

THEY WERE PART OF MY FIREFIGHTER FAMILY

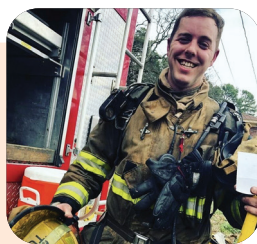


In the years since the pandemic began in 2020, COVID has become a leading cause of death for frontline workers, including firefighters. When a firefighter dies, they are grieved not just by their civilian family and friends, but also by their firefighter family. When you work 24-hour shifts, you basically live with your coworkers, and they can end up becoming so much more than just colleagues. When Charlie Tull, a firefighter in Arkansas, experienced the deaths of two coworkers, Eli of a heart condition in 2018 and Scott of COVID in 2021, he found himself grieving as if members of his civilian family had died.

We spoke with Charlie in October of 2022. What follows are excerpts from our conversation.

On what it means to be a firefighter...

For me, you definitely get a sense that you're part of something bigger than yourself. You realize the job is not about you. It's about the community. You're directly affecting people's lives every day. There's a tired old saying, "If somebody is calling us and they need our help, it's quite possibly the worst day of their life." So, we go there to hopefully help and make the situation better.



This is an excerpt of Dougy Center's Grief Out Loud Podcast, Episode 236. To listen to the full interview with Charlie and to access our collection of resources for children, teens, and their family members grieving a death due to COVID-19, please visit dougy.org/covid.

I should have talked about it more with my crew, and how it was affecting me. And, you know, let your guard down a little bit, let people know that you're hurting.

On how the coworker relationship between firefighters is unique...

The relationship between my coworkers is completely different because we actually live together. Our schedule is the main thing that makes us closer. At my department we'll work a full 24-hour shift, so if you have a bad day with your superior or your peer at the job, you don't get to clock out at 5pm and just go home and talk about how bad your day was. I consider them family that I could call at midnight on any given day. I know that they would show up and be there just like my dad would or my brother would. They are my brothers and sisters.

On the shock of Eli and Scott dying..

Eli was a young guy, mid 20s, strong, played football in high school, just really healthy. He was on our Combat Challenge team, which basically means not only was he really good at technical firefighting, but he was also really athletic. So, his passing was just shocking. There wasn't a single person that really could believe it. And Scott, he was a little bit older, but he wasn't in bad shape, health wise, or anything like that. He did contract COVID, as many of the people in our department did, but we just always assumed this is something that he'll come out of, you know, but he ended up getting hospitalized with it. I remember they would post pictures of him, and he'd be holding

up a thumbs up from his ICU bed. We just continued to think “He’s gonna pull through, he’s gonna make it out,” but ultimately, he succumbed to it. Both instances were just really shocking.

On what it was like working early on in the pandemic...

I remember it vividly. I’m in Arkansas and it was one of those things where we just thought hopefully it won’t come this way, but if it does, maybe it won’t be that bad. There was a very uneasy feeling throughout the department. There was really no guidance at first, nobody knew what to tell us. Do you just wear a mask? Do we put on our air packs? Do we fully gown up in surgical gear? I wasn’t scared for myself – I was scared for my family. I have two kids and I was terrified that I would give it to them because we just didn’t know what the effects would be, especially on kids, at that point. We just had to put our heads together and say, “Listen, we’re still going to have to respond to these calls. We have to go to someone’s house. We can’t just decide, uh, no, we’re not going in. Yeah, very uneasy, is the word I would use to describe the first year.

On how the grief of Eli and Scott’s deaths affected him...

Well, I hear this word a lot when people talk about people passing – numb. It’s just a feeling of numbness, you know, almost disbelief. There’s just kind of hollow reminders of those guys around their stations. I’ll never forget when I actually got assigned to the station that Eli was working at and I had to eventually hang my gear on the same hook that he hung his gear on, because we were the same rank in the same position. And it’s just little things like that. When you work in such a tight knit group, it’s just always there. For the first couple of weeks, it was hard. It was emotional. Especially for guys that had to fill their spots and come in to work because

the trucks have to be staffed. But the work did kind of help take your mind off it. We wanted to be busy. Because if you’re not busy, all you’re doing is thinking about the loss.

On what wasn’t helpful in his grief...

I guess just personally, the thing that wasn’t helpful for me, was just dwelling on it. I kind of wanted to isolate myself from, I mean, really, everyone, when it first happened, and I didn’t want to talk about it. But in hindsight, I know that wasn’t the best thing to do. I should have talked about it more with my crew, and how it was affecting me. And, you know, let your guard down a little bit, let people know that you’re hurting. Let them see that you’re human too. You want to be selfish in some ways and keep some memories and things to yourself and whatever, but it doesn’t help the family, and it doesn’t help your fire family. Holding it in and not talking about it, I would say that’s probably the least helpful thing.

On the advice he’d give to other firefighters grieving a coworker...

The first thing I would say is, don’t be afraid to express your feelings about that individual that passed. Talking out loud about those people, you may not realize it in the moment, but it really will ultimately help you move past a lot of your grief. There will always be a little part of you that’s just incredibly sad about losing them but allow yourself to be a little more vulnerable and talk about it to your other friends that you work with – and even your family at home. I learned that firsthand. You have to be able to talk about these things, because the more you hold onto it, the more you just feel burnt up on the inside. Let your guard down a little bit. Talk about it. Cry about it if you need to.



The mission of Dougy Center is to provide grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving. dougy.org • help@dougy.org • 503.775.5683



This resource was funded by the Brave of Heart Fund, founded by the Foundations of New York Life and Cigna and administered by E4E Relief. The Brave of Heart Fund was established in 2020 to provide charitable grants and emotional support services to families of the frontline healthcare workers, volunteers, and support staff whose lives were lost in the fight against COVID-19. It continues to offer support to these bereaved families via partnerships with non-profit organizations aligned with the fund’s core purposes. employeeerelieffund.org/brave-of-heart-fund