

≡What are You≡

**PASSIONATE**

>>> ABOUT <<<

# 2023 Annual Report





# 2023 was a record-breaking year by all accounts.

We received 226 referrals from dozens of hospitals across the US, we're officially in more than half the country (27 states!), we secured our largest grant ever (from the Richard King Mellon Foundation), our research was chosen at five national/international conferences, we brought back the Night of Inspiration for the first time since 2019, and we negotiated the first pay increases from our hospital and health insurance payers.

We had some amazing mentoring stories this past year, too (I can't wait for you to read this annual report! And if you haven't seen our Storybook yet, please enjoy it! [ConnectingChampions.org/storybook](https://ConnectingChampions.org/storybook)). I try to remind my staff and our mentors regularly that, just by being them, they are changing the lives and futures of young people during their cancer journeys. But the truth is that the kids & young adults are changing our lives every day. Our team has a "Celebrations" thread where we share tears of joy and fun facts all the time. Here's one of my favorites: Connecting Champions is going to space, y'all! 'Connecting Champions' will be engraved on NASA's Europa Clipper spacecraft as it travels 1.8 billion miles to explore Europa, an ocean world that may support life." How cool is it that one of our mentors is placing Connecting Champions among the stars in honor of the participant he is mentoring!

But there's one moment in particular that I want to celebrate with you all, because I think it really represents the future of Connecting Champions.

In June, I was selected to be a plenary speaker at an international conference, the Global Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Congress. In front of hundreds of people – from 19 countries around the world – there I was on the big stage. I talked about how young people in cancer treatment and survivorship have unique needs that are critically unmet in the world of healthcare, and the creative ways Connecting Champions is addressing those needs.

As soon as I walked off the stage, I was flooded by medical professionals from around the world: US, UK, Australia, Canada, and even India. After seeing our research-backed model, each was asking how they can build a program like Connecting Champions in their countries. And then it hit me:

**We are literally leading the world when it comes to career and school preparedness for young people during their cancer journeys.**

Having done this work for over 12 years, we have made discoveries that had never been made before. Even among major health institutions, Connecting Champions has established itself among the global leaders in child and young adult oncology.

The world is watching what we are building, and each one of you represents a set of hands that has lifted up our organization in the last year. The future is bright – for Connecting Champions and for all our participants – and you are the reason why.

From my heart to yours,

Sidney

Executive Director & Founder, Connecting Champions



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

**“WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP?”**

*and provides a mentor in that field who can help them achieve a brighter future.*

*\*during treatment or survivorship*

## ROWAN

Rowan *LOVES* cars. Everything from the different models to the horsepower of different engines, he knows all of the facts and details. When he signed up for Connecting Champions, Rowan asked us to find him someone that he could share his passion for automobiles with.

We were excited to match Rowan with friend of Connecting Champions and car enthusiast Joe Mancino. Joe and Rowan have been meeting for years and, in that time, they have discussed all things Ford Mustang related (Rowan's favorite car), built a model car together, and Rowan and his family even got to visit Joe's home to see (and ride in) his exotic car collection.

“Rowan's been inspiring me during every video chat and when we met in person,” said Joe. “The world needs more Rowans!”

Featured on the front page, Rowan's smile shines brightest when he's hanging out with his mentor and checking out his favorite cars.



## SOPHIE

Ever since Sophie underwent treatment, she has known she wanted to go to school to be a physician assistant. Inspired by her own PA during her time in the hospital, Sophie hopes to one day emulate her role model.

Enter Emily, a physician assistant with Nephrology at UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. With Sophie being a junior in high school and envisioning her life after graduation, Emily has been there every step of the way in helping her narrow down her choice of school and find the perfect fit to further her education.

Their conversations involve everything from what kind of program to enroll in to what college Sophie thinks would be best for her, but they also talk about more than just Sophie's future plans.

“When they're on a meeting, they're talking for the full hour,” said Connecting Champions program staff member Matthew. “A lot of it is about Sophie's future, but Sophie gives updates about what is going on for her marching band or swim team. These meetings are just relaxing, hanging out and talking.”

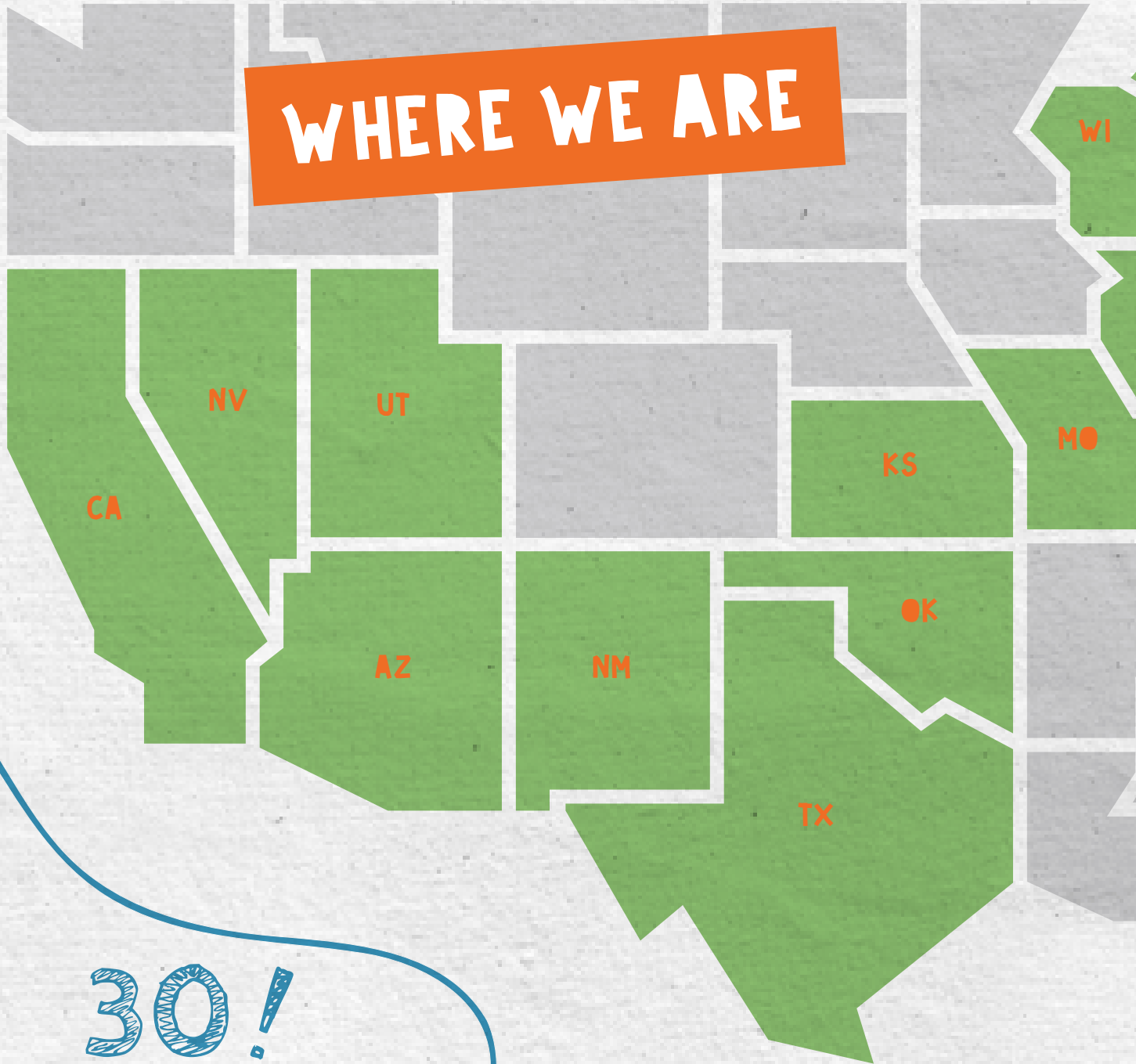
Sophie met a physician assistant years ago that inspired her to pursue a life in medicine. With the help of her new PA friend, Emily, she is able to envision that bright future ahead.



Participants  
in 27 states

Hired a mentor  
finder

WHERE WE ARE



30!

PARTNERSHIPS  
WITH  
HOSPITAL  
SYSTEMS

Launched a new  
three-year strategic plan



CELEBRATED OUR  
12TH BIRTHDAY AS  
AN ORGANIZATION



*Featured in the press in Pennsylvania,  
West Virginia, and Michigan*

## 2023 HIGHLIGHTS



226  
Referrals

### EARNED INCOME PARTNERS

*Helen DeVos Children's Hospital*

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*WVU Medicine Children's Hospital*

We were  
invited to  
present at  
Seven national and international  
conferences



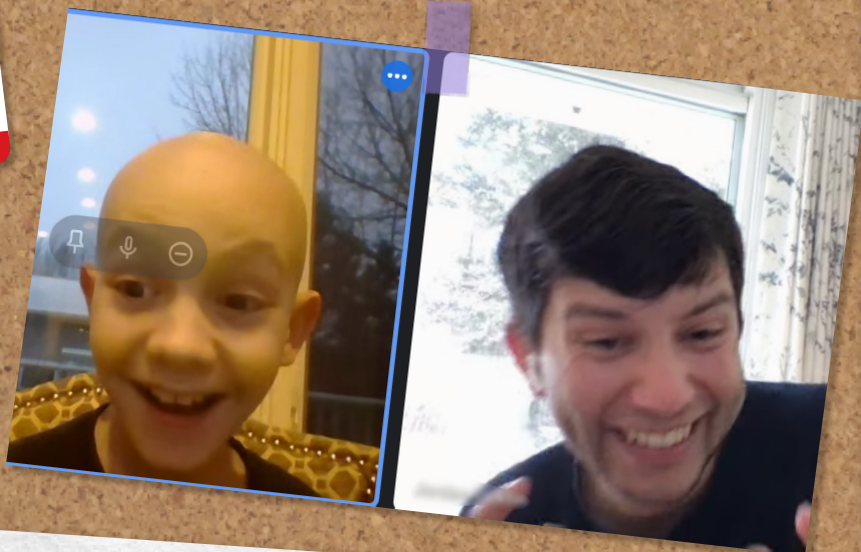


HELLO  
my name is

EZRA

11 years old

## WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP?



When asked to sum up the friendship between Ezra and his mentor, Jordan, Grand Rapids Program Coordinator Danielle beamed: "They're best buddies!"

Ezra is obsessed with the wonders of space. His mentor, Jordan, is the perfect match for the 11-year-old as he teaches him all about his role in quality assurance through NASA.

"Their friendship is amazing because Jordan is very, very good at getting on Ezra's level and he has a lot of very similar interests as Ezra, like building Legos," said Danielle.

One of their biggest projects involved them building the Europa Clipper, a spacecraft being developed by NASA, entirely out of Legos. As Jordan works on the actual spacecraft, he is able to teach Ezra all of the cool features on the project.

Another one of the friends' passions is travel. As Jordan has had to travel for work, he's filled Ezra in on his trips by showing all of the fun places he's been. When Jordan went to Alaska, one of Ezra's dream destinations, Jordan was sure to share his views so Ezra could feel like he was there with his friend. To return the favor, Ezra took time out of his family trip to Hawaii to share the breathtaking views on a call with Jordan.

"Their calls are so important to the both of them," said Danielle. "They're on the call for like an hour and a half and they just love catching up!"

Jordan has become more than just a mentor to Ezra; he's now a close friend that is able to share his passions and dream alongside Ezra.

"The match between Ezra and Jordan couldn't have been more perfect," said Ezra's mom, Laura. "Their interests were the same. Their personalities were very similar. Jordan has a way of making Ezra feel comfortable and his support during all of that was amazing."

Although she was unsure if Ezra would want to participate due to his shy nature and treatment schedule, Laura is so happy that he was paired with such a kind and welcoming mentor, allowing her son to meet a positive role model that also shared his passion for space and exploration.

"When Connecting Champions was introduced to Ezra while we were in the hospital, I thought there was no way that he would be interested; he was so shy and that would be something outside of his comfort zone," Laura remembered. "He wanted to do it and I am so glad that he did. The process was great and the time that we spent over Zoom meetings with Jordan has been such a highlight for Ezra during his whole treatment. I know it was one of the best things out of his whole experience."  
- Laura, Ezra's mom

Together, Ezra and Jordan have made countless memories throughout their friendship, and they are truly out of this world!



WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE  
WHEN YOU GROW UP



AYANNA



Ayanna was introduced to Connecting Champions when she shared with her hospital staff that she was overwhelmed and unsure how to apply for physical therapy school. A recent college graduate, she knew she wanted to take the next step in becoming a physical therapist, but she didn't know where to start.

Connecting Champions reached out to David, a physical therapist who would be able to share his experiences with Ayanna and help her pursue her passion.

"At first, I was pretty scared of going out of my comfort zone," said Ayanna, reminiscing on her initial days with the organization. "When I met David, he was so kind and the energy that he gave off was very welcoming. He's the type of person that you can talk to very easily."

Right off the bat, it was obvious that Ayanna and David were going to be successful together. "David does a really good job of balancing what he experienced and thinks Ayanna should look for while also encouraging her and seeking this out for herself," said Virtual Program Associate Cait.

David was able to answer all of Ayanna's questions about becoming a physical therapist and what a career in the field may look like. A majority of their conversations, however, revolved around Ayanna's application process for physical therapy school.

"Getting into physical therapy school is a stressful process," David admitted, thinking back to his time applying to programs. "Anything to help ease that stress and the burden of trying to navigate that, it felt good to give her the opportunity to help her go down a certain path."

Together, David led Ayanna through all of the different aspects of the application process. They made a pros and cons list of different schools, listing everything Ayanna would want in her dream school, and went through each potential program, identifying all of the requirements to be admitted to the college.

"They really put all of the pieces together of this puzzle for her PT application," Cait said. "Ayanna's a million steps ahead of the game, but she is also so actively engaged in doing the things that they talk about. David's really helping set her up for success. It's really, really cool!"

All of the hard work throughout their calls paid off when Ayanna got to share with David and Cait that she was accepted into a physical therapy program! "I felt like my heart was going to explode because they were definitely some of my biggest supporters," Ayanna said. "Sharing the news with both of them, it was a really good moment that I'll honestly never forget."

When asked about the moment Ayanna shared the good news (pictured above), David said, "Hearing her say that she got in, thinking back to all of the work that she put in and the times that she doubted herself, it all went away and I just saw how proud she was. It was an awesome moment knowing that I was looking at a future colleague of mine. I couldn't be prouder."

Once Ayanna finishes school and becomes a full-time physical therapist, she will have the opportunity to work in the same field of the mentor who helped get her to where she is today. "The physical therapy field is gaining a future excellent clinician, someone that is going to work tirelessly not just to help people but to use her own experiences to make the profession better," said David. "I've been seeing her talk and just hearing someone that's passionate about making an impact and the ideas that she's already been thinking of before even going to school, you just know that this is a special individual that is going to do some great things."

As she looked back on her experience with the organization, Ayanna shared what fond memories she holds and her gratitude for her mentorship with David. "I'm really thankful for getting to be a part of Connecting Champions," she said. "I have such happy memories. They really helped me get here."



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Thank you to all our donors, sponsors, & foundations for helping our kids and young adults pursue their passions!

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## \$40,000 to \$74,999

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**Sidney Kushner**  
Founder & Executive Director  
Favorite food: Apple  
Cinnamon Cheerios



**Coy Thompson**  
Program Director  
Favorite animal: Red-tailed hawk



**Arias Flory**  
Senior Operations Manager  
Favorite book: "Oathringer"  
by Brandon Sanderson



**Danielle Conklin**  
Grand Rapids Program Coordinator  
Favorite activity: Camping  
with my family



**Cait Wolf**  
Virtual Program Associate  
Favorite Singer: Ben Rector



**Matthew Hammel**  
Regional Program Coordinator  
Favorite movie: Inception



**Sean Nolan**  
Assistant of Everything  
Favorite sports team:  
Pittsburgh Pirates



**Kaitlin Travinski**  
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Favorite travel destination:  
Walt Disney World

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



**Connecting**  
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[connectingchampions.org/storybook](https://connectingchampions.org/storybook)



# 2024 EVENTS



During March Madness season, people across the country form teams with their coworkers, friends, and families to sponsor the kids & young adults with cancer in Connecting Champions. They make their bracket pools charitable or simply raise money to change a life.

Entire month of March | Online | [MarchtoFriendship.com](https://MarchtoFriendship.com)

## Toast from Coast to Coast

Thursday, May 16

[ConnectingChampionS.org/Toast](https://ConnectingChampionS.org/Toast)

Buckle up and rev your engines because we're hitting the road for an epic virtual journey! Help us celebrate the incredible participants and mentors of Connecting Champions in every corner of the nation. Join us for an unforgettable evening filled with excitement, laughter, and all of the possibilities ahead. From lively performances to heartwarming testimonials, we're packing our itinerary with pit stops that'll leave you inspired and ready to hit the road running!



## Connecting Champions Charity Run in Memory of Vic

Sunday, July 28

[ConnectingChampionS.org/RunforVic](https://ConnectingChampionS.org/RunforVic)

In memory of Victoria Ondo Burnfin, our beloved intern & mentor

Join #TeamVic in-person in Pittsburgh or wherever you are virtually for this year's Charity Run. Run or walk a 5k with us and help us raise money to create hope and joy in the life of a kid or young adult facing cancer.



## Night of Inspiration

Saturday, September 28

Jewish Community Center of Pittsburgh

[ConnectingChampionS.org/Inspiration](https://ConnectingChampionS.org/Inspiration)

Every year, we host an evening where our mentors present our kids and young adults with personalized awards, sharing how they've inspired us with their bravery during the cancer journey.





# Connecting Champions

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

6375 Penn Ave, Suite B #1225, Pittsburgh, PA 15206

