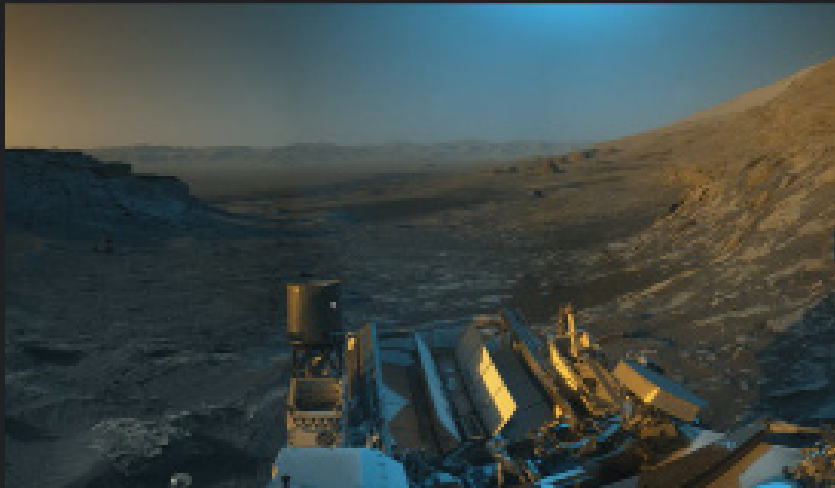




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# STORYBOOK

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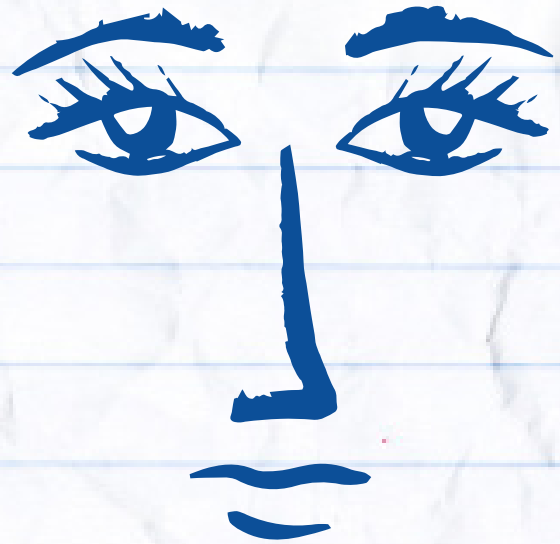
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*Ben & Doug*



# PERSPECTIVE

## FROM A TEEN IN Connecting Champions



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*In 7th grade I started having awful pain in my leg. No one thought cancer was a possibility. I was a track runner, cheerleader, and active kid. However, as days turned into weeks and weeks into months, I knew it was more than that. Immediately after looking at the x-ray, we knew. It was cancer. And my life was changed forever.*



*Every day 43 new kids will hear the words "you have cancer."*

*Approximately 1 in 285 children will be diagnosed with cancer before their 20th birthday. To you this may not seem like a lot, but when you are only 14 and attended more funerals a year than you did birthday parties, you're faced with a harsh reality. No child is safe.*

*I tell my story not in hopes that those who hear it will take pity on me, but in hopes that they'll take action. I hope that a little kid in the hospital cancer ward will hear my story and think: "If she can do it, so can I."*

*If she can do it,  
SO CAN I.*

Despite the daily pain, the surgeries, the chemo, if it meant one child was helped by my story I would go through it all again. I would accept every prick, poke, and stab gladly. Every tear shed, every moment I would redo.

Cancer is a journey myself and every other cancer family never expected or wanted to take. People like Sidney, Coy, and everyone at Connecting Champions make it easier. They make it worth it.



There were days I was so depressed I didn't want to do anything, so my mentors would just come sit with me, hold my hand, and make me feel not so alone. During my cancer battle the only things I truly longed for were to survive and have companionship.

They gifted me not only their friendship but also a whole new outlook on life. To be quite honest they gave me my will to live back. They gave me hope when there seemed to be no use in having any anymore. For that I will be forever grateful.

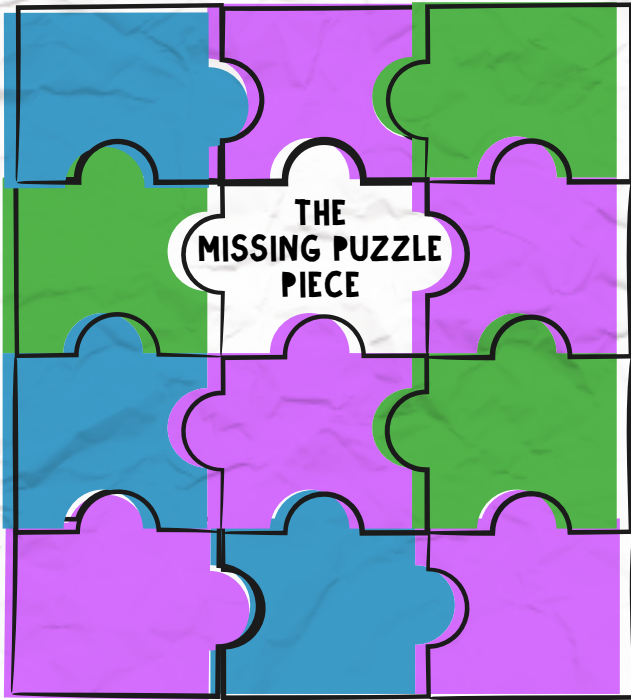
My journey is ongoing – in fact it may never be over – but with my Connecting Champions friends in my corner I am convinced I will follow my dreams. Because of them, I have found my purpose in this life. I am convinced without them I may have not had the will to keep going.

- Katie

18-YEAR-OLD  
CONNECTING  
CHAMPIONS ALUM







*Tens of thousands of children and young adults are diagnosed with cancer annually. Most survive, but research shows the significant psychosocial and vocational side effects can be devastating. A diagnosis as serious as cancer freezes a child's or young adult's life and can force them to give up future plans in order to focus on cancer treatments. Even when a child or young adult enters survivorship, the challenges continue. It can take decades to catch up, if at all.*

*The moment a family hears the words "your child has cancer," the child or young adult is plucked from their everyday routine, including school, to get their first round of treatment. In a snap, school counselors and internships become inaccessible. Friends pass by and the child or young adult must figure out socialization as well as school and career planning all on their own.*

*There is a vitally missing piece to the puzzle, and Connecting Champions is filling it.*

*Connecting Champions asks kids and young adults with cancer\* .....*

***"WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP?"***

*..... and pairs them with a mentor to help pursue their passions.*

*\*during treatment or survivorship*

## OUR OUTCOME FOCUS AREAS

*In this Storybook, you will see Connecting Champions through our kids' and young adults' eyes. You'll hear their dreams and see them step into their future. Each story captures one of our core outcome focus areas:*

- ✓ Career Exploration
- ✓ Identity Formation
- ✓ Creating Space for Coping
- ✓ Fostering Joy
- ✓ Career/School Planning & Preparedness
- ✓ Enhancing Care in the Hospital



# ABOUT CONNECTING CHAMPIONS

Through our in-person and virtual programs, we've paired 3- to 26-year-olds (during treatment and in survivorship) with mentors from over 100 career paths such as fashion, zoology, NASA engineering, various trades, and even ghost hunting. Our mentors are there every step of the way.

We have partnered with hospital systems throughout the U.S. and now have participants from coast to coast.

As you can see in our *Outcomes Report*, our groundbreaking approach has become nationally recognized.

Our deep investment in outcomes is changing the way people understand and treat young people with cancer.

In the words of one of our teens who wants to open her own fish store, "This mentorship allows us to have an escape from the medical world and dive into what we love doing. My passion is so much stronger than it ever has been. I feel like I have a step up now."

Read Our  
Outcomes Report

[connectingchampions.org/outcomes](http://connectingchampions.org/outcomes)



## OUR FINDINGS & IMPACT

Our evidence-based, outcomes-driven approach has helped hundreds of young people across the country better survive the cancer journey, psychosocially and vocationally. We give them the resources they need to envision life beyond the disease by exploring the fields they love or simply helping them feel like a kid again.

**WITH A CONNECTING CHAMPIONS MENTOR BY THEIR SIDE:**

**98%** of teens and parents have reported we make the child healthier

**97%** of participants reported learning new skills from their mentor

**100%** of participants said they want to be like their mentor when they're older

**TOP REPORTED NEEDS FROM OUR YOUNG ADULT PARTICIPANTS:**

**85%** Career Experience

**75%** Networking, Career Planning & Internships

**71%** Feeling in Control of My Future

**OUTCOME FOCUS AREA:**  
Career/School Planning & Preparedness



**name** JESSICA



**passions** *Law & Travel*

**age** 24

**mentor** *Larry, Lawyer & Professor*

**friends since** *February 2022*



24-year-old Jessica had just graduated from law school when she was first introduced to Connecting Champions and her mentor.

## AN ASPIRING LAWYER, JESSICA USED HER CONVERSATIONS WITH HER MENTOR, LARRY, TO PREPARE FOR A CAREER IN LAW.

Larry, a law professor at Columbia who also teaches in Europe, was the perfect match for Jessica.

"It became a fun thing to just sit and learn about all of his experiences," said Jessica.

"He has a wide range of knowledge when it comes to different topics."



Initially meeting virtually, Jessica and Larry's conversations have moved to in-person conversations over coffee in New York City. With Larry being a well-traveled lawyer with a lot of experience, he is able to take relevant events happening in the world and explain to Jessica the legal implications behind them.

"A lot of our conversations focused on political conflict and international law issues," said Jessica. "Sometimes we would just sit there and discuss our points of view or how those issues can be resolved."

Larry helped Jessica prepare for her career following her education, discussing all of the different factors that go into a life as a lawyer.

## "IT WAS LIKE SEEING IT FROM A WORKING PERSPECTIVE RATHER THAN AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE,"

said Jessica on the difference between her conversations with Larry and her time in law school.

"We talked about what you can actually do in this field; it was interesting to see his perspective of how everything functions together or how he thinks something should be handled."

Now, Jessica's mentorship with Larry has become a friendship on a more personal level. "We've evolved from Connecting Champions as meeting with someone in your field to just meeting and chatting about life," said Jessica. "He's kind of like a grandpa to me."

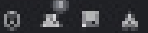




OUTCOME FOCUS AREA:  
Fostering Joy



1:17 PM | zoom.us/j/1000000000



name **MYLA**

age **11**

passions *Friendship, Games & Crafts*

mentor *Caroline, College Student*

friends since *March 2021*





While many of the friendships in *Connecting Champions* are based on a similar career path or professional field of interest, Myla and her mentor were brought together because they shared each other's passions.

Myla is in sixth grade and full of energy. She loves unicorns, Disney, and math club.

## ONE OF HER FAVORITE THINGS, HOWEVER, IS HER FRIENDSHIP WITH HER MENTOR, CAROLINE.

Part of Georgetown University's Caring for Children with Cancer club, Caroline met Myla when she was helping lead *Connecting Champions'* STEM club over the summer. They connected on a personal level and became friends.



Myla and Caroline meet around three times a month. Their meetings begin by catching up as Myla shares updates on her time with the math club and dancing.

When they are finished talking about what has happened since their last meeting, they jump into the games. Although there is a computer screen separating them, they do not let that hinder their enjoyment of playing together. Their favorites are Uno Online, a Pictionary-type game called Skribbl.io, and Scattergories.

If Myla and Caroline are not playing games, they are doing crafts together. For Myla's tenth birthday, Caroline sent her a color-by-sticker unicorn book and they would spend meetings chatting about interests while completing their books. It is very impressive how they are able to hold a whole conversation while also keeping their focus on their colorful unicorn.



One of Myla's favorite activities with her friend is tie-dying, as Myla loves all the different colors and possibilities. Another one of the highlights of Myla's friendship with Caroline was when Caroline created a custom Jeopardy-style trivia game about things she and Myla enjoyed. Categories included math, history, and Disney.

Having had so much fun, Myla challenged herself to create her own Jeopardy game. Titled "Myla Trivia," their next meeting was filled with 25 questions all about Myla. Caroline was tested on Myla's favorite foods, Disney movies, and favorite facts. She also threw in some questions about their friendship to see if Caroline remembered important details about their relationship.

The longevity of this friendship is a testament to how special Myla holds Caroline in her heart. Despite being back to school and active in extracurriculars, Myla still looks forward to her frequent calls with her favorite Georgetown Hoya.

"I love how connected she feels to Caroline, even though they have not been able to meet in person," said Denise, Myla's mother.

Recently, Myla and Caroline have begun baking cookies together as this friendship does not seem to be slowing down anytime soon. There are definitely more games of Myla Trivia on the horizon.



OUTCOME FOCUS AREA:  
Career Exploration

← Sky



name

SKY



age 18

passions

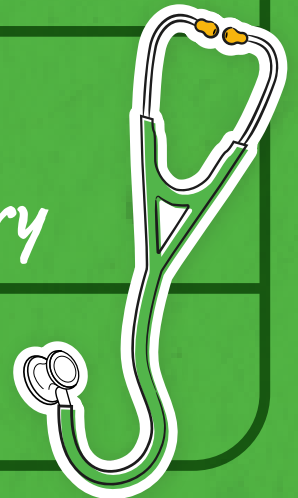
*Military Medicine & Video Editing*

mentors

*Members of Different  
Branches of the Military*

friends since

*July 2021*





18-year-old Sky dreamed of being a physician assistant in the military. Having a grandfather that served in the military, Sky knew that this is the path she wanted to take. She explored many different options on how to get there, meeting with sergeant recruiters from both the Army and the Navy, a physician assistant in the Navy, and a member of Michigan State University's ROTC program.

However, the military has a requirement that anyone who enlists must be at least five years in remission. This really put a wedge into Sky's plans as she is now unable to pursue the typical track to follow her dreams. This five-year hurdle is not something that most kids pursuing the military have to worry about, but unfortunately Sky would have to wait an additional year following a four-year undergraduate program.

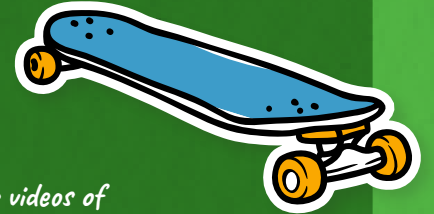
With the help of Connecting Champions Virtual Program Associate Sophia, however, Sky has been introduced to many different ways to pursue her dream. Sophia told Sky about the possibility of attending a five year PA school, giving her the opportunity to enlist directly out of school. Sky even got to talk to a college enrollment manager.

Recently, Sky is thinking about switching from a physician assistant path to the nursing route. After receiving reassurance from Sophia that it is okay to change her mind, Sky met with the nursing program clinical director at Michigan State University to gain more knowledge.

**A LOT OF SOPHIA'S TIME WITH SKY IS SIMPLY FINDING HER PEOPLE THAT CAN ANSWER HER QUESTIONS. IT ALLOWS HER TO GAIN KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HER OPTIONS.**

It is not necessarily someone telling her what she can do when she grows up, but rather someone showing her different ways to achieve her goals. Sophia introduces Sky to so many different people because there are so many different ways to reach her dreams.

A secret hobby of Sky's that she recently disclosed to Sophia is skateboarding and editing videos of her skateboarding. Sophia responded by starting a search for a video editing mentor and also introduced Sky to the possibility of minoring in video editing in college. Unaware that she could simultaneously work on something in college completely different from her nursing plans, Sky was ecstatic to learn of this opportunity and has met with academic advisors at various colleges to see which one fits her interests best.



Sky has grown so much throughout her time with our organization. **SKY HAS BECOME EMPOWERED TO ASK HER OWN QUESTIONS AND HAS BEEN GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE HER OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE.**

She has begun searching for shadowing opportunities and taking control of her future.

"Connecting Champions helped me get a more focused plan for my future and has connected me to people I may never have been able to," said Sky. "I've changed because I now have a focused goal and I know exactly what I want to be doing in a few years."

While Sky never intended to switch from a military physician assistant path to pursuing nursing, we are extremely proud of the young woman she is becoming and excited to see the bright future she is creating for herself.



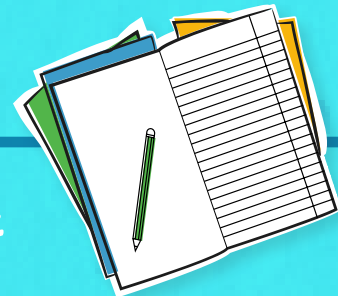
name **CASPER**

age **14**

passions *Art & Drawing*

mentor *Jess, Tattoo Artist*

friends since *May 2021*





Casper and his mentor, Jess, have a lot of things in common: they both love art, they are left-handed, and they both love anime. When these two talented people work together, anything is possible.

14-year-old Casper loves art and drawing, but after being diagnosed with cancer, he lost that desire to draw all day long. However, **HIS LOVE FOR ART CAME BACK TO LIFE WHEN HE MET HIS NEW BEST FRIEND, JESS,** a full-time tattoo artist who also works on canvas, paper, and digital works. One of their main passions that connects them to Casper is their love for anime.

During their biweekly virtual meetings, Casper and Jess spend time together presenting their artwork to one another. These assignments, predetermined at the previous meeting, allow Casper and Jess to show off what they have been working on since the last time they met. Their art is usually focused around anime and the characters that star in Casper's favorite shows. When presenting their works, they are able to discuss their different drawing techniques, such as the way they made their characters' eyes or shaped their hair and faces.

Sloane, one of Connecting Champions' program staff, loves that their friendship is centered around Jess's ability to make Casper laugh. Jess is always the last one to join their video calls, logging in at 9:33 for a 9:30 call, always doing something crazy as their entrance. Whether they be dressed as an anime character or entering the frame from a weird angle, Jess always keeps Casper laughing.

Casper and Jess's first time meeting in-person was very exciting. "When Casper first found out that he was actually going to come to Pittsburgh and meet Jess, he was jumping all over the place,"

said Casper's grandmother. "We come to Jess's shop and Jess meets us at the door. They hug each other and Casper semi-starts crying and he's like 'I'm so happy to meet you! I'm so happy to meet you!' He was totally, totally thrilled that he was able to meet Jess. He was very, very excited to meet this person that brought art back into his life."

"I think now there's this mutual respect where they both know how much they mean to each other," said Skylar, the West Virginia Program Coordinator of Connecting Champions. "They both understand how amazing they both are. I think it's just this excitement to be together and to be near each other and to be able to share things with each other."

Jess has noticed how much they have seen Casper grow over the course of their friendship, astonished by the young adult he is becoming. "Casper is truly no ordinary human being," said Jess. "From the first meeting, he was open and caring, listening and digesting as if nothing ailed him. Since his remission and starting school, I have only seen those characteristics flourish and develop new modes of curiosity."

When asked what this friendship means to them, Jess was quick to admire his friend.

**"OUR FRIENDSHIP IS UNBOUNDED TRUST AND IMPENETRABLE JOY," SAID JESS.**

"We meet every week and share our lives with each other: struggles, laughs, and everything in between with no judgment. What first was an exploration of artistic engagement has slowly evolved into a friendship of pursuing life through the lens of art."

● **OUTCOME FOCUS AREA:**  
Creating Space for Coping



name **JULIA**

age 19

passions *Nutrition &  
Weight Management*

mentor *Megan, Nutritionist*

friends since *October 2022*

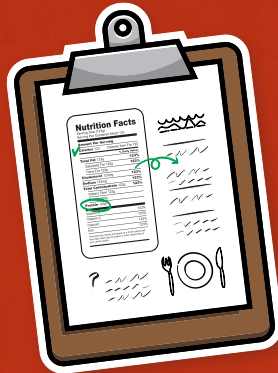




Connecting Champions program coordinator Danielle summed up 19-year-old Julia perfectly:

## "SHE'S LIKE THE COOLEST PERSON EVER!"

Julia, a freshman in college, is super interested in the field of bariatrics. Growing up watching shows about weight loss, she has always been intrigued by nutrition and weight management.



As the owner of her own clinic for nutrition and weight loss management, Julia's mentor, Megan, is helping to expand Julia's knowledge of the field. "As soon as I met Megan, she was bright, funny, and she asked me a lot of questions about myself and got to know me," said Julia.

"They have an awesome friendship because Megan is very good at helping Julia with career preparedness and college prep in terms of what classes to take and her major, Master's, and internship opportunities," said Danielle.

Recently, Julia and Megan have been working hard to understand how nutrition and cancer are related.

## "JULIA REALIZED WHEN SHE WAS GOING THROUGH THE CANCER JOURNEY HOW MUCH HER NUTRITION

## AFFECTED HOW SHE WAS FEELING EVERY DAY,"

said Danielle. "I think Megan is trying to encourage her and show her what an interesting niche in the world of dietetics is to have that firsthand knowledge of cancer and nutrition."

Megan and Julia work great together as their conversations involve them "geeking out" over nutrition and dietetics. Julia is also able to use her conversations with Megan as a break from thinking about her diagnosis; it gives her the opportunity to focus not on her diagnosis but on the future and being able to help others.

One of the most incredible things about Julia is her ability to advocate for herself. Danielle notes what a strong young woman she is and the beauty of her friendship with Megan. "Yeah, they're awesome. They're so cool!"

Julia and Megan have begun a deep dive into what college classes would be best and all of the possible degree paths that Julia can take while at school.

Although Julia knew what field she wanted to get into, her friendship with Megan has helped solidify her dreams while giving her a clearer vision to be everything she's ever wanted.

"I feel like I can really look up to her with how successful she is and how many people she's helping," said Julia. "I feel like Connecting Champions has really put a lot of effort in finding the right mentor for me. I feel like this will really impact and benefit me for life."

# Perspectives from the Hospital

*While Connecting Champions continues to have an immensely positive impact on the lives of kids and young adults with cancer across the country, the organization is also leaving a mark on the hospital staff. We are working alongside them to provide the care that is crucial for this population of young people.*

*With the Connecting Champions team at their side, hospital staff say we make their program stronger. They finally have resources to better address their patients' unmet psychosocial and vocational needs.*



**JENNIFER CARRERA**  
AYA Clinical Oncology  
Navigator, Lurie Children's  
Hospital of Chicago

*"Connecting Champions means so much to my program. We work solely with teens and young adults for which the Connecting Champions program fits right in. So many teens and young adults are either just beginning to consider their future careers and passions or just embarking on finding that first job. Cancer interrupts this and can put their lives on pause. Many feel left behind from their peers. Connecting Champions gives them that positive energy and a step toward gaining ground by doing something positive and useful for their futures."*

*One thing that stands out the most about Connecting Champions is the organization's unprecedented mission and our ability to uniquely change the field of pediatric and young adult oncology.*

*"Connecting Champions is focusing on something that very few resources are focusing on: life after treatment."*



**CLARE DEVEAU**  
Social Worker,  
Helen DeVos Children's Hospital  
in Grand Rapids, MI

*"AYAs need a light at the end of the tunnel. Connecting Champions has been a piece of that light for many patients in Midwest Michigan."*



**MORGAN SYME**  
Adolescent & Young Adult Life  
Specialist, Helen DeVos Children's  
Hospital in Grand Rapids, MI

*"A diagnosis of childhood cancer results in a dramatic change of life focus and activities. Connecting Champions draws upon the individual needs, hopes and dreams of patients to permit focus on things that bring joy at a very challenging time."*



**DR. JEAN M. TERSAK**  
UPMC Children's  
Hospital of Pittsburgh



*Dr. Tersak homed in on how Connecting Champions positively impacts its population during such a trying time in the patient's life. However, the impact of the Connecting Champions program in these hospitals cannot be overstated, and the organization's presence in the hospital is doing more than providing a mentor or plan following treatment.*

*"The nursing staff appreciates the support of Connecting Champions. Patients sometimes feel more comfortable with the Connecting Champions staff and express their feelings more openly to them than the medical staff."*

**JEN MCFOY**  
*UPMC Children's  
Hospital of Pittsburgh*

*The Division Chief of Hematology and Oncology at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh also believes in the importance of Connecting Champions for the hospital staff, saying:*



**DR. LINDA MCALLISTER**  
*Division Chief of Hematology and Oncology,  
UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh*

*"Connecting Champions makes it easier for my faculty to care for our patients and their families."*

*Connecting Champions staff members as well as hospital staff do their job for one reason: to provide life-changing care to a vulnerable population. The presence of Connecting Champions is helping the hospital staff provide more complete and innovative care that has never been possible prior.*

*"Connecting Champions staff members have the opportunity to spend time and build rapport with the patients without juggling multiple patients both inpatient and outpatient. They have the opportunity to connect the hospital setting with the world beyond the walls of Children's Hospital. I love how the program helps patients connect their hopes and dreams with real people living out their dreams. They can truly be present with the families and patients, which is incredibly important."*



**ROBIN TARBI**  
*UPMC Children's Hospital  
of Pittsburgh*

*When Connecting Champions was created in 2011, its goal was to give these young people with bright futures battling cancer a chance to look past their diagnosis; it provides a chance for them to dream and simply be a kid or young adult.*



**DR. PATRICK TOMBOC**  
*Pediatric Hematology &  
Oncology Division Chief, West Virginia University Medicine Children's Hospital*

*"Connecting Champions means that I do not have to remind my patients' families that their child is still a child. From the moment I meet a family and deliver the devastating news that their child has cancer, I hope that I can impart to them that their child is not their illness. Connecting Champions reinforces that idea and allows a parent to see their child again."*

# THE STORY OF CONNECTING CHAMPIONS

*When I was 16 years old, my friend Lauren was diagnosed with cancer. That very day, she was pulled from school to get her first round of chemotherapy treatment. One of the questions that kept ringing through my head was, "What can I do to be a helpful friend for someone going through such isolation?"*

*Two years later, I had gotten into college, studying Applied Mathematics at Brown University, and Lauren passed away shortly thereafter. I knew I wanted to do everything I could to give back in her memory.*

*So I started volunteering at the local children's hospital with kids who have cancer. I would start every conversation with one question: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I was amazed to see the kids' eyes light up as they shared their dreams:*

**"I WANNA BE... A BALLERINA! A WWE WRESTLER! A BOOKSTORE OWNER!"**

*You could see that, in that moment, they weren't thinking about their illness – they were just kids again.*

*How many times have you been asked as a kid what you wanted to be when you grow up? I know I was certainly asked a bazillion times, and I never thought twice about all that the question meant. It wasn't, "What do you want to be if you grow up." It was, "What do you want to be when you grow up."*

*When we ask a sick child or young adult, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" – that one question has the power to change their life forever.*

*We celebrated our 10th birthday as an organization in 2021 and, to this day, it's still the only job I've ever had. Through those years, I've had the gift of hearing hundreds of kids and young adults across the country share their dreams of what they want to be when they grow up.*

*We've connected kids and young adults from ages 3 to 26 with mentors who share their passions – teachers, NASA scientists, constitutional lawyers, tradespeople, and yes, even ghost hunters.*

*Over these 10 years, I've seen our kids grow up, many even going to school to become just like their mentor.*

*In the words of one of our young adult alums, it can be so easy to be seen as "just a bald head and an IV pole." But it only takes one question to change that.*

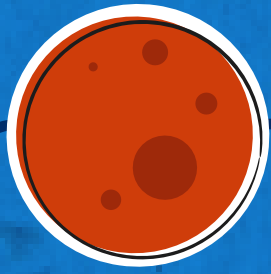
*When we talk about the kids' and young adults' futures with the word when, not if, we're helping them pursue their passions and envision life beyond the disease. Whatever they want to be, we're all here rooting for them.*

*With all my heart,*

*- Sidney*







name **BEN**

age **18**

passion **Computer Engineering**

mentor **Doug, NASA Mars  
Rover Operator**



friends since **October 2021**

*Ben hopes to be a computer hardware engineer one day. Throughout high school, 18-year-old Ben was a member of his high school's robotics club and has continued his education by enrolling at Michigan Technological University. However, through his mentor, Doug, Ben is able to get more experience than any class he's taken so far.*

*Doug worked on the team at NASA responsible for operating the Mars rover. The two friends discuss every aspect of the rover, from its programming to pictures taken of Mars. Doug explains everything about the rover to Ben, including the process of sending its code for the day the night before and watching it do its tasks. Their conversations also expand to management and working with others.*

*Ben has grown a lot in his friendship with Doug. When asked how she has seen Ben change over the course of their friendship, Connecting Champions Virtual Program Associate Cait said she has really seen Ben come out of his shell thanks to Doug's guidance. She sees a sense of comfortability in Ben*

*as they talk about life and all of the possibilities for Ben in the future.*

*"I've definitely become more confident" said Ben. "Something as cool as planning what the Mars rover is going to do, knowing that he's a normal person and can do it, I can definitely achieve great things."*

*Despite Ben starting at a new college, this friendship is not slowing down. Ben and Doug use a program that allows them to build hypothetical computers as well as create computer programs through their matching Raspberry Pi devices. This friendship is definitely out of this world!*

*"Those of us who are fortunate enough to be mentoring, we're the ones getting inspired," said Doug. "We're speaking to people who are dealing with stuff that we can't even begin to imagine, still getting them through their day, still getting themselves through high school and college, still bringing their A-game. That's why I show up...The champion in this conversation isn't me; it's Ben!"*





# Connecting Champions

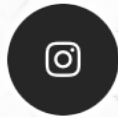
FOUNDED 2011

Learn more at: [connectingchampions.org](https://connectingchampions.org)

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