

# Precious Mettle

THE GOODLIFE CANCER DANCERS CELEBRATE SURVIVAL AND INSPIRE OTHERS TO FIGHT AND FLOURISH

BY TERESA LEE RUSHWORTH

**D**onna MacDonald was just 32 when she was diagnosed with chondrosarcoma, a rare cancer that developed in her sternum. A healthy and fit firefighter, she had been with the Providence, Rhode Island Fire Department less than five years of what she had hoped would be a 30-year career.

Seventeen years, nine surgeries, and one polyethylene and titanium sternum later, she has emerged victorious and has found ways to help others who are suffering.

Ultimately, MacDonald was able to reach the 15-year mark in her firefighting career: much longer than anyone would have predicted, but still only half of her goal. The decision to retire was heartrending; firefighting was her passion, part of her very identity. Like many cancer patients, she would discover that while the life-threatening

nature of the diagnosis is the first thing that comes to people's minds, the life-changing aspects of the disease can present survivors with significant challenges.

Many survivors find that helping others who are facing the cancer fight is an all-but-essential ingredient of post-cancer life. This is certainly true for MacDonald. Because their work often exposes them to burning toxins, firefighters have higher cancer rates than the general population; and because they are accustomed to being the rescuers, the problem solvers, they sometimes find it difficult to request help for themselves. Thus, the Firefighters Cancer Support Network exists to provide mentors who understand what they are going through.

MacDonald is a Florida representative for FCSN, speaking at firefighter events around the country



Donna MacDonald has undergone multiple surgeries on her sternum after developing a rare form of bone cancer.

and mentoring firefighters through their cancer journeys and beyond. She also advocates for female firefighters, who make up only about 3.8 percent of the profession and are therefore often overlooked, despite contracting different types of cancer than men and thus requiring additional research and awareness.

In 2019, MacDonald discovered a new way to serve the cancer community—one that draws on a facet of her background poles apart from her experience as a first responder. She joined the GoodLife Cancer Dancers.

MacDonald was actually a dancer before she was a firefighter, so she fit right in with the



The GoodLife Cancer Dancers' current lineup: Donna MacDonald, Grace Rigoni, Peggy Hamilton, Colleen Brennan, Debbie Chastain, and Kimberly Nardone Lalota; new members are always welcome.

Cancer Dancers, a group founded by Peggy Hamilton of GoodLife Fitness Studio in 2018. Though not a cancer survivor herself, the fourth-generation Vero Beach native was inspired by many family members and friends who had battled the disease, including her grandmother, mother, and several siblings. As a fitness trainer, Hamilton is passionate about helping cancer survivors improve their quality of life through exercise.

Alongside Hamilton when the Cancer Dancers began was Colleen Brennan, who now serves as the group's manager. The 68-year-old is a longtime survivor, having been diagnosed with an aggressive form of breast cancer when she was just 37. Her treatment was grueling. Like MacDonald, she had a very supportive husband by

her side.

Brennan has danced since age 4, and she joins Hamilton and MacDonald in choreographing the troupe's routines. Together with Debbie Chastain, Kimberly Nardone Lalota, and Grace Rigoni, all breast cancer survivors, they perform at cancer walks such as Making Strides and Relay for Life, as well as cancer support meetings and various community events. They never charge for performances; their payment is written on the faces of the people they entertain and inspire. "We want to show that cancer didn't take away who we are," says Brennan.

The GoodLife Cancer Dancers have developed several routines to suit a range of audiences and needs: "broken," "sassy," "funky," and "grateful," a tribute to caregivers.

self-conscious and shy and kept their movements small. In time, as they felt safe with us, their personalities began to peek through, and they became sassy and daring. It's a pure joy to witness."

Is there one quality they all have in common? "I would have to say compassion is the key," Brennan says. "The willingness to put others before oneself is a beautiful thing. This is not about egos and drawing attention to yourself. It's about honoring each other, bolstering each other, and celebrating life." ❁



Donna MacDonald was exposed to carcinogens while working as a firefighter.