



**Survivor Story: Chantel Benish**  
**Sable Altura Fire Department Colorado, Fire Captain/EMS Coordinator**  
**Diagnosed with Breast Cancer 2020**



My

name is Chantel Benish. I am a mother and a wife, sister, aunt, daughter, dog lover, horse rescuer, lover of fitness and health, and I love the outdoors. Professionally, I have been working in emergency services for a long time. I was the EMS Coordinator and a Fire Captain for the Sable Altura Fire Protection District. My fire home also included the East I-70 Corridor Fire Departments. I was the EMS Coordinator for their EMS Medical Director before taking a position as a fire-medic. As a Health and Safety Officer for my department, I was frequently policing use of PPE, SCBA, and finding ways to decrease carcinogen exposure. Ironically, I am now a cancer survivor.

I would like to premise my story with this: cancer makes people uncomfortable. It is a dreaded disease that even paramedics do not care to know a lot about other than how to best help a cancer patient in an emergency. Especially because my cancer was breast cancer, it can feel uncomfortable for those who don't have breasts. That is ok. Please do not let it impact the importance of my story, because you will find that the treatment for breast cancer and testicular cancer are very similar. Breast cancer does not go into remission like other cancers. It is survivorship with the hope it does not metastasize.

I was at work in February 2020, right before the pandemic shut everything down. I had been waiting weeks for the results of my biopsy, I was not too worried as this was my second biopsy. That is when the dreaded phone call came in. Not the "you have cancer phone call" but the "your physician needs to speak to you in person" phone call. My husband met me at the doctor's office. Both of our departments let us leave knowing we were possibly about to receive devastating

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news. Once at the doctor's office, we waited for 45 minutes (yes, I counted the seconds), when we were finally able to meet with the practitioner; the conversation was simple and lasted 2 minutes. I was told I have breast cancer and they were referring me elsewhere.

Shock and devastation were what my husband and I both felt. What ran through my mind were things like, I am not ready to die. I am not done being a mom. We just rescued our 2<sup>nd</sup> horse. What will my husband do? What type of breast cancer? Do I have to go through chemotherapy? HOW AM I GOING TO TELL MY KIDS. We decided to tell our 3 kids with honesty and sincerity. We explained that there was a lot we did not yet know. My youngest who was 9 years old at the time, would ask me every morning for weeks if I was going to die that day. I won't lie, that was hard.

I called and made an appointment with the breast cancer center immediately after getting the news. They were able to get me in four days later. I was very tearful, as one can imagine, facing an unknown evil is terrifying. When the first appointment arrived, I not only met my oncologist, but my entire team. My oncologist, the oncology surgeon, the radiation oncologist, the reconstructive surgeon, and genetics counselors. I was then scheduled two weeks later for lymph node removal surgery. This was the moment of truth; this is how they find out if the cancer has spread. Fortunately, the cancer was not found in my lymph nodes. I was also informed that I do not have a genetic predisposition for breast cancer.

I opted for natural reconstruction after a double mastectomy, the original surgery was greater than twelve hours. My surgery was on the first Monday everything was shut down due to the pandemic. My family and friends were not allowed in the hospital. I woke with 4 drains, IVs, and other things we won't talk about. To this day, I have yet to see my doctors' smiles due to masking policy. Complications from the surgeries were continuous and at times, terrible. I had problems with seroma in my abdomen. I also now have lymph edema and a condition called axillary cording in my left arm. Over the next year and a half, I would have 3 more surgeries related to breast cancer and treatment for a total of 30 hours of surgery in 18 months. I worked at the FD in between surgeries. I would work my way back to being response ready after each surgery only to endure another surgery. I was diagnosed with both invasive lobular carcinoma and invasive ductal carcinoma. The lobular carcinoma was the dominant cancer, it does not form a lump due to loss of a protein which is why it does not respond to chemotherapy, so I did not have to endure that. I began taking chemo-preventive medications with the hope that the cancer does not come back. These medications are taken for a minimum of five years although research is showing ten years is beneficial. The side effects are bad enough that many patients need to take breaks from them. The medications cause joint swelling, pain in muscles, joints, and bones as well as bone loss, temperature dysregulation, and fatigue, among other things. One can lament that I lost a lot because of cancer. I acknowledge that and I have grieved for my loss, I loved being a firefighter. I love being a paramedic. But with the culmination of all the surgeries, loss of

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sensation in my torso, and the medication side effects, I had to make the difficult choice and medically retire from the fire service.

The unwavering support I received from my fire department, Sable Altura, as well as the East I-70 corridor fire departments- Bennett-Watkins FD, Strasburg FD, Buckley Airforce FD, Byer's FD, Deer Trail FD, Agate FD, and all my friends from various agencies across the State has been breathtaking. It helped us so much. Because I was diagnosed with a cancer that was not yet covered by the firefighter cancer trust, the donations from the sale of shirts provided by Kinsco and designed by the Fire Chief at Sable Altura for support of my diagnosis and breast cancer awareness in October 2020, offered my family a financial cushion in our time of need. Words can never repay the sense of gratitude I feel for that support.

We all remember how there were limited supplies of items like food, toiletries, and soap during the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. There were also shortages of surgical items like gauze, tape, iodine, and bandages. When I shared this with my surgeon, he raided the hospital storage and brought me a bag containing the supplies I needed. Because counseling and support groups had been shut down, there were not support connections being made for cancer survivors like there are now or like there were before the pandemic. It was not easy for folks who were in similar circumstances at that time. If I felt like I was abandoned and alone, I am certain they did as well. Being a peer support counselor and knowing I was having a hard time incorporating all that was happening, I reached out to Code-4 Counseling. They came through for me. A cancer diagnosis is terrifying, no one should go through it alone. Cancer certainly takes a toll, but with the support of the people you care about and who care about you, it can be incorporated into a new way of life. I can't move as quickly as I once was able to, and I still have off-days, but I am a little better everyday thanks to my will and my village of support.

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