

REMARKS

**Rachel Gillman, Daughter of fallen District Chief Henrick (Rick) Batelaan
2024 Toronto Fallen Firefighter Memorial, June 23, 2024**

Good Morning Everyone and thank you for joining us today in this time of remembrance and reflection;

My name is Rachel, this is my sister Kate, and we are the daughters of District Chief, Rick Batelaan.

Standing here in front of the families and friends of our fallen firefighters is nothing short of an honor, privilege and a heartbreak.

We want to say to the families, we see you and you are not alone.

Our shared experience of love, loss, grief, sorrow, hope and longing has tied us together; and while I can say that I am grateful that my dad is being recognized for his sacrifice today, our families sacrifice, this is not a place I want to be, and it's okay if you feel the same.

As a student in a masterclass on grief; I have learned that this emotion tends to exist among most others. We can be happy, healing and hurting all at the same time, and it is okay to honour those feelings in any way that we need to. Grief is the love that we had for our person, the life that we shared and cannot be easily contained. It fades some memories and sharpens others. Grief can take a picture of them, a sunset or firetruck passing on the street to steal the breath right out of your chest when you least expect it. Grief can make us search for meaning in coins on the street, a song on the radio, or in another chance encounter.

Or it could be just seeing their name etched in a beautiful stone; that makes you think "how the hell is this our life now?"

Because after all, words don't do their lives justice.

I was at work a few weeks ago, when a fellow nurse I didn't know started to tell me about her recent trip to Toronto with her boyfriend, who is a firefighter in Northern Ontario. She told me that they were down by the harbor watching the fire boats and stumbled upon the Fallen Firefighter memorial and stopped to pay their respects, cueing the tears on my end. She looked slightly horrified as I mentioned that in just a few weeks, we were going to be adding my dad's name to that wall. She tried to comfort me by telling me how nice the spot is, and how well done the memorial is, but the truth is that a stranger reading my dad's name on the wall doesn't tell you about his beautiful, complex full and utterly too short life and because grief makes people uncomfortable, they're often too afraid to ask about them for fear of upsetting us.

The funny thing is, that I want you to ask.

And I want you to tell me too, the good, the bad and the heartbreaking about your people.

I want to hear about their laugh, their personality, what they meant to you – how they influenced you, what you miss about them...

And I can tell you how hard it was to spend my first Father's Day without him, writing this speech instead of celebrating with him.

But that being said, I want to take a moment to talk about my dad, because it feels like those happen less and less.

Rick was a proud and dedicated firefighter for over 38 years; his love for learning lead him into participating with the Toronto Heavy Urban Search and Rescue Team (HUSAR) and down the path to becoming a District Chief.

He grew up in Scarborough, a middle child of six, to parents who immigrated from Holland after surviving WWII.

My parents met in high school and have a love story that spans over forty years – and includes the two of us and four grandchildren that idolized their 'Pa.

Dad loved the outdoors, almost as much as his family and was the President of his Hunt Club, the leader of our annual camping trips, Chief S'more Maker and Fire Poker.

He enjoyed the simpler things in life – a long ride on his motorcycle, a swim in the lake, a fish on the line, a cold beer on a hot day and cooking a meal for his family and friends.

He was looking forward to his retirement and making plans to move and vacation when Cancer struck.

He was diagnosed with an Occupation Cancer in May 2022; stage IV Pancreatic Cancer doesn't have a survival rate.

Dad lived bravely with his terminal illness for 14 months – travelling, camping, hunting, heading into the city to watch the Blue Jays, spending time with the people he loved and creating the precious memories that are all we have left.

He died peacefully at home on July 17th 2023, surrounded by his family and so much love; it was heartbreaking and beautiful all at once.

And some days it all just feels like too much; we are tired of grieving, we are tired of this new life and the weight that we carry and the path ahead seems unclear.

There is a quote from *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox & The Horse* by Charlie Mackesy that reminds us how to cope with the uncertainty and darkness that follows loss.

The boy and the horse are walking thru the woods

“I can’t see a way through” said the boy

“Can you see your next step?”

“Yes”

“Just take that one” said the horse

It reminds us to stay in the present moment, and not to borrow worry from the future.

To focus on what we can control, one foot in front of the other, a little at a time.

We will find a way to carry the weight of our losses, to heal and move forward – and make it through the fire.

To the firefighters here today, every one of you are going to touch countless lives throughout your career, but every one of you also has a family that needs you just as much. You all deserve to go home safe to them, whether that’s safe from the inherent risks of a fire, a dangerous call or the lasting effects of exposure, it’s all the same. Remember my dad, the firefighters who we honour here today, and the names of the brave men and women inscribed here today and advocate for your rights. Remember that they mattered, and so do you. That you have the right to be protected from ALL the risks in your workplace.

I asked my dad well after he was diagnosed and knowing that he was going to die from this Cancer if he would change anything.

Unsurprisingly, his answer was no. I think he found solace, knowing he was trading his life for the many others that he saved throughout his thirty-eight years on the job.

But as the family, the ones left behind.... The pins, the awards, the flags, the memorials will never fill the void that he left in our lives, and that’s the hard reality of it all.

And when the grief hits the hardest, and the memories we have just aren’t enough to ease the pain, I try to remember that maybe a little girl has her dad because I no longer have mine.

But as a little girl myself, I remember all too well how patiently my sister and I would wait for dad to come home from the hall. We’d hear his car pull in the driveway, and rush into the front closet to surprise him, trying to stifle our giggles. He’d walk in the door, often bringing the lingering smell of smoke with him – especially after a particularly long night. We’d jump out to surprise him, and I would pester him to tell me all about the adventures that he had at work that shift – sometimes there was nothing to say, or maybe it was too hard to talk about, but every now and then he would tell me a story.

Dad used to be a Rescue Truck guy; and it was here he met Dave Mason, another courageous firefighter we honor here today. They remained friends long after they stopped working in the same hall, the shared bonds of service are long lasting – so much so that they both died of occupational cancer within months of each other.

The rescue truck attended a call for a parking garage fire, where he casually talked about going underground to look for people who might need help. He told me that the smoke was so thick, that he lost sight of the rope leading out, just as his oxygen tank started beeping, signaling it was running low. Time has faded many of the details, but the anxiety I felt as he recalled not knowing if he was going to get out safely stayed with me.

As much as I loved hearing dads "hero" stories, I was acutely aware of the danger he was putting himself in – and every time he was at work and we saw fires on the news, or heard about them on the radio - we were calling the hall to see if he was there, and if he was safe. I knew that he was smart and sensible, mostly because he knew the risks of being reckless, but Cancer was the silent killer we never saw coming. This wasn't talked about nearly as much as the potential for casualties on scene, but the numbers don't lie, and this is now the biggest risk you face on the job today.

So how will you protect yourself?

How will you advocate for yourself and your brothers and sisters standing with you?

Will you make sure that you're not just coming home safe from the call, but you're coming home safe. Period.

And we say to everyone here today, that WE are the reason they live on.

Please help keep their memory alive in this world

Share the stories, talk to them, hold the love we have for them close to you and don't let that flicker out.

Say their names bravely, and with pride

Know that they are still real

They are still here

They still matter

And they are still yours

In our dad's words, "be brave with me"

Dad, we love you, we miss you, and we're so proud to carry you with us

Keep going everyone