Survivor Story: Bubba Hammond
Coweta County, Georgia Fire Department, Firefighter/EMT
Diagnosed Stage 4 Gastroesophageal Cancer Adeno Carcinoma in 2020

“When I was first told I was a Stage 4, my first thought was that I couldn't work. Dying never crossed my mind.”

Two years ago, I found out through some blood work from my fire department physical that I was anemic. I was instructed to make an appointment with my primary care doctor because they were also concerned about my high blood pressure. My doctor thought that I was not producing red blood cells and advised me to start taking iron and B12. Over the last year I had been feeling run down and a little weak. I attributed it to my blood pressure pills because they are beta blockers.

Later that summer my wife and I went camping. I was having trouble swallowing some food and this had been going on for several months. I began to choke and she had to perform the Heimlich on me. When we returned home, she insisted that I go back to the doctor. So, I went back to the doctor and he performed a colonoscopy and an endoscopy. He told me that I had a shrunken esophagus and he could perform a simple procedure to stretch it out and then I could move on and get back to normal. He also informed me that because of COVID protocols, my wife was not allowed in with me, and when the procedure was over, they would take me to the front door where my wife would be with the car.

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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.
After the procedure I woke up and my wife was standing beside me. My first thoughts were that something went wrong. I was correct. The doctor said that he found a mass and I needed to have a CT scan ASAP. He wanted to get on it quickly because he thought it was cancerous. The CT scan showed a mass in my esophagus, several lesions on my liver, some small spots in my lungs, and spots in my lymph nodes. The biopsy revealed Gastroesophageal Cancer Adeno Carcinoma Stage 4.

I went to Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Atlanta, GA. My daughter happened to work there as a scheduler. Now that’s convenient! They wasted no time in getting me in and performed their own CT scan to form a game plan. By now, I couldn’t swallow anything at all, not even my pills. In my first day I saw three different doctors. First, a Radiologist who said they would treat me with radiation in specific areas so I could swallow. Second, was a surgeon who wanted to put stent in my esophagus so I could swallow. Third, was my lead doctor who wanted to start chemotherapy and take care of the spreading situation first, then work down from there.

My wife heard, Stage 4, and wanted to attack the situation immediately. The doctor said that it was Stage 4, but that I was not sick, we’re treating a healthy person with a problem. I think if we use the plan I have mapped out, we should be able to put this in remission for about 10 years or so. Then I went off to surgery and more biopsies. After the surgery, my doctor came in and said I can’t even get the probe through the opening, so if you can’t drink it don’t put it in your mouth. That changed the plan to six rounds of chemotherapy every three weeks followed by infusions, lots of support medicines, and another chemotherapy called Cisplatin that lasts seven hours.

I began treatment on August 24th and the first round of chemotherapy was terrible. I have never been so weak in my entire life. The guys from the department came by a few times and helped me move about and gave me fluids. The second round was not as bad, I was able to eat small soft food and the people at CTCA taught me how to eat and swallow. Chew all your food and eat slowly, this goes against every single firefighter habit I have ever known. The third round was the same and now I can now eat a little easier. We did another CT scan and it showed the mass in my esophagus shrank half way, and my lungs were clear. My lymph nodes in my upper chest remain clear and there are only seven lesions on my liver now.

We continue to press on with the plan and head into the 4th round. I’m having the same response; I’m eating more food and gaining weight now. Some symptoms are becoming apparent now. I have a little neuropathy, nausea, and my ears are humming like I came out of a concert. The 5th round was especially rough, my symptoms increased and had vertigo settled in. The symptoms are tolerable, just every irritating. Off to another
CT scan and it showed my lungs are clear, all my lymph nodes are clear, and only 2 very small spots on my liver. My esophagus is still swollen. I am finally on my 6th and final round. In December they disconnect the pump for the final time… Merry Christmas!

Now I begin immune and maintenance therapy. This requires me to go to CTCA for a med-drip for one hour every three weeks and a CT scan every six to nine weeks. This will go on for 2 years.

When I was first told I was a Stage 4, my first thought was that I couldn’t work. How would I take care of bills and things around my house? Dying never crossed my mind. I prayed a lot and started spreading the word. Firefighter Cancer Support Network found out about my story and reached out. They helped me walk through an insurmountable amount of paperwork. I was able to get insurance from the state quickly. I received disability from my local fire department. FCSN even reached out to my wife to see if they could assist her. They were able to get her in touch with other caregivers to learn what to expect and tools she would need to help guide us through this. They have assisted us through this whole process.

We are staying positive! We have a long journey ahead and we have a great support group in our friends at CCFR, CTCA, and FCSN! I have learned set my pride aside and ask for help. There are wonderful people out there wanting to help and be a part of your journey.

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