

Sharon's Story

"This can't be happening...not to me, not again..."

To this day, I can still remember those words screaming in my head over and over again. January 2, 1998, I am at the emergency room of Maricopa County Hospital; facing Lieutenant Gary Zimmerman, my husband, Doug's commander after he advised me that "Doug didn't make it..."

Doug was a 12 year veteran of the Arizona Department of Public Safety (DPS). Doug was working in his dream assignment as a DPS motorcycle officer when a young man in a hurry struck Doug from behind, killing him instantly.

The hospital scene was all too familiar to me. In 1983, I stood in the same emergency room, in the same hospital, walked down the same hall to face a trauma doctor. Virtually the same words struck me like a bolt of lightning, "...I am sorry Mrs. Knutson, your son Ricky didn't make it..." Another young man, influenced by drugs and in a hurry, drove up onto the sidewalk, striking my 6 year old son from behind, killing him instantly.

"This can't be happening, not again..."

I was born and raised in a Christian home; I learned many things at an early age. I learned that our lives need to reflect a spirit of service to others which extend beyond you. I learned that each of us has a choice in the face of personal crisis. It is often referred to as "being bitter or better". And while this may seem simple enough and an easy choice to make, it can be difficult to understand and even more difficult to embrace in the midst of traumatic personal loss. I learned forgiveness was essential to spiritual and mental health. In the year after Doug's death, I found comfort in volunteering at DPS, providing perspective and advice to the families of the department's new recruits.

In September 11, 2001, my world was rocked again. I sat in my living room that morning watching the fires burn in New York City and the Pentagon. I cried with an overwhelming sense of loss and grief for the families and struggled with feelings of helplessness for the police and firefighters who would forever be changed by this catastrophe. I did what my dad always told me in such difficult times, "...just pray for them Sharon."

My prayers were answered when I received a phone call from a police psychologist friend who was called to "Ground Zero" in New York City. Sarah's request was short and to-the-point: "Sharon...I need you here." I packed my bags immediately.

Here I was again – with an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of people in crisis. I knew grief and I knew loss. For the next 24 days, I answered phones, set up files, participated in debriefings, served food, cleaned offices, took out the trash...and walked Ground Zero.

The destruction of the former World Trade Center was truly beyond words, pictures or video. The whole scene reminded me of looking at a loaf of bread with thousands of ants working to remove it, tiny piece by tiny piece. Each day, the landscape changed slightly as progress was being made to remove the rubble and recover loved ones. It gave me another appreciation for how we, individually, can positively make a difference in the lives of people, one at a time.

While at Ground Zero, I received a phone call from Tom Jonovich, the vice-president of the 100 Club of Arizona. A non-profit organization that came to my rescue within hours after Doug was killed, providing support and financial resources. "Sharon, would you consider serving as the executive director of the 100 Club?" I had been over-whelmed with the support of the community after Doug's death and I wanted to give back to my public safety family. The 100 Club gave me that perfect opportunity so I submitted my

resume for the executive officer position and went to work as the second full-time executive director in December 2001.

My personal experiences proved to be a very valuable asset to me. Being able to share what the 100 Club had done for me personally put a face to the mission of the club. I could share first hand what it meant to be devastated by the sudden loss of a spouse and what it meant to have the 100 Club show up within hours to give their financial assistance and offer their emotional support

I always contrasted in my mind the day following my son, Ricky's death and Doug's death. Doug and I had to go to the bank and take out a loan to pay for Ricky's funeral. After Doug's death, I also went to the bank, but it was to deposit a check, not to take out a loan.

Each time we lost an officer or firefighter I was devastated all over again. As strange as it might seem, I asked God to help me always remember the pain so I could empathize with the families who suffered loss. I understood the spouse's loss and I understood the loss of a mother. The bond I built with some of these families allowed me to begin to tell their stories and it wasn't long until more and more citizens understood the mission of the 100 Club. Support began to grow and as the support grew, so did the opportunity to increase the financial and moral support of the club to our public safety families.

There was one thing that haunted me as we became better known and expanded to a statewide organization. We only responded to tragedy. The 100 Club was synonymous with death and often devastating injuries. I met officers and firefighters who expressed that their career-ending injuries caused such financial devastation to their families; they wish they had died so their families would be better cared for. I knew sometimes it was harder for people to live than it was for them to die. I had to change that.

The 100 Club just celebrated its 40th anniversary and I am about to complete my 7th year with the organization. I came on board and was able to build off of a firm foundation. I've had an excellent board of directors and staff who have helped dream of better ways to support these families that give so much to our communities. In my 7 years we have been able to raise line-of-duty death benefits from \$7,000 to \$15,000, serious line-of-duty injuries from \$4,000 to a maximum of \$18,000 for 12 months, and institute a non-line-of-duty death benefit of \$5,000. In 2004, we started the Safety Enhancement Stipend program to help purchase equipment to enhance the safety of our officers/firefighters and gave out just \$20,000 in its first year. Since then, we have paid just under \$500,000 to date, thus allowing us to become pro-active by preventing injury and death, not just responding to it. In 2007, we started a Scholarship program to assist family members of public safety in their pursuit of a higher education. In 2 years the 100 Club has assisted 30 students and paid \$96,500. We launched a Special Needs fund and a HEROS program to assist with non-line-of-duty life-changing incidents; bringing community resources together with the needs of public safety families. We have a Professional Advisory Team that assists public safety officers/firefighters dealing with life altering events and have assisted and partnered with the Wills For Heroes Foundation in providing over 3,000 free wills and medical directives to first responders.

Today as I look back on those first days as executive director I am overwhelmed at the support we have received and given. I truly believe we are touching the lives of those who have answered the call to make our communities and state a better and safer place to live.

My parents' influence has proven to be what I needed to turn my tragedies to triumph. In allowing God to use my loss and pain to help others, I have found true joy.