

Providing Opportunities out of Tears: Ryan Elwood's Story

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Ryan Elwood's Story

In the fall of 2015, firefighter Lieutenant Ryan Elwood, took his life. But, out of his passing, seeds have been planted to provide hope, opportunity, and futures for young firefighters.

I had the opportunity to meet Ryan's parents and aunts and hearing their experience with losing their son and nephew. Through their tears they told me about the wonderful person Ryan was. Ryan grew up as a smiling, funny, quick-witted kid. He was the youngest of three children, brother to Tommy and Meghan. He was tough. He played every sport possible and especially enjoyed basketball and volleyball. From a young age, Ryan loved helping people.

He was social and extroverted and never showed any signs of depression. His intuitive nature made him able to sense if someone was having a bad day. He cared about people and always looked for ways to help. His friend's father even remarked on a time when twelve-year-old Ryan stood up for a homeless man. Ryan's peers made jokes about the homeless man for asking for money, but Ryan stood up and said, "You don't know what he's going through. Stop teasing him." This act left an impression on Ryan's friend's father. What twelve-year-old has this kind of compassion and courage?

As Ryan grew up, he became more and more passionate about the idea of helping others, and he joined the fire service to be able to put his compassion and courage into action for others. He loved acquiring more knowledge and training as he worked for both the Hometown and the North Palos Fire Departments. He tirelessly earned every certification possible, and in 2012 he became a Medal of Valor recipient. Ryan was one of the youngest firefighters to be in line for lieutenant and was made lieutenant posthumously in September right after he passed.

Ryan's family is tight-knit. His father was a member of the Board of Trade and his mother was a teacher and, later an administrator. They enjoyed many fun memories together. Ryan was extremely close to his grandfather who passed away in 2015. This loss hit him hard and Ryan grieved for him. Soon thereafter, Ryan lost a close friend in a car accident. Still reeling from these losses, Ryan continued to serve and care for others in his work in the fire service.

Two weeks before Ryan took his life, he went out on a call to help a man who had attempted suicide. The man had unsuccessfully tried to end his own life and Ryan was able to resuscitate him in the ambulance. But upon arriving at the hospital, the man didn't make it. Ryan was quite disturbed and affected by this incident, but his family believes this incident had an even greater impact on him than anyone understood.



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Ryan had trips planned and lots of plans for the future. He had healthy relationships, and aside from mourning the loss of his grandfather and friend in 2015, in addition to this traumatic call, Ryan seemed okay. Perhaps this decision to end his life was a somewhat quick decision. His family wonders.

As his loved ones reflected on what could have caused Ryan to take such drastic measures, they promised themselves never to be mad at the fire service. Ryan loved the fire service and they want his love to carry on.

