

Johna Beech

Kenai, AK

I was born in Los Angeles and raised in Phoenix, but I moved to Kenai, Alaska in January of 2008 by way of Florida.

My folks moved to Alaska in 2006 and I fell in love with it when I visited them the summer of 2006. My folks and I agreed it would be beneficial for me to move closer, so there was a kid around as they continued to age. Being the youngest of the kids, it was easier for me to make the move and I have not regretted it one bit.

When I am not working, I am volunteering within my community. I have been involved with Relay For Life since 2009, American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network since 2013, and this past year I joined the Alaska Advisory Board for the American Cancer Society.

Little bit about me. I was born in Los Angeles and raised in Phoenix, but I moved to Kenai, Alaska in January of 2008 by way of Florida.

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The town I live in is on the road system, meaning you can drive to it. We have communities in Alaska which are only accessible by plane or boat.

Although Kenai is on the road system and we have an incredible hospital here, there are times when we have to travel to Anchorage for healthcare. It is

a 3hr road trip when the weather is decent or a 20min flight.

My mom and I had an agreement from the time my grandfather came to live with them; Any appointments which were overnight or out of town, I would handle them. Anything in town or day of, she would handle it. After my grandfather passed, we rolled that plan over to my dad's medical appointments. My mom was in relatively good health and was the primary caregiver for my dad who was diagnosed with early onset dementia in the fall of 2013.

Fast forward to August of 2018, my dad was having heart issues and ended up being life flighted to Anchorage. I drove the 3hrs to the Heart Institute to be his advocate. What we thought was

going to be a weekend stay ended up being 14days. During his stay, I would be in his hospital room from 8a to 8p to catch the Drs and be in the loop with everything that was going on. You see, I started working for a small non-profit in June 2011. We had paid time off, but no short term/long term disability. The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) did not apply to us because we were a small staff. So I worked remotely the entire time, managing my employees and tasks from his hospital room.

Fast forward to November 2019, my mom wasn't feeling great. She ended up going to the ER on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. The stomach flu she thought she had turned out to be stage 4 pancreatic cancer that metastasized to her liver. We were told she would have 6months to a year, but it would be more like 6months. I notified

my board of directors (bosses), my staff and key community members of what was going on because I knew, although I am amazing at spinning plates, that I might let one (or more) drop. Everyone told me to do whatever I needed to do, but again, I kept working in the office and remotely.

December 26, 2019, as we were easing into a rhythm with my mother, my dad nosedived. He got a stomach flu and ended up so dehydrated, his heart was struggling, and his kidneys were shutting down. At this point, I thought my parents were in a race to die, but I kept working.

Griz, my dad, ended up in the hospital for another 10days. I kept the same schedule as last time, 8a to 8p to meet drs and approve treatment plans and worked from his hospital room.

My dad stabilized enough to come home but had 2 more hospital stays in a short time frame.

January 16, 2020. My mom opted to not continue chemo. She said she was sorry. I told her it was ok, fully knowing it wouldn't be much longer, but who am I to be selfish and beg her to keep trying?

February 26th. My dad had been back in the hospital for a few days. I brought him home that afternoon, after attending a work event that I couldn't miss, only to turn right around and bring my mom to the hospital to be admitted for end of life care. I spent the next 5 days in her hospital room, working when I could.

My mother passed on Monday, March 2, 2020. I returned to work the following Monday.

My dad went into end-of-life care on March 27th. I did what I had done the last few months and kept working from his hospital room.

My dad continued to decline and passed on Thursday, April 2, 2020. I returned to work 3 days later.

Thankfully I had a slew of PTO hours banked up. I used them when I could not work so I did not have a financial hardship. This entire time, it never occurred to me to take time off. Not one of my board members suggested taking time off.

Honestly, I don't think they knew what to do. Stuff like this doesn't happen every day and there was no policy, or road map to guide us, so I kept working, spinning all the plates, not letting one fall.

This is why this policy is so important:

So in moments like this, caregivers can focus on spending time with their dying loved ones.

So in moments like this, a caregiver never has to wonder if they will have a job after their world is done falling apart.

Thank you for listening to my story.