

FEBRUARY 2019



**SONS OF THE FLAG**  
*Revolutionizing Burn Care*

**DONATE**

# BIG VOICE #3



**FINDING  
PURPOSE  
AFTER PERIL**

**OUR PURPOSE:** In honor of veterans and first responders, we are revolutionizing burn care for ALL Americans. Our vision is to accelerate the process of testing leading technologies and pushing them into circulation for immediate use by burn survivors across the nation.

# LEADERSHIP LETTER



Dear Friend,

I hope you've had a blessed start to 2020. Thank you for your generous end of year contributions. Your giving during the holiday season is invaluable for the families, veterans, first responders and institutions we serve.

As the founder of Sons of the Flag (SOTF), all of the stories from our community feel personal to me. But truthfully, some stories hit my heart a little harder. Devin Barnhart's journey is one such story; a burn survivor, firefighter, and now SOTF Task Force Leader for Colorado. In August 2008, Devin was severely burned in a house fire that claimed the lives of three of his close friends. Struggling with why he had been allowed to live, Devin ultimately found purpose after peril when he harnessed his trauma to dedicate his life to service. I know what it's like to lose friends to devastating burn and blast trauma; loss is a wound that never fully heals. I know what it's like to struggle with wondering, *am I a victim or a survivor?* And I know what it's like to be transformed by trauma and called to serve in a new way. That's why I founded SOTF. I am so grateful to Devin for joining the SOTF team, becoming a champion for our cause and the community we serve.

Speaking of champions for the cause, the American Burn Association (ABA) held the annual National Burn Awareness Week (NBAW) earlier this month; NBAW is always a great opportunity to heighten our efforts to increase burn awareness and understanding of burn prevention within the community. We've included some of the ABA's advice for preventative measures against common contact burns.

We hope you enjoy this edition of *Big Voice*. Much like the “big voice” loudspeakers used to broadcast urgent messages on a military base, our *Big Voice* brings vital news to you: incredible stories from burn survivors and care providers who embody fearlessness, determination and fortitude. A burn injury lasts a lifetime but the trauma doesn't have to. As you consider your giving for the coming year, **I invite you to commit to partnering financially with SOTF throughout 2020. Faithful support from friends like you enables SOTF to pursue our mission of revolutionizing burn care.**

With a grateful heart,

Ryan "Birdman" Parrott  
Founder & CEO

## NATIONAL BURN AWARENESS WEEK

National Burn Awareness Week (NBAW), an initiation of the American Burn Association (ABA), mobilizes and unites burn, fire and life safety educators and organizations to advance burn awareness and prevention. This year NBAW occurred February 2-8; the theme 'Contact Burns – Hot Surfaces Damage Skin!' educated communities on how to prevent common burns in the home and workplace. With 73% of burns occurring in the home, and almost one-third of burn injuries happening to children under the age of 15, understanding the severity and scope of burns is a vital first step towards combatting their occurrence and keeping families safe.

The ABA suggests the following preventative measures against common contact burns:

- Supervise children around hot objects at all times. Keep hot tools out of reach of children.
- Stand at least 3 feet away from hot outdoor objects. Keep area clear of trip hazards.
- Protect your feet from hot objects by wearing shoes when walking on hot pavement or sand
- Turn heating pads and blankets off before sleep
- Have hot pads available whenever cooking. Long oven mitts are best for reaching in or over hot surfaces. Assume all pots and pans are hot.
- Treat items from the microwave as you would items from the oven. Limit microwave use by children.

SOTF is grateful to the ABA for their dedication to improving the lives and reintegration of burn survivors by advancing burn care, treatments and research, and relentlessly promoting burn awareness and burn prevention messages in the community.



# FINDING PURPOSE AFTER PERIL

"I wake up on the couch, look over my right shoulder and see one wall completely on fire." The 45 seconds that followed this realization altered Devin Barnhart's life forever.

Devin was staying at his friend Joey's house. Joey's mother had just succumbed to cancer, and his friends gathered to console him. When Devin awoke to a wall of fire, he yelled "FIRE!", shook awake his friend Jeremy who was sleeping on a nearby recliner, and they ran out the front door. Realizing that Joey and his girlfriend Amber weren't outside, wordlessly, they both ran back into the house. "Jeremy went upstairs, I went downstairs. I went into the basement, and when I turned the corner, all I remember is fire. I'll never forget the sound. The popping, the crackling. It was like a freight train passing by. Everything was on fire. I go back to the stairwell and at the top of the stairs all I see is a glow. I remember thinking, *this is it. This is where they're going to find my body.* Then I decided *no, they're going to find me outside.* So, I pulled

my shirt over my face and ran up the stairs, tripped and fell on the top step. That fall probably saved me because I dropped to my hands and knees. I was below all of the smoke. I had a 15 feet crawl to the front door. As I'm crawling, all of the carpet and padding is peeling off underneath my hands.

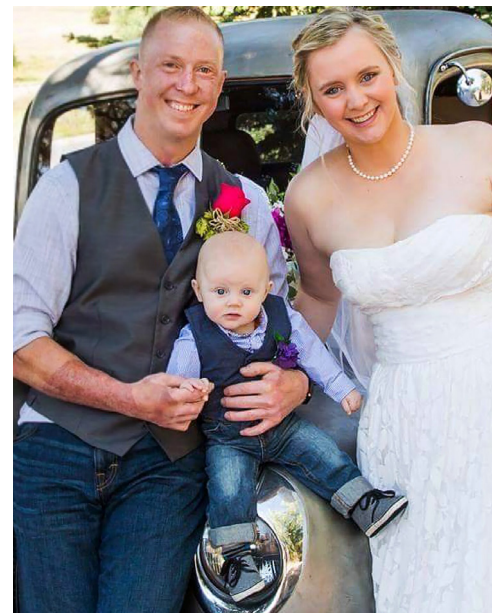
Devin sustained burns to 75% of his body. He spent the next 6 weeks in a medicated coma, followed by 2 weeks in the ICU, then 2 months in rehab. His coma was filled with morphine-fueled nightmares that would revisit him for the next 2 years of his recovery. While in hospital, Devin missed the funeral

**"I wanted to become a firefighter... to prevent people from having to go through what I went through—to be the person showing up in someone's worst moment."**

It's disintegrating from the heat." After what felt like an eternity of crawling, Devin made it outside and ran across the street screaming for help. Just 45 seconds since waking. When he finally heard sirens approaching, Devin was overwhelmed with relief; he knew that meant somebody was coming to help.

of his friends Joey and Amber. It wasn't until later that he learned Jeremy had also passed away trying to save them.

Recovery was excruciating. Devin recalls being bathed and scrubbed in a debridement tub with what felt like metal scouring (continued over page)



**ABOVE LEFT:** Devin shortly after being admitted to the burn unit on August 3, 2008. He had burns to 75% of his body. **ABOVE MIDDLE:** Devin meeting Scott Lefebvre, one of the first responders who took Devin to the hospital. By chance, they would meet again years later when Devin was training at the fire academy to become a firefighter. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Devin and his wife Sierra on their wedding day, with their baby boy Daxton.

(continued from previous) pads to debride all of the dead skin, fight infection, and improve wound healing. "I can't even begin to describe the level of pain. No amount of pain medication could help. My parents were present for one of the treatments; the three of us held hands and just cried." But Devin wouldn't let the nurses stop scrubbing, he knew he needed to endure for his recovery.

Devin had over 30 surgeries. In addition to the painful rawness from skin grafts, he developed heterotopic ossification in both elbows. "It's common with burn and spinal injuries. Calcium deposits around your joints and hardens into bone. My elbows couldn't flex or extend, they were locked at 90° angles. I couldn't touch my face, brush my teeth, or get food to my mouth." Devin had to relearn how to eat, get dressed, bathe, and go to the bathroom. But he was determined to regain independence.

Devin eventually returned to college to finish his degree in photography and graphic design. Plagued by survivor's guilt, he questioned the purpose of his continued existence. His agonizing ultimately led him to a simple yet powerful answer—he had survived to serve. "I tried to find purpose. I enrolled in EMT (emergency medical technicians) school; I did ride alongs with the fire department. I wanted

to become a firefighter, a great one, because I wanted to prevent people from having to go through what I went through—to be the person showing up in someone's worst moment."

Determined to achieve one "unrealistic" goal after another, Devin received his EMT certification, worked night shift for four years at an ER, and worked as a volunteer firefighter before attaining a dream placement with Poudre Fire Authority in Fort Collins, Colorado in 2016. 2 weeks into the 22-week fire academy, Devin's son Daxton was born. Devin praises the immense strength and support of his wife Sierra in raising a family together in the fire service.

And yet, "I wasn't happy. I didn't know what was wrong. I was always striving for Destination Happiness, I couldn't enjoy anything. I drank all the time." Knowing his family and future were at stake, Devin finally reached out to his department's peer support system. He was shocked when he was diagnosed with PTSD. "I thought only veterans got PTSD, that I hadn't earned the right to have PTSD. But I've been through trauma, and I see traumatic events every day at work. I had a lot of counseling after the fire, but I'd never had counseling after the loss of my father in 2012. I realized that I was angry, sad and upset that he missed all of these huge moments. He never got to see me

become an EMT, a firefighter, a father, a husband."

As Devin learned to heal this wound, a new challenge arose. "I started losing vision in my left eye. I got it checked out and turns out I have MS. I remembered a man I met in hospital who had MS. A quadriplegic; he had two little girls and a wife; he was an author; and his optimism had inspired me to stop wallowing in self-pity. So I thought, *ok, this is just another hurdle in my race of life. I'm going to keep moving forward, stay optimistic, and enjoy everything that I have.* And seven months after diagnosis, my MS is in remission. The medications are working, life is good."

Last year, Devin became the SOTF Task Force Leader for Colorado. He says that serving with SOTF helps him fulfill another crucial aspect of burn service. "I get to serve the burn community that *have* survived and need to recover and rebuild. SOTF connects me with burn survivors so that together, we can help them pave their future." It's a collaboration that Devin knows changes lives. "I'm thrilled to be able to contribute. I want to be a champion for SOTF and share my story on their behalf to enlighten the nation. This keeps the memory of my friends alive, and speaks to people suffering from fire trauma as well as any struggles someone might be going through."

# FIREMANSHIP CONFERENCE

## FEBRUARY 24–28, 2020

The annual Portland Firemanship Conference is almost here! The conference strengthens the sense of community amongst first responders by gathering and equipping courageous men and women who serve on the front lines. This year's conference will provide hundreds of hours of education and training for more than 700 firefighters of every rank, from fire departments across the country. We're excited to train and learn alongside our brothers and sisters in service. See you there!

Sons of the Flag is grateful to be the primary beneficiary of the Firemanship Conference.

### firemanship

\ˈfɪ(ə)rˌmən,ʃɪp\

*noun*

the practice, skill, or occupation of firefighting