

Survivor Story: Wendy Watkins

CAL FIRE Local 2881 / Fire Fighter

Diagnosed with breast cancer (infiltrating ductal carcinoma) in 2020

The first day of my 72-hour shift is when I got the call. The quiet morning and familiar routine of my engine checkout was interrupted by news that no one wants to hear, “Your lab results indicate positive for infiltrating ductal carcinoma.”

Having only began my fire service career three years prior, I was blindsided. I knew that cancer was a huge risk of the fire service, but never thought it would happen to me. I was young, healthy, active, and relatively new to the job.

A month prior to the diagnosis, the lump I discovered in my right breast had no accompanying symptoms. I hesitated at first on going in for a mammogram, but in hindsight, I am grateful that I did. After a mammogram, ultrasounds, and biopsy, the results were in, and my life was about to change forever.

I would not be where I am today without the support of my family, friends, and my brothers and sisters in the fire service. Minutes after I hung up the phone with the doctor, my brothers at Station 20 were already offering help, guidance, words of encouragement, and hugs. I knew that I wouldn't be fighting alone.

Prior to the diagnosis, I hadn't heard much about the Firefighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN) and what they have to offer. My aunt reached out on my behalf and put me in contact with Scott Jennie. He was so kind and encouraging, explaining the FCSN mission and promptly mailed out their toolbox. The toolbox proved to be essential in keeping me organized throughout my new journey.

I was fortunate enough to be able to continue working on an engine while receiving treatments through October of 2020. By then, the fatigue had become too much to contend with, and I decided to take some time off of the engine. My department stepped up and assigned me to work in the service center for 2021, allowing me the ability to begin daily radiation treatments; something I could not have done if I was still assigned to an engine as a fire fighter.

Fast forward to 2022, a true turn of events in my life. After hundreds of doctor visits, chemotherapy infusions, radiation treatments, and a full mastectomy — I am happy to announce that I am finally on the other side of the battle. I am currently back to full duty and assigned to an engine; what an amazing feeling to be back.

My family, fire family, friends, and FCSN have been there every step of the way. The help, support, guidance, reassurance, and hope they offered got me through the toughest days. I will be forever grateful for the Firefighter Cancer Support Network.

