

## A Widow's Plea - In Memory of Howard

By Joyce Plouff

Wife of Sergeant Howard J. Plouff II – EOW 2-23-07; 10:42 pm

The holidays have come and gone. For those who wear blue these are typically working days. Families try to squeeze in time before or after a shift and make the most of their time together. TIME. Isn't that what we always do? Shift work, weekends, weddings, birthdays, anniversaries all become a blur. When Howard's best man was making his way down the aisle a year after us, Howard put in for the time off. After all, it was his turn to be best man and support his best friend in this life changing event. Jake had followed us to NC and became a firefighter in Raleigh. Howard was denied the vacation day and called in sick. His sergeant called him and made him come back to Winston-Salem and Howard missed his best friend getting married. His sergeant explained this was only the beginning of missing out on important events, life and time.

So true. Howard learned his lesson well and rarely called in sick in 17 ½ years. He had his wisdom teeth removed and went in to work. His sergeant had to force him to go home when I was in labor with our first child. He did take some time off for both our daughters' births but it was pre-planned vacation time or 'comp time.' He seemed to have a lot of that since he always went in early and left late.

Overall the choices were made to take care of his family. We worked as a team and blended our schedules to be there for our girls and take care of each other. We squeezed TIME in every way we could. This also meant making time for Howard's PD family. Get togethers and squad parties were Howard's way of staying close to his colleagues. He was always the first to help someone move or have a party at the house.

Through it all, Howard 'saved' his sick time to put towards retiring early. I would lament how I would need to work until I was 90 as a schoolteacher, to which he would reply "No, when I retire you retire so we can spend TIME together." Howard had earned roughly 1,289 hours of sick time when he was

shot and killed responding to an officer's plea for assistance. He died at 10:42 – End of Watch/Work. No TIME left for us together either as a PD family, family of four, or two old, retired folks.

When Howard was in the hospital, my only thoughts were to have him recover. My astute, youngest child wondered amidst her pain how we would pay the bills and have food to eat. I was naïve enough to think that we would be taken care of through Howard's pensions, etc. Although I slowly learned this wasn't



the case. It's not like a police officer and schoolteacher had money in the bank. In the days and weeks that followed, I realized we didn't have money to pay the bills. That is until PBA/PBF stepped up (rather quickly, too) with a check for \$5,000.00. This was essential and deeply appreciated. If nothing else, I could assure my daughters that we would eat and stay in our home filled with memories. TIME painfully slipped by and I juggled and struggled with tons of paperwork (estate, insurance, etc.) amidst my enormous grief. It was apparent I couldn't function as a schoolteacher but that \$5,000.00 check faithfully came every month for a full year. We were also very fortunate that the community donated money to a fund set up for our family through PBA. Howard's colleagues rallied together and the Winston-Salem PBA Chapter President even spent a frigid night on the roof of a gym to raise money for our family! Needless to say, this response was overwhelming. Howard's family would

be taken care of by his PD family.

The TIME Howard 'saved' we can never truly recover. In fact, the city has said he (or his beneficiaries) won't be receiving monies for this earned time. The state and the City of Winston-Salem simply returned the monies Howard contributed to the retirement/pension fund which I had to roll over into an IRA. This means no "Widow's Package," no pension, no monthly payments.

To pay it forward (our police officers' hard work and generosity), so to speak, I am becoming an advocate for law enforcement and their families. I wrote in anguish to our local representatives and senators about the secondary insult of not receiving Howard's pension. I have met with legislators and we are currently trying to effect change in the state statute to provide a "Widow/Widower's Package" that would provide a pension to the beneficiaries of officers' feloniously killed in the line of duty. It is my hope we can push through a similar plan for the local pension plan

as well.

Howard died February 23, 2007, at 10:42 pm. End of shift, end of work. Without Howard, I am lost and TIME stands still. No more shift work but no more squeezes of TIME. No more time as a family, no more squad parties, no more future time as a retired couple. Emotionally we all will never be the same. As I gather strength, I am finding new avenues to honor Howard and demand that his murder be a wake up call for us all to step forward and advocate for our law enforcement officers. PBA/PBF offers a perfect opportunity for us all to do just that. Whether this is through donating our TIME, energies or money, I know we must all cherish our memories and work hard to stay safe and never let them win. Howard, as a guardian angel, is making sure you never walk alone. Howard will always be my biggest hero, and I will always be his biggest fan. But you all are my heroes. Bless you all and stay safe.