

## Survivor Story: Gina Burke

**Local 1075, St. John's, NL / Fire Captain  
Diagnosed with breast cancer in 2014**

Hi, my name is Gina Burke. I am a daughter, sister, wife, and mother to two beautiful humans. I currently hold the rank of fire captain with the St. John's Regional Fire Department (SJRFD) and I'm a cancer survivor.

I was hired in 1992 and completed my paramedic course in 1999. Throughout my career, I have been a member of the High-Angle, Cold-Water Rescue, and Confined Space teams. I received my fire lieutenant promotion in 2010 and then was promoted to fire captain in 2013. To say the least, the last 30 years in the fire service have been great to me!

It was June of 2014 that my life changed. What seemed to be a normal everyday occurrence, I found myself checking my breasts. It was habit since my sister had breast cancer in 2012. Really, it was as natural as breathing! As my hand effortlessly inspected my breasts, I was met by something totally unexpected. My left hand had made a discovery of something foreign. It was a lump on the upper outer side of my right breast. It was different than anything I had felt before. At that moment I knew what I was in for. And so it began!

I knew every grueling appointment, test, surgery, and treatment that lay ahead. I was not so much shocked as I was angry — infuriated! I had just done all this with my sister two years prior, and now I was giving up another year of my life to this unforgiving disease, cancer.

To break it down, I found the lump in June. It took me two months to get an appointment for a mammogram, which led directly to an ultrasound. These two procedures quickly followed with a biopsy, and this confirmed that I had been diagnosed with invasive ductal carcinoma, grade 2 with lobular features (one of three sentinel nodes being positive). More tests were performed, and I was quickly scheduled for surgery in September 2014, where I had a double mastectomy.

In November, I began my first treatment of six rounds of chemo, every three weeks. Following this, I completed 24 rounds of radiation. It was a necessary evil throughout which I lost my hair, had stomach issues, and was literally dying in order to live. It was very taxing on my family so we quickly decided that my husband would take care of them while I took care of myself! So, with the help of my beautiful mom, we were able to do just that. In total, I had a full year off. I was able to do this with the great benefits we have in Local 1075, the approval of management, and with the support of my amazing husband and coworker, Fire Captain Barry Burke, who worked overtime shifts to bank for me to use as time off in lieu of overtime once my sick leave had run out.

I returned to work September 2015 and treatment continued. I was on tamoxifen for the last seven years. Finally, in October 2022, I broke up with my oncologist — a bittersweet event. I was so happy to be finished this journey, but I would miss my doctor, now friend, Dr. Kara Laing who helped me fight this ugly disease.



As I reflect back, my journey had begun prior to the awareness and action for the deadly risks and exposures of firefighting. Support groups were not big and decontamination policies were not something individuals did after fire but rather hazmat incidents.

When I first joined the SJRFD, it was a time when fire fighters wore their soiled turnout gear as a badge of honour, displaying all of the calls you had attended. To clean your gear meant you brought it home and washed it in your own washing machine. You can only imagine the exposures.

As I mentioned earlier, my sister had breast cancer two years prior to me. Upon my diagnosis, we were tested to see if our cancer was genetic. Tests ruled out genetics! After knowing all I know about the carcinogens from firefighting, diesel exhaust fumes, and chemicals in bunker gear/turnout clothing, I can't help but feel guilty. Guiltily for not really knowing the hazards and guilty that I had exposed my family.

In 2015, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador advanced an amendment to the Workplace Health, Safety and Compensation Act and regulations to provide presumptive cancer coverage for the province's career and volunteer fire fighters. In October 2022, they added eight more cancers to the already 11 existing recognized cancers, leading the way in Canada to protect and acknowledge the dangers fire fighters are exposed to.

I am grateful to all those involved in helping to protect fire fighters. Grateful for the tremendous work and achievements of my fellow union brothers and sisters in this fight against cancer. Grateful for better work environments, better safety practices, and greater awareness. With perseverance, lobbying, and passion — fire fighters were able to educate and put into motion the steps that would lead to the ultimate fire protection for fire fighters, that is — presumptive cancer legislation.

To say this experience has changed my life is an understatement. I believe it has taken many years to actually find myself again. To merge the old me prior to cancer with the person I have become because of cancer. I am aware now and have experienced that life is very funny, and it can change in the blink of an eye. I am more present and grateful for the life that I am fortunate enough to live, and I try to take nothing for granted!

Really, life is a gift! I consider myself a private individual; however, I believe that knowledge is power, and if sharing my story has the ability to help just one individual than it was worth it!

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