

# SURVIVOR STORY:

## RUSTY HULSE

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My name is Rusty Hulse. I am happily married with four kids. I was born and raised in Fayetteville, Arkansas. For the past 29 years, I have been a proud member of the fire service. I got my start as a volunteer fire fighter when I was 16. In 2009, I quit resisting destiny and made a career out of it. I have been with the Fayetteville Fire Department for the past 15 years and have served as Battalion Chief of Planning since 2020.

Rewind back to 2015. The year started with ups and downs. I was working as a driver/operator on Engine 2 and was engaged to my wife, Jennifer. Early spring hit hard because my brother, Randy, was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Randy made it almost another 30 days before losing his battle.

Jennifer and I were married in April, so the roller coaster was once again riding high. Summer came and at the end of June, I was promoted to captain and was assigned to Engine 1. Life was going great. As fall approached, the subtle symptoms I had been ignoring for probably a few years started getting harder to ignore.

I had continued to write off occasional blood in the toilet bowl as a symptom of getting older. I started getting random cramps. I continued to ignore these and write them off as the effects of eating spicy foods.

As the fall progressed, the symptoms kept getting more problematic and frequent. I'm not a big believer in visits from ghosts or anything like that, but I do believe in divine intervention. Around Thanksgiving, I had a very vivid dream about my brother, Randy. The following day, I did not remember the subject of our conversation, but I had one thought on my mind: "GO TO THE DOCTOR, DUMMY."

Before this, I did not get to the "go see a doctor" box on my checklist until I was certain I was dying, so I made an appointment with a doctor my family had used before. The doc checked me out and found nothing of concern but ordered a colonoscopy. I went through all the lovely steps to prepare for the test and showed up that morning. The doctor said something along the lines of, "I'm sure it's nothing serious since you are only 37."

The next thing I remember was waking up and coming out from under the haze of anesthetic. The doctor walked in with a pale and somber look on his face. He then proceeded to say those words that everyone prays they will never hear: "You have cancer."

Remember the roller coaster? It just flew off the track. For a moment, I felt like the world stood still while he went over the results and recommended that I have surgery immediately and then follow up with an oncologist. Remembering advice given to me by many friends and family members who had gone through this, I told the doctor I wanted a second opinion and asked him for a referral to MD Anderson in Houston, Texas. The doc said that was a wise choice and sent my referral the same day.

I don't remember a lot about the days immediately following the diagnosis, but I remember anxiety and confusion. The biggest thing I remember is reverting to my fire fighter roots and being determined to hit this thing head-on and beat it. Throughout my entire experience, I never once allowed myself to consider the "what-ifs." I would beat it.

I got an appointment secured in Houston for early January, and we went about the holiday season without telling the kids anything. I did not want to spoil their Christmas by worrying about their Dad, nor did I want to tell them anything until we were sure about what we were dealing with.

January came, and we spent a week in Houston doing tests and meeting with no less than four doctors. The doctors met with me before the end of the week and let me know that it was bad. They were waiting on the results from another test but warned me I quite probably had stage 4 colorectal cancer. Friday came around, and they called to tell me that we had barely caught it at stage 3, not stage 4. This was some relief, but it set the stage for a long year ahead.



To this day, one of the most complex parts of the experience was telling the kids. We left Houston and drove to Oklahoma City, where my two kids live with their mother. After a heart-wrenching day with them, I convinced them that I had no intention of letting this beat me. We returned home to Fayetteville and had the same talk with the boys.

February officially started the fight. At the end of January, I had a chemo port implanted in my chest and in early February I started my first round of chemotherapy infusions. I would go in and have a three-hour infusion, and then they would hook me up to a pump to take home. The pump would continue to push the chemo drugs into my system for two more days.

The chemo lived up to its reputation, and I was sick and tired like never before during the three days. I had two weeks off between treatments, so I went to work in the off times. There were some days I felt wiped out just by putting my gear on the truck, but I was convinced not to let cancer define and control me. After four chemo treatments, I did six weeks of daily radiation treatments while continuing with my old friend chemo, but in pill form.

During the late spring, I had an MRI to prepare for the surgery that would happen later in the summer. When the doctors got the MRI results, they noticed a dark spot on my bladder. I was referred to a urologist and promptly told I also had bladder cancer. Luckily, the tumor in my bladder had not significantly progressed, so they were able to go in and remove it and said we would watch it over time.

Fast forward to summer, Jen and I returned to Houston where I had a 12-hour surgery. They ended up taking out a section of my colon, along with about 15 lymph nodes in my pelvis that were cancerous.

The location in my colon where they had to work required that I have an ileostomy for a few months while I did my second round of chemo.

After about eight weeks, I was able to return to work. Once again, continuing to work allowed me to keep my mind off the cancer and leave no room for doubt. I finished my chemo treatments sometime in the fall. I will never forget when I finished my last treatment; I walked out to the hall to ring the bell. Not only did I walk out to ring the bell, I walked out to see a parking lot full of fire trucks and a room full of my Brother and Sister fire fighters there to support me. To this day, this was one of the most moving moments of my life.

December came, and I once again found myself in Houston, this time for surgery to reconnect the plumbing and say goodbye to my little bag friend who I would not miss. After that, I returned home, healed up, and returned to work at the job I love.

As time progressed, I went from having checkups every month to every quarter, twice a year, once a year, and then in 2021, I rang the bell again. The doctors at MD Anderson said I still had no signs of cancer and, at this point, they considered me cured. For the first time in what seemed like decades, I was no longer waiting on that next appointment.

Later on, I finally looked to see what my statistical odds of beating the type of cancer I had (I would not allow the doctors to tell me when I was fighting). The odds weren't all that great it turns out. I still struggle with the old "why me" thought when I think about beating cancer when so many others do not, but I do not let that weigh me down.

It took a while for me to find my way to give back, but in the summer of 2023, I joined the Firefighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN) as the Arkansas Director. I was unaware of the FCSN when I was in my fight, but I wish I had been. I hope to use this opportunity to help my fellow fire fighters who are fighting the same fight I did.

The advice I have for anyone facing cancer is this. 1) Don't ignore symptoms, if something feels wrong, get it checked! 2) You are not a cancer patient; you are a cancer WARRIOR! 3) Never allow room for any thought other than "I will beat this." 4) Get a second opinion regardless of the scope of the first diagnosis. 5) Finally, remember, you don't fight a fire alone ... don't fight cancer alone! Turn to prayer. Reach out to friends, family, fellow fire fighters, and the FCSN. We all have your back!