

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



Mackenzie, age 14, future meteorologist

annual report



**Connecting
Champions**

Helping kids with cancer pursue their passions

Highlights from 2020

The new Connecting Champions ...

... the year when we became a national organization

Hi friends,

What a year it has been! Going into 2020, our team was so excited. “We’re going to expand to a second city! Can you believe it?” Little did we know that it wouldn’t be just a second city, or a third, or a fourth... **We now have kids and young adults in our program from NINE different cities across the country.** Our virtual mentorship program has been flying, and hospitals all over are asking us if we can bring it to their patients. Who knew it could be so exciting to pay taxes in other states?

We celebrated our 250th all-time friendship and opened our second physical location in partnership with WVU Medicine Children’s Hospital. Our program coordinator has been designated “essential staff” by hospital leadership and is working side-by-side the rest of the care team during the pandemic. Our participation rate is 95% and our outcomes are getting some serious attention.

In March, everything may have stopped, but the kids and young adults needed us to keep going. The social isolation we all felt was only magnified for kids with cancer and their families. Each child could only have one parent with them in the hospital, and no siblings or friends.

The need for our program didn’t just maintain — it grew.

We worked around the clock to develop a virtual mentorship program in a matter of weeks. We saw that kids and young adults with cancer across the country needed our help, so we decided to accelerate our strategy, dip into our reserve fund, and roll out our new program nationwide. **Six hospital systems across the country have partnered with us,** and more are putting together implementation teams.

Our virtual mentorship program is centered around helping the kids and young adults share passion projects with their mentors. Instead of simply talking over video each week, we send “passion project kits” so they can get a behind-the-scenes look at a career / passion from the comfort of their hospital bed or home.

Sidney's letter continued on next page >>

Connecting Champions is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

One of our 21-year-old young women, Bree, wants to be a cosmetologist when she grows up. We sent Bree a mannequin so that each week she and her mentor, a local cosmetologist, can hop on video to perfect all kinds of beauty techniques.

One of our 10-year-old girls, Cecilia, loves dinosaurs so we paired her with a world-renowned female paleontologist. Each time she's in the hospital, Cecilia and her mentor video to learn about a different dinosaur and the discovery process — and even dig up some fossils!

Last year I shared my belief that the best organizations have multiple founding moments. Well, this is the new Connecting Champions. **We're no longer a local organization — we are a national organization.** The future we always dreamed of is here.

Thank you for all that you are & help us to be,

Sidney

*Executive Director & Founder,
Connecting Champions*

Our Virtual Friendship Program is in **9 CITIES & COUNTING!**



Within eight weeks of the pandemic, we designed a **brand new program** and partnered with hospital systems across the country. Kids and young adults from nine different cities have signed up for our program. Hello Chicago, Morgantown, Cleveland, Buffalo, Grand Rapids, Washington, D.C., Dover, Cincinnati, and Pittsburgh! Stay tuned as we add more cities in 2021!

We reached

250 ALL-TIME FRIENDSHIPS

One of my favorites this year is with a young girl in rural West Virginia who wants to be an aquarist when she grows up. We paired her with a woman from the Pittsburgh Zoo & Aquarium; the two of them are reading a book together and videoing with the animals!

We now have a second physical location:
WEST VIRGINIA



In October, we **launched a “hybrid model”** in partnership with WVU Medicine Children’s Hospital. Our program coordinator Sloane visits the kids & young adults in the hospital each day with her tablet and connects them, from the comfort of their hospital beds, with their mentors in the community.

We hired a

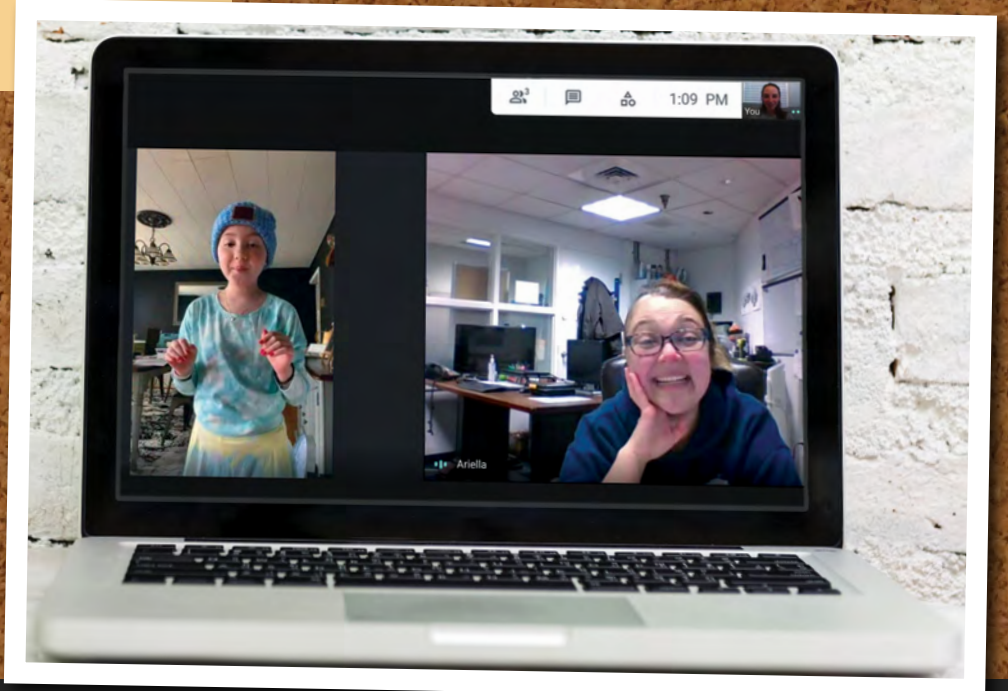
DATA ANALYST

One of the most groundbreaking layers of Connecting Champions is our evidence-based, data-driven approach. We built Outcomes Reporting software and collect data on a daily basis. Having a dedicated Data Analyst (thanks to a grant from the R.K. Mellon Foundation) now **positions us to present our outcomes on a national stage** in the coming years.

What do you
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Baylee, age 11, Future Aquarist

Baylee is an 11-year-old who **wants to save all of the ocean animals** when she grows up. We paired her with Ariella, an aquarist at the Pittsburgh Zoo and Aquarium. Baylee and Ariella meet at least twice a month virtually to discuss not only ocean animals, but also other animals! They have discussed sharks, penguins, turtles, polar bears, and red pandas just to name a few! Baylee loves meeting with Ariella so much, she decided she wanted to do her **Make-A-Wish at the zoo with Ariella for a week!**



Maya, age 11, Future Fashion Designer

Maya is an 11-year-old who wants to be a fashion designer when she grows up, specifically **creating wedding dresses and gowns**. Her mentor Trista, is a Fashion Design and Merchandising Professor at Kent State University's School of Fashion! Initially this duo learned about how to create a design, where to draw inspiration from, and began sketching fashion creations. Currently, Trista is teaching Maya how to sew, and they are **working on bringing Maya's first fashion collection to life**, which they hope to showcase at the end of the year!



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Learn more: www.ConnectingChampions.org

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to all of our generous donors in 2020!

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Founder & Executive Director

Fun Fact: "One day in high school, my psychology teacher gave us a challenge: whoever memorized the most digits of Pi (the mathematical number) would win an actual pie from the teacher! I memorized 101 digitsmy teacher forgot the pie."

Emily Dougan *

Administrative Assistant

Fun Fact: "I love to engage in all types of creative endeavors — primarily, I love to draw with a traditional dip pen and ink, enjoy creative writing, and am working hard at learning German!"

Coy Thompson ^

Program Coordinator, Pittsburgh

Fun Fact: "I love trying new food, and I make a point to try any new food that I am offered, as long as the person serving it eats it too. I have gotten to try many surprisingly good dishes this way, such as gibnut, pigeon soup and tacos de lengua."

Alyssa Rapelje *

Program Champion

Fun Fact: "In addition to working with children, I love to travel and experience new places, people, and cultures! I fed a blind rhino in Kenya, rode a bobsled down the Olympic track in Utah, and saw the Pope in Japan."

Sloane Strauss *

Program Coordinator, West Virginia

Fun Fact: "I have been to the most southern point of Africa and saw where the Pacific and Indian oceans blend together!"



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*Night of***INSPIRATION****Every September**ConnectingChampions.org/inspiration**Emceed by Sean Nolan**, teen cancer survivor

Every fall, Connecting Champions hosts the “Night of Inspiration,” an evening where our mentors present the kids and young adults personalized awards sharing how they’ve inspired us with their bravery during the cancer journey.

*March to***FRIENDSHIP****Entire month of March, online**MarchToFriendship.com

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

TOAST TO ...**When: it's a mystery!**ConnectingChampions.org/milestone

In 2020, we hosted our first ever virtual toast — the Toast to 250 — to celebrate the 250 all-time friendships in Connecting Champions. 350 attendees from 30 states received a “mystery toast box” at their doorstep, with a fancy drink, pastries, and other mystery items. I wonder if there will be another milestone to toast to soon...

*Charity***MARATHON TEAM****Every May** (ConnectingChampions.org/marathon)**In memory of Victoria Ondo Burnfin**, our beloved intern & mentor

Starting in 2020, we transitioned to a “virtual marathon,” where participants run or walk wherever they are in the world! Whether a full marathon or a pet walk, there are many ways to hop into nature for a cause.

*Janet Lynne McAllister***MASQUERADE BALL****Every April** (jlmMasqueradeBall.com)**In memory of Janet Lynne McAllister**, mother of our Board member Terrence

Before passing away from cancer in 2016, Janet’s birthday wish was to host a masquerade ball to raise money for those impacted by cancer. We “dress to the nines” and a kid in Connecting Champions is presented with a “Guiding Light” award.

