



**Survivor Story: Jeanine R. Nicholson**  
**San Francisco Fire Department, California-Fire Chief**  
**Diagnosed with Breast Cancer 2012**



In 1994,

when I first joined the San Francisco Fire Department, and raised my right hand as I was sworn in, cancer was the furthest thing from my mind.

After 18 years in the SFFD, I heard those 3 fateful words from my doctor. “You have cancer”. I was a recently promoted Captain and was focused on learning and growing in that role. But I was diagnosed with an aggressive type of breast cancer. Within 2 weeks of diagnosis, I had a double mastectomy and a port implanted in my chest. Over the following 6 months, I endured 16 rounds of chemotherapy. I lost weight, lost my appetite, lost my hair, lost energy, had sores in my mouth and rashes on my body.

But I know that I am one of the lucky ones. Not only did I have access to great healthcare, I had an incredible support system around me. And I had a treatable and “curable” cancer. I was able to heal and rebuild myself and work my way back into fighting shape! I came back to full duty in just under 2 years.

Post diagnosis and treatment, I got involved with the San Francisco Firefighters Cancer Prevention Foundation (Tony Stefani founder) and sat on the board for several years. I also began teaching cancer risk and prevention with a wonderful group of female scientists and firefighters.

In May of 2019, I became the Chief of the San Francisco Fire Department. In my first year, I was successful in fighting for a newly budgeted Chief of Health, Safety and Wellness. That individual

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now works on a multitude of issues, cancer being one of the main ones. In addition, I hired a new Department Physician who is proactive in addressing firefighter health. All of this has helped build on a cultural shift in our Department when it comes to firefighter health.

As a department, we ceased purchasing toxic firefighting foam and have worked with manufacturers and vendors to create safe PPE for firefighters (no PFAS). We secured funding for post manufacture bolt on extractors for some of our engines and trucks. Our members have taken part in scientific studies that include female firefighters, wildland fire cancer risk, as well as a nationwide firefighter cancer study.

Like many other departments in the fire service, at every working fire, our members are directed to a gross decontamination station to remove toxins from their skin and equipment. We have instituted new policies that include regular cleaning of our PPE and have installed wash extractors in every single station in the Department. Contaminated equipment stays outside of the living areas of the stations. None of this was the case for much of my career.

This is about instilling cultural change. We educate our new members on cancer risk and firefighter health in the academy. When we institute new policies and procedures, our leaders in the Department insure that these are followed. Ultimately these reduce risk and save lives. We need to build on and continue making systemic changes moving forward.

So how did occupational cancer change me? It made me more grateful than ever for my life and everything and everyone in it. It made me want to be of more service. It changed my perspective on a lot of things.

I am so fortunate to be in the position where I can truly advocate for the health and wellness of all members of the SFFD and ultimately the Fire Service.

**I do not want anyone else to go through what I did.**

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