

SURVIVOR STORY:

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I am a big believer in regular fire department physicals. That's because it saved my life not once, but twice. In 2014, 16 years after I was hired as a fire fighter with the Gig Harbor Fire Department, blood work at a routine physical came back abnormal. I was sent to a hematologist and, after additional lab work and a bone marrow biopsy, I was diagnosed with essential thrombocythemia. This is a rare form of leukemia caused by a mutation on the Janus Kinase 2, or JAK2, gene, which can lead to blood clots and strokes. I'd been experiencing no symptoms.

The genetic mutation is caused by exposure to something at some point, but they'll never pin point it exactly. Fortunately, in the state of Washington, leukemia is covered by presumptive language, so the ongoing treatment, medications, and doctor's visits are covered.

I was promoted to assistant chief at Gig Harbor in 2020, continued working through my treatment, and added additional duties volunteering for the Firefighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN). The FCSN aims to provide education and information about cancer prevention to all of Washington state fire academies. They also provide peer support and resources to fire fighters and family members diagnosed with cancer.

My department took a break from annual physicals during COVID but restarted the practice in 2021. In addition to monitoring my cancer, I knew my age indicated I needed to do a colonoscopy.

After the screening was done, the doctors came to discuss the findings. I had colorectal cancer. Treatment included removing the entire ascending colon and 12 adjacent lymph nodes. The mass was indeed malignant. And detected in one lymph node. I was diagnosed with stage 3B colorectal cancer.

After recovering from surgery, I was given 12 rounds of chemotherapy. The last treatment was in July of 2022. Since then, bloodwork and a follow up colonoscopy with an additional full body CT was done. All showed no signs of cancer.

Back when I started as a fire fighter, we really had no education about cancer risks.

Firefighting is a great job. I wouldn't change what I've done for anything. I've been lucky to have cancers that are treatable. But the Firefighter Cancer Support Network and other organizations are trying to educate first responders about cleaning your gear, what's in the smoke, and what we can do to make a better future for ourselves.

Early in my career, dirty gear was a badge of honor, not anymore.

At Gig Harbor, we have a second set of gear, gross decontamination, and regular gear cleanings. We are now redesigning fire stations. An 80-million-dollar bond was passed to help with this. We will be safer due to decontamination facilities, updated diesel exhaust systems, and ventilated PPE storage rooms.

Many fire fighters are hesitant to get the physical as they worry that if they are diagnosed with cancer, they'll lose their jobs. I am the poster child - showing them that will not happen. Fire departments invest a lot of money in their employees, with hiring, outfitting them with proper gear, and doing all of the training. They have invested all of that money in you and want to keep you as an employee, plus, you're a human being to them.

