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HEADLINE: How you can honor a fallen policeman

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by By Laurie Roberts, The Arizona Republic – Nov. 1, 2008 12:00 AM The Arizona Republic

They'll gather at a church in Mesa this morning as they have too many times before lately, a silent, solemn procession of men and women, there to pay tribute to one of their own.

From all corners of the state they'll come, in their Class A uniform best they'll come, and they'll stand, with straight backs and broken hearts, for Phoenix Officer Shane Figueroa.

Sharon Knutson-Felix will also stand.

She more than most understands the loss when an officer dies, not only to a police department and a community but to a family. To a young widow named Melisha and to Kenzie, just three months into this life and left now without a father.

Officer Figueroa was killed a week ago as he raced to answer a call of shots fired. The man who hit him was drunk nearly three times over.

He is the third public-safety officer to die on the job this month. Corrections Officer Douglas Falconer died Oct. 1 while working with an inmate crew to fight a blaze near Lake Havasu City. Department of Public Safety paramedic Bruce Harrolle died Oct. 13 while rescuing hikers in Sedona. And now Officer Figueroa.

When a cop dies, it's not just those who loved him who feel the loss. All week long, people have asked me what they can do. So I took the question to an expert.

Twenty-five years ago, Sharon lost her 6-year-old son, Ricky, when a car jumped the curb and hit him as he walked with his aunt and baby sister. Ten years ago, she lost her husband, DPS Officer Doug Knutson, when he was struck on Loop 202 as he stood beside an abandoned car.

"Your world stops," she told me this week. "The world goes on but your world stops."

Sharon still has the cards people sent, the letters and hand-drawn pictures offered by strangers. She gets them out now and then and rereads them. Through them, her grandchildren get to see a piece of their uncle and grandfather, to understand that their deaths mattered and that people took the time to say so.

Those small gestures carried Sharon through the early days of grief. At times, they still do.

These days, she's executive director of the **100 Club**, which assists the families of officers killed or injured in the line of duty. She'd never heard of the club until members knocked on her door the day after Doug's death, handing her a check and taking one worry – funeral costs – off her plate. "I remember them saying, 'We stand behind the men and women who stand behind the badge.' "

Which is where Sharon has stood ever since. Wherever tragedy touches the men and women who serve us, you will find her. After 9/11, she spent 24 days in New York, offering a shoulder to rescue workers. She recalls jumping onto the running board of a truck to talk to the driver hauling debris from Ground Zero.

"I said, 'How are you doing through all of this?' And nobody had talked to him," she recalled. "He was just driving in and out getting loads. He just broke down and wept and said he had lost his five children in a fire a

year before and he drove there from another state just to help. He could hardly see through his tears. I remember him taking my hand and saying, 'Thanks for caring.' It was such a little thing. All I did is talk to him, and yet sometimes that's all people need, a touch, a hug, a card, whatever."

Which brings me to Sharon's answer. What can you do? Drop a card to the Figueroa family or a few bucks into the bank account set up for Melisha and Kenzlie (any M&I Bank). Make a donation to the **100 Club** (5033 N. 19th Ave., Suite 123, Phoenix, 85015). Or go out this morning and line the route that will carry Officer Figueroa to his grave.

"The only wrong thing to do," Sharon said, "is nothing."

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Highlights: 100 Club