YA CANCER GAB FEST

THE GABSTER

MAGAZINE 2025

JOINING FORCES

SURVIVORS, SIDEKICKS, AND SUPPORTERS

PRESENTED BY

CACTUS CANCER SOCIETY

AND

ELEPHANTS AND TEA

WELCOME TO YEAR 6 OF YA CANCER GAB FEST

What began as a collaboration between **Cactus Cancer Society** and **Elephants and Tea** has become a cornerstone gathering for the adolescent and young adult (AYA) cancer community. Each year, we're blown away by the energy, honesty, and intention that attendees bring. YA Cancer Gabfest has grown into more than just a virtual event—it's a moment each year, a tradition, and a reminder that none of us have to face cancer alone.

If you're joining us for the **first time**, we're so glad you're here. This week is about connection, authenticity, and feeling seen. It's for meeting people who "get it" and holding space for the shared stories that we all have. You'll meet fellow survivors, caregivers, and professionals who show up with open hearts to share stories, challenges, and hard-won wisdom.

If you're a **returning attendee**, welcome back! You already know the magic of this space. We've worked hard to create a **fresh, dynamic agenda** this year that we hope will deepen your connections and spark new insights. From thought-provoking panels to creative coping sessions to "After Hours" hangouts filled with games, laughter, and storytelling—there's something here for everyone.

This year's theme—**"Joining Forces"**—captures that spirit, inviting us to stand together as survivors, sidekicks, caregivers, and professionals, co-creating a path through young adult cancer, side by side.

Alongside the sessions, don't miss this newest edition of ***The Gabster Magazine***, filled with stories, creative pieces, and behind-the-scenes perspectives from across the community. Think of it as your YA Cancer Gabfest keepsake, something you can return to long after the week wraps up.

Most importantly: remember that YA Cancer Gabfest doesn't stop when the week ends. Both of our organizations are here for you year-round. At **Elephants and Tea**, you'll find community and first-person storytelling that helps you feel less alone. At **Cactus Cancer Society**, you'll find creative, interactive programs that help you connect, cope, and thrive. Together, we're committed to making sure young adults facing cancer always have a place to turn.

We're deeply grateful to our teams, sponsors, and supporters who make this week possible. And we're grateful to you for being here, for showing up, and for adding your voice to this ever-growing community.

Here's to **year six**, and to the power of **Joining Forces**. Together, let's make this week unforgettable.

With gratitude and excitement,
Mallory + Nick

Mallory & Nick

MALLORY CASPERSON,
CEO AND CO-FOUNDER,
CACTUS CANCER SOCIETY

NICK GIALLOURAKIS,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AND CO-FOUNDER,
ELEPHANTS AND TEA
& STEVEN G. CANCER FOUNDATION

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YA CANCER GAB FEST

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YA CANCER GABFEST SCAVENGER HUNT

Download the Deckle App!

The name of our game is "YA Cancer Gabfest 2025"
and the pin to join is 9896

We are so excited to see your submissions!

You can start submitting your entries on
Monday, December 1 through Wednesday, December 10.

Fun prizes might be involved!

You'll need to download the free app and tap "join event."

WHEN LIFE GETS TOO HARD

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2025 AGENDA

MONDAY, DECEMBER 8 - ORIGIN STORIES - CONNECTING THROUGH OUR DIAGNOSIS & EXPERIENCES

5:00-7:00 p.m. ET Young Adult Glimoa Survivor Creative Workshop: Powered by Servier

Join the YA Cancer Gabfest team and our friends at Servier as we have a pre-conference art workshop for those impacted by a young adult Glioma diagnosis. Join us for a fun, artistic activity while connecting and chatting with other young adults impacted by cancer! Open to Glioma patients, survivors, and thrivers only. Additional registration is required.

Speakers/Facilitators: Aerial Donovan and Lauren Morales, LCSW

7:30 p.m. ET Welcome and Opening Keynote with Jon Fox

"Survivor" and "Survival" can be tricky words. Outside the context of cancer, they often carry a specific connotation: they imply a finality to one's experience. As AYA cancer survivors, we know the opposite to be true—that our survival is not an end to our experience, but rather a forceful and continual challenge of navigating life as a new version of ourselves. We might discover that superheroes don't necessarily get to choose their own origin stories: they emerge out of them, having learned to harness some power from being forged so deeply in tragedy and adversity. And we must ask ourselves: What would it look like to become the hero of our own life and story? And how, after all we have been through already, could we possibly begin to make that happen?

Speaker: Jon Fox

8:45 p.m. ET Narrative Workshop: Crafting Your Origin Story

Step into the pages of your own epic tale! In this interactive workshop, participants will uncover their origin stories—the powerful beginnings that shaped who they are today. Through guided prompts and creative exploration, you'll learn how to reframe your experiences into empowering narratives. Whether you're building stronger connections, standing up for what you believe in, or simply trying to understand your path, this is your moment to claim the cape and embrace your inner hero.

Speakers: Aerial Donovan and Lisa Orr, MA

9:45 p.m. ET After Hours: Superhero Speed Friending

Get ready to meet other AYAs in this fast-paced, fun, and low-pressure hangout. Whether you're a survivor, sidekick, or supporter, this interactive session is all about making quick connections with people who get it. Come for the convos, stay for the laughs—you might just find your next cancer sidekick.

Speaker: Christina Kosyla

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 9 - ALTER EGOS & SECRET IDENTITIES - BALANCING SELF-EXPRESSION & PRIVACY THROUGHOUT YOUR CANCER EXPERIENCE

7:30 p.m. ET Secret Identities and Force Fields: Discovering Your Boundaries

Every superhero needs to know where their power begins and where to draw the line. In this session, we'll use guided journaling prompts as guideposts to help you uncover what boundaries feel right for you and how much of your secret identity (a.k.a. your cancer story) you want to share. Through writing and reflection, you'll explore who's earned a seat at your hero's table, when to activate your force field, and how to spot the villains who drain your energy. By the end, you'll leave with a clearer sense of your personal limits, a few new "superpowers" for saying no, and a newly discovered blueprint for protecting your well-being while still connecting authentically with others.

Speaker: Jean Rowe, LCSW, CJT

8:30 p.m. ET Capes, Color, and Confidence: Superpowered Self-Expression

Every superhero chooses their costume with care, not just for the look, but for what it means. Whether it's a bold cape, a signature color, or a symbol of resilience, their style reflects their identity, their battles, and their strength. Personal touches are powerful forms of self-expression. Join us for a session that explores how cancer super-advocates harness that same energy to express themselves throughout their cancer experience and beyond. Whether it's through fashion, body art, writing, makeup, or other creative outlets, each story is a reminder that feeling like yourself can be a radical, healing act. Come hear how these real-life heroes embrace their identities, reimagine their style, and wear their stories with pride.

Speakers: Annie Bond, Eldiara Doucette, Summer Konechny, and Lisa Orr, MA

9:30 p.m. ET After Hours: Alter Ego Trivia Night

Suit up your brainpower and get ready to test your trivia skills—with a heroic twist! Join us for a fun, interactive night of pop culture, cancer community, and alter ego-inspired questions. Whether you're secretly a trivia genius or just in it for the laughs, this is your chance to show off your smarts and connect with fellow Gabsters!

Speakers: Lauren Creel, MSW, MPH and Kayla Fulginiti, LCSW, OSW-C

YA CANCER GAB FEST

AFTER HOURS

ELEPHANTS AND TEA & CACTUS CANCER SOCIETY

Join us at the end of each day for even more engagement with your fellow Gabsters!

MONDAY, DECEMBER 8, 9:45 P.M. ET - SUPERHERO SPEED FRIENDING

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WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 9:30 P.M. ET - NONPROFIT JEOPARDY CHALLENGE

In this interactive virtual game, we're putting a superhero twist on Jeopardy!, with every question and clue focused on nonprofit organizations supporting adolescents and young adults navigating cancer. You'll test your knowledge, learn about real-world organizations doing incredible work, and discover resources available to YOU—whether you're looking for support, connection, or just want to know who's out there making a difference in the AYA space. No superpowers (or comic book knowledge) required—just curiosity, creativity, and a love for learning something new!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 11, 9:30 P.M. ET - SUPERPOWER SHOW & TELL

What's your hidden talent, go-to coping hack, or unexpected post-cancer strength? Bring it to Superpower Show & Tell, a fun and supportive space to share (or just cheer others on). Whether your superpower is baking, dark humor, or napping like a champ—this is your moment to shine with your YA Cancer Gabfest crew.

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12, 9:30 P.M. ET - THE MASKED CANCER SINGER

Just like The Masked Singer—but with your favorite faces from the AYA cancer community in disguise! Join us for a hilarious, music-filled guessing game as well-known survivors, sidekicks, and supporters perform anonymously while you try to figure out who's behind the mask. Come for the mystery, stay for the talent (or courage), and get ready for some serious fun.

2025 AGENDA

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 10 - YOUR SURVIVORSHIP ALLIANCE - FINDING SIDEKICKS & SUPPORT IN ACTION

6:00 p.m. ET Real Talk on Clinical Trials: Powered by Syndax

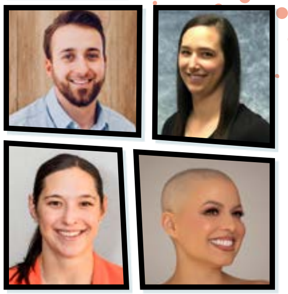
Join this empowering and informative panel session about clinical trials. Whether you're considering a trial, currently enrolled, or just want to understand what it's all about, this is your chance to hear first-person stories from AYA patients and survivors who've been through it. You'll also debunk myths and misunderstandings about clinical trials, learn practical tips for navigating conversations with your care team, and discover resources and guidance to help you make informed decisions. Come with questions, leave with clarity, and maybe even feel a bit more like the hero of your own health journey.

Speakers: Mallory Casperson, MS, Jessica Acosta, Hail Quackenbush, Pam Simon, NP, MSN, CPNP, CPON

7:30 p.m. ET How to Be a Sidekick (and Let Yourself Need One)

Even superheroes need sidekicks, and sometimes, being a sidekick is its own kind of superpower. In this candid session, we'll explore what real support looks like: how we ask for it, how we offer it, and how we learn to truly show up for one another. You'll hear from incredible duos who've stood by each other through diagnosis, treatment, survivorship, and everything in between. Through stories of communication, missteps, strength, and mutual care, this session dives into the ways we find our people and how we become the support others need.

Speakers: Tyler Barr, Ali Cooper, Sara Quilici Giles, and Lynn Leiro



8:30 p.m. ET Building Your Cancer Support Squad

Every hero needs a team. In this interactive, workshop-style session, you'll be guided through mapping out your own personal support squad. Together, we'll explore the different types of support you might need and help you identify the people in your life who can play those roles. Who's your go-to for late-night venting? Who helps you organize appointments? Who brings the memes? Whether you're newly diagnosed, deep in treatment, or years out, this session will help you name your needs, find your people, and feel more supported, because no one gets through this alone, and you deserve a team that's got your back.

Speakers: Mallory Casperson, MS, and Bryan Walker, MS

9:30 p.m. ET After Hours: Nonprofit *Jeopardy!* Challenge

In this interactive virtual game, we're putting a superhero twist on Jeopardy!, with every question and clue focused on nonprofit organizations supporting AYAs navigating cancer. You'll test your knowledge, learn about real-world organizations doing incredible work, and discover resources available to YOU—whether you're looking for support, connection, or just want to know who's out there making a difference in the AYA space. No superpowers (or comic book knowledge) required—just curiosity, creativity, and a love for learning something new!

Speaker: Christina Kosyla

CHECK OUT THE 2025 GABFEST MERCH!

Scan the QR code to check out some of our amazing designs!

Show your support for this amazing event and community!

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The only magazine written for and by the AYA Cancer Community

Our mission is to help adolescent and young adult (AYA) patients, survivors, and caregivers know they are not alone in facing cancer through community support, survivorship resources, and research.

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Elephants and Tea is the nonprofit media brand of the Steven G. Cancer Foundation

2025 AGENDA

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 11 - FACING OUR KRYPTONITE & UNCOVERING OUR POWERS

7:30 p.m. ET Kryptonite Check-In: A Fireside Chat on What Zaps Our Strength

Every superhero has a weakness, but talking about it out loud can be its own kind of power. In this intimate fireside chat, we'll kick things off with honest reflections on the challenges of survivorship, especially the visible and invisible disabilities that shape our daily lives. During this session, we'll take a thoughtful and honest look at the things that zap our energy, mess with our routines, or make survivorship feel extra complicated.

Speakers: Christina Kosyla and Kyle Stamper

8:30 p.m. ET Power Up Workshop: Finding Your Hidden Strengths

You've faced hard things and built some serious superpowers along the way. In this creative, hands-on workshop, we'll explore the unique strengths, skills, and strategies that often go unnoticed but make a huge difference in how we move through the world. Together, we'll design our own personal "power-ups." Whether it's a coping mechanism you didn't know you had, a talent that's helped you thrive, or a strategy that keeps you grounded, this session is about recognizing the tools you've built and celebrating the strength you carry.

Speakers: Lauren Morales, LCSW

9:30 p.m. ET After Hours: Superpower Show & Tell

What's your hidden talent, go-to coping hack, or unexpected post-cancer strength? Bring it to Superpower Show & Tell, a fun and supportive space to share (or just cheer others on). Whether your superpower is baking, dark humor, or napping like a champ—this is your moment to shine with your fellow Gabfest crew.

Speaker: Nick Giallourakis, MS

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 12 - TO BE CONTINUED: NAVIGATING THE NEXT CHAPTER

7:30 p.m. ET Plot Twist: The Next Chapter of Your Survivorship Saga

Every superhero's story doesn't end when the challenge is over; it's just the beginning of a new chapter. In this action-packed panel, cancer advocates will share the ongoing saga of their survivorship journeys, where the plot isn't always predictable, but the growth, strength, and resilience are nothing short of extraordinary. From navigating new health battles and shifting roles in their personal and professional lives, to discovering fresh superpowers they didn't know they had, our panelists will dive into what it means to keep writing their own story after cancer. Join us to hear how, just like any hero, they're redefining their destiny with every twist and turn.

Speakers: Elissa Baldwin, Nick Giallourakis, MS, Carissa Hodgson, LCSW, OSW-C and Yahira Torres

8:30 p.m. ET Choose Your Own Adventure: Superhero Doodles

Unleash your inner artist and co-create a league of legendary (and maybe a little wacky) superheroes! In this fast-paced virtual drawing adventure inspired by the game Doodle Face, each participant will add their own twist to a growing superhero story—one doodle at a time. No drawing skills required—just your imagination and a sense of humor!

Speakers: Aerial Donovan and Lisa Orr, MA

9:30 p.m. ET After Hours: The Masked Cancer Singer

Just like The Masked Singer—but with your favorite faces from the AYA cancer community in disguise! Join us for a hilarious, music-filled guessing game as well-known survivors, sidekicks, and supporters perform anonymously while you try to figure out who's behind the mask. Come for the mystery, stay for the talent (or courage), and get ready for some serious fun.

Speaker: Mallory Casperson, MS

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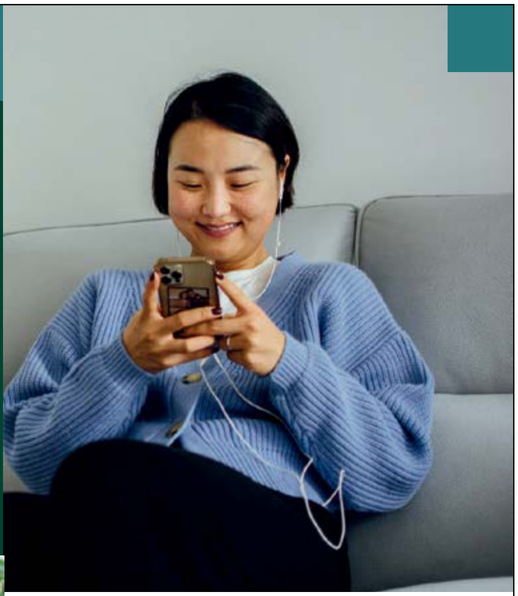

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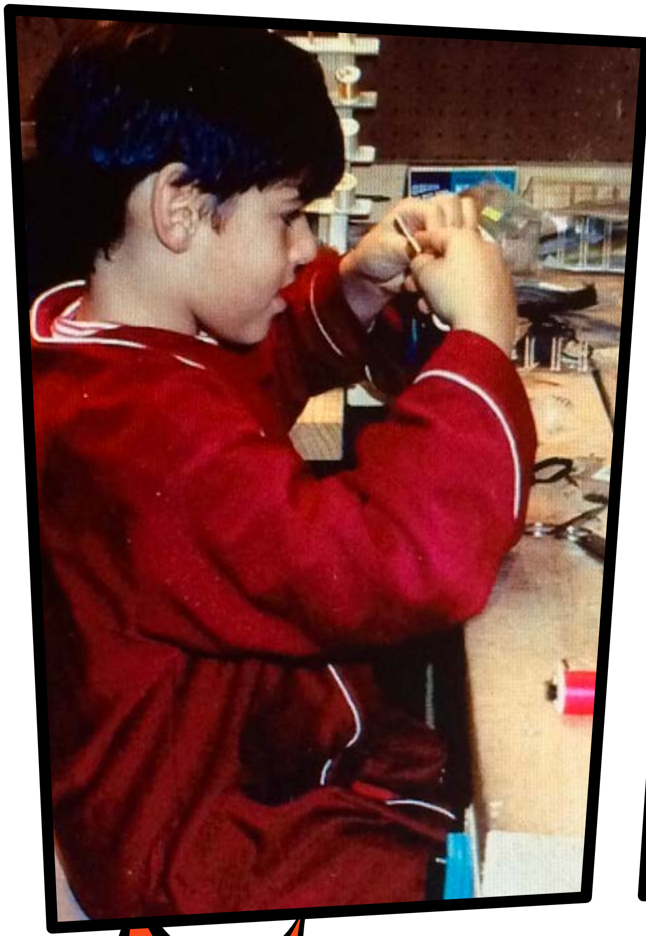
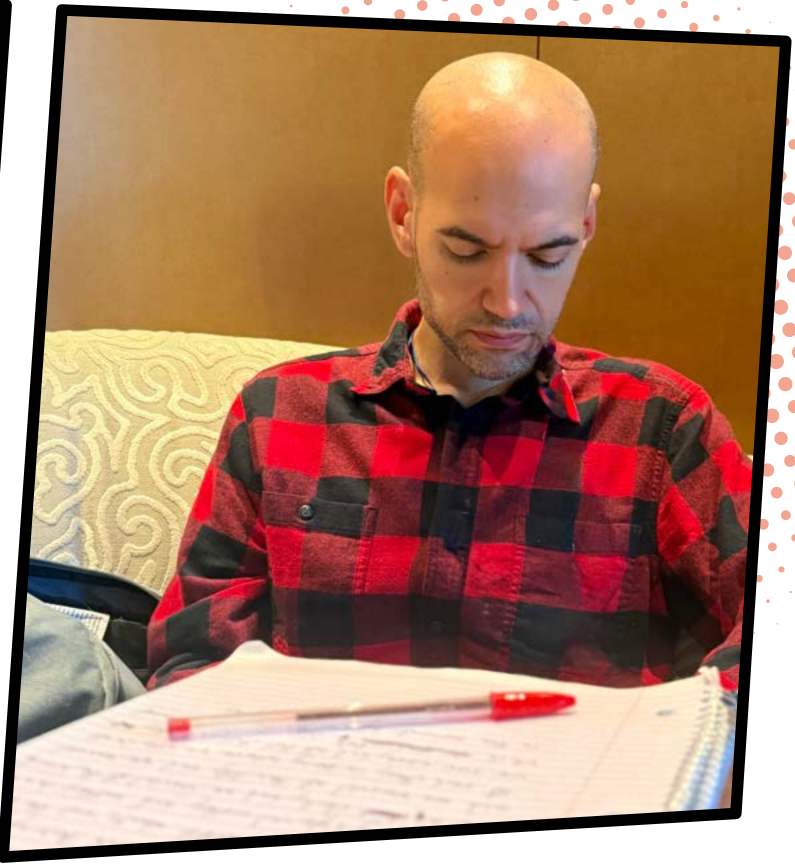
STORY AND SURVIVAL

STARTING FROM THE UNLIKELY, AND MOVING TOWARD THE INEVITABLE (AN ORIGIN STORY)

BY JON FOX





IDENTITY.
BELIEFS.
EXPERIENCES.
SUPERPOWERS.

These are just some of the core components of an origin story, whether they are ones that play a role in forging who we've become or they help explain the unique ways we show up in the world today. Because an origin story is, after all, a story. It is an arc. It is something to help us make sense of ourselves and the way that things were, or how they've come to be—a way to draw lines between all the past selves we continue to recall, all the present parts of ourselves we now feel, and all the future selves we can only begin to imagine.

Story is narrative. For us as human beings, this involves both self-perception and self-authorship. We must interpret our lives through the lens of our narratives. Even now, writing this, I am trying to communicate not merely an idea, not merely a theme, but the whole of the feeling—the unique construction of the experience—the plot, with all its twists and its slow or sudden turns, the major characters who were or who have become so near and dear. This is story. This is narrative.

My life and my struggles did not begin with my cancer, nor did they end, nor have they dissipated or diminished since. But when I think now of my story—my experience—what comes into focus is no longer so much about the nuances of my particular adversities, but much more about the still-nuanced particularities of my trajectory and my growth. And so, how did I get here? This—this feels like my true origin story.

Being diagnosed with cancer as a young adult is rare—rarer still when one receives two distinct and unrelated cancer diagnoses during the same window of time and course of treatment. Even within the adolescent and young adult (AYA) space, we recognize that some cancers are much more rare than others. The same is true for certain categories of cancers. And here was my first notable observation: sometimes even rare categories—of cancer or of anything—can be the beginning of profoundly special bonds.

The first time I met Katie was at a virtual game night for AYA survivors. It took six months before we personally connected and became friends, but when we did, one thing bonded us right away: we were both survivors of rare gastrointestinal cancers, and our major surgeries forever changed our relationships with eating, food, and digestion. She'd never heard of my Whipple procedure until her care team told her that her own surgery—an esophagectomy—was the second most major oncology surgery of modern times. Of course, she then had to look up what ranked #1 (spoiler alert: it's the Whipple).

Even in the rare AYA cancer space, we both knew what it felt like to be isolated by a unique experience of life (food and eating) that so many, even other cancer survivors, take for granted and understandably turn to for a glimmer of comfort when faced with grief and overwhelming emotions. For us, cancer had left that relationship complicated: food-centric language and metaphors, so common in everyday conversation, often felt triggering, leaving us feeling excluded or reminded of painful limitations.

We'd both cringe at all the food-related discussions and icebreakers, even in AYA support groups and events. We sympathized with the well-intentioned people who, of course, had no way of realizing how difficult it was for a rare few of us. That shared sensitivity and self-awareness around nuance, complexity, and the space for odd exceptions to the often assumed rules was one of the first ways we learned something rare and precious about one another.

It has been said many times that so much of who we are is revealed—maybe even created—by the way we respond to adversity. Viktor Frankl comes to mind. It is one thing to make meaning from grief or suffering on your own, or even within the context of a broader community. It is quite another to do so in close connection with a specific person—someone who can relate in ways that can turn even sadness, like a statue of grey stone, into a delightful surprise as wispy as a cloud that has so lightly come down to kiss you, for a moment, on your forehead.

Our rare cancer experiences taught Katie and me about one another, and in the beginning, this was not some fast-track to "resilience." I always noticed and admired the graceful resilience in Katie's spirit, but we first entered one another's lives with simple compassion and curiosity. Resilience came much later, and it still feels more like a lifelong practice, a never-ending work-in-progress. But in terms of our origin story, it is the story of how two people, against all odds, in the midst of the most brutal physical and emotional anguish imaginable, came together, first as fast friends, and later as life partners.

I could not give you anything close to sufficient as an example or explanation, or even a sliver of the context for how our friendship evolved into that rare and true love. But suffice it to say, there were obstacles along the way, large and small, and many remain. If you had asked either of us just one year before we officially became a couple whether this type of love could possibly develop in either of our lives, it would have seemed as likely as me telling you right now that, a year from today, unicorns and dragons will walk the earth. It was simply so far outside the paradigm of reality or what seemed possible—for both of us.

And so this brings me to the final and most important point that I'd like to make. And perhaps this is true of any great origin story—that it is always intertwined with the transformation of some highly unlikely series of events into a mysterious and miraculous set of outcomes or superpowers. It is as though the most static and lonely caterpillar has no idea of (or perhaps even

JON FOX IS A LIFELONG LEARNER AND CREATIVE, A DEEP THINKER AND FEELER, AND A SURVIVOR OF TWO DISTINCT YET CONCURRENT CANCERS THAT WERE BOTH DIAGNOSED AND TREATED IN 2022, DURING HIS LATE THIRTIES. HE IS NOW THE CREATIVE CONTENT COORDINATOR AT ELEPHANTS AND TEA. PRIOR TO HIS SURVIVORSHIP AND INVOLVEMENT IN THE AYA SPACE, HE WAS A LOVING AND DEDICATED ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER FOR 10 YEARS.

FOX'S TREATMENT INCLUDED A WHIPPLE PROCEDURE, A RADICAL SURGERY THAT RESULTS IN A PERMANENT AND EVOLVING ADJUSTMENT TO ONE'S RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD, DIGESTION, NUTRITION, AND THE POTENTIAL HEALTH CONDITIONS THAT CAN ARISE AFTER, AS IT FUNDAMENTALLY CHANGES THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF ONE'S GASTROINTESTINAL TRACT AND DIGESTIVE SYSTEM. HE LOVES NERDING OUT ABOUT HEALTH, SCIENCE, AND ESPECIALLY THE PANCREAS.

HE IS A POET, WRITER, AND A LOVER OF STORYTELLING IN ALL FORMS, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT CAPTURES THE NUANCE, AMBIGUITY, OR DICHOTOMY OF LIGHT AND DARK THAT OFTEN CHARACTERIZES THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE. HE IS PASSIONATE ABOUT BRINGING AWARENESS, FOSTERING EMPATHY, PROVIDING SUPPORT, AND ADVOCATING FOR AYA PATIENTS AND SURVIVORS, PARTICULARLY THROUGH WRITING, JOURNALING, STORYTELLING, CREATIVITY, AND MEANINGFUL, COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS.

despairs at) the perception of its seemingly never-ending cocoon, not knowing if or when it will emerge, not even capable of conceiving what it will be like to be something more than or different from what it is, or what it would be like to exist as someone or something entirely new.

This is not a promise. This is not even a suggestion. This is a story. And of course, we must ask: how much of our story do we get to write for ourselves? Maybe the universe throws us a whole ugly chapter. Maybe it's the worst chapter we could ever have anticipated. Maybe something terrible happens to our favorite character. Maybe we lose ourselves—or worse, those we care about. And maybe we can only continue by writing, for ourselves, the next single and solitary word.

Our stories are all built, letter by letter, word by word, moment by moment, choice after choice—and it is hard to accept that so many of these "choices" are not our own. Life's story is full of mystery, unknowns, and things we cannot control. Sometimes, it feels like we are forced to pilot an aircraft for which we never received training. Other times, it feels like the only choice we have is to let go when all we want, more than anything, is to hold on.

Sometimes, we choose hope, even when our ending is not guaranteed. Sometimes, we don't know whether we will ever be able to look back and say, "yes, I did it." We don't always know what our story will be, and that is both good and potentially bad. We don't know if we'll look back and feel more like a superhero, or more like a villain—or maybe worse: as if we never got the chance to emerge from our cocoon at all.

But remember: this is a story. We always have some degree of power over our story. We get to decide what a superhero looks like, and what kind of superhero we can be: the hospital nurse who made me cry simply from the kindness in her voice, the casual friend who drove me to the chemo clinic when my father couldn't—the list goes on and on. Maybe in my story, these people are more supporters and sidekicks—but I assure you, this is more than sufficient material for them being superheroes of their own story.

Whether it's through kindness, creativity, or a relationship, the possibilities are truly endless. You can always make meaning. You can always make a small difference in the world, or in the lives of those around you. In a way, this is the unique gift of being human. It is a blessing and a curse—we must all endure suffering—but we all have the opportunity to turn it into a story. And in this way, we can craft our very own origin story, even from the dust, even from the crucible of what it's like to live as an AYA with, or after, a cancer diagnosis.

And if you're not sure where to start, maybe begin by asking questions. Maybe start by having conversations. Start by journaling. Start reaching out more to friends, or to people who have the potential to become friends. Chances are, you're already doing so much—or at least more than you think—or at least you have already begun writing some of your own origin story. Your first word. Or the next word. Or the word that might be the one that somehow changes everything. You just might not know it—not yet. ●

OVERGROWN

BY SUMMER KONECHNY

when I first got sick,
I craved something I could control.
my body had gone rogue, so I chose to control the narrative instead.
I claimed to be an open book—my pages a pristine, crisp white,
with a bold, clear cut font that left no room for misinterpretation.

I found myself sharing my most dulled down, easily digestible chapters,
I didn't dare publish the ugly parts.
I knew they made others nervously squirm in their seats,
uncomfortable with the thought that not all things happen for a reason.
I knew I had been assigned bravery when I was diagnosed,
and I knew that if I remained calm, those around me would too.

I wrote fiction, hiding my suffering behind a manicured manuscript.
my paragraphs were short and to the point,
omitting the details that I knew would make stomachs turn.

as I recovered, I tried to revisit my own story, but
mould spread into the thin creases of my pages,
vines grew into my cracked and broken spine,
weeds and water damage covered my contents,
and left the fine print of my sickness exposed.

stories about my loved ones
and how they've handled my journey
began to seep out from the cracks in my cover.
I let others in on the incomprehensible guilt I feel,
knowing that I've scarred those who I love the most-
even though it isn't my fault.

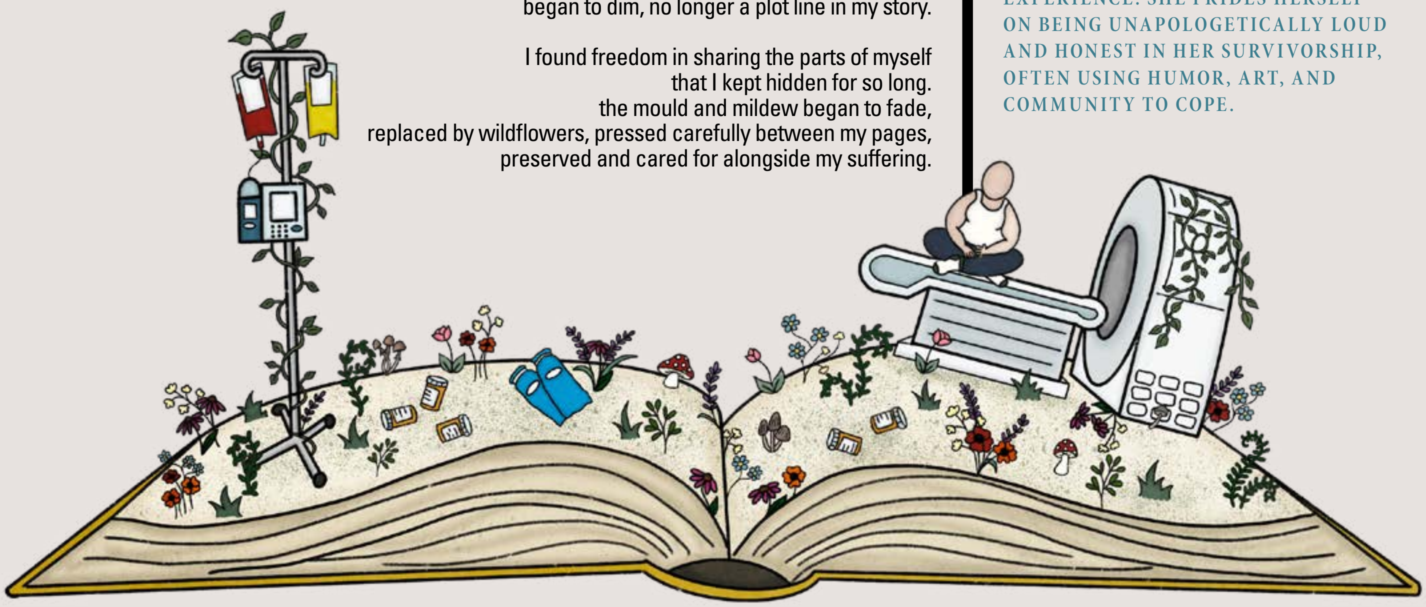
tales of the time that my body nearly killed me
bled through the ink on my worn out pages.
I shared how terrifying it was to slip in and out of consciousness for weeks on end,
not understanding how sick I truly was.

I broadcasted the way my heart still stings during moments of joy,
knowing that one day, the happiness I was feeling could be torn away once again.
I allowed others to investigate the all knowing ache
that stains every page I've written.

I ripped the pages out of myself, and threw them to the wind,
not caring about the mouldy, overgrown details
that were previously left to rot.
the aches and pains of decay and unattended shame
began to dim, no longer a plot line in my story.

I found freedom in sharing the parts of myself
that I kept hidden for so long.
the mould and mildew began to fade,
replaced by wildflowers, pressed carefully between my pages,
preserved and cared for alongside my suffering.

SUMMER KONECHNY IS A 26-YEAR-OLD WRITER, AYA CANCER AND SARCOMA ADVOCATE, AND STAGE IV CANCER SURVIVOR LIVING IN VANCOUVER, CANADA. SHE WAS DIAGNOSED WITH OSTEOSARCOMA IN HER LEFT TIBIA IN 2022, AND UNDERWENT 10 ROUNDS OF CHEMOTHERAPY AND A LIMB-SPARING SURGERY ON HER LEFT LEG. IN 2024, SHE EXPERIENCED A SPONTANEOUS HARDWARE FAILURE IN HER ENDOPROSTHETIC AND WAS DIAGNOSED WITH A RECURRENCE OF HER CANCER IN BOTH LUNGS. SHE SPENDS HER FREE TIME WORKING WITH ORGANIZATIONS INCLUDING THE TERRY FOX RESEARCH INSTITUTE AND BC CANCER AS A PATIENT PARTNER, WORKING PRIMARILY ON PROJECTS RELATED TO AYA CANCER, SARCOMA, PRECISION MEDICINE, AND IMPROVING THE PATIENT EXPERIENCE. SHE PRIDES HERSELF ON BEING UNAPOLOGETICALLY LOUD AND HONEST IN HER SURVIVORSHIP, OFTEN USING HUMOR, ART, AND COMMUNITY TO COPE.



Original artwork by the author, Summer Konechny

TUGGING ON SUPERMAN'S CAPE AND REMOVING THE LONE RANGER'S MASK

AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION DURING YOUR CANCER JOURNEY

BY JEAN ROWE, LCSW, CJT

Putting on a good face. Going along. Not rocking the boat. The power of the white coat. These ideas keep us in a place where we're not really listening to ourselves.

How do we hear and listen to our internal wisdom? Developing boundaries. Holding boundaries. Having boundaries! With families, in close friendships, and at work, these can be hard to maintain at any time.

While living with cancer and the unpredictable long-term management it demands, holding and maintaining boundaries become more important than ever.

Let's take the holidays, for example. Your family may or may not expect you to be where they are or to be with them no matter what might be happening in your treatment or post-treatment life. However, the people you love—and who love you—are responding. Whatever they're saying, whatever their expectations are, these are reflections of them, not you. They are their expectations, not yours.

While it may come to feel like it's your responsibility to manage it for them, it's not. This does not even belong to you.

Anne Lamott says "no" is a complete sentence.

It's okay to say no, even if you've never said no before—even to those lovely, expectation-saturated people in your life.

Today is a great day to start testing the water on how you can say no. You can start with something small.

My friend, Jan, years ago, talked about how she didn't have enough time and had a hard time saying no. As a joke, I said, "I'll start leaving you outrageous requests that you must say no to. I'll make these up so that you can practice saying no."

So, I called her, and I said, "Jan, I found a litter of puppies by the side of the road. Can I bring them to your house?"

She hesitated.

I said, "Jan, the answer is no!"

She said, "But they're puppies."

I said, "They're fake. Say no!"

Saying no is not selfish. It is allowing for what is best for you.

This may feel like you're "going against" something—maybe even "the establishment," and you can decide what "the establishment" is: The way your own family system has always been. Never saying no to your parents. Always going along. Doing what they want you to do, whether you wanted to do it or not, whether it felt authentic for you or not.

The stakes are higher now as you manage life with cancer.

It doesn't mean those lovely, expectation-saturated people don't mean well. I feel certain they do. I feel certain they want to spend every second they can with you, with everything feeling as normal—or back to normal—as possible, because they're scared. And that's okay. They get to be scared. You get to be scared. You also get to ask for what you want.

So go ahead, tug on Superman's cape. Pull the mask off the Lone Ranger. Blaze new boundaries. Remember this is a practice.

You may think, *oh boy, where do I start*? This is where you bring in the friends you feel you can be absolutely yourself with. Pay attention to the things that feel like *yes*. Pay attention to what feels like *no*.

The reasons for saying no at this starting place are not important right now. Maybe you say no because you're tired, because something else needs your attention (like rest), or because you need sacred alone time.

My friend Carissa taught me about a bed party. She gets in bed with her tea, her phone, her iPad, her knitting, her books, and her journal. She surrounds herself with all the things she loves, and then she stays there for as long as she wants.

If somebody calls you and you've made an exquisite, glorious, luscious, delicious plan like this one—and the caller is someone you really enjoy, so you feel a little bit of FOMO—I encourage you to keep the boundary you set for yourself. Some part of your being is messaging loudly:

This is what you need right now. This is what you want right now.

If you do, I think you'll discover what a gift it is to hold the boundary. It's not about hurting someone else's feelings. It's about not hurting your own feelings. You deserve to come first.

Reschedule with the person who called. Ask for an alternative, or just ask for a rain check, and then if you really mean it, follow up.

Your terms. This isn't about fighting. It's about respect and understanding that your decision may not be one that your loved ones want. That's okay. You will be living authentically. You will be choosing you—first.

It's a heavy load to carry, always worrying about disappointing others. We swallow down a lot. We stuff down our own desires. And it comes at the detriment of our own healing and self-care. It is not selfish. It is a practice to do this differently. Know that you won't do it perfectly right the first time. It will feel awkward. You might bumble along. That's all normal. Just start—for you.

What's one thing you might be able to choose for yourself to make YOU the priority (number one) today? ●

JEAN ROWE IS A LICENSED CLINICAL SOCIAL WORKER, A CERTIFIED JOURNAL THERAPIST, AND AN EXPERT CONSULTANT AND TRUSTED VOICE IN THE FIELD OF YOUNG ADULT CANCER. HER WORK INCLUDES EDUCATIONAL PRODUCT AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT, DELIVERY, MANAGEMENT, AND EVALUATION. SHE IS AN EXPERT FACILITATOR WHO DESIGNS, IMPLEMENTS, AND DELIVERS CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS AND JOURNAL WRITING WORKSHOPS TO YOUNG ADULT CANCER SURVIVORS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC.

ROWE HAS PRESENTED REGIONALLY, NATIONALLY, AND INTERNATIONALLY ON VARIOUS TOPICS RELATED TO HER WORK AND INTERESTS. SHE HAS WORKED WITH OTHERS THROUGH COMPANIES PROVIDING VIRTUAL THERAPY AND SERVES AS A GUEST FACULTY MEMBER WITH CACTUS CANCER SOCIETY. SHE PROVIDES SUPERVISION TO SOCIAL WORKERS PURSUING CLINICAL LICENSURE AND PROVIDES CLINICAL CONSULTATION TO THOSE ALREADY LICENSED.

CACTUS
CANCER SOCIETY

What young adults facing cancer are saying about our online programs...

ART WORKSHOPS

> Art programs are my favorite because I love self expression. I feel like talking about similar traumatic cancer experiences while expressing oneself through art is very therapeutic.

> I look forward to each month's meeting. Hearing what everyone has to share is always eye-opening and makes me feel less isolated.

GUYS DISCUSSION GROUP

JOURNALING & WRITING WORKSHOPS

> Journaling with Jean is my favorite! She's wonderful, her prompts are thought-provoking, and the safe space is SO valuable.

SURVIVORSHIP SERIES

> I just started the Survivorship Series yesterday and had a blast! I was having a rough day and it's just what I needed to provide joy to my evening.

> It's not often I get a chance to hang out with other people who are dealing with similar things that I deal with. Even if we aren't directly doing things that address cancer, we get to see that we are not alone.

BUILDERS WORKSHOPS

AND SO MUCH MORE...

> I feel I finally belong somewhere with people that get me and love me for who I am. You have been instrumental in my healing.

Find us at CactusCancer.org

✉ hello@CactusCancer.org
@CactusCancer
@CactusCancer
@CactusCancerSoc

SUPERHERO SIDEKICK TRADING CARDS

BY AERIAL DONOVAN

TAKE THE MAGIC OF GABFEST WITH YOU WHEREVER YOU GO!

These **Superhero Sidekick Trading Cards** are designed to slip right into your pocket, perfect for when you need a burst of creativity on the fly.

Each card features a one-of-a-kind hero that secretly represents a Gabfest staff member or speaker… but can you guess who's behind the mask?

Use them to remind yourself what your superhero sidekick friends would tell you on a hard day!

THE HEALER OF HEARTS

GLITTERFANG

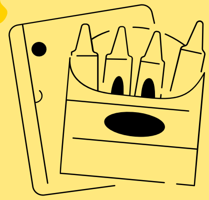
THE VERDANT WANDERER

THE LIVING TOME

SUPERHERO SIDEKICK TRADING CARDS

THAT'S NOT ALL!

Flip open your crayons, markers, or gel pens, because these cards double as a coloring activity on the go. Whether you're waiting for an appointment, traveling, or just need a five-minute brain break, these mini masterpieces are ready to spark your imagination.



Crayon by Geni Alando from thenounproject.com

GLITTERFANG

"KEEP YOUR CHIN UP, PAL, WE'RE GONNA TAKE ONE DAY AT A TIME."

THE HEALER OF HEARTS

"IT TOTALLY MAKES SENSE WHY YOU WOULD FEEL THAT WAY. THIS TOO SHALL PASS."

THE LIVING TOME

"TO HEALTH, GROWTH, AND RAISING HELL WHEN NECESSARY. NOW SPILL, TELL ME EVERYTHING!

THE VERDANT WANDERER

"I'M HERE AND I SEE YOU."

SUPERHERO SIDEKICK TRADING CARDS

SUPERHERO SIDEKICK TRADING CARDS

CHRONOFIN

"IT WON'T FEEL LIKE THIS FOREVER."

THE STORYWING

"HERE TO LISTEN, OR JUST SIT QUIETLY WITH YOU."

THE SLEEPLESS SAGE

"YOU'RE DOING GREAT, YOU'RE RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE"

THE ARCANE BULLDOG

"I'M HERE FOR YOU."

THE MINIMALIST LISTENER

"IT'S NORMAL TO HAVE HARD DAYS, I'M HERE TO LISTEN."

THE GOLDEN VOYAGER

"DON'T RUIN THE DAY!"

SUPERHERO SIDEKICK TRADING CARDS

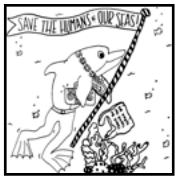
The Healer of Hearts is the friend you didn't know you needed, armed with endless hugs, a raccoon who's way too good at stealing snacks, and a journal that doubles as a power source. With healing powers off the charts and sass deployed only when necessary, this hero reminds you that your feelings make sense—and that every storm passes. Whether offering a glass of wine or a perfectly timed pep talk, The Healer of Hearts makes the world feel just a little lighter, one hug at a time.

Glitterfang is equal parts tiger chaos and beach zen, vanishing mid-sentence just to reappear with perfect nails and a reassuring grin. Armed with a sparkle shield, an indestructible mom bun, and a knack for making invisibility hilarious, this hero turns goofiness into healing magic. Nothing can beat this tiger with her mantra, "Keep your chin up, pal, we're gonna take one day at a time," Glitterfang proves that glitter and grit can absolutely save the day.

The Verdant Wanderer slips through space with a flicker of green light, always arriving with tea, empathy, and full of snacks. A sentient spider plant with roots that rise for shelter and comfort, this hero turns every place into a safe haven. Water renews their strength, but it's their simple reminder, "I'm here and I see you," that makes their magic unforgettable.

The Living Tome is a star-cloaked guardian of wisdom, equal parts cosmic guide and sassy best friend. With ocean waves humming through their voice and glowing ink that can turn words into reality, this hero balances healing calm with fiery encouragement. Whether offering infinite knowledge or a spicy margarita, The Living Tome toasts to health, growth, and raising hell when needed, then leans in with, "Now spill, tell me everything!"

The Storywing glides through the skies as a puffin with a library's worth of wisdom in their heart. With the gift of choosing the right story and brewing soul-matched tea, this hero can calm storms, lift spirits, and wrap the world in comfort. Boots firmly grounded but wings always ready, The Storywing reminds you they're here to listen, or simply sit quietly by your side.



Chronofin rides the tides of time with dolphin grace and Ziggy Stardust flair, weaving music into spells that steady the shifting sands of past and future. With gadgets glittering on a glam rock suit this dolphin hybrid creature proves that empathy is the strongest anchor in any era. Offering coffee and the gentle reminder, "It won't feel like this forever," Chronofin turns time itself into a source of healing.

The Arcane Bulldog blends wizardry with bulldog loyalty, conjuring spells as easily as offering steady, grounding silence. Cloaked in a cape with music pulsing through enchanted headphones, this hero proves that sometimes the fiercest magic is simply being there. With wrinkles that rival runes and a stubbornness stronger than steel, The Arcane Bulldog is both protector and friend, always ready to say, without words, "I'm here for you."

The Sleepless Sage roams the world with their desert fox intuition, boundless stamina, and a glittering sci-fi style that never quits because they literally never sleep. With combat boots planted firmly in the sand and sage green sparkle lighting the way, this hero thrives on midnight walks and endless energy. Whether offering rooibos tea or a grounding reminder that "you're doing great, you're right where you are," The Sleepless Sage turns exhaustion into empowerment.

The Golden Voyager zips through life with teleportation powers. This talking dog has enough optimism to outshine the sun. Whether fetching snacks, socks, or margarita salt, this hero knows exactly what you need, sometimes laughter over a drink, sometimes quiet comfort with tea and cookies. Dressed in comfy athleisure and armed with boundless compassion, The Golden Voyager reminds us all: don't ruin the day!

The Minimalist Listener doesn't need flash or fanfare, just black pajama pants, a journal, and with a name like Nuance, who heals bellyaches with a single purr, they're pretty much a bestie at first sight. With hugs that cure more than medicine and words that weave fractured selves back together, this hero creates quiet spaces where pain softens and integration begins. Offering only water and presence, The Minimalist Listener proves that sometimes the simplest gifts—listening, holding, and healing—are the most powerful of all.

WHY IT IS HARD TO ASK FOR HELP HOW TO ASK & WHAT SUPPORT CAN BE

BY LAUREN MORALES, LCSW

The first time I walked into my oncology clinic, I immediately noticed I was the youngest person in the room. Everyone else looked older—much older. I was the only millennial patient in the room and if it wasn't already obvious, my ripped-up jeans and exposed tattoos said it all. I could see the looks on the nurses faces, and inevitably, "You're so young," would find its way out of their mouths. Early in my diagnosis, the age gap felt like one more chasm I had to figure out how to cross. I sat down, suddenly hyper-aware of how out of place I felt, and a heavy loneliness settled deep in my core.

As my visits became more frequent during treatment, I found myself relating more to the young infusion nurses than the patients around me. They became my social lifeline during those long chemo days. We'd talk about weekend plans, concert tickets, and dating stories. While I appreciated the company, it also reminded me how out of place I felt. Some of the older patients tried to connect, but conversations often ended with, "You're too young to be here," and I'd smile politely, sigh, and lean back into my infusion chair, feeling dejected.

And while I loved my nurses, they couldn't always relate. I remember one telling me she was pregnant, absolutely glowing with excitement. I congratulated her and smiled weakly, but inside I felt myself quietly unravel. I was sitting there being pumped full of the red devil, childless, and already struggling with infertility even before cancer. She hadn't done anything wrong, but it reminded me how much I needed support from people who understood the complicated grief that comes with all of this. That was the moment I knew I needed more support, but I had no idea how to start.

It wasn't until later in treatment, when I started connecting with other adolescent and young adult cancer folx, that I really started to feel seen. Reddit forums, Discord servers, and Instagram groups eventually led me to people who supported me in countless ways during treatment. I made connections with several women online who are still in my life now, and whom I consider lifelong friends. Though those early connections weren't in person, they meant everything

to the thirty-something-girl sitting in her living room, too sick to leave her house.

WHY ASKING FOR HELP FEELS HARD

If asking for help feels unnatural, you're not alone. I had no idea where to start when I realized I needed someone my age to talk to. I also felt nervous about starting, because what did it mean that I needed extra help? I had always been the strong one! Many of us were raised to be self-reliant, or we're used to being the one others lean on—not the one asking for support. Working with a therapist and connecting with other patients were the things I needed for learning how.

In my work as a therapist, I can't even count how many clients I've worked with who have cancer and feel the need to be the "perfect patient." Often when navigating the medical system, we develop defenses to make sure we are listened to and heard, also known as the "everything is fine" perfect patient persona. For others, when everything in your life already feels like too much, the idea of asking for support can feel like just one more thing to figure out. You may not have the mental bandwidth to know what you need.

HOW TO ASK FOR HELP

Start by asking yourself what could *feel* helpful right now. In the beginning, I just wanted someone my age to talk to during chemo. I tried to find someone I could text, call, or send videos to while I was stuck in the infusion chair. For you, the need might be different. But it doesn't have to be big or dramatic for it to be meaningful.

Try thinking about your needs in a few different categories. Maybe you have practical needs, like someone to drive you to appointments, help with groceries, watch your kids, or walk the dog. Or maybe it's emotional support, like someone who can just listen without trying to fix your problems, or who can help you calm down after feeling panicked. There's also social support, which is more about authentic connection and feeling less alone. That might look like a standing FaceTime date, joining an online group, or joining an art club.

Whatever the need, the more specific the ask, the easier it is for someone to say yes. Let people know how they can show up in a way that *actually* works for you. And if they can't or don't respond well, remember that's not a reflection of your worth. It just means you may need to ask someone else or look in a different direction.

WHAT SUPPORT CAN BE

Support doesn't always look the way we imagine. It might come from your longtime circle. It may come from where you least expect it. Some of my strongest connections during treatment came from unexpected places, like a previous college professor who sent me cards every few weeks to look forward to. Then there were the beautiful people I found through shared experience, not shared history.

You can also ask your care team about support options. Your nurse navigator, oncology social worker, or doctor should have information about AYA-specific groups, national programs, mentorships, or online communities. There are even retreats, conferences, and workshops specifically for younger cancer survivors. Therapy is another professional resource that can help you feel less alone. A therapist who understands oncology can provide a consistent, safe space to process everything you're carrying.

Religion, spirituality, or any kind of meaning-making practice can also be part of your support system. For some people, that's prayer, community worship, or leaning into faith traditions that offer comfort and connection. For others, it might be journaling, meditation, being in nature, or having space to reflect on the big questions that illness tends to stir up.

Whether it's a group chat that keeps showing up, a steady therapist who holds space, a friend who checks in without being asked, or someone online who simply says, "same," it all matters. You don't need a perfectly curated circle or a full roster of support. You just need a few souls who know how to stay, the ones who can sit with you when things feel heavy, who let you be exactly where you are without rushing you to the next thing.

Wherever you are in your cancer story, you deserve care that is soft, steady, and real. You were never meant to carry all of this alone. Start small. Reach out. Let people meet you there. You might not find a crowd. But you might find your people, the ones you've been worthy of all along. ●

LAUREN MORALES, LCSW, WEARS A FEW DIFFERENT HATS: SENIOR PROGRAM COORDINATOR AT CACTUS CANCER SOCIETY, PART-TIME PRIVATE PRACTICE THERAPIST, YOUNG ADULT CANCER SURVIVOR, AND MILITARY SPOUSE! HER WORK FOCUSES ON SUPPORTING FOLX NAVIGATING CANCER, SURVIVORSHIP, AND CHRONIC ILLNESS THROUGH THE LENS OF COMMUNITY BUILDING, TRAUMA SUPPORT, AND MEANING-MAKING. WHEN SHE'S NOT IN SESSION OR BUILDING PROGRAMS, YOU CAN USUALLY FIND HER READING A GOOD BOOK, HUNTING DOWN THE BEST SUSHI SPOT, OR HANGING WITH HER TWO DOGS. CONNECT WITH HER AT SEEKINGSUNRISETHERAPY.COM

THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE HERD

BY ALIQUE TOPALIAN, PHD, MPH

Getting a cancer diagnosis at age 27 can feel a bit like walking into Mordor. You are surrounded by darkness and everything is on fire. Like wearing the Ring of Power, dark thoughts can take over your mind, causing frustration and sadness. To overcome this and win the battle, you need to find your own fellowship. Your friends can help you overcome the darkness, and much like Sam, they carry you when you feel you can no longer go on. Friendship can keep hope alive even when all seems lost. Time and time again, my friends in the adolescent and young adult (AYA) community have lifted me up, not only during treatment, but in post-treatment life, when you have to figure out how to live "life now."

After my diagnosis, I decided to focus my career on survivorship and supportive services. I had just completed my PhD and felt that I had the unique skill set to do research in this space and amplify the patient voice. However, living and working in this space is not always easy. When you and your community have lived through cancer, you are passionately driven to improve the experience for others.

There are many times in my career where I am the only survivor in a room of people talking about doing research with survivors. It can be hard when people don't know the reality of living through a cancer diagnosis—the fellowship no one wanted to be a part of. There are also times professionally when people look at you differently for being a survivor, and not in a good way. Finding other survivors in this professional space can feel a bit like the eagles showing up to rescue Gandalf from Saruman's tower—a moment of pure joy and healing after immense suffering.

Last year, during the AYA Community of Practice at one of the largest cancer organizations in the world, there were only a few patients in the room. Luckily, one of them was Julia. Together, we vocalized our experiences, which contradicted the discussion taking place. Speaking out together made us stronger, and people listened! We have more power when we work together. Following this meeting, Julia and I were asked to lead a working group and became cancer sidekicks. Our group focused on partnering with AYA patient-facing organizations. We live in this community and know how important AYA organizations are, filling gaps where young adults fall through the cracks. The ability to highlight their missions and build mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and the academic community is truly exciting.

Our community of practice meetings looked different this year. Instead of only two patients, there were several. Even better, representatives from patient organizations were in the room and able to speak up about their needs and barriers to academic partnerships.

Together, Julia and I have grown our relationships with these organizations. Together we have joined voices, advocating for our community. I know that, together, these voices will move the needle—ensuring that WE as a community are represented and that WE as a community are in the rooms where decisions are made. Together we are stronger. Together, we can make a difference. Together, we are heard. Together, we are the herd. ●

ALIQUE TOPALIAN, PHD, MPH IS A TWO-TIME CANCER SURVIVOR. SHE IS NOW IN REMISSION AND USING HER VOICE TO PASSIONATELY RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF CANCER PATIENTS. HER EXPERIENCE WITH CHILDHOOD CANCER INSPIRED HER TO OBTAIN A MASTER'S IN PUBLIC HEALTH AND A PHD IN HEALTH PROMOTION AND EDUCATION IN 2020. LITTLE DID SHE KNOW THAT IN MARCH OF 2021, SHE WOULD RELAPSE WITH ACUTE MYELOID LEUKEMIA, THE FIRST PERSON TO EVER RELAPSE AFTER 22 YEARS. DURING HER TIME IN ACTIVE TREATMENT, SHE USED EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO NETWORK, PARTICIPATE IN PSYCHOSOCIAL PROGRAMMING, AND EDUCATE HERSELF ON RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO PATIENTS IN ALL STAGES OF TREATMENT. TOPALIAN WAS SELECTED AS A 2022 RECIPIENT OF THE 40 UNDER 40 IN CANCER AWARD AND WAS RECOGNIZED AS ONE OF THE 100 INFLUENTIAL WOMEN IN ONCOLOGY IN 2024. SHE IS SHARING HER EXPERIENCE WITH THE UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI AS A RESEARCH SCIENTIST, FOCUSING ON PATIENT EXPERIENCE, ONCOLOGY PRIMARY CARE, CANCER-RELATED COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT, AYAS, AND SURVIVORSHIP.

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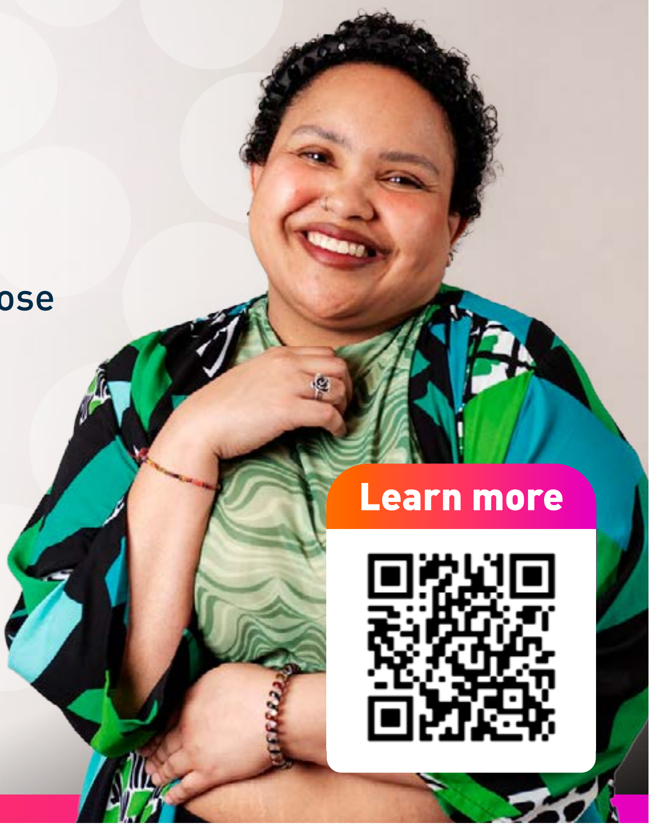

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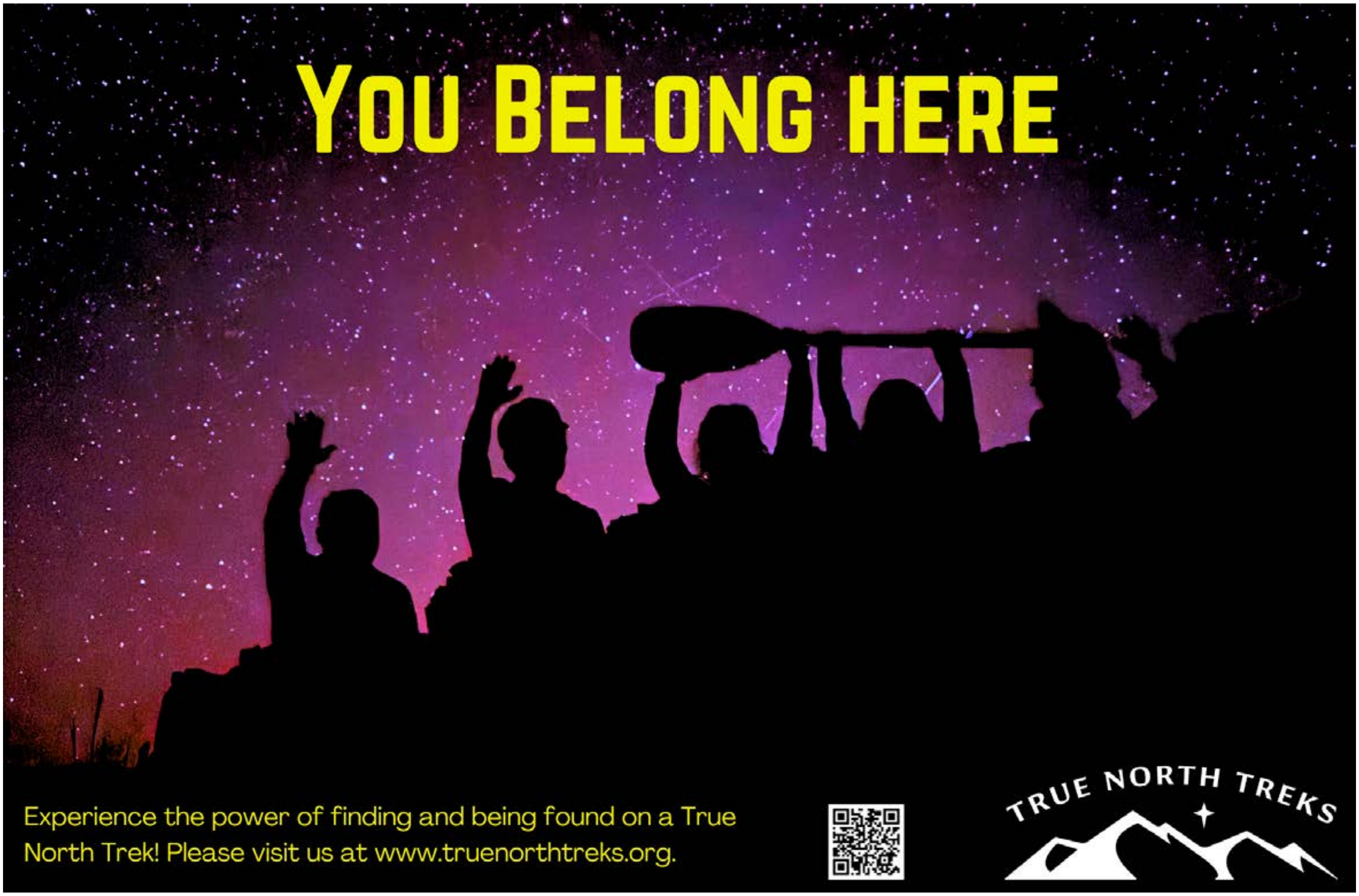

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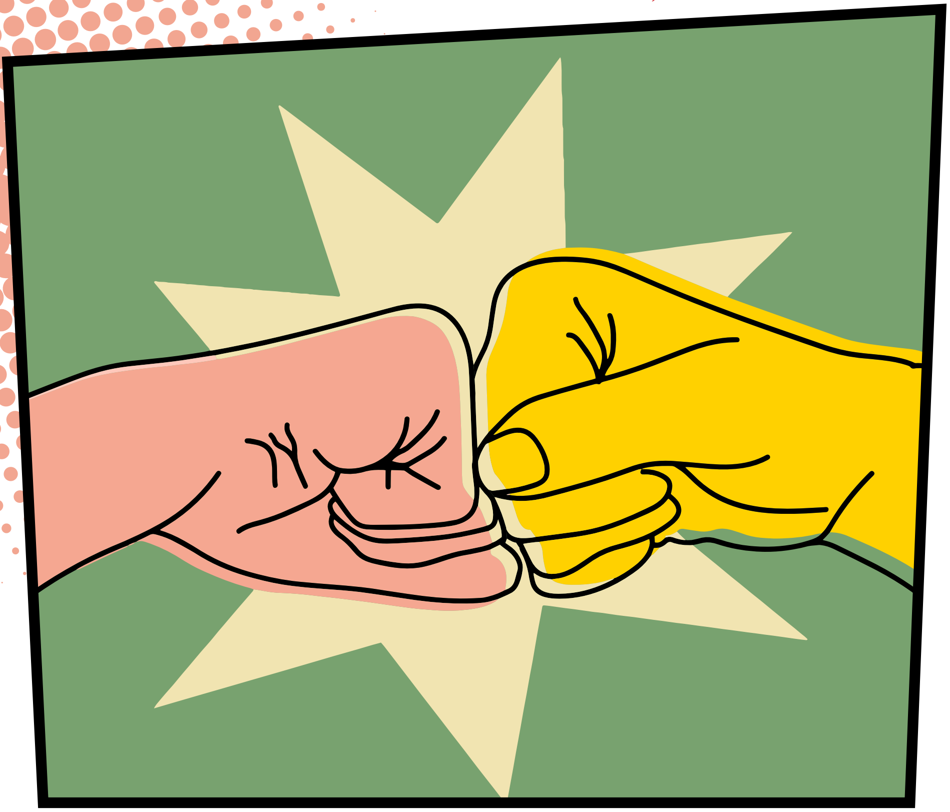
FINDING YOUR PLACE IN THE SEA OF ADVOCACY

BY JULIA LAURSEN



Finding support and sidekicks is like fishing. There are plenty of fish in the sea, but you won't catch any by standing still. You need the right tools. In the young adult cancer sea, those tools are showing up and participating.

After being diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer in 2021, I found sidekicks by joining online support groups (shout out to the Potatoes and CCC). By 2023, I wanted to build my survivorship alliance by becoming a patient advocate. I wasn't sure how, so I convinced my husband we should give up our lease, pack our lives into storage, and hit the road. My goal was to attend as many cancer conferences and events as possible. Just as I'd found sidekicks by showing up to support groups, I believed I'd find my advocacy role by showing up where advocates were.

Our first stop was the largest oncology conference in the world—the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) Annual Meeting in Chicago. I imagined strutting in, wearing my bright pink suit and impressing everyone. The roadmap to patient advocacy would be handed to me, along with opportunities to help young adult cancer patients.

I went straight to the patient advocate lounge, a space set aside for advocates. There was a buffet, a stack of pamphlets, and small groups of people having hushed conversations. I grabbed some food and sat alone. I quickly realized showing up wasn't enough this time.

Determined not to give up, I explored the massive exhibition hall. Maybe the roadmap was there, and the jobs were with pharmaceutical companies. I worked up the courage to approach a few booths, but when they saw my badge marked "patient advocate," they said they couldn't engage with me due to regulations. Among 40,000 people, I'd never felt so alone.

That Saturday was the Adolescent and Young Adult Communities of Practice (AYA CoP) meeting, open to anyone in young adult oncology. I hoped I'd finally found my people. Doctors, researchers, nonprofit leaders, and seasoned advocates introduced themselves, sharing long lists of accomplishments. Talk about intimidating. I felt like the kid from podunk Nebraska—out of my league. As I wrestled with imposter syndrome, the discussion shifted to what the AYA oncology space needed, including how to engage community providers.

I was perplexed. Growing up in small communities and working as a rural travel nurse, I knew community providers had no desire to attend events bigger than their towns. With a shaky voice, I participated, sharing my perspective. To my surprise, I felt heard.

Even though I was heard, I left ASCO feeling defeated. Nobody handed me a roadmap. I wasn't invited to meetings behind closed doors. I didn't land a job. I felt like the kid at the adult table on Thanksgiving—or so I thought.

Weeks later, still on the road, I received an email from the AYA CoP moderator asking if I'd co-lead a working group. Of course, I said yes. That's how I met my new sidekick (or maybe the lead character) Alique—kind, driven, and experienced in advocacy.

Poor Alique, paired with this young, inexperienced nomad trying to make the world better for young adult cancer patients. She was Moana, and I was her Heihei. Much like Moana and her sidekick HeiHei, we started with just us in our advocacy boat. We met to determine what these groups needed in the choppy waters of AYA cancer advocacy. After coming up with a plan, we invited leaders from some of the biggest names in AYA nonprofits to join us on our mission.

Again, I believed in myself and my ideas a bit too strongly. Like HeiHei, I squawked at these seasoned leaders, convinced I'd solved all the AYA world's problems. But after all my squawking, I quickly learned these brilliant ideas weren't that brilliant. I left those first meetings feeling shipwrecked—but at least I had my Moana!

After some time to reflect, I realized if Alique and I were Moana and HeiHei, then these advocacy group leaders were our Maui. Not because they'd turned "bad," but because they'd been around far longer and understood something crucial: how to shapeshift to meet the needs in front of them, and the importance of showing up again and again.

In the last year, I've shown up—willing to listen and try. Like Moana and HeiHei, Alique and I have learned to join forces with Maui. Instead of assuming we have the best ideas, we're now working alongside powerhouse nonprofits to explore real, actionable change and bring a louder, united AYA voice to ASCO. We want to show ASCO what we already know: these groups—our Mauis—are not just good; they're essential to AYA care and survivorship. How we share that message will be decided together, as a team in the same boat—shapeshifting, squawking, surviving, and showing up together.

In the CoP, I realize there is a much-needed time and place for my ability to squawk. I've also learned that building a survivorship alliance looks different for everyone and changes over time. There's no standard roadmap. Each person must create their own and be willing to adapt as needed. Your role may change. Some days you'll need to squawk to be heard; other days, you'll need to shift directions entirely.

Like Moana taking to the sea, you have to find where you fit and what brings you joy. Remember, that will evolve too. But, like with Maui—or even Tehit—alliances shift. There are always more fish in the sea. Decide which ones you want to catch and go after them with all your heart. Be open to change. Honor what your body needs. Be true to yourself, show up, and participate. That's how you build your map and find your alliance—Moanas, Mauis, HeiHeis, and all. ●

"LIKE MOANA TAKING TO THE SEA, YOU HAVE TO FIND WHERE YOU FIT AND WHAT BRINGS YOU JOY. REMEMBER, THAT WILL EVOLVE TOO. BUT, LIKE WITH MAUI—OR EVEN TEHIT—ALLIANCES SHIFT. THERE ARE ALWAYS MORE FISH IN THE SEA. DECIDE WHICH ONES YOU WANT TO CATCH AND GO AFTER THEM WITH ALL YOUR HEART."

IN JANUARY 2021, AT 32 YEARS OLD, NEBRASKA NATIVE AND NURSE **JULIA LAURSEN** WAS DIAGNOSED WITH STAGE III-C INFLAMMATORY BREAST CANCER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. WITH IN-PERSON SUPPORT LIMITED, SHE TURNED TO ONLINE COMMUNITIES, QUICKLY REALIZING HOW MANY PATIENTS—AND PROVIDERS—LACKED KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THIS RARE DISEASE, THE YOUNG ADULT CANCER EXPERIENCE, AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE TO SUPPORT THESE COMMUNITIES.

DETERMINED TO CHANGE THAT, LAURSEN IMMERSED HERSELF IN SELF-EDUCATION BY ATTENDING CONFERENCES, ADVOCACY PROGRAMS, AND YOUNG ADULT CANCER CAMPS. IN 2024, SHE, HER HUSBAND MITCH, AND THEIR DOG OLIVER TRAVELED THE U.S. FOR NINE MONTHS TO DEEPEN HER UNDERSTANDING OF RESOURCES FOR THE UNDERSERVED AYA CANCER COMMUNITY AND FIGURE OUT HOW HER SKILL SET COULD BE APPLIED IN THE ADVOCACY SPACE.

LAURSEN CURRENTLY CO-HOSTS A MONTHLY ONLINE AYA BREAST CANCER SUPPORT GROUP THROUGH SHARE CANCER SUPPORT, SERVES AS CO-CHAIR FOR ASCO'S AYA COP WORKING GROUP, PROVIDES PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT FOR SHARSHERET, AND CONTRIBUTES AS A LIVED SUBJECT-MATTER EXPERT FOR THE CONGRESSIONALLY DIRECTED MEDICAL RESEARCH PROGRAM. SHE HAS BEEN FEATURED IN ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS AND PODCASTS, SPOKEN AT NATIONAL CONFERENCES, AND GUEST-AUTHORED NUMEROUS BLOGS. SHE CONTINUES TO CHAMPION AWARENESS, CONNECTION, AND RESOURCES FOR ALL BREAST AND AYA CANCER PATIENTS.

AMY

BY TERRENCE HO

TERRENCE HO WAS BORN IN 1987 AT ALACHUA GENERAL HOSPITAL IN GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA. AFTER GRADUATING WITH A DEGREE IN SCULPTURE FROM YALE UNIVERSITY, HE SPENT A YEAR AND A HALF TRAVELING AROUND THE WORLD, FUNDED IN LARGE PART BY PLAYING GUITAR AND SINGING ON THE STREETS. HE THEN TAUGHT GRADE SCHOOL ART AND MUSIC IN CHICAGO, BANGKOK (THAILAND), HSINCHU (TAIWAN), AND GAINESVILLE, MOST RECENTLY WITH A TRAVELING HIGH SCHOOL IN BOTSWANA, MEXICO, UAE, GREECE, MALAYSIA, TÜRKIYE, AND OMAN. HO EXPERIENCED HEALTH PROBLEMS DUE TO A RARE BONE MARROW FAILURE CONDITION, WHICH BROUGHT HIM HOME TO GAINESVILLE, WHERE HE NOW SPENDS MUCH OF HIS TIME DRAWING, READING, COOKING, AND CLIMBING. HE LOVES LANGUAGES AND MULTILINGUAL PUNS. HE LIVES WITH HIS WIFE, QIANQIAN, AND THEIR INNUMERABLE STUFFED ANIMALS.

That’s how I met Amy. An immunologist herself, her bright practical optimism put my family at ease. Especially when she recognized our use of Cantonese.

She introduced me to the online support group I still attend, though my diagnosis isn’t quite the same.

I saw her a few days ago at the NIH, still recovering after a tough bone marrow transplant. Amy has been my sidekick. I pray I can be hers.

#SORRYNOTSORRY YOU FOUND US

BY JESS ISOMOTO

Why does cancer happen to the coolest people? Haha, just kidding—but also. . . maybe I'm not?

There are always new people at our cancer support group: one last time, then two, then drip-dripping in every month, and occasionally, a whole flood of newbies. Cancer is the annoying faucet that never turns off, an endless flow of survivors. But each time I meet someone new, I understand why we say this is the worst club with the best members.

"Worst club, best members" is one of the slogans for The Breasties, a nonprofit organization for survivors, previvors, stage IV thrivers, and caregivers impacted by breast and gynecologic cancers. I'm the co-ambassador for the SoCal Breasties, a regional branch based in Los Angeles, along with another longtime member, Kayla.

Our group meets monthly on Zoom, has a group chat, hosts two meetups a year, and organizes a holiday gift exchange. It doesn't sound like much, and most of our interaction is virtual, yet I can honestly say I've made real connections and formed friendships that are incredibly supportive and among the most meaningful relationships in my life. And fast! It's remarkably easy to bond with other remarkable people. (Yes, that was an inside joke for cancer patients!)

Conversations with cancer friends are so good because we have incredible range: we move effortlessly between cracking up at dark humor and getting deep about our fears, our identities, our pasts—and whether we even have a future. There's a shared foundation of worst-case scenarios that allows us to skip the small talk and platitudes and really be open with each other.

When you're talking to other cancer people and you see the nodding, the understanding, because they just *get it*, it's such a relief. Although our diagnoses and prognoses may be different, the cancer experience lets us be mirrors for each other in many ways. It's comforting to be able to see something familiar, especially at a time when you may not actually recognize yourself in the mirror.

But as much as we're the same, we're also a random collection of professions, personalities, cultures, and secret talents. Cancer doesn't discriminate! My group has fierce mamas who take their babies to protests, fearless journalists, quirky bookworms, strong and feisty fitness instructors, neurodivergent nature lovers and dog moms who run social media accounts for their pups. We've also got the sassy friend with hilarious comebacks for every situation, super talented artists, models, dancers, and actors, that person whose style you totally envy, oncology nurses who help us decode our scan reports, and some of the nicest humans you'll ever meet. When a new person joins, we are sorry they need us, of course—but not at all sorry that they found us. I'll forever be grateful for the community cancer brought me to, and I hope others feel the same. Worst club, best members.

For me, having cancer friends is the secret to survivorship. As an AYA BIPOC cancer patient, I wasn't able to find other patients I could relate to at the hospital, so I turned to social media and support groups. But too often, the groups I found weren't the right fit—members were of a different age, in different situations, or—worse—had different humor. (Humor is a legitimate coping mechanism

JESS ISOMOTO WAS DIAGNOSED WITH STAGE III BREAST CANCER IN FEBRUARY 2020, RIGHT BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, WHICH DELAYED THE START OF HER TREATMENT BY ALMOST TWO MONTHS. HER CANCER BINGO CARD IS FULL OF SQUARES: CHEMOTHERAPY, MASTECTOMY, RADIATION, CLINICAL TRIAL, IMMUNOTHERAPY, OOPHORECTOMY, INFECTION AND EMERGENCY SURGERY, DEEP INFERIOR EPIGASTRIC PERFORATOR (DIEP) FLAP RECONSTRUCTION, FALLING FROM NEUROPATHY AND BREAKING HER ARM, VERZENIO, AND ENDLESS DIARRHEA. SHE IS NOW "NO EVIDENCE OF DISEASE," AND BELIEVES IN CELEBRATING EVERYTHING, EVEN THOUGH SHE STILL STRUGGLES WITH THE UPS AND DOWNS OF SURVIVORSHIP, WHILE REMAINING MOSTLY JUST GRATEFUL TO BE HERE. SHE WORKS AS A COLLEGE STUDENT ADVISOR IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA, AND IS A DOG MOM, CAT AUNTIE, AND CANCER ADVOCATE.

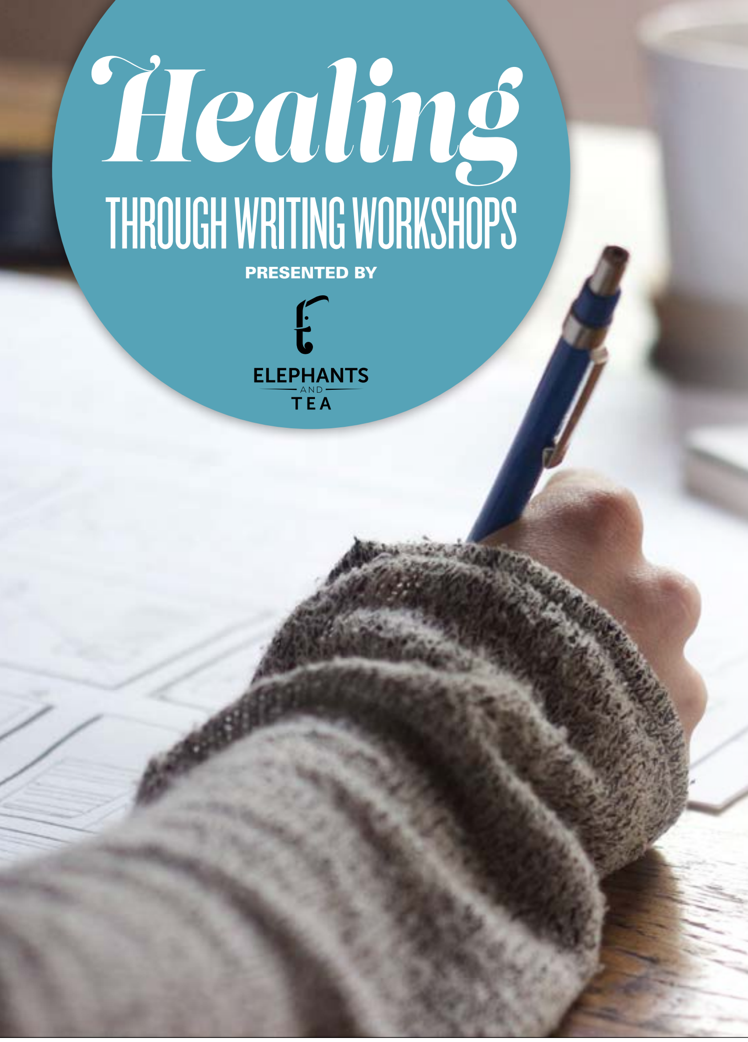
and one of my non-negotiables!) When I finally found a couple groups where the vibe was right, I went all in—and five years later, I'm still active in both and now co-leading one of them. I've also ventured beyond my cancer type and joined a few AYA-focused groups for all cancers. I'm happy to say I've found my community, and I want to help others find theirs, too.

My cancer friends give me the best support through all the hard things and confusing times, cancer-related or not. Sometimes that support looks like venting and validation, meeting up for boba tea just because, asking the whole group "did anyone have this side effect?" It's also texting me a funny pic of your dog while I'm anxiously waiting for a scan, me texting you capybara memes on your bad day, helping each other mark cancerversaries even if we're not in the mood to celebrate, resharing your funding site when you're too shy to post it again, passing along a chain of hand-me-down wedge pillows for whoever's surgery is next, or forwarding info about giveaways and other resources so everyone gets the free stuff too. Sometimes support just looks like just being there so I know I'm not alone.

I'm absolutely sure that the healing I've been able to do, the decisions I've been able to make, and the milestones I've been able to reach are thanks to the ideas, encouragement, and confidence my cancer friends have given me. Their support is invaluable, and the information-sharing is even more so. The best communities have open doors, not gatekeepers: we share resources and research updates, free services and scholarships, and tips from our nurses and physical therapists. We even share the answers to embarrassing questions we've already asked so you don't have to!

Sharing information matters because doctors are often so focused on saving our lives that they forget all the other side effects and consequences that shape how we keep living as 20-, 30-, 40-somethings. Some of our members would never have known to ask about fertility preservation before starting chemo, physical therapy after surgery, or the option of switching to a lower dose of a difficult medication if they hadn't heard it from someone else in the group. It's not "the more, the better"—because it's awful to see more people diagnosed—but it might be "the more, the smarter." As our group grows, so does our network of patient experiences and collective knowledge. We will crowdsource so hard that our doctors, insurance companies, and employers won't know what hit them.

If you haven't found a support group or made cancer friends yet, this is your sign to start! I hope you find a group that welcomes you in and gives you a safe space to process and heal. I hope that, as you share your story and listen to the stories of others, you'll add to the collective, community-built support network. Sorry you're here, but not sorry to have another awesome person on our side. One of us! One of us! (Also—sorry, not sorry, for the enthusiastic chanting!)



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REST IS MY SUPERFUEL

ALI SCHMITT, LICSW, RYT

A few years ago, in the final months of pregnancy with my third baby, I was exhausted, in equal parts from the physiological changes, the emotional weight of living in the unknown, and the ongoing demands of my life. As you know, this is not unique to pregnancy. The exhaustion and overwhelm are common for cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers as well.

During those intense months of my third and fourth trimester, I tried to be gentle with myself. I put my feet up. I went to bed early. But I wish I had known the real power of rest during this exhausting and physically challenging time in my life. As a certified Daring to Rest Coach, yoga nidra facilitator, and clinical social worker, I am committed to finding a tone of rest in my life and supporting my clients to do the same.

We all hold so many things—our health, our careers, our families, our communities. The load for a cancer patient, survivor, or caregiver is uniquely heavy. What we hold can be exhausting, even when some of the elements that create the load provide purpose and meaning. If we can find ways to lighten our load, even briefly, the benefits are endless.

After returning to work postpartum and being cleared for regular exercise, I rushed back into life full force. I was determined to get my energy back. Many days, I literally ran around without even noticing my breath or pausing to ask how I was feeling.

A few months into my new normal, I was still exhausted and carrying more than ever. Karen Brody, my teacher and the author of *Daring to Rest: Reclaim Your Power with Yoga Nidra Rest Meditation*, was offering a 40-day yoga nidra challenge. Yoga nidra, or yogic sleep, is a sleep-based guided meditation, fondly known as 'the art of doing nothing.' It was hard to imagine that I had time for this, but maybe rest was exactly what I needed—maybe rest would help lighten the load I was carrying.

In her book, Brody says, "It's widely touted that forty-five minutes of yogic sleep feels like three hours of regular sleep." This sounded worth trying, so I did something radical. On the first day of the challenge, I tucked my two-year-old into her crib for a nap and laid down on my bed for some yoga nidra. I laid down instead of doing the dishes, cleaning up the living room, responding to emails, or zoning out on the couch. For 30 minutes, I did nothing. It felt amazing. It *did* feel like a night of sleep. So I did it the next day, and the next. My body, my brain, and my heart responded immediately. I could feel the lightness that rest was providing for me.

Sometimes I describe yoga nidra as a vacation because I have some of those same feelings. I'm guided away from the heaviness and busyness of my life to a relaxing, peaceful place. When I return, I have more capacity to be present in my day-to-day life. As I slowly return to my routine, I see small moments as more sacred. When a conflict arises, I have more clarity and self-compassion about the challenges in my life. I can hear my intuition more clearly.

Rest has begun to feel essential, especially on full, chaotic days. The less time I have to rest, the more I know I need it. Rest doesn't always look like laying down for 30 minutes and doing yoga nidra. I have learned that rest is a tone I can set in my life.

Rest can look like finding silence. Silence can come in the form of waking before the kids to drink my tea alone. It can sound like taking a walk without a podcast in my ears. It can sound like being in nature. It can sound like reading a book in the waiting room at a doctor's office, rather than scrolling on my phone.

Rest can look like a break from technology. Even a small break from technology feels restful to me. I might take that break by not using my phone after dinner or disabling applications on my phone that are bringing me stress. I can ask myself when technology is and isn't working for me, and I can slow down enough to check in with myself before and after picking up my phone. When I ask myself how I feel, more and more, I can hear the answer.

Rest can look like boundaries—not only with technology but in all areas of my life. The magic of rest is that the more I slow down, the more clearly I can hear myself thinking and feeling. With this knowledge, I can make decisions to support my well-being. I might decide not to check test results in the healthcare portal until my doctor calls. Maybe I choose to refrain from talking about my treatment plan with certain family members. I might say no to activities that don't align with my energy, depending on what is happening in my life and my health.

Rest can look like a shorter rest practice, as simple as three deep breaths before getting in my car or interacting with certain individuals. One tool I share with clients frequently is *Shava Yatra,* or the 61-point marma relaxation technique. This guided relaxation is often an element of yoga nidra. Although it only takes five to ten minutes, it can be deeply relaxing. This practice can be done while waiting for a charged medical appointment or during an uncomfortable procedure that requires you to stay still. I have come to adore a 30-minute yoga nidra whenever I can get it, but many days I reach for a shorter practice.

Resting and slowing down have become my superfuel. They give me the energy and capacity to take on both the big and small moments in my life. They fuel me to be more awake and alert, to see the path behind me with greater compassion and kindness, and the trail ahead with more discernment and wisdom.

Rest gives me strength. It has made me strong enough to do nothing, or a little at a time, rather than always doing everything. When I am rested, I feel strong enough to know what I can hold and what I can set down.

When you look at your life and the way cancer has shaped it, you might imagine how rest can supercharge your life with clarity, peace, ease, strength, and joy. And even if you can't quite imagine it, you might give rest a try. This superfuel might just live up to the hype! ●

"REST GIVES ME STRENGTH. IT HAS MADE ME STRONG ENOUGH TO DO NOTHING, OR A LITTLE AT A TIME, RATHER THAN ALWAYS DOING EVERYTHING. WHEN I AM RESTED, I FEEL STRONG ENOUGH TO KNOW WHAT I CAN HOLD AND WHAT I CAN SET DOWN."

ALI SCHMITT, LICSW, RYT IS A MOTHER OF THREE YOUNG DAUGHTERS, A SOCIAL WORKER, A YOGA AND MEDITATION TEACHER, A CERTIFIED DARING TO REST COACH, AND A YOGA NIDRA FACILITATOR. SHE HAS A TELEHEALTH PRIVATE PRACTICE IN MASSACHUSETTS, WHERE SHE SUPPORTS WOMEN, MOTHERS, AND CAREGIVERS IN BALANCING THEIR OWN NEEDS WITH THE DEMANDS OF CARING FOR OTHERS.

HER STUDIES AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCES HAVE GIVEN HER THE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPLORE CARE IN MANY SETTINGS, INCLUDING EARLY INTERVENTION, PRESCHOOL, ADOPTION, GROUP HOMES, BOSTON MIDDLE SCHOOLS, EDUCATION IN HONDURAS, AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN SOUTH AFRICA.

YOU CAN OFTEN FIND SCHMITT PLAYING, RUNNING, DANCING, CREATING, AND ENJOYING NATURE WITH HER LOVED ONES. SHE SAYS ALL OF THIS FEELS POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF HER FOUNDATION OF REST.

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CHOREOGRAPHING LIFE AFTER CANCER

BY ANNA WASSMAN-COX

Navigating the uncertainty of life is something we all grapple with. But when cancer shows up in young adulthood, that uncertainty sharpens into a question that feels almost impossible to answer: *Where do I go from here?*

For me, the answer came slowly. I learned that living with intention—actively designing the life I wanted—was how I could find my way after cancer. That looks different for everyone. Just as no two diagnoses are the same, no two next chapters are either. So as I share my story, I invite you to ask yourself: *What would it look like to navigate the next chapter in a way that is true to me?*

When I was diagnosed with breast cancer at 25, my life felt like it had stopped, like someone had pressed pause on the movie a third of the way through with no plan to ever hit play again. After treatment ended, I didn't know what to do next, so I tried to "move on" and get back to "normal." I threw myself into work, planned my wedding, moved from Chicago to Germany and then to California, survived a pandemic, and told myself everything was fine. The "fake it until you make it" mindset carried me through those first post-treatment years.

Then, during a routine check-up, my breast surgeon and I felt a new lump. I was facing a local recurrence at age 29. Twice before 30—how do you even begin to navigate that? Just when I thought my

ANNA WASSMAN-COX IS A TWO-TIME YOUNG BREAST CANCER SURVIVOR, FORMER PROFESSIONAL BALLET DANCER, AND THE FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE ONCO-BALLET FOUNDATION. WASSMAN-COX HAS OVER NINE YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN MARKETING, EVENT PLANNING, AND STRATEGY, AND ATTENDED LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO, WHERE SHE GRADUATED SUMMA CUM LAUDE WITH A BACHELOR OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION. SHE HAS EXPERTISE IN TRAUMA-INFORMED BALLET MOVEMENT FOR CANCER PATIENTS AND SPECIALIZES IN THE BRAINDANCE METHODOLOGY TO IMPROVE BRAIN AND BODY CONNECTION. SHE IS ALSO AN ADVOCATE FOR THE ASIAN AMERICAN BREAST CANCER COMMUNITY AND SERVES AS THE CO-FACILITATOR ON THE FIRST ASIAN AMERICAN, NATIVE HAWAIIAN, PACIFIC ISLANDER (AANHPI) SUPPORT GROUP FOR BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS AND THRIVERS WITH THE YOUNG SURVIVAL COALITION. WASSMAN-COX HAS BEEN FEATURED ON ABC7, CBS, *THE DREW BARRYMORE SHOW*, *LA TIMES OC DAILY PILOT*, AND *THE JAM*. SHE HAS ALSO BEEN FEATURED IN *PEOPLE MAGAZINE*, *TODAY*, *BETTER HOMES AND GARDENS*, *ORANGE COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL*, *WILDFIRE MAGAZINE*, AND MORE. FOLLOW HER ON INSTAGRAM @ ANNAMAZINGJOURNEY / @ONCOBALLET.

Showing Up

CAN BE YOUR SUPERPOWER

When survivors, sidekicks, and supporters join forces, amazing things can happen. b-present provides the tools and resources to strengthen your circle, stay connected, and show up for each other when it matters most. Whether you're living it, loving someone through it, or supporting from the sidelines — showing up changes everything.

Learn more at **b-present.org**.

SCAN NOW TO DOWNLOAD FREE B-PRESENT RESOURCES

Dana-Farber Cancer Institute | Young Adult Program

Together in community, support, connection, and advocacy.

Thank you for your incredible work in uplifting the voices and spirits of young adults with cancer and their loved ones.

The Young Adult Program (YAP) at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute is proud and honored to support YA Cancer Gabfest 2025.

life was starting again, it felt like it was being pulled in the opposite direction.

That day in the doctor's office, my life changed again. Cancer rearranged what I thought my late 20s and 30s would look like. I will never know the life I might have had without it, but facing my recurrence brought me an unexpected gift: a sense of peace with ambiguity. I finally learned to move through life with more intentionality.

I started tuning in instead of tuning out. I returned to what I knew and what my body needed. I revisited things I loved as a child—dance, ballet, creativity, play, and imagination. I leaned into spaces where I could let go and begin to truly heal from the trauma and scars cancer left behind.

After treatment, many of us want to start fresh and rewrite everything. Sometimes that is necessary. But our bodies also crave stability and familiarity after such instability. For me, finding that stability meant working in the cancer space. The friendships I built in this community felt closer than many long-term relationships. I asked myself: *What can I bring to this community?*

The answer emerged when I reconnected with ballet. I had trained and even pursued ballet professionally before life pulled me away from the stage. During my recurrence, I realized ballet could be my way to give back, a bridge between my passion and the cancer community.

That vision became the Onco-Ballet Foundation, a nonprofit I created to bring joy, healing, self-expression, and even whimsy into the lives of people facing cancer. I wanted to share the magic of movement with everyone, no matter their experience or ability.

So, how do I navigate the next chapter? Honestly, it is still to be continued. Every day is different. Some days feel easier. The farther I get from treatment, the simpler it is to forget what happened, until my body reminds me. Ribs cramp from radiation damage. Neuropathy leaves my hands and feet tingling mid-yoga. Hot flashes jolt me awake at 3:00 a.m. Medical menopause has me sounding like a bone-cracking symphony every morning. These reminders hurt, yet they are the reality of how strong and resilient my body is.

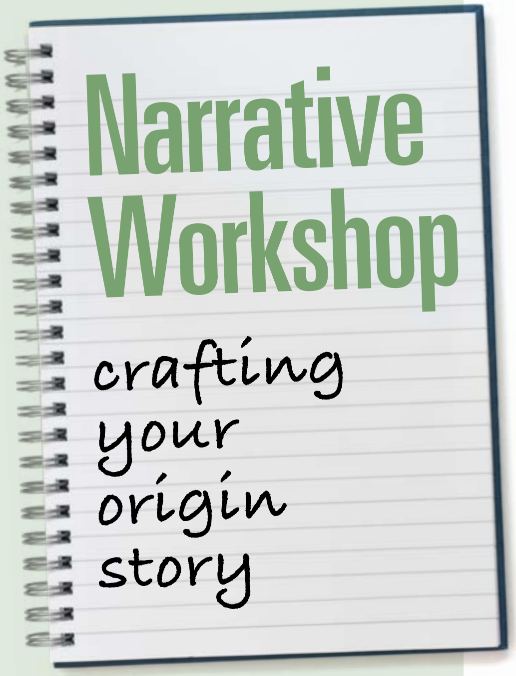
I have learned to move forward by leaning into discomfort instead of pushing it away. There have been tears, anxiety, and even medication to help me find stability, but also moments of laughter, beauty, and deep connection.

If you are wondering how to navigate your own next chapter, I cannot give you a one-size-fits-all answer. What I *can* say is: keep going. Live in the moment. Take in the beauty around you. Do what feels authentic and good for you. Put down the phone. Be present. It's okay to not be okay all the time. And when you can, choreograph the next chapter in steps that are entirely your own.

Your story isn't over. It's still unfolding, and the music is still playing. Keep dancing with steps that are yours to choose, and others you have yet to discover. ●

My art piece, "Survivorship Is Weird," is all about how life after cancer feels surreal—It's confusing and disorienting, like a dinosaur eating ice cream and walking around in a rainbow city. Nothing really makes sense, and I wanted to capture that vibe.

CHELSEY GOMEZ (OHYOURESOTOUGH) IS A TWO-TIME CANCER SURVIVOR, ARTIST, AND ADVOCATE USING CREATIVITY TO CONFRONT THE REALITIES OF LIFE AFTER A CANCER DIAGNOSIS. HER WORK BLENDS HUMOR, HONESTY, AND EMOTIONAL DEPTH, REFLECTING THE RESILIENCE AND COMPLEXITY OF THE YOUNG ADULT CANCER EXPERIENCE. THROUGH HER PLATFORM @OHYOURESOTOUGH, GOMEZ SHARES ART AND CONVERSATIONS THAT CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES ABOUT CANCER, FOSTER COMMUNITY, AND ENCOURAGE SELF-EXPRESSION FOR THOSE NAVIGATING A SERIOUS ILLNESS.



Narrative Workshop

crafting your origin story

RULES FOR THIS NARRATIVE WORKSHOP:

There is no right way to do this.
Your story is yours—how you tell it, feel it, or explore it today is exactly enough.

You can't get it wrong.
Spelling, grammar, structure… None of it matters here. This is about honesty, not perfection.

Don't overthink it.
Let your pen (or keyboard) move before your inner critic has time to weigh in.

This space is judgment-free — including self-judgment.
Everything you write is valid. Even if it's messy. Even if it doesn't make sense yet.

You never have to share unless you want to.
What you write is for you first. You're in charge of your own story.

Be gentle with yourself.
This kind of reflection can stir up emotion. Pause when needed. Breathe. Return when ready.

RESPOND TO THE FOLLOWING PROMPTS:

(YOU MAY ALSO USE YOUR PREFERRED JOURNAL OR DEVICE):

1. Close your eyes and picture your life before cancer. What kind of place did your story begin in? What did it look like, sound like, and feel like to be there?

2. Who is a "guide" or "mentor" in your story—someone who helped you see your path more clearly, even for a moment?

3. What "ordinary" moment actually carried extraordinary meaning in your journey? Why does it stand out now?

4. What do you now understand about your past that you couldn't have seen while you were in it?

5. If you were to write a letter to the "you" from your most difficult chapter, what would the first few sentences be?

6. If you could give your life's story a title, what would it be? Why?

7. What is the title of the chapter you are in right now—and what do you want the next one to be called?

THIS IS **LIVING WITH** CANCER™

This Is Living With Cancer™ is a program developed by Pfizer Oncology that includes resources designed for all people living with cancer, regardless of cancer type or stage of disease. This program is available to anyone in the United States, whether they're currently on a Pfizer treatment or not.

Advocacy resources

Encouragement, education and tools to help patients navigate their treatment journey.

Nutrition, exercise and wellness tips

Articles about healthy living, exercise and dietary considerations, as well as resources on managing depression, anxiety, pain and more.

Inspiration

Hear the real stories of people living with cancer. Their journeys may be different, but they all share strength, resilience and inspiration.

Personalized support

Whether you're a patient or a caregiver, **This Is Living With Cancer™** is here to provide personalized support and resources that fit your needs.

Find tools to help live life beyond your diagnosis at **ThisIsLivingWithCancer.com**

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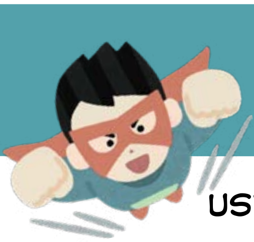

SPEED FRIENDING

USE THIS PAGE TO HELP YOU KEEP TRACK OF YOUR YA CANCER GABFEST BESTIES, OLD AND NEW!

NEW FRIEND!

Name: ____________________

IG/TikTok: ____________________

Email: ____________________

PEOPLE TO ADD ON IG/TIKTOK

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____

____

PEOPLE TO HAVE A ZOOM DATE WITH

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RECOMMENDATIONS

① ____________________

Suggested by: ____________________

② ____________________

Suggested by: ____________________

③ ____________________

Suggested by: ____________________

④ ____________________

Suggested by: ____________________

RECONNECT WITH THESE PALS

Name: ____________________

Why we vibed: ____________________

Name: ____________________

Why we vibed: ____________________

Name: ____________________

Why we vibed: ____________________

Name: ____________________

Why we vibed: ____________________

BUILDING YOUR CANCER SUPPORT SQUAD

SOMETIMES WE DON'T ASK FOR SUPPORT BECAUSE WE HAVEN'T MATCHED NEEDS TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE. USE THIS WORKSHEET TO MAKE THOSE CONNECTIONS.

Example *NEEDS* you might have and *ROLES* to fill in:

- **Organizer** (appointments, logistics, meds)
- **Comic Relief** (memes, jokes, distraction)
- **Cheerleader** (encouragement, positivity)
- **Shoulder to Cry On** (emotional support)
- **Protector** (advocates with doctors/insurance)
- **Sidekick-in-Training** (someone who wants to help but isn't sure how yet)
- **Fixer** (solves practical day-to-day problems, runs errands, drops off/cooks meals, rides to treatment)

Superpowers = What kind of support they bring

Weakness = What they can't provide, it is important to note limits

Best way to reach them = text, call, meme, knock on their door, etc.

Remember: squads can change over time. You don't have to fill every role today—this is just a tool to help you see who's already in your corner and where you might want to add reinforcements.

MY NEED ▶

SUPPORT CHARACTER:

NAME:

SUPERPOWERS

WEAKNESS

BEST WAY TO REACH THEM

MY NEED ▶

SUPPORT CHARACTER:

NAME:

SUPERPOWERS

WEAKNESS

BEST WAY TO REACH THEM

MY NEED ▶

SUPPORT CHARACTER:

NAME:

SUPERPOWERS

WEAKNESS

BEST WAY TO REACH THEM

MY NEED ▶

SUPPORT CHARACTER:

NAME:

SUPERPOWERS

WEAKNESS

BEST WAY TO REACH THEM

YOUR SUPER HERO CHARACTER SHEET

HERO NAME:

UNIQUE TRAITS, (THINGS THAT MAKE YOU, YOU)

PRACTICE MODE (FAVORITE COPING STRATEGIES)

KRYPTONITE (THINGS THAT HOLD YOU BACK)

ENERGY RESTORERS (THINGS THAT FILL YOUR CUP)

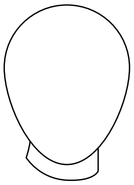
CATCH PHRASE (WORDS YOU LIVE BY)

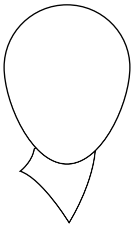
MUST HAVE (SUPERHERO ACCESSORY)

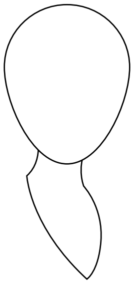
PICTURE (DRAW YOUR OWN **OR** CUT/PASTE FROM NEXT PAGE)

COLOR, CUT & PASTE YOUR SUPER HERO SELF

HEAD

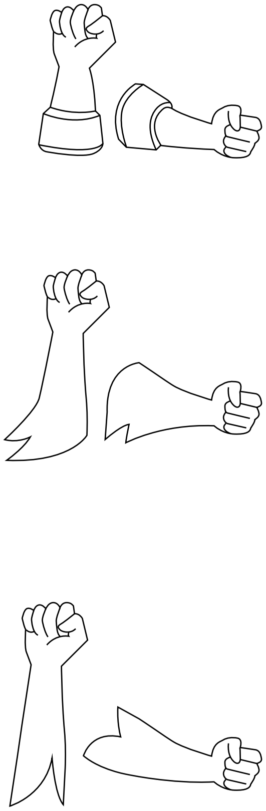




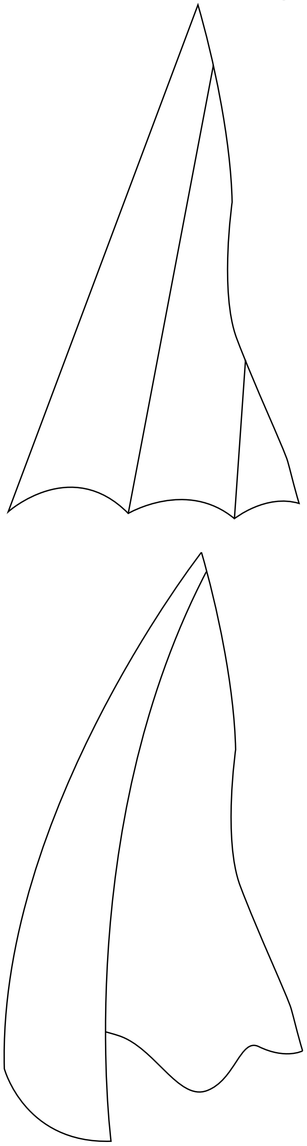


HAIR

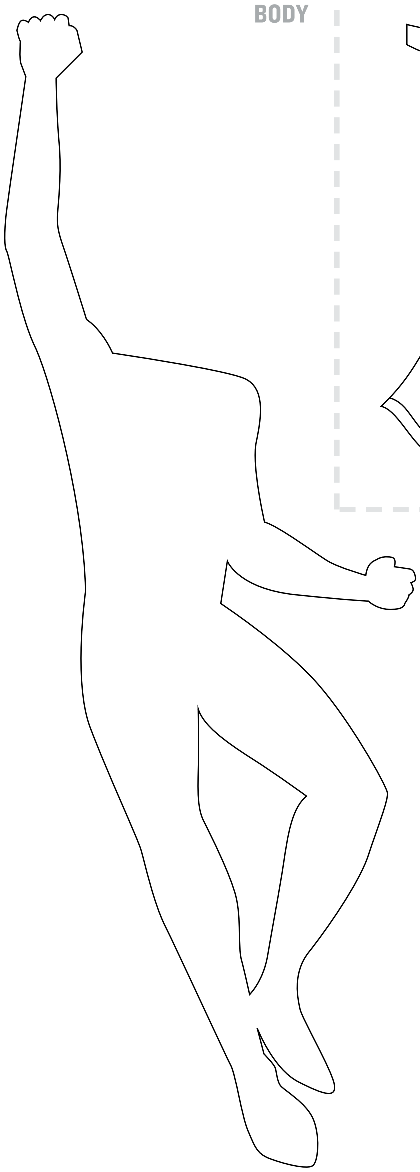
GLOVES



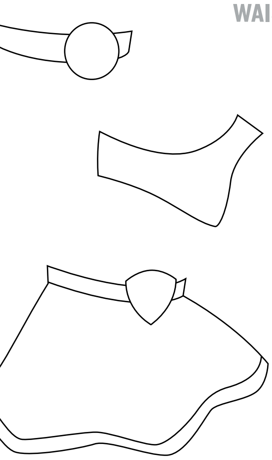
CAPE



BODY



WAIST



BOOTS

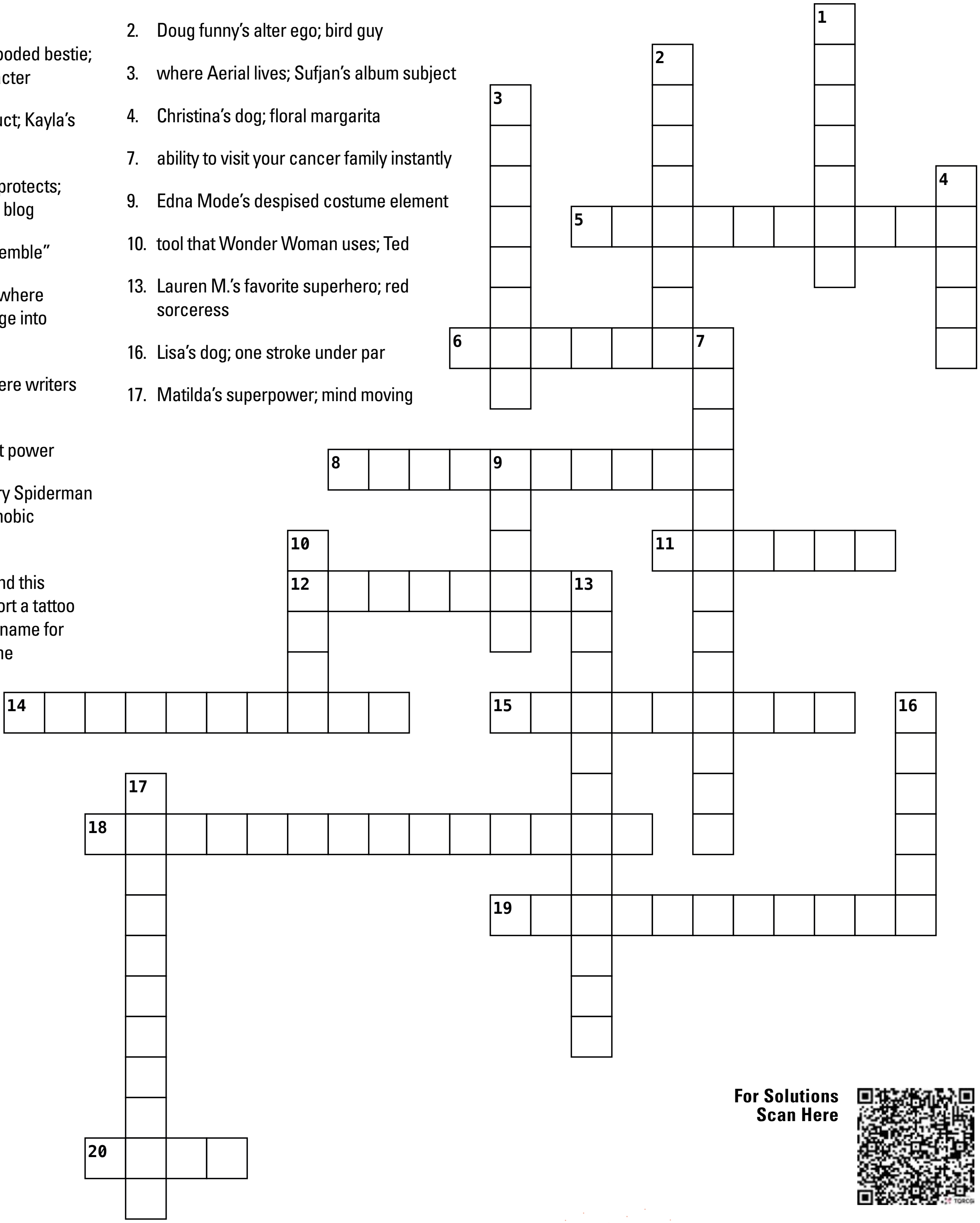
YA CANCER GABFEST CROSSWORD PUZZLE

Across

5. four members of cactus team live there; Jolson's here I come
6. Mallory's cold-blooded bestie; cult Disney character
8. stinky dairy product; Kayla's dog's name
11. city that Batman protects; New York culture blog
12. "__________, assemble"
14. old school place where superheros change into costumes
15. e + t program where writers read work
18. other half of great power
19. place where every Spiderman exists; arachnophobic nightmare
20. Mallory, Aerial, and this team member sport a tattoo of their orgs; nickname for Spongebob's home

Down

1. Jon Fox's home city; so nice they named it twice
2. Doug funny's alter ego; bird guy
3. where Aerial lives; Sufjan's album subject
4. Christina's dog; floral margarita
7. ability to visit your cancer family instantly
9. Edna Mode's despised costume element
10. tool that Wonder Woman uses; Ted
13. Lauren M.'s favorite superhero; red sorceress
16. Lisa's dog; one stroke under par
17. Matilda's superpower; mind moving



For Solutions
Scan Here

For Solutions
Scan Here

YA CANCER GABFEST WORD SEARCH

W R R H E A D Q U A R T E R S I D E K I C K T W R I T E R X
I M J R S U P E R H E R O R X G A B E Q Y J X Z Z N O X R A
G X R T M R D E F E N D E R K Y G I D E N T I T Y V Q U G S
N T E C Z E S U P E R N A T U R A L B F N E I V T I K N E P
I H S R S C S U R V I V O R S H I P N Z G L F G R N E I C E
L O I E N N B U F Z A O Y G N J C V O G G E M J E C Y G I E
A M L A C A H E A L T H C A R E H H N A X P G A A I N I T D
E E I T C C W Y P O V M I U T H O A O B C H Z E T B O R S N
H L E I G H D H E M C A E R N O D H I S T A M T M L T O U E
C Y N V J W A Q C A C T U S V V W W T T E N A U E E E Q J M
M Y T E F H Y T J Z I V X F O C S G C E L T R G N B K S O E
A F T E R H O U R S S Y I C R Y H J A R E A V A T C G C H S
S A N Z A W U V B C I H A L J I A T X S P V E B M R U L Y I
X C O M M U N I T Y S T X D L J E I A C O J L F T S A A Y S
P D M H E Q N A R B E A Q R S A H N A P R I Z E E U R I T Q
S T K N T V G Y E G N P P L A J I R D I T E J S E P D R I L
T G X B N Z M R S F E E P R A Y E N C S A P C T M P I V L U
R X Y H A Y N O P S K L Q B I G U E M Y T S M H C O A O I D
E I E E L T C T O O E E Y X I C B O G T I K A J S R N Y B X
N H B R I E O S N R L T I V R R K P Y P O V N W X T B A I T
G J T D G I M L S E E O E H E V B L T X N C G G Z V K N S D
T T H O I X I I I F T R N A K H D C Y E J O A E Q P J C I O
H I G F V N C P B L Z U K C A N C E R V E R S A R Y M E V Q
S F I B E A S N I E Q E B D E Y M J Y R K H N M J A T E N Z
E O L M O C I J L C R K U S P G J M O H N M R L G W R N I D
L R F O U S J Q I T S P O N S O R W C L U B Q A G C Z I U X
G P N E L U L S T G D R A A P D A W W N E X Z X O O X Z B X
G N Z O O M B A Y O U N V P I B R M C G S I B M S F A H X A
U O S U P E R P O W E R J R S P M Y B V N F E M D R H I W J
M N P O J O U L C M X C M P A H N K D E U O H W P L I N K S

action
advocate
afterhours
cactus
cancer
cancerversary
caregiver
chat
clairvoyance
club
comics
community
creative
defender
elephant
flight
friends
gabfest
gabster
guardian
headquarters
healing
healthcare
herd
home
icebreaker
identity
invincible
invisibility
justice
keynote
links
magazine
manga
marvel
meet
muggle
nemesis
nonprofit
online
origin
overcome
prickly
prize
reflect
resilient
responsibility
scanxiety
sidekick
speaker
speed
sponsor
story
strength
superhero
supernatural
superpower
support
survivorship
tea
telekenesis
telepathy
teleportation
treatment
vigilante
villain
writer
xray
zoom

Jessica Acosta (She/Her)

Jessica Acosta is a 30-year-old rectal cancer survivor whose cancer story is rooted in the incredible work from clinical trials. Because she has Lynch Syndrome, she was eligible for immunotherapy and followed a clinical trial with her oncologist in San Diego. Undergoing immunotherapy gave her a unique experience compared to those who were treated with chemo. Acosta hopes sharing her experience will show people cancer doesn't look one specific way and will bring comfort to those starting immunotherapy or a clinical trial for the first time. She is passionate about empowering AYAs to advocate for themselves and educating people on what the cancer experience is like. She loves writing poetry (especially for *Elephants and Tea!),* painting, going to the beach, and watching women's sports with her wife.

Tyler Barr (He/Him)

Tyler Barr is a husband to Lynn Leiro, a two-time cancer survivor, and the proud father to Audrey. He is also a son, brother, and uncle, deeply rooted in family. Professionally, he works in the humanitarian and disaster response field, driven by a commitment to helping others in times of crisis. Outside of work, he enjoys watching sports, running through the streets of Los Angeles, and spending time with his dog, Mocha. Inspired by his wife's journey, he is passionate about supporting caregivers of cancer survivors by offering guidance, resources, and a safe space to share and heal.

Elissa Baldwin, MA (She/Her)

Elissa Baldwin, MA, is a leukemia survivor and the director of national patient education at The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society (LLS). She was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia (AML) in June 2016 and has been NED since December 2016. At LLS, her role includes co-hosting the patient/caregiver podcast, *The Bloodline with LLS*, producing videos, including the *How Do I?* series and *Hematology Horizons* vlog series, and participating in the AYA Advisory Board to provide more adolescent and young adult content. She is passionate about educating and empowering blood cancer patients to make the cancer experience easier. Baldwin lives in Portland, Oregon, with her dog, Sophie.

Annie Bond (She/Her)

Annie Bond is a comedian, writer, and cancer advocate from Austin, Texas. At 26, she was diagnosed with stage IV metastatic breast cancer that spread to her liver and was given two to five years to live. She just celebrated her 10-year diagnosis anniversary.

With a background in improv and stand-up, Bond uses her unique sense of humor to share the realities of living with cancer. Through her work, she raises awareness, builds community, and offers support and representation to others navigating this disease. She's spoken at events nationwide, written for major publications, and built a loyal following of over 100,000 across social media platforms.

When she's not writing or speaking, Bond enjoys playing music with her dad, a fellow cancer survivor, working in her garden, and trying every craft. Her beloved dog Lemon is, in her own words, "The greatest animal to ever live."

She dreams of seeing a cure for cancer in her lifetime and is using her voice, platform, and weird jokes to help make that dream a reality.

Mallory Casperson, MS (She/Her)

Mallory Casperson is the co-founder and chief executive officer of Cactus Cancer Society, a nonprofit organization providing online support programs to young adult cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers. Casperson's career began in aerospace engineering where she earned an MS degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and worked with the Air Force Research Lab and NASA. After facing cancer as a young adult caregiver and then as a patient, she left a PhD program and founded Cactus Cancer Society. She has worked to put Cactus Cancer Society at the forefront of survivorship digital health, developing programming and logistics that offer young adults facing cancer unparalleled access to peer connection, while simultaneously expanding supportive and creative programming to the inpatient or isolated patient population. She is active in young adult cancer research, and drives development and strategy, oversees operations and programs, and manages a growing, remote staff at Cactus Cancer Society. She is a recipient of the 40 Under 40 in Cancer award. In her spare time, Casperson loves being outside with her partner, young kiddo, and two rescue pups. Inside she loves baking, reading, video games, and following her family's bearded dragon around the house.

Ali Cooper (She/Her)

Ali Cooper is a brain cancer survivor who was diagnosed with a grade III anaplastic astrocytoma in 2015 at the age of 24. After seven months of treatment, she was declared NED in 2016. She currently resides in the Bay Area with her husband and is a stay-at-home mom to their three beautiful daughters, ages seven, four, and two. In her free time, she is a high school and collegiate basketball official. Raising her kids near her twin sister, Sara, is her favorite part of life.

Lauren Creel, MSW, MPH (She/Her)

Lauren Creel, MSW, MPH, is the chief operations officer at Cactus Cancer Society. She was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma at the age of 23. After treatment, she was inspired to use her personal cancer experience to help other patients, so she returned to academia, earning a master's in public health and a master's in social work from San Diego State University. A few years after her treatment ended, she got involved with the AYA cancer community through a wilderness retreat. The interaction with other people her age who had gone through cancer helped her to process her own experiences and begin the healing process. She is passionate about cancer survivorship, specifically issues of isolation, resilience, fear of recurrence, and advocacy for AYAs with cancer, which is why she is thrilled to be at Cactus Cancer Society.

Eldiara Doucette (She/They)

Eldiara Doucette, pronounced El-Deer-Uh, is a content creator, author, and three-time survivor of synovial sarcoma, a rare form of soft tissue cancer. Her journey began back in 2021, when she received the diagnosis shortly after her nineteenth birthday. She has worked with Elephants and Tea in several capacities over the years. Last October, she became an above-elbow amputee due to an unexpected, inoperable recurrence. Soon afterward, she discovered her passion for education and advocacy. She believes the experience of a young adult cancer patient is unique and, frankly, underrepresented. Her goal is to increase the visibility of AYA populations struggling with this disease and, ultimately, to help more people understand and feel understood.

Aerial Donovan (She/Her)

Aerial Donovan is the co-founder and chief program officer at Cactus Cancer Society, where she transforms connection, creativity, and compassion into life-changing support for the young adult cancer community. She champions opportunities for survivors and caregivers to forge authentic relationships, build self-advocacy skills, and access resources without barriers. With a deep well of expertise in community-building and a talent for creating engaging digital experiences, Donovan has helped Cactus Cancer Society's programming flourish and reach thousands of young adults across the globe. Her dedication is rooted in her own lived experiences, fueling her commitment to improving long-term survivorship and uplifting caregiver well-being.

Her leadership and impact have been recognized nationally as part of the inaugural class of the 40 Under 40 in Cancer Award, a testament to her vision for a future where every young adult facing cancer feels seen, supported, and empowered until a world without cancer exists.

Jon Fox (He/Him)

Jon Fox is a thinker and writer from New York City. He is a survivor of both testicular cancer and a pancreatic neuroendocrine tumor, the latter of which required a Whipple procedure. Prior to his cancer diagnoses, he taught elementary school English for 10 years. He is passionate about learning to navigate life in the face of loss, complex trauma, and ambiguous grief. In his spare time he enjoys listening to podcasts, learning as much as he can about the gastrointestinal system, and always looking to experience or create a new compelling narrative.

Kayla Fulginiti, LCSW, OSW-C (She/Her)

Kayla Fulginiti, LCSW, OSW-C, is a licensed clinical social worker and the senior director at Elephants and Tea. She has been involved in the adolescent and young adult (AYA) oncology space since 2007, first as a hospital social worker in adult oncology and then as a pediatric oncology social worker and school program coordinator. Throughout her career, she has always advocated for and emphasized the importance of AYA support by assessing and raising awareness about AYA needs through direct clinical care, research, and community engagement, and through serving on advisory boards for various nonprofit organizations. Fulginiti has been involved in the nonprofit space for over eight years, having multiple roles such as program manager and program director within the youth suicide prevention space and AYA cancer communities. She lives with her husband, son, and their boxer rescue, Blue Cheese, in Denver, Colorado.

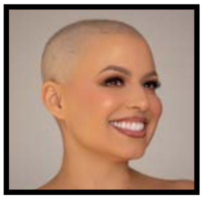
Nick Giallourakis, MS (He/Him)

Nick Giallourakis is the executive director of the Steven G. Cancer Foundation (SGCF) and Elephants and Tea. Elephants and Tea is a dba under SGCF and is its media brand for adolescent and young adult (AYA) cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers with the mission to ensure AYAs feel less alone in facing cancer. He is a content marketing nerd—both print and digital—and loves using storytelling to build communities like Elephants and Tea. He is a husband, father, dog lover, and sports enthusiast.

Sara Quilici Giles (She/Her)

Sara Giles is/was a sibling caregiver to her twin sister Ali, who was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2015. Ali has been cancer-free since 2016, and life for her and her sister will always be in two chapters—before and after. Giles works for the Bay Area Women's Sports Initiative, coaches high school basketball, and is Mom to Makena (4) and Jamison (2).

SPEAKER BIOS

Carissa Hodgson, LCSW, OSW-C (She/Her)		Carissa Hodgson, LCSW, OSW-C, is the director of programs and community outreach at Bright Spot Network, which provides support to parents with cancer who have young children. She has over 16 years of clinical and program experience working with families facing cancer. She has been co-chair of the Youth, Families, and Cancer Special Interest Group at the Association of Oncology Social Work since 2015. Hodgson is also a long-term lecturer at the Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she teaches courses on grief and loss, and generalist practice with individuals, families, and groups. She has a private psychotherapy and consultation practice where she specializes in cancer, chronic illness, caregiving, grief and loss, child and adolescent development, family systems, and the queer community.
Summer Konechney (She/Her)		Summer Konechneyis a 26-year-old writer, AYA cancer and sarcoma advocate, and stage IV cancer survivor living in Vancouver, Canada. She was diagnosed with osteosarcoma in her left tibia in 2022 and underwent 10 rounds of chemotherapy and a limb-sparing surgery on her left leg. In 2024, she suffered a spontaneous hardware failure in her endoprosthetic, and then was diagnosed with a recurrence of her cancer in both of her lungs.
Christina Kosyla (She/Her)		Christina Kosyla is an educator, theatre artist, and accidental rare disease advocate. Her performance and directorial work have been showcased at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Edinburgh, Scotland, and various jazz festivals in Tuscany. Since her diagnosis with a desmoid tumor in 2018, she has advocated for rare disease research and patient support through speaking engagements on podcasts, on social media, and at conferences. Kosyla recently joined the Board of Directors for the Desmoid Tumor Research Society. She lives in New Jersey with her dog, Daisy.
Lynn Leiro (She/Her)		Lynn Leiro is a mom, wife, daughter, travel enthusiast, foodie, and two-time cancer survivor.
Lauren Morales, LCSW (She/Her)		Lauren Morales, LCSW, wears a few different hats: Senior Program Coordinator at Cactus Cancer Society, part-time private practice therapist, young adult cancer survivor, and military spouse! Her work focuses on supporting folx navigating cancer, survivorship, and chronic illness through the lens of community building, trauma support, and meaning-making. When she's not in session or building programs, you can usually find her reading a good book, hunting down the best sushi spot, or hanging with her two dogs. Connect with her at seekingsunrisetherapy.com
Lisa Orr, MA (She/Her)		Lisa Orr is the brand director at Elephants and Tea. She is an almost seven-year triple-negative breast cancer survivor who has found passion in helping other young adults navigate a cancer diagnosis. She is an ambassador for the Triple Negative Breast Cancer Foundation and is the creator and host of the *Don't Call It a Journey* and *AYA Cancer: Unfiltered* podcasts (both streaming on Apple Podcasts and Spotify). Orr resides in Reading, Massachusetts, with her husband, two sons (ages 10 and 8), and their dog, Birdie. In her free time, she loves to write, cook, travel, and spend time with her friends and family.
Hail Howell Quackenbush (He/Him)		Hail Howell Quackenbush is a two-time anaplastic lymphoma kinase-positive (ALK+) large cell lymphoma survivor and is currently receiving ongoing treatment (which so far, is thankfully keeping him NED) for a recurrence that happened seven years into his initial remission. Before his recurrence, he was working at an animal rescue sanctuary helping to care for over 100 animals ranging from geese to ungulates. He has done other work in the realm of animal care and conservation, including living out of a tent for two months in the wilderness of the Mexican Sonoran Desert while helping to collect data on the winter migratory patterns of songbirds. More recently, he has worked as an actor/singer in musical theatre. He currently lives on an island in the Salish Sea near Seattle that you can only get to by ferry boat, where he is a proud member of the local Ukulele Society. He finds joy in many things, including reading, writing, singing and making music, spending time in nature, and spending time with friends and family.

Jean Rowe, LCSW, CJT (She/Her)

Rowe is an expert consultant and trusted voice in the field of young adult cancer. Her work includes educational product and program development, delivery, management, and evaluation. She is an expert facilitator who designs, implements, and delivers continuing education for healthcare providers and journal writing workshops for young adult cancer survivors and the general public.

Jean has presented regionally, nationally, and internationally on various topics related to her work and interests. She has collaborated with companies offering virtual therapy and serves as a guest faculty member with Cactus Cancer Society. Rowe provides supervision to individuals working toward clinical licensure as social workers and provides clinical consultation to those already licensed.

Pam Simon, MSN, CPNP, CPON (She/Her)

Pam Simon is a nurse practitioner and director of the Stanford Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Program. Throughout her 32-year nursing career, Simon's expertise has always been with pediatric/adolescent oncology. As a Nurse Practitioner, she found her passion with the AYA cancer population and in 2015, launched the Stanford Adolescent and Young Adult Cancer Program. Simon completed an online Master's Certificate in Teenage and Young Adult Cancer Care through Coventry University in London and continues to work to improve the care for this underserved population at a local, regional, and national level. She lives in Half Moon Bay, California, with her husband Bret. They have two young adult sons, Ben and Jake, and a labradoodle named Frankie. She enjoys hiking, biking, and exploring the Bay Area.

Kyle Stamper (He/Him)

Kyle Stamper is a 42-year-old dad of two young daughters. He was diagnosed with a grade IV anaplastic astrocytoma brain tumor in 2021, and is currently working as a software engineer and data scientist in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Yahira Torres (She/Her)

Yahira Torres is a dynamic leader, passionate philanthropist, and proud Latina mother of two. With a diverse educational background in business administration, fine arts, and graphic design, she currently serves as an operations manager at a company providing affordable and sustainable workspaces for artists, and also supports mental health work as an executive assistant to a New York-based therapist.

Diagnosed with breast cancer in September 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Torres found herself navigating treatment in isolation. Seeking connection, she turned to social media and found a powerful community of young, diverse survivors who became a lifeline of support. Inspired by this experience, she founded Lion-ess Retreat, a nonprofit offering one-of-a-kind experiences for individuals affected by breast and gynecological cancers. Together with chief operating officer and fellow survivor, Macee Maddock, Torres helps others access the same sense of healing and community that guided her through her own journey.

She also shares her story of resilience, body acceptance, and self-love, shaped by her experiences with weight loss surgery, multiple cancer-related surgeries, and personal transformation. Torres now uses her platform to advocate for healing, peace in solitude, and the power of community. Her work reflects the belief that one person can spark meaningful change in the lives of many.

Bryan Walker, MS (He/Him)

Bryan Walker is a ten-year survivor of Hodgkin lymphoma and a passionate advocate for young adults impacted by cancer. As a board member for a young adult nonprofit, he helps shape programs that bring connection, healing, and purpose to those navigating this thing called "life." Walker's journey from diagnosis to remission and beyond fuels his personal mission to inspire others to find strength in vulnerability and hope in community.

Professionally, he is a dynamic sales leader with more than a decade of experience in healthcare and technology, known for building teams, driving growth, and mentoring the next generation of talent. But it's his authenticity, resilience, and deep commitment to service that truly set him apart.

Whether he's leading from the front or sharing his story from the stage, Walker shows up with heart, humor, and a belief that we all have the power to turn adversity into impact.

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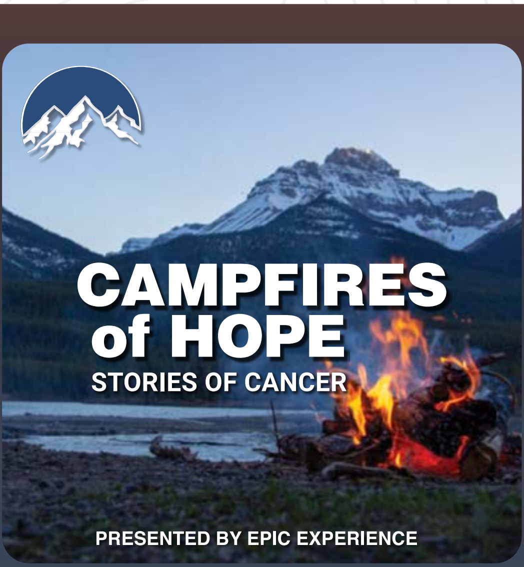

NOV. 13

Adventure Therapy for Cancer Survivors

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>
> – Stephenie, YA patient

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>
> – Alyssa, YA caregiver and Brooklyn, YA patient

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