

PROVIDING CANCER ANSWERS:

John Johnson Turns His Diagnosis into an Opportunity

BY JENN WOOLSON

John Johnson is a big believer in regular department physicals. That's because they saved his life not once, but twice. In 2014—sixteen years after Johnson was hired as a fire fighter with Gig Harbor Fire Department—blood work at a routine physical came back abnormal. He was sent to a hematologist and, after additional lab work and a bone marrow biopsy, he was diagnosed with essential thrombocythemia. This rare form of leukemia, caused by a mutation on the Janus kinase 2, or JAK2, gene, can lead to blood clots and strokes. Although Johnson's platelet count was 792,000, compared to the normal 400,000, he'd been experiencing no symptoms.

"That genetic mutation is caused by exposure to *something* at some point, but they'll never be able to pinpoint it exactly," Johnson says. But fortunately for him, in the state of Washington, leukemia is covered under presumptive language, so his ongoing treatment, medications and doctor visits are covered.

Johnson, who was promoted to assistant chief at Gig Harbor in 2020, continued working throughout his treatment and added duties working with the Washington state affiliate of the Firefighter Cancer Support Network. The organization aims to provide education and information about cancer prevention to all of the state's fire academies. They also provide peer support to fire fighters or family members diagnosed with cancer, including a toolbox of information on cancer and a calendar to keep track of appointments. The network will deliver the toolbox in person if requested or mail it out and follow up with a phone call to answer questions.

Johnson's department took a break from physicals during the height of COVID but restarted the practice in the fall of 2021. In addition to monitoring his cancer, he knew his age indicated that he needed a colonoscopy.

He had the screening procedure, and when he woke up, the nurse said that the doctor would like to speak to him in the consultation room. "That's usually not a good sign, right?" he jokes. "The doctor said, 'I'm not an oncologist, but I've been doing this for a long time, and you have a mass in your colon that I think is cancer.'"

Johnson was referred to a colorectal surgeon and was able to get an appointment the next morning. Two weeks later, the surgeon removed his entire ascending colon and 12 adjacent lymph nodes. The mass was indeed malignant, and because there also was cancer detected in one lymph node, his cancer was designated as stage 3B.

After recovering for a few months, he started 12 rounds of chemo, finishing the last one in July 2022. Since then, bloodwork, a follow-up colonoscopy and a full-body CT scan have all shown no signs of cancer.

"Back when I started [as a fire fighter], we really had no education about cancer risks," Johnson says. His own personal knowledge was based on his dad's experience. After serving as a fire fighter in the U.S. Navy, he ended up with three different forms of cancer.



"Firefighting is a great job," Johnson says. "I wouldn't change what I've done for anything. I've been lucky enough to have cancers that are treatable. But the Firefighter Cancer Support Network and other organizations are trying to educate first responders early on about cleaning your gear, what's in the smoke and what we can do to make a better future for ourselves."

He says that early in his career, dirty gear was kind of a badge of honor. Not anymore.

At Gig Harbor, in addition to having an extra set of gear, gross decontamination and regular professional gear cleanings, Johnson also is focused on the bigger picture. His district recently passed an \$80 million bond to redesign some stations. Johnson is part of the team redesigning the new stations to be safer, including decontamination facilities within *all* of the stations, updated diesel exhaust systems and negatively ventilated bunker gear rooms.

And, last but not least, Johnson goes back to those lifesaving department physicals. He admits that some fire fighters are hesitant to get a physical because they worry that if they're diagnosed with cancer, they'll lose their job. "I am the poster child that that will not happen," he says. "Departments invest a large amount of money in their employees—with hiring, outfitting them with gear, doing all of the training. They've invested all that money in you, and they want to keep you as an employee."

"Plus," he adds, "you're a human being to them."

Firefighter Cancer Support Network

Any local union or fire department interested in information or a presentation from the Firefighter Cancer Support Network (FCSN) can put in a request at [FCSNWA.org](https://www.fcsnwa.org). Washington state is one of the few states where the Firefighter Cancer Support Network is self-sustaining through dues made to the Washington State Council of Fire Fighters.