

Journey to C.O.P.S. National President

By: Brooke McKay, C.O.P.S. Marketing Coordinator

Sergeant Ben Bolton with the Alexandria (VA) Police Department, described Jennifer Thacker as, “One of the worst survivors I had ever seen,” when he greeted her at the airport for National Police Week in 1999. Sgt. Bolton continued, “Jennifer looked so beaten down and so broken, for her to rise up to be Concerns of Police Survivors’ National President is truly amazing.”

Jennifer Thacker lost her best friend and husband, Agent Brandon Thacker with the Kentucky Department of Alcohol and Beverage Control, on April 16, 1998, when he was shot during an undercover assignment. Jennifer was left alone to raise their 1 ½ year old daughter, Katherine. Jennifer turned to Concerns of Police Survivors (C.O.P.S.) during her greatest time of need.

Anne McDanel, Jennifer’s mother, recalls, “It seemed nobody in our family or her friends could understand Jennifer’s pain. Being her mother and seeing her suffer so terribly, made me feel helpless. I had no idea where my daughter and granddaughter would find support. But when she walked into the National Police Survivors’ Conference sponsored by C.O.P.S. that National Police Week, I knew she found people who understood her pain and suffering.”

Jennifer then attended C.O.P.S. Spouses’ Retreat in 1999. “I got so much out of National Police Week; I knew I needed to go to Spouses’ Retreat. After attending the retreat, C.O.P.S. became something that I knew was good for me,” said Jennifer. Jennifer has attended eleven Spouses’ Retreats, never missing a year since Brandon’s death.

C.O.P.S. Spouses’ Retreat is held every September for the spouses of law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty. At the retreat, survivors attend grief seminars led by mental health professionals and find great support from their peers. The weekend is full of activities; the spouses learn archery, canoeing, pistols, shotguns, and are also challenged on a 50-foot climbing tower or a 25-foot high ropes course.

“I knew once my daughter was old enough to go to camp that it was going to be good for both of us to go. I needed Katherine to journey through her grief in as healthy a manner as possible. Camp was the right place for both of us to be,” Jennifer stated. Jennifer and Katherine have attended C.O.P.S. Kids Summer Camp together since 2002, the first year Katherine was old enough to attend.

C.O.P.S. Kids Camp is a weeklong event held for surviving children ages 6-14 of America’s fallen law enforcement heroes killed in the line of duty. Their parent or legal guardian attends with them. Summer camp provides family interaction, camp activities, and grief counseling.

Jennifer explained why C.O.P.S. Kids Camp has been so important for Katherine, “One of the things camp has taught Katherine is that she is not the only child in this world living without her father. She knows she cannot use that as an excuse for failure or an

emotional crutch because there are so many other kids who are going through the same things. Camp helps her feel connected. She has school friends, but then she has other friends from camp who understand and share the unique aspect of losing a parent to a line-of-duty death. She has become a very compassionate person who wants to help other people. I really believe the C.O.P.S. programs have taught her to respect other people when they are talking, to listen to their issues, and how to reach out and comfort other children her age who are hurting.”

Jennifer Thacker’s work as C.O.P.S. National President will come to a close in May 2010. Through her efforts more law enforcement officers mentor at camp so the children can develop close relationships with officers. She has become quite an effective speaker and is comfortable talking with one survivor or speaking in front of thousands. Jennifer was recently awarded the “Superior Achievement Award” from the Milwaukee County (WI) Sheriff’s Office. And in 2007, she was given the “Gutsy Gal” HER Award at Louisville’s *Today’s Woman* magazine’s Awards Ceremony, **H**onoring **E**xcellent **R**ole Models.

Ben Bolton sees Jennifer Thacker from time to time at National Police Week Planning Committee meetings or law enforcement conferences, “What a change! Jennifer Thacker is a qualified, competent, and bold leader of a national organization that I, too, believe is responsible for rebuilding shattered lives and even saving lives. She exemplifies C.O.P.S.’ motto of ‘Rebuilding Shattered Lives’ and her efforts have helped countless others to rebuild their lives as well. Today, she’s one of the most well-rounded and healed survivors I know!”

Visit C.O.P.S.’ website, www.nationalcops.org, for more information on the organization and the programs offered to America’s surviving law enforcement families.