



Fire Fighter Cancer Awareness and Prevention



CAREGIVER STORY: ANDY VALENTA

Vista, CA Local 4107 / Fire Fighter & Paramedic

Diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma in 2021; Line-of-Duty Death: April 25, 2021

My name is Caylie Valenta. I am the widow of fire fighter/paramedic Andy Valenta. Andy died on April 25, 2021, at the age of 33 from occupational cancer.

Andy and I met when he was just hired with the City of Vista. He was celebrating his last night of “freedom” before starting his career, and he caught my eye from across the bar. We spent almost 12 incredible years together. We were married in 2014 and had two daughters together, Lily (age 4) and Grace (age 3). We were true soul mates.

Andy worked for the City of Vista Fire Department for 11 years. It was without a doubt his calling in life. He was a strong figure in the department. He had a big voice in the union, and was well respected. You could always expect to have fun if he was on your shift. His pranks and food challenges were legendary! He was a true Brother, and was passionate about helping others.

Andy was so happy with the life he created.

Andy was a healthy, fit, normal guy with excessive amounts of energy. We had no warning as to what was to come. Early December 2020, he suddenly started having severe headaches and intractable vomiting. The worst pain he felt in his life. Numerous ER visits, and we had no answers, and Andy had no relief from his pain. A month into this, he told me he discovered some lumps in his armpits. When I heard this, my heart immediately sank. I knew what we were dealing with.

He underwent an urgent CT, and the following day, January 6, 2021, we received the call that people have nightmares about. Andy had cancer, and it was everywhere. Dozens of tumors throughout his abdomen. It was in his liver, his lungs, his chest cavity, his spine, his ribs, his hips, his shoulder. Rapidly destroying his body. Stage 4 melanoma. Pure shock and fear was all we felt. And yet the world kept moving. Ten minutes after that phone call, we had to bring our daughter to preschool like it was any other day.





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Within 48 hours of that call, we were connected with the Firefighter Cancer Support Network. A box was delivered directly to our home, filled with folders of resources. That box became our cancer hub. It organized every document we received, and filled up quickly.

Four days into this horrific discovery, Andy was hospitalized in the ICU with an extensive brain bleed caused by the cancer. We thought that was the end for him. But he fought through it, came home, and started intense, whole-brain radiation followed by oral therapy. All with extensive side effects. Initially, he was responding very well to the treatment. There was hope. Andy defied the odds before, he could do it again.

Then, just three months into treatment, he started rapidly declining again. The treatment was working everywhere except his brain. He went from eight tumors in his brain to close to 50 within weeks. He lost the ability to walk. He lost the ability to speak. But he still wanted me to schedule him for more treatments. He did not want to give up. He wasn't afraid of dying, but he would fight with every cell in his body for our girls and I. When he was unable to even eat or take his medications, I had to make the decision to place him on hospice. By far the hardest and most painful decision I've made in my life. I had to watch my strong, loving, confident husband waste away in a hospice bed. Within days he passed away. He lived only three and a half months from the point of diagnosis.

I am now without my husband. Without my best friend. Without my partner in life. We looked forward to becoming a cute old couple one day. That dream has been ripped away. Our girls won't grow up with their Daddy. They may not even remember much about him. And Andy won't get to be a part of raising his children. We are living a real-life nightmare. This cancer was an absolute monster that no one should ever have to experience. And we are just one of so many families that have suffered as a result of occupational cancer.

In Andy's honor, we are creating the Andy Valenta Melanoma Foundation to raise awareness within fire departments and provide and/or encourage routine skin checks. A fate like Andy's may be preventable for others if caught early. We hope to help as many families as we can in avoiding the nightmare we've endured.

Thank you to FCSN for bringing fire fighter cancer awareness and prevention across the nation.