

SURVIVOR STORY:

PATRICK SANJULIAN

Fire Captain / Clarksburg Fire Department
Clarksburg, WV Local 89



My name is Patrick SanJulian. I have been a professional fire fighter for the City of Clarksburg Fire Department for over 20 years. I am a captain, an EMT, and a devoted father of three.

On Oct. 16, 2022, I was diagnosed with metastatic acinar adenocarcinoma stage IV, a rare and aggressive form of pancreatic cancer. I have undergone chemotherapy and multiple surgeries to fight this awful disease. I hope that my story helps raise awareness for early detection and even prevention for my fellow fire fighters.

I was on duty and started having flu like symptoms and was feeling crummy. I chalked it up to the start of an ulcer because of my failing marriage and life's stressors over the previous few months.

And then, I threw up blood, not once and not just a little. It was an ulcer for sure. Until it wasn't.

On Oct. 16, the ER doc said, "It's bad, and we think it's cancer." I had several procedures to stabilize the bleeding that very first week. We were hopeful that it was a lymphoma type of cancer but were sadly mistaken.

After a 14-day wait, on Oct. 22, biopsies and a PET scan confirmed a diagnosis of stage IV metastatic acinar adenocarcinoma.

A second opinion was obtained and confirmed that the prognosis was not good. Acinar adenocarcinoma is deadly, and the survival rate is less than 1% beyond 12 months. The cancer had engulfed the pancreas, invaded my liver, and had extended into the portal vein. I had several positive lymph nodes in my abdomen and esophageal varices.

Treatment started immediately. I had a nerve root block attempted to help with the abdominal pain, but the tumors were too significant. I had a port placed and chemotherapy was initiated by IV with three very intense and high-dose medications. I was not a candidate for any of UPMC's clinical trials, and the outlook felt overwhelmingly bleak. I ran the emotional gauntlet of grief and fear. I asked myself a million times what I had done to deserve this, what about my kids, and what now?

The anger came, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't truly scared.

The Firefighter Cancer Support Network reached out and a mentor was assigned to me. I also received a cancer support toolbox in the mail.

Having a fellow fire fighter who was also going through this battle to help provide support and encouragement was incredible. I will never say this fight has been easy, but what I can tell anyone who is facing this type of battle: You are not alone. There are so many blessings in the darkest of dark days. As a member of the IAFF Local 89, my union and I lobbied for changes to the presumption definitions in our state. Pancreatic cancer is now one of the fire fighter cancer presumptions.

Currently, I continue fighting the now hidden disease with oral chemotherapy. I completed 14 rounds of IV chemo. I have had numerous surgeries for esophageal varices, but I continue to show no recurrence and the active tumors are no longer responsive on the PET scans.

It's my turn to provide the support that was so important in my fight. If you or a fire fighter that you love has been diagnosed with cancer, please reach out to the Firefighter Cancer Support Network and let a mentor provide you with the support you need to fight too.

