



**Survivor Story: Steve Westcott**  
**Perkins Township, Ohio Fire Department, Firefighter/Paramedic**  
**Diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia in 2008 and 2009**

"It wasn't going to happen to me until it did... twice."



You don't forget where you are when you find out you have cancer. It's surreal. For me, I didn't have my life flash before my eyes. Instead, I saw my future appear, then run past me with all the things I still wanted to achieve, and they started to escape me. Looking back, I ignored every sign and symptom of leukemia and continued to think my health was infallible because I was in great shape and took care of myself. For as long as I can remember, I not only looked up to ones protecting our communities but wanted to be one of them as well. It was no surprise that I wanted to become a public servant, it is in my bloodline and I wanted to follow my dad's footsteps. Yes, I knew the job's dangers. I came to terms with possibly leaving it all out there on the call with my boots on. Never once did I consider the possibility of dying from this job with my boots off while on a cancer floor in a hospital.

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**Our Mission:** To assist firefighters and EMS providers and their immediate families diagnosed with cancer by providing badge to badge support, training and guidance.



I hit the jackpot right out of school and landed the career of my dreams. I loved every moment and can honestly say I never "worked" a day while doing it. With each year that passed and every call we took, the topic of cancer wasn't a mainstream thought in the fire service, and all the while hundreds, if not thousands of firefighters were dying from cancer. It was sitting right in our blind spot. That made the surprise of being told I had cancer even more impossible to fathom, especially once I knew this was the extraordinarily aggressive and fatal type of Acute Myeloid Leukemia bunkered down in my bone marrow, eating away at my very core.

During my first battle with this horrible disease, I spent six months in and out of the hospital enduring round after round of chemotherapy, more blood transfusions than I could count. That's when I had my first experience with the Firefighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN). It was crazy to me to have such a fantastic organization seemingly come from nowhere and offer me support with the very thing I needed—a support network not of family and friends or medical professionals, but other firefighters going through the same thing and genuinely sharing with me what helped get them through. In our line of work having someone who has experienced something you haven't was indeed someone to learn from and listen to.

Once I was healthy enough to start paying it forward, I immediately started mentoring other firefighters with the FCSN and found myself volunteering with them 12 years later. After fully rehabbing, I was ecstatic to get back on the trucks and be doing what I loved once again. Only six months had passed by and then once again the horrible news came back. Knowing it was much more aggressive this time around I only had a 10% survivability rate. Hoping I would receive a successful bone marrow transplant and move towards a potential cure. The worst news was knowing I would have to walk away from the job I'd always dreamt of having and have to hang up my turnouts and helmet up on the rack for good. It didn't matter if cancer killed me or not, I already felt dead inside having to walk away from all that I knew.

After having a pretty good "moment" to myself I was once again lifted by my amazing brother and sister firefighters, the FCSN, community members, family, and friends, and I geared up for the fight of my life. I waged a very hard-fought battle, and with the help from my marrow donor from Germany, I'm still here to talk about the fight, the losses, but mostly the victory. I guess there is something to be said about being German engineered after all!

It's hard to pinpoint just one thing or person or organization which helps you defeat cancer. You really can't. However, one of the most significant assets I had going for me and which leukemia didn't have, was the strength, willpower, and full force of the fire service and the FCSN. From their toolbox to their mentors, the

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cards, and the phone calls, they help you remain focused on what matters and make sure you know you are not alone. "Together we can" is not just a slogan to this organization; it's an ethos, a core value, and honestly, a severe attitude that embodies us losing too many of our brothers and sisters from this awful disease.

Even after all that, they provided me so much more and truly another saving from this illness. It gave me a newfound purpose to get out of bed with a mission and goal in mind and something to become once again. Just like cancer in our profession, mental health is another enormous challenge facing us. After the trials and tribulations of what I had been through, and I'm no different from anyone else, there is immense post-traumatic stress, survivor's guilt, and overall depression from what I thought I had lost. To this day, the FCSN still gives me a home in the fire service and a platform to speak about firefighter-occupational cancer. It's given me the chance to connect with fellow brothers and sisters going through what I faced in my past. I know that I might be able to help them in some way and it keeps me moving forward. I know that "together we can" will become "together we will!"

Sitting here after all these years have passed, I'm no longer sad at what I felt was lost, instead, I choose to focus on the joy. I had the opportunity of achieving a childhood dream and knowing what that felt like. Instead of helping 10-20 people in one day, I get to help hundreds, if not thousands when looking at the bigger picture. On my journey I found that Ohio didn't provide assistance to its firefighters. I rallied together with a handful of other stakeholders and earned our state's cancer presumption coverage.

Lastly, I learned there's absolutely nothing a group of firefighters can't achieve together when told the task is impossible. Instead, we smile and trudge on. FCSN is more than a bunch of cancer diagnoses. It's more than the prostate cancers from New York and Florida, or that sternal cancer from Rhode Island, even that breast cancer in California, and leukemia from Ohio. It's about a group of amazing people all bonded together over the disgust and hatred towards cancer. They all use their positions in an effort to help others and that's what helped me most too!

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