

*What do you want to be  
when you grow up?*



*Steven, age 4, future clown*



**Connecting  
Champions**

*Helping kids with cancer pursue their passions*



Left: Yaheim, age 16, football lover / Right: Parker, age 9, future train conductor

## A peek inside...

- 2 The Story of Connecting Champions
- 3 What is Connecting Champions?
- 4 David's Story: Turning life right-side up again.
- 6 Jessica's Story: A first friend & a forever friend.

- 8 Angelika's Story: Like a real live cooking show!
- 10 Donor Impact: Sophia & the Lammies
- 12 Perspective from a Teen: Alumnus Katie
- 14 Meet Some of Our Kids
- 16 Get in Touch with Us

# The Story of Connecting Champions

## A letter from Sidney, our founder

When I was in high school, my friend Lauren passed away from a rare form of cancer. Watching her go through that journey, I knew I needed to help.

That's when I met Jenny. She was 9 years old and braving one of her first rounds of chemotherapy treatments. I walked into her room with a smile on my face and, as we chatted, I asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

Her eyes lit up and, before I could finish the question, she exclaimed, "I want to be a dancer!" I could see, in that moment, Jenny forgot about cancer and was just a kid again.

Jenny taught me that, more than anything, **kids with cancer crave the opportunity to hang on to their childhood.** She didn't want cancer to define her, and yet everyone who walked into her room, day after day, was there to ask about her illness.

As we started our goodbyes, Jenny's face completely changed. She looked up at me and said, "I'm just afraid all my friends are going to forget about me now that I have cancer." Hearing that from a 9-year-old girl made my heart sink into my stomach. Being out of school for so long, away from her friends, without hair, and unable to

dance — Jenny was afraid she would be forgotten.

As I spoke with other kids, parents, hospital staff and researchers, I quickly learned that Jenny wasn't alone. **Eighty-four percent of children survive cancer medically, but they're surviving with serious social and developmental side effects.** Everyone I spoke with talked about the need for long-term, one-to-one social support, and yet no one was providing it.

Jenny inspired us to find the missing piece to the puzzle of pediatric oncology.

I started Connecting Champions when I was 19 years old. We ask kids with cancer, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and connect them with a mentor for the cancer journey.

**As parents and teens have shared, Connecting Champions has helped save kids' lives in ways medicine cannot.** We help our kids find purpose, continue to grow, and go from "cancer kid" to "kid" again. I am so grateful to have each and every one of you in our Connecting Champions family.

With appreciation,

Sidney

2

# What is Connecting Champions?

Learn a little about what we do ...

... & how we do it

**84%** of children & adolescents survive cancer, but ...

... research shows they survive with significant social, emotional, and developmental side effects as a result of intense treatment and severe social isolation. Kids are being pulled from school, no longer able to achieve essential developmental milestones. Teens are struggling to envision their life after cancer or develop a greater-than-cancer identity. Families are facing unmanageable levels of distress in and out of the hospital, creating a major barrier to effective coping.

As families and studies suggest, **cancer isn't just an attack on one's health — it's an attack on one's childhood.**

**“Connecting Champions added a light in a dark, bleak situation. It made him remember what was still possible in life, not what he couldn't do, but what was still waiting for him to accomplish.”**

~ Parent of a Connecting Champions child

## How do our friendships work?



We have been fully integrated into the hospital care team. Just as a newly diagnosed child is introduced to their doctors & nurses, they're also introduced to us.

We're the one person who walks in & doesn't talk about cancer. We ask...

What do you want to be when you grow up?

We then find a mentor for the child who can visit them weekly to monthly every step of the way.



Regular visits include everything from playing Pokemon in the hospital to checking out the Forensics Unit in between rounds of treatment.



## A few quick facts about Connecting Champions



We serve kids **ages 3-21**



Through our historic partnership with **Children's Hospitals,**

our evidence-based, outcomes-driven approach helps us save kids' lives, enhance care, & change the field forever.



We've matched our kids with upwards of **50 different professions**



That's a lot of **hours of support for a single child**

We're known for our rare ability to provide virtually unlimited hours of support.

On the next few pages, you'll see stories that exemplify our four outcome areas:

**#1** Helping families manage distress

**#3** Fostering a greater-than-cancer identity

**#2** Promoting child development

**#4** Establishing a post-cancer vision



David, age 10, future basketball star

## Turning life **RIGHT-SIDE UP** again.

“It has to be a dream. Somehow I’m going to wake up. Somehow, somehow this can’t really be happening, because this is my baby.”

Two and a half hours in the ambulance to Children’s Hospital, and that’s all Danielle could think of with her son David right next to her.

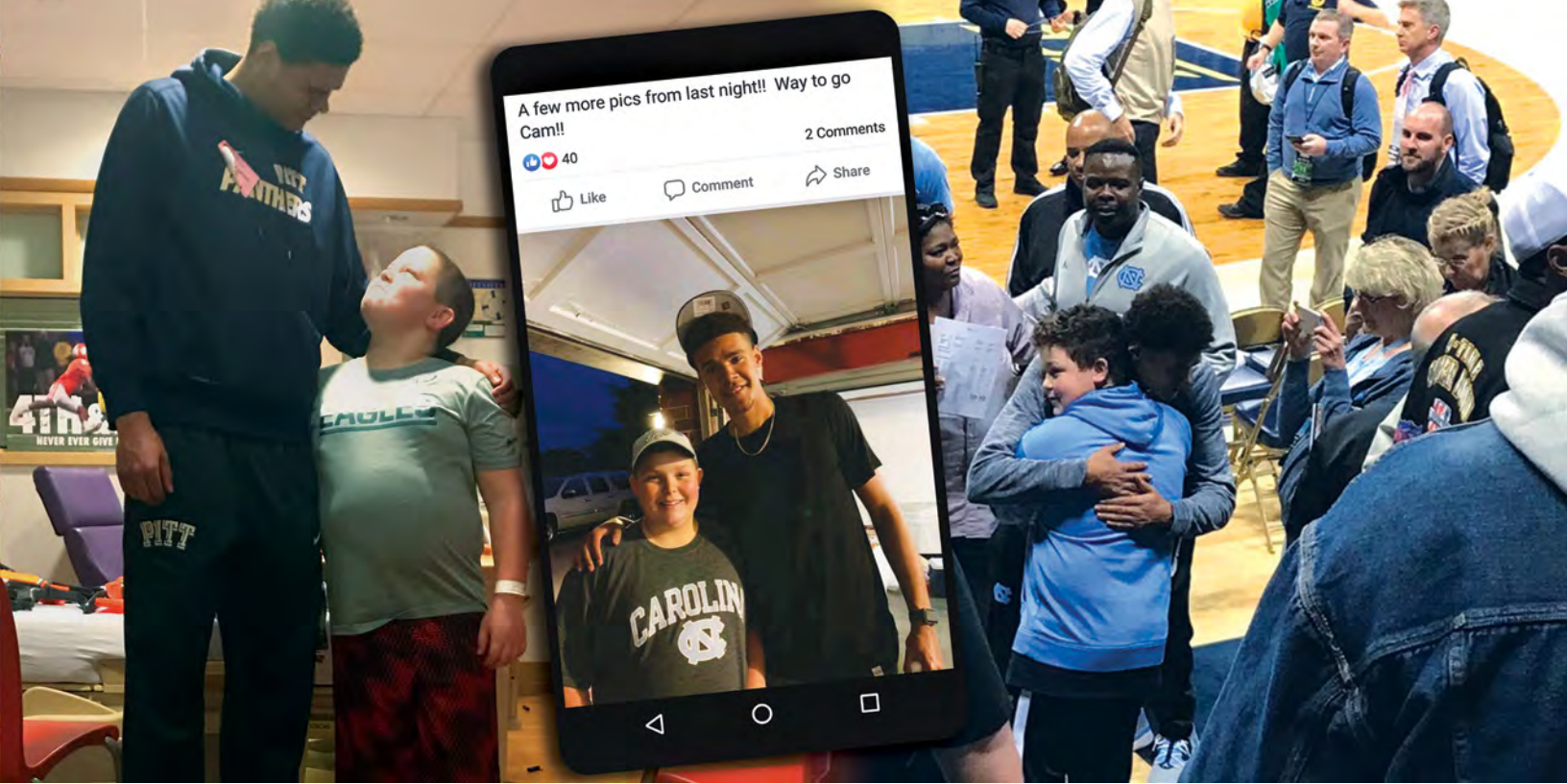
**As David’s mom shared, a cancer diagnosis flipped their whole world upside down.** David was diagnosed right in the middle of basketball season, and couldn’t play another game as he went through cycle after cycle of chemotherapy. **He and his mom endured months of isolation — oftentimes unable to even leave his room**

**for weeks at a time.** Their home is two and a half hours away, and David could only see his brother once a week. His friends kept playing basketball, and one of the highlights during his cancer journey was the one time he got to videochat with his class.

The stress of this new life weighed heavy. David was a positive, silly kid, but he understandably felt really down. He didn’t want to see the other kids on the oncology floor, because it was too hard to see kids like him being so sick. One day he even told his mom he thought he was on his deathbed.

**Mom was left to figure out how to help David remain positive — but she was alone too.** She was away from her friends too, the life they had built at home, and she had to figure out how to manage months away from her job. Every day she would wake up and give David her everything. She never wanted him to see his mom being scared.

From the time we met them, we knew we



wanted to bring in a friend, someone who would have a big, kind presence. Cameron Johnson was a 6' 8" college basketball player, so we knew he had the "big" part down. But it was the "kind" part that made him truly stand out.

The first time Cameron walked into David's room, he pulled up a chair right next to his hospital bed and they just started chatting, as friends. **It was the first time someone walked into David's room and didn't ask about his cancer.**

Within minutes, David challenged him to a Nerf gun battle (David begrudgingly admits that Cameron did, in fact, win). Two and a half hours later, Mom had to step in because it was way past David's bedtime. The two friends didn't want to say goodbye, but they knew it would be the first friendship moment of many to come.

**Over the next year, Cameron was there for David every step of the way.** They spent lots of time together in the hospital playing Xbox, watching basketball, and racing RC cars. As David started feeling better, they went bowling, attended basketball games, and even had an epic pizza eating contest. But nothing beats this past summer,

when Cameron was drafted in the first round of the NBA Draft. David, who's in remission now, was personally invited to Cameron's family- and friends-only watch party.

**As with many Connecting Champions friendships, Cameron helped turn David's and his family's life right-side up again.** When David's mom saw her baby smile and be silly again, she could take a long-awaited breath. While David was with Cameron, she finally had the opportunity to talk with some adults (our program staff) about the fears she never wanted David to see.

And David, the kid who wouldn't leave his bed and felt hopeless, all of a sudden couldn't wait to hop out of bed for the next time he could see his new friend, Cameron.

### *Outcome Area 1:*

### **Helping Families Manage Distress**

Connecting Champions helps kids, parents, and siblings manage the immense stressors in and out of the hospital — fear, loneliness, anxiety, etc. — in order to make the cancer journey more manageable and to facilitate effective coping strategies.



*Jessica, age 4, a forever friend*

## *A first friend &* **A FOREVER FRIEND.**

Halfway through her first year in preschool, Jessica was diagnosed with a rare form of brain cancer. Her family heard about Connecting Champions while in Children's Hospital, and Jessica's mom called to see if we could find a friend for her daughter.

When we took Jessica and her family out to ice cream, we got to meet a little girl who loved to make people laugh. Having only spent a few months of her life in school, she wasn't ready to talk, but she was definitely ready to share silly faces. As her mom shared, **Jessica lost a lot of her confidence when**

**she was diagnosed and immediately plucked from school.** All the progress she was making expressing herself, learning how to share, talking with unfamiliar people, etc., started to fade.

**More than anything, they just wanted a first friend for their daughter.**

We couldn't wait to introduce her to Sami, a student at the University of Pittsburgh studying psychology and education. Jessica was too young to know what she wanted to be when she grew up; she just wanted a playmate during the many scary days in the hospital.

For the next two years, Sami and Jessica would schedule weekly playdates from the comfort of Jessica's hospital bedside. **Sami spent over 400 hours with Jessica — an amount of time unheard of in healthcare** — giving her experiences similar to the ones she was missing



back home with the rest of the kids her age.

After hours of Old Maid, Go Fish, puzzling, and coloring, their friendship became a staple in Jessica's life. Many things felt out of control, but when she was with Sami, she could make the day her own. Jessica became more accepting of her battle with cancer, and when Sami was there, she didn't feel the need to scream at the top of her lungs during procedures.

**Jessica had an aggressive form of brain cancer, and we wanted to create as much normalcy as possible during her time with us.** She may not have been able to be in school with her friends, but Sami helped her learn essential developmental skills like how to speak her mind, access her creativity, listen and be heard, and talk to unfamiliar faces.

So many areas of expertise are represented in healthcare — medicine, nursing, social work, psychology, academia, art, music, etc. — but the one field that is shockingly lacking is child development. **Kids with cancer are severely at risk of falling behind. Our program staff, with decades of experience as elementary educators, are filling**

**in the missing puzzle piece.**

When mentors like Sami come into the hospital, we are able to use evidence-based strategies, conversations, and activities to drive positive development and help kids feel like kids.

Jessica and Sami's friendship lasted about two years before she passed away. We still keep in touch with her family, and everywhere Sami goes, she shares stories of Jessica's kindness, joy, and silliness. **The two friends weren't ready to say goodbye, but with Sami in her life, Jessica knew that whatever she was feeling, she wouldn't have to feel it alone.** During one unexpected surgery, Sami made sure to meet Jessica in the hospital, and Jessica lit up. "I knew they'd be here! They're always here for me."

*Outcome Area 2:*

### **Promoting Child Development**

At a time when development freezes and often reverses, Connecting Champions helps kids reach the essential child development milestones they would be reaching had they not been so sick.



Angelika, age 9, future chef

## Like a real live COOKING SHOW!

The first day Angelika met Chef Geoff, we saw an excitement (Angelika calls it “nervous-citement”) that we had never seen in her before. As her mom later shared, it was our first glance at what Angelika was like before she was diagnosed.

**For Angelika, repeated long stays in the hospital started to change her.** Six months before she met Chef Geoff, we asked her, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” and she didn’t even want to think about it. She hated being away from home for weeks at a time, getting pricked every day, and having to take so much medicine.

Cancer caused Angelika to close herself off,

and the disease started to define her. **Everyone in her world was talking about cancer, and her identity changed from “kid” to “cancer kid.”**

She wasn’t thinking about her life after cancer, so we decided to introduce Angelika to a couple friends (college students Copley and Courtney) who could visit her in the hospital each week and help her get her identity back. They would play Candyland together and chat about unicorns. But after six months, we started to notice something — Angelika only wanted to talk about one thing: cooking.

**When we asked Angelika if she would want to meet a chef, the “nervous-citement” started to blossom as she said yes.** We found her a mentor, Chef Geoff, the Executive Chef for the Pittsburgh Penguins. He invited Angelika to join him in the Penguins’ kitchen after her current round of treatment (it was a four- to six-week inpatient stay getting chemotherapy).

For the next three weeks, Angelika could be





heard telling all her doctors, nurses, social workers, child life specialists — anyone who would listen, really — that she needed to get better soon so she could meet her new chef friend.

Sure enough, Angelika started to get better and we scheduled her first cooking session with Chef Geoff at the Penguins' facility. **She was timid at first, but as soon as Chef Geoff asked if she wanted to be his sous chef for the day, her eyes lit up and, for the first time in a long time, she started to feel like herself again.**

In the six months we knew Angelika, she never left her parents' side. But about 30 minutes into her cooking with Chef Geoff, he whispered something in her ear, she smiled, turned to her parents, and shouted, "Time for you to leave! We're making a surprise lunch!"

It's moments like those that define Connecting Champions. Cancer was causing Angelika to lose her identity, throwing her into months of darkness. **Her mentor brought light into her life, and we saw her inner-child come back.**

When she kicked her parents out, her confidence and her passion started to shine again. In that moment, she went from being a "cancer kid" to a "kid" again.

Over the next three years, Angelika and Chef

Geoff shared a friendship that grew and grew and grew. She helped him make a meal for the Penguins after one of their games, and she would visit him on the way home from her treatments at Children's Hospital. Last year, Chef Geoff came to the hospital to watch Angelika "ring the bell" to celebrate her last ever chemotherapy treatment. Every visit started with a signature Angelika-Chef Geoff hug. The two still text to this day.

**Chef Geoff helped Angelika regain her purpose, and recognize that cancer is just a chapter of her life, not her whole story.** She started to envision her life as a chef after she beat cancer, and she hopes to open her own restaurant someday. And when she does, we know who will be waiting outside to be her very first customer — her friend Chef Geoff.

### *Outcome Area 3:* **Fostering a Greater-Than-Cancer Identity**

### *Outcome Area 4:* **Establishing a Post-Cancer Vision**

Connecting Champions provides mentorship that helps kids recognize that cancer is just a chapter of their life, not their whole story.

# The Impact of a Donor

## *on Connecting Champions friendships*

*How donors Sue & Scott Lammie changed Sophia's life*



**Fourteen-year-old Sophia was adamant that she needed to memorize the Amendments to the Constitution** before meeting her Connecting Champions mentor, Ellen Doyle.

When we asked Sophia, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” we could barely finish the question before she said she wanted to be a constitutional lawyer who focused on either criminal justice reform or immigration law. She was in 8th grade.

**We paired her with Ellen, a kind, fearless lawyer. She was the only person in Sophia's life who could speak her language and help her pursue her passions.** As Sophia's mom shared, “When Ellen visits, Sophia gathers up every ounce of energy she possibly can, and for that hour or two, she makes it count.”

Over the past year-and-a-half, **Ellen and Sophia started a “two-woman book club” during Sophia's difficult rounds of treatment**, met world-famous author Bryan Stevenson, attended a mock trial, and had fun at the zoo petting the red pandas. Sophia is doing great now and, in the coming months, she and Ellen plan on visiting the ACLU and attending a real trial.



*Sophia, age 14, future lawyer*

*We asked*

## SCOTT & SUE LAMMIE ...

What inspired you to give to Connecting Champions & help make Sophia's friendship possible?



*Meet a couple of our donors:*

**Scott**, Senior Vice President, Business Development and Board Treasurer,  
UPMC Insurance Services Division, &  
**Sue**, Member of Connecting Champions Outreach Advisory Committee

*In Scott's words ...*

“ It's very clear that the social and developmental challenges Connecting Champions addresses is the most important area in healthcare that remains unanswered, outside of medical breakthroughs. It helps find the cure for spiritual cancer. If you can get folks to foster positive experiences, you can change their lives.

*This is an evidence-based program & deserves to be treated that way. It should be part of mainstream practice. ”*

*In Sue's words ...*

“ As a parent, I know that if you give young people the opportunity to really give some thought about what engages them, the effect is life changing. It has been so heartwarming to meet Sophia and to see the manifestation of everything our donation, through her friendship with Ellen, means to her.

*Connecting Champions gives the children hope, & it gives them someone who's passionate in the same way they are. It is empathetic, holistic, kind, sympathetic, & engaging. It shows the best part of humanity. ”*

# Perspective from a Teen

## *in Connecting Champions*

*In the words of Katie, an 18-year-old alumna of Connecting Champions*

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

**Every day 43 new kids will hear the words “you have cancer.”** Approximately 1 in 285 children will be diagnosed with cancer before their 20th birthday. To you this may not seem like a lot but when you are only 14 and attended more funerals a year than you did birthday parties, you're faced with a harsh reality. No child is safe.

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

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



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

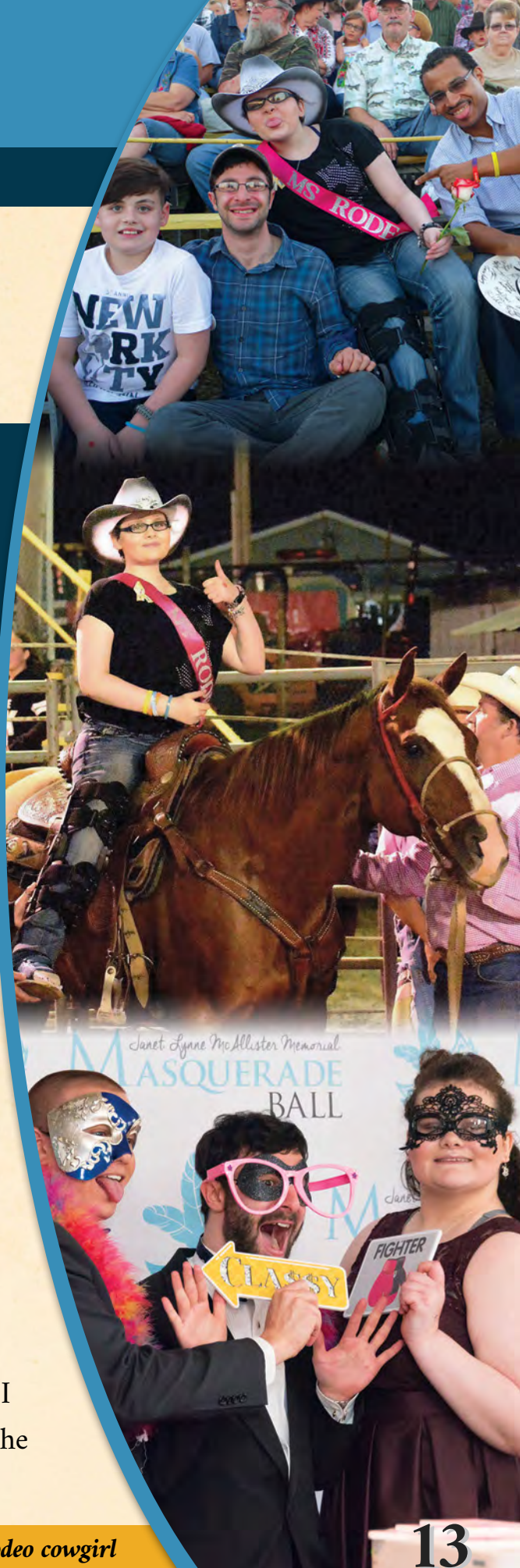
“*With my Connecting Champions friends in my corner, I am convinced that I will follow my dreams. Because of them, I have found my purpose in this life.*”

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

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

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

*Katie, age 18, future scientist & rodeo cowgirl*



What do you want to be when you grow up?

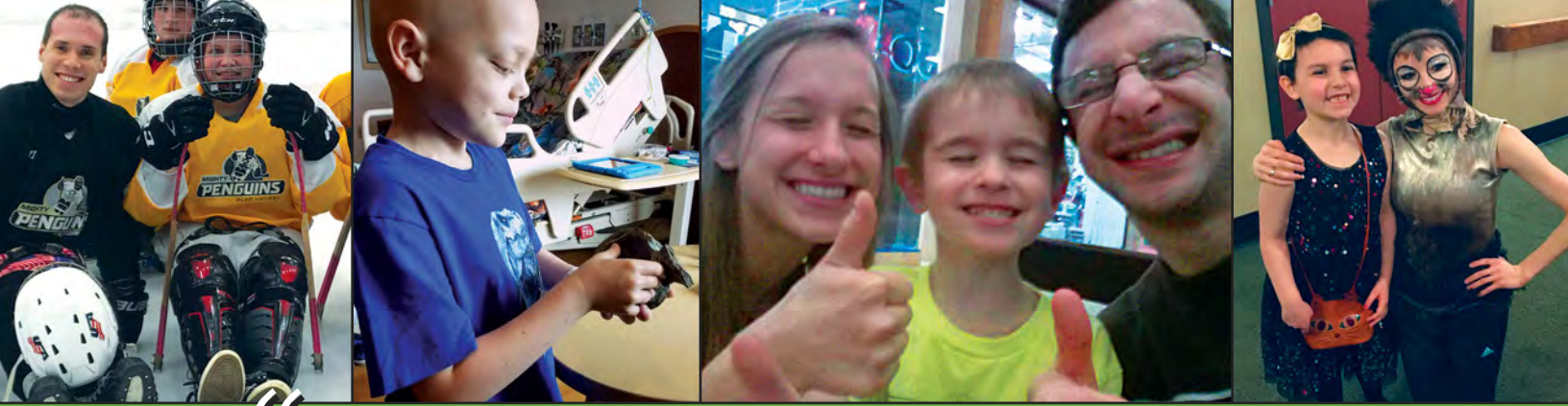


*Meet some of our kids!*

*Clockwise from top left: Anya, age 11, forever friend / Aiden, age 4, future professional wrestler / Emma, age 15, future chef / Jesse, age 19, future professional wrestler*



*Clockwise from top left: Sydney, age 8, arts & crafts enthusiast / Jayme, age 11, future basketball star / Mason, age 10, future outdoor explorer / Riley, age 8, forever friend / Adrian, age 7, future Pokeman trainer*



“ Happy children heal more quickly & focus less on negative aspects of illnesses. I strongly believe that Connecting Champions helped save my daughter’s life. ”

~ Parent of a Connecting Champions child



**Get in Touch with Us**

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