



Kelly Kennedy Survivor Story
Firefighter Paramedic
Rock Springs Fire Department, Wyoming
Diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma 2019



My Name is Kelly Kennedy, this is my survivor story.

I was a Firefighter/Paramedic for the city of Rock Springs Wyoming for 20 years and 1.5 years volunteer before that, retiring in 2011 to chase a career in flight medicine where I currently work now as a clinical manager for Classic Air Medical.

In late 2019 I was in the high-country elk hunting and having problems catching my breath and feeling daily fatigue, attributing this to 'old age' I didn't think much of it other than I noticed I had a palpable lump in my neck. I visited my local family Dr who told me it was a lymphatic response to an ear infection, to which I replied this is totally an atypical response for me to any earache or illness in the past and I wanted to make sure it wasn't something bad like lymphoma. Well, another month goes by, and now I have two lumps; so, after a flight shift I went to visit my wife who works at the local hospital and I asked my ER Physician friend to check me out; he immediately send me to imaging for a scan.

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When I got done and dressed, I returned to the ER to check in with my wife and say hi to my crew that was waiting for a patient transfer. There was silence and my wife came up to me to hug me; she had been crying and my two flight team members starting crying, I looked to my left at the Dr station and noticed an image on the screen completely littered with white; I said, as I felt feelings I've never experienced before, "That better not be Me!" Well, it was. As it turned out I was full of tumors, 20 plus in my neck, hundreds in my chest, several on my liver, kidneys, heart, and too many to count in groin. Biopsy confirmed Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, stage 4, so the journey started, and I was set for consult with Huntsman Cancer Center in Utah.

Still in close contact with my FD brothers and sisters, it did not take long for news to travel and an overwhelming amount of phone calls visits and support.; I had learned that my Cancer was covered because I was a FF, and this is when I received first contact from FCSN. I received my toolbox and I have to say I was impressed. I did not have an assigned mentor however had many mentors, and not just from my Fire Department, but the entire State! Then my work (Classic Air Medical) got involved and had a huge benefit golf tournament in my support, a go fund me started by a past FD member and Flight co-workers; just an overwhelming amount of love and support! Because of all this love and support and feeling blessed, I knew I would beat this.

By the time a couple weeks went by and I arrived for my consult I was sick, admitted to ICU as I was in renal failure and feeling terrible, scared to death because I couldn't start chemo until I got healthy enough. One week later I started my Chemo, and man was that I long day! After two severe reactions on the escalated doses of R-CHOP we called it a wrap after 13 hours of sitting in the chair. Now a couple months have gone by, and I was cancer free, bald and in remission! however it did not last long, 10 months down the road from original diagnoses and at the peak of Covid, in for an oncology checkup, My cancer had returned with a vengeance, this was depressing because I was just starting to feel better and getting back into the grind golfing, camping, hunting, and flying patient.

The new plan: Get after it right away with chemo again, get me to remission, and receive an autologous stem cell transplant! Because my veins were destroyed from the first go around of chemo my first step was to receive a tunnel port in my chest, this made life nice due to the frequency of chemo treatments and the grueling stem cell harvest process. The process itself was awesome and very interesting, however at this point my body is hammered, I have NO immune system to speak of, and the medications to stimulate and release stem cells were miserable and honestly worse than the chemo; even at that, my spirits were high, I still felt very blessed because of all the Firefighter and co-worker support. A grand junction CO firefighter/paramedic had a shirt drive that I will never forget! The quote is "Bring me your worst, and I will show you my best"; over 1200 shirts were purchased! Firefighters and first responders as far away as Florida supported and blessed me with messages of support and purchased a shirt; My wife cried.

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Transplant Day! This is where things got real, I ended up at my low, and the support, love and prayers mattered most. To start it was still Covid time and my wife could not enter the facility, my H&H was super low and I prayed I didn't get so much as a hang nail for fear of sepsis. Day -5 I received a very high dose of chemo they call the 'Nuclear Bomb' that completely wipes out your prior immunity to everything, that's not a euphemism, it is a fact! Before one can receive the transplant, one must be 0-0, this means at no WBC's, H&H at 5/13, neutrophils 0, needs to be this way before transplant for 'engraftment' to take place. This is day '0'. Day +1 is your 'new birthday' the staff even brings a b-day card and sings. Day 3 is when it hits and I've never been so sick in my life, hair falls out again, pancreas is destroyed so now I'm an insulin dependent diabetic. My entire life til now I was a warrior, strongest on my department with a 400 Lb bench press and ranked 11 in the world FF Combat Challenge, known for my strength and toughness; laying in bed, needing assistance to utilize the bathroom and looking emaciated. Thank God for modern technology, Skype/Facetime, all the prayers, and again calls and support from all my fire brothers and sisters and a reach out from the FCSN. Day 14 there is a light at the end of the tunnel, feeling better, and able to get around on my own, but it will be another 20 days of isolation on the transplant floor with no visitors other than the care team before I can leave. After 45 days I got released! Got to breath outside air and hug my wife.

The next year is a roller-coaster of sickness, pneumonia 5 times, one 'bug' or another every other week, Zero natural immunity to anything! As stated earlier the process wipes you clean so I had to start all immunizations as if I was a newborn, only difference is adult dosages, with a full understanding why babies cry when they get shots. Summer came and although I felt my gains were to slow (A type Personality) I was improving day by day. It is unbelievable the changes your body goes through; metabolic, physical, and mental. I feel every experience in life is a teaching moment. I learned that I'm not invincible, I truly believe in the power of prayer and positive attitude. That we get self-focused on ourself and don't realize how tuff this is on our family and friends; even though you try to not show your pain, I felt I had to still be the "Tuff Guy" however learned real quick that My wife was and kids were the strong ones! I feel this experience was hyper-humbling and made me a better person, a better care giver and brought to light what being a firefighter and having brothers and sisters in arms is all about.

This November is my- 2 year post transplant checkup, I am very optimistic! I feel great, my body is finally where I feel I should be, and no more insulin!! I receive IgG infusions every 45 days which will probably be forever due to my permanent neutropenic status, I haven't been ill with anything for a year and I feel very blessed! Being a mentor for FCSN and talking with other Firefighters going through a similar situation is just one small way I feel I can Pay it forward.

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