



Survivor Story: Michael Dubron, Founder of FCSN
Los Angeles County Fire Department, Firefighter/Paramedic, Crew Chief/Paramedic Air Ops
Diagnosed with Colorectal Cancer in 2003

"Cancer changed my life."



It all started with three words, "you have cancer". As a career Firefighter/Paramedic with the Los Angeles County Fire Department seemingly in control of my life, both personally and professionally what in my life could possibly change everything? Those three words did, and my life will never be the same.

I was 39 years old, working at one of the elite assignments in our department as a Crew Chief/Paramedic in the Air Operations unit assigned to one of our Firehawk helicopters. These multi mission aircraft respond to a wide variety of calls from search and rescue, fires, floods, EMS, among many others. Truly an adrenaline junkies dream come true, additionally a feeling that many of us in the fire service sense we have, "control". I was married with two young daughters and life around our busy home was filled with activities and adventure, living what I perceived as the American dream again having that feeling much like at work, a feeling of control. How could I lose control of my life both at work and at home? Those three words.

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After having some issues with blood in my stool, repeatedly due to my age and health, I was told I had hemorrhoids. However, the problem worsened and I had a feeling inside that something else was going wrong. After additional testing is when I was ultimately given my diagnosis, it was a phone call simply stating "Mr. Dubron, the tissue samples we removed yesterday came back as cancer, we need to see you immediately". I knew nothing about cancer and I had never in my life prepared myself to hear those three words. I had never taken a course in cancer 101, however, I enrolled quickly. Everybody I had called and reached out to responded with dismay and sadness and their response was always the same "let me know if you need anything". The problem was I didn't know what I needed and I didn't know where to go.

My crash course in cancer 101 became overwhelming especially after a CT scan revealed the cancer spread to my lymph nodes and liver. This prompted the following course of action, chemo, radiation, along with surgery. My prognosis was one to three years of survival. If I thought I had reached the worst days of my life, that day was it. I stopped by my unit and addressed my co-workers, my partners, my fire service family, I told them I won't be coming back. Upon returning to my home that day there was a delivery on the porch. A brand new pair of boots which I had ordered. I simply told my wife you can send those back I won't be needing them anymore. When the tears had dried, we decided to do some additional research on my cancer and seek other opinions.

The education I received was consuming me every hour of the day and night ultimately landing at USC Norris and Dr. Robert Beart. It was February and if I could have ever used a ray of sunshine, or a glimmer of hope it was Dr. Beart who provided it. I found myself in the office of a cancer surgeon who had not only operated on one, but two United States Presidents. He painted a picture of where we were going, with a committed team of world-class cancer experts and our goal was nothing short of survival.

Two weeks later I found myself in recovery, after an all-day affair Dr. Beart worked his magic. Later, we would find what turned out to be one of my best days ever. The pathology reports revealed the lymph nodes and spots on my liver were not cancer and the margins of the primary cancerous mass were good. I saw Dr. Beart and asked what he thought of that report and his simple straightforward response was "we got this".

I had begun to do a little research during cancer 101; I found something that was never discussed in my time as a firefighter. There are a lot of us being diagnosed, just within my department it was eye opening but nobody shared what was happening or had done anything about it. Cancer impacted me so much that I felt compelled to do something, to give back with my new life. I wanted to create and organize a place where firefighters within our department could be available should another one of us be diagnosed like I was. A place where they could connect with a cancer survivor who immediately provided focus, direction, comfort, strength and hope within

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their diagnosis. Furthermore, we had to educate our members about the issue of cancer and how we are being diagnosed and dying from this disease. Also, and understanding that maybe, if we become proactive about cancer, we could reduce the number of diagnosis and those dying.

The news spread quickly and after realizing my idea may be growing into something special, I needed help. It was now a thought of creating an organization that would assist not only Firefighters from my department, it would reach out to others in my state, country, and ultimately around the world. My local union, L-1014 President Dave Gillotte and board of directors embraced this idea and provided much needed resources and assistance. One of my life's truly greatest mentors took me under his wing and shared his experience and knowledge on how to build a successful program and non-profit organization. Dallas Jones was that man and his leadership along with my dear friends Rich Duffy of the IAFF, Bob Kilduff of Professional Firefighters of Massachusetts helped me lay the groundwork. The Firefighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN) was born in 2005 and my idea and vision now had traction. It opened the worldwide door and raised awareness about cancer in the fire service. There were so many wonderful people, and firefighters who shared in my passion. Billy Goldfeder and Bobby Halton are two of the finest I'll ever know and they unlocked so many of those doors. I am grateful to them and so many others who continue the fight.

Today the FCSN led by our President Bryan Frieders, a passionate board of directors from across the country, a business advisory panel, and a dedicated staff work tirelessly to provide that valuable assistance and give hope to all firefighters. Not just active and retired career firefighters, but volunteer firefighters, and their immediate family. The FCSN provides that education about how real cancer is, and how we can change the culture of how we operate. Most importantly, I know that if one of our brothers or sisters are diagnosed, they're just a phone call away from getting something they need, hope.

January of 2021, the International Association of Fire Fighters and the Firefighter Cancer Support Network partnered in presenting the first annual Firefighter Cancer Awareness Month. This was a vision I pictured when the FCSN grew into something I never imagined from a simple idea. Dallas Jones and Bob Kilduff who are no longer with us, would be so proud to see the efforts demonstrated today. Both of them lost their battle with cancer. Though, we cannot completely eliminate cancer, when we do lose one of our own to this disease it gives me, and should give you, the will to do something in their honor. My will is to continue to provide comfort, strength, and hope to those who have been diagnosed and create a proactive approach to combating occupational cancer in the fire service, around the world.

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