cism/index.html>
- ❖ Carson J Spencer Foundation – <http://carsonjspencer.org/>

The International
Critical Incident Stress
Foundation
<https://www.icisf.org>

Exploring Ways to Talk to Someone Who is Suicidal:

https://www.ted.com/talks/kevin_briggs_the_bridge_between_suicide_and_life

<http://codegreencampaign.org/>

The “Code Green Campaign” is a first responder oriented mental health advocacy organization.

<https://theringer.com/social-media-suicide-prevention-policies-5490c2c224e0>

How social media sites are focusing their efforts to sophisticate their warning systems and provide help to users who are experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Assess your mental health with a short, anonymous test provided by Screening for Mental Health:

<https://mentalhealthscreening.org>

Your **FEEDBACK**

This page features unsolicited input from our readers. The independent content on this page does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Two More Chains staff.



Beware of Our Own “Unconscious Bias”

I read your [Two More Chains Winter Issue](#) today after having a discussion with my supervisor (a woman who also happens to be a former jumper and hard-working ranch kid) about what might be called “conditioned bias.”

Bre Orcasitas’ “One of Our Own” interview very strongly echoed this conversation. My supervisor and I are the only two women in the East Zone fire organization of our Forest. We also share the common experience of having worked in a variety of Regions, and as part of a variety of resources/modules/organizations.

Because of this, we have both worked for supervisors with a variety of leadership styles and personal, unconscious “conditioned” biases. Whether leaders know it or not, their unconscious biases come out every day in the decisions they make, how they respond, and the standards they set—which becomes the rookie’s “normal” and establishes the basis for how they behave and perceive things as a firefighter.

My first experience on a hotshot crew, for example, set a very different standard for me than for someone whose first hotshot experience was elsewhere. This is not good or bad. This is objective fact and could be said for any other IHC or suppression resource.

My point is that these mental SOPs developed as a rookie carry forward with people and heavily influence their decision-making for the rest of their careers, whether or not they are aware of that influence. If these mental SOPs include inappropriate behaviors and expectations that were modeled by the rookie’s mentors and people functioning in leadership roles, these have now become the rookie’s “normal” and will be carried forward as such.

As a woman in fire, I continue to see these passed-down, subtle behaviors that I have learned to work around, but that take energy and time to do so—which I have less and less patience for as I get older and my threshold for the ridiculous gets shorter.

Each of us have these “conditioned” biases based on what we absorbed as our “normal” growing up and the people and places we learned from in the environment around us. Our challenge as leaders is to RECOGNIZE what these are in ourselves, how they might influence our behaviors and decision-making, and—most importantly—how they are influencing our up-and-coming fire folks.

Thanks for the brain-tickler, and keep providing us with good food for thought.

Wendy McCartney

Prescribed Fire and Fuels Technician

Gunflint Ranger District, Superior National Forest, Region 9



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