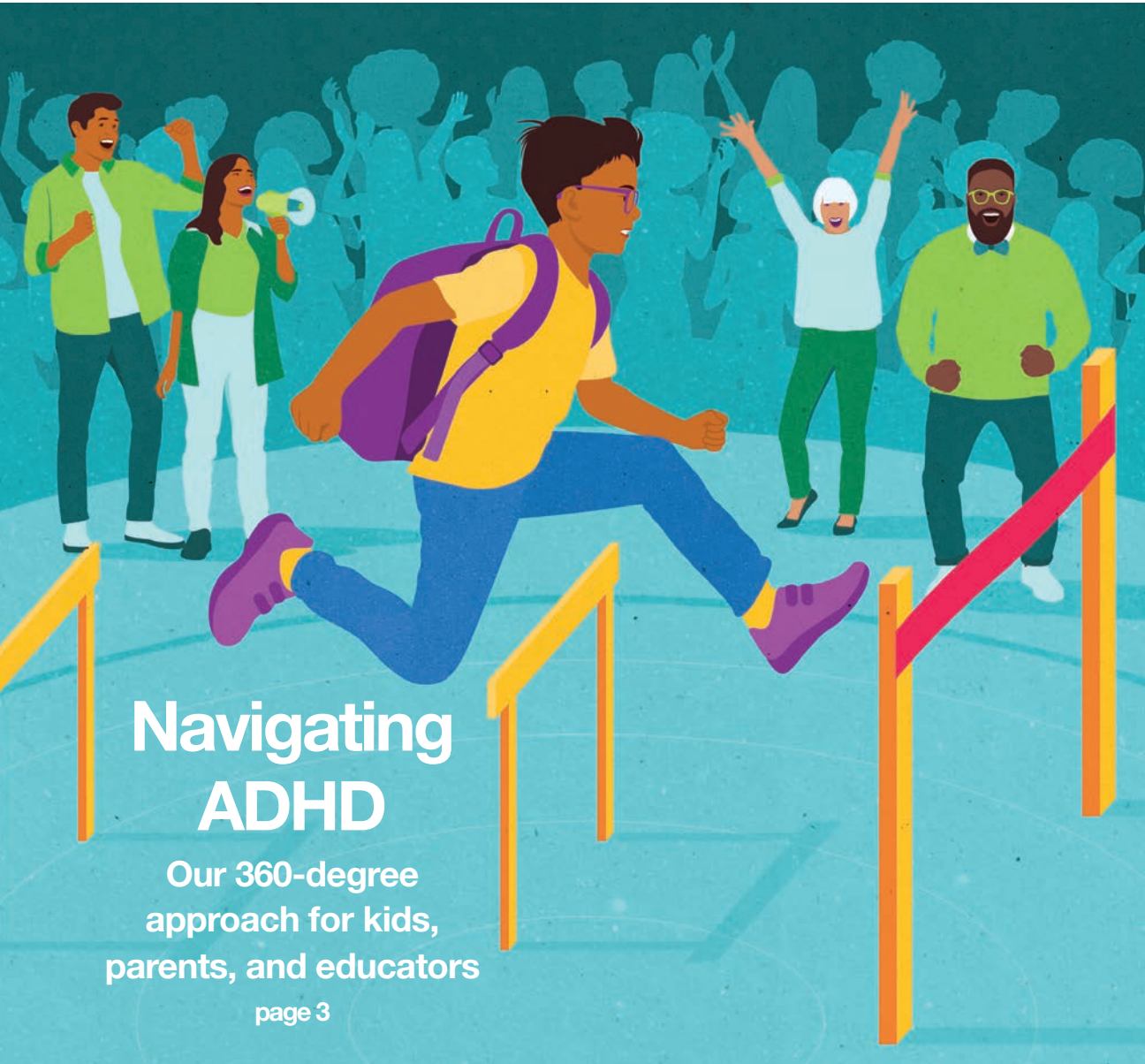


A NEWSLETTER FOR  
FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

# Connections

WINTER 2025



## Navigating ADHD

Our 360-degree  
approach for kids,  
parents, and educators

page 3

5

### Modernizing Oakland

When it opens in 2031, our new hospital building in Oakland will offer a state-of-the-art, light-filled, healing environment for children. Take a sneak peek.

7

### Bright Bodies

Learn how UCSF pediatricians are taking on the childhood obesity epidemic – from intensive case management to fun outdoor activities designed just for kids.

9

### Coming Home

Dr. Anthony Ong spent most of his life in treatment for hemophilia at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals. Now 33, Ong is back at UCSF as a physical therapist.





**As 2025 kicks into full gear,** UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals are leaning into a spirit of optimism and the power of possibility as we continue our drive for progress.

I remain so moved by your generosity and the advances we have made for pediatric care. Once again, our commitment to clinical excellence was recognized by U.S. News & World Report, which ranked our hospitals among the top pediatric medical centers nationally in all 11 specialties. We were the best in Northern California in cancer care, urology, and cardiology and improved significantly in many areas.

And we are closer than ever to breaking ground on our new hospital building in Oakland – a state-of-the-art, child-centered, medical home for patients from across the Bay Area. When it opens in 2031, the new facility will offer a light-filled, healing environment that reflects a systemwide effort to reimagine and modernize our pediatric campuses. You'll learn all about the new hospital building on page 5.

We also are doubling down on our commitment to behavioral health services, and it shows. This year, we were honored as a "Top 50" hospital in behavioral health in the U.S. News & World Report rankings. With the opening of our first stand-alone outpatient pediatric mental health services building in Oakland in 2023, and 20 new inpatient behavioral health beds in the new hospital building, we will undoubtedly continue to distinguish ourselves in this crucial field.

I could not be prouder of the world-class care we are providing to the Bay Area's diverse communities and the incredible potential that this health system holds, not only as a national leader in pediatric medicine but also as pillar of equitable access to health care for local kids.

Your exceptional generosity is what inspires our optimism and drives our progress. I am excited to continue working together to take UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals to new heights.

Sincerely,

Nicholas M. Holmes, MD, MBA  
President, UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals  
Senior Vice President of Children's Services, UCSF Health



## UCSF and NASA Partner to Benefit Cancer Patients

Last fall, UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital patients – pictured here with NASA astronaut Yvonne Cagle – participated in a symposium at UCSF's Mission Bay campus with NASA's Ames Research Center and Johnson Space Center exploring opportunities to collaborate on advancing cancer care and research. In addition to holding scientific discussions, NASA astronauts visited patients in the hospital, sharing words of encouragement and insights about the Cancer Moonshot initiative, a national effort, supported by UCSF, to transform cancer care and ultimately end the disease as we know it. Read the full story by scanning the QR code.





# This 360 Degree Approach to ADHD is Working in Local Schools



Social worker **Jeanette Feddes** works with Naomi, a 10-year-old student with ADHD.

Weekday mornings used to be exhausting for San Francisco mom Lissette as she tried to shepherd her young son Andrew out the door to school.

“He would need constant reminders to get dressed, brush his teeth, get his shoes on,” Lissette says. “At school, his teacher had to tell him over and over to focus and do his work in class.”

Andrew, who has dyslexia and ADHD, is now a fifth grader and excels at math. His mom has seen big improvements since they started participating in a UC San Francisco-created program for elementary school students with attention and behavior difficulties called Collaborative Life Skills (CLS).

School social workers, who are trained by UCSF staff, lead the CLS program, which teaches students to build organizational and social skills while instructing parents and teachers how to support their child at home and in school.

“Most school counselors aren’t trained to help children with attention issues, so the help is limited to reducing a student’s workload or giving them extra time for tests,” says UCSF psychologist Linda Pfiffner, PhD, who created the CLS program.

CLS is an adaptation of Pfiffner’s clinic-based ADHD treatment program that was requested by the San Francisco Unified School District in 2009. So far, CLS has been used in more than 40 elementary schools in San Francisco,

including four Spanish language schools. It also has been modified for remote, web-based training for counselors, parents, and teachers and for international use, including at 19 schools in Mexico.

The program has made a big difference for her whole family, Lissette says.

“Andrew is more motivated now; he sees the good outcome when he succeeds. If he is ready for school early, he gets to play with his little sister; they both love that. And I can see the change in myself. I feel confident that I have the tools to really help him.”

## A Synergistic Approach

On a sunny spring day, four kids in the CLS group at Alvarado Elementary School stand next to a table, backpacks on both sides.

Team One’s backpacks are tidy and organized. Team Two’s bags brim messily with crumpled papers, food wrappers, and loose pencils. Social worker Jeanette Feddes, stopwatch in hand, explains the rules. Find all the objects in the backpack that are listed on your sheet of paper. The first team to get all the objects wins.

After 12 seconds, Feddes stops the watch. “Way to go, Team One!” she shouts, as the kids on the far side of the table beam with satisfaction.

“These are the kinds of hands-on activities that give the kids an “aha” moment,” Feddes says. “If you are messy and disorganized, it takes longer to do things, and you have less time for fun. So, we teach them strategies to stay organized.”

In Feddes’ eight-week CLS group training sessions, students learn many skills that often need bolstering in kids with attention challenges, such as how to do homework, show good sportsmanship, get along with others, and control emotions and impulses.

Their parents, meanwhile, meet weekly to stay current on the students’ lessons and learn how to support their children’s emotional regulation, motivation, and executive functioning – things like planning, remembering, and multitasking. Home-based strategies include giving specific instructions, enforcing routines, and incorporating consistent praise and rewards.

“Parenting a child with attention and behavior challenges can be

hard and frustrating,” Feddes says. “To learn and practice those skills with other parents who understand is powerful.”

Teachers are taught to develop and revise a daily report card that includes each CLS student’s goals, which they share with the students and parents. Together, the components are synergistic.



**What students need is scaffolding for all areas of their life – a plan for home and school.**

– Linda Pfiffner,  
UCSF Psychologist

“An isolated, school-based intervention leaves a lot out,” Feddes says. “When you get everyone together to understand the child and work as a team at home and school, you get better results and more empathy.”

## First San Francisco, Then the World

Several published studies have shown that the CLS program improves students’ behavior, ADHD symptoms, and social and organizational skills – results that persist at least eight months after the program ends. These findings held true in the English and Spanish programs, in-person and online, and internationally in Mexico.

At the same time, the studies have helped reveal specific areas for improvement. Theresa Gundran-Rosales, a social worker at Robert Louis Stevenson Elementary School in San Francisco’s Outer Sunset district, has noted the changes in the CLS program of 2024, compared to when she used it at a different school in 2012.

“The program has more visual elements now; before, it was more text-heavy,” Gundran-Rosales says. “There are more digital aspects and procedures to designate backup school staff when someone is out sick. Everyone is more engaged as a result.”

As refinements in the SFUSD program continue, efforts to expand it elsewhere continue. San Diego schools are now implementing it, and successful results from a pilot in Culiacán, Mexico, have led to interest from other cities in that country, says Lauren Haack, PhD, a UCSF psychologist who led the adaptation of the program for Mexican schools.

“We didn’t need to make a lot of cultural adaptations for students in Mexico; it translated well,” Haack says. “Our hope is this work can be useful to additional countries where ADHD isn’t commonly recognized.”

Pfiffner agrees that accessibility and quality are essential.

“Let’s make the program as good as possible, and available to as many students as possible,” she says. “That’s the ultimate goal.”



# Our Blueprint for A New Era in Children's Health

Creating a world-class pediatric health system for the next century



UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland has served East Bay families for more than a century and consistently ranks among the leading children's hospitals in the nation. In 2031, UCSF will take our beloved Oakland campus to new heights with the construction of a new hospital building—a state-of-the-art, child-centered medical home for patients from across the Bay Area. The seven-story facility will modernize our Oakland hospital, allowing us to serve more families, accommodate the latest technology, and transform care services to meet the pediatric needs of our local community and the entire region.

**Check out some of the key features of our new hospital building:**



## A Modern Emergency Department

The new and expanded Emergency Department will provide double the current space for the child-centered trauma care that has put our Oakland hospital on the map.



## Dedicated Space for Behavioral Health

A newly created, dedicated inpatient behavioral health unit featuring 20 beds will provide essential capacity and services and fill a vital need.



## A New Unit for Infants

The brand-new Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) will feature private rooms, as well as rooms for families with multiple children requiring care.



## A Model of Health Equity

Above all, the new hospital building will stand as a rare example of a world-class hospital that serves patients from all economic backgrounds, regardless of their financial circumstances.



## State-of-the-Art Surgical Suites

Expanded and modernized operating rooms, including seven new surgical suites, will support the latest technology and care across cardiology, neurosurgery, cancer, and orthopaedics.



## More Private Patient Rooms

The number of single-patient rooms will triple – from 39 currently to 137 – with improved, dedicated space for patient and family support.

For more information about how you can contribute, please contact **Jasmine Payne, Assistant Vice Chancellor & Chief Development Officer, Children's Health**, at [Jasmine.C.Payne@ucsf.edu](mailto:Jasmine.C.Payne@ucsf.edu).

# Healthy Lifestyles, Bright Bodies

How UCSF is tackling obesity in kids



Alex, a sweet, soft-spoken, thoughtful 9-year-old, began gaining weight during the pandemic-related school closures in 2020. By fall 2021, his condition had become serious. Alex – whose name has been changed to protect his privacy – was diagnosed with obesity, pre-diabetes, and fatty liver disease.

Alex and his parents were referred to the Healthy Lifestyles Clinic at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital (ZSFG), where UCSF pediatricians provide treatment for children with overweight and obesity. The family met with a pediatrician, a nutritionist, and a physical activity case manager, who secured Alex a scholarship for swimming lessons through San Francisco Recreation and Parks.

Two years later, Alex’s weight had stabilized, and his pre-diabetes and fatty liver disease had resolved. Amy Beck, MD, a UCSF pediatrician and co-director of the Healthy Lifestyles Clinic, says Alex’s physical and emotional transformations have been enormous. “He has so much more confidence and enthusiasm

for movement now. He really seems to love it. It’s been great to witness.”

## The Power of Prevention

Beck was a fourth-year medical student doing a rotation in emergency pediatrics when the power of prevention hit home.

“I remember thinking that we’re really fixing these kids,” she recalls. “We’re fixing this kid’s ankle. We’re fixing this kid’s pneumonia. But then I started realizing that half the patients I saw were at high risk for diabetes. I had this feeling that we were addressing the things we knew how to fix but not these harder issues.”

That was Beck’s “aha” moment. She recognized that the challenges many of her patients were facing might not affect them today but could reduce their quality of life – or even its length. “As a pediatrician, my job is to set children up for a healthy future,” she says.

In 2014, Beck joined the UCSF faculty as a pediatrician and co-launched ZSFG’s Healthy Lifestyles Clinic to offer evidence-based strategies for treating childhood obesity in

underserved children and their families and change the course of the diabetes epidemic.

## The Social Determinants of Health

The children referred to the Healthy Lifestyles Clinic with obesity tend to exhibit four major health complications: pre-diabetes, fatty liver disease, high blood pressure, and obstructive sleep apnea – conditions that have long-lasting repercussions for the patient’s health and generate significant costs for the health system every year.

Beck says that structural challenges – often called “social determinants of health” – underlie many of the health conditions that her patients experience. Food, income, and housing insecurity; language and cultural barriers; and limited access to physical activity all play roles.

“If you’re food-insecure, processed foods are just more affordable than fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, fish, even dairy products,” she says. “And there’s a strong connection between the intake of processed food, weight gain, and all these other complications.”

Income level also plays a part in access to exercise. “Even for a highly resourced parent, registering for sports programs can be super overwhelming. It’s all online. It’s time sensitive. And it’s expensive. If you need a scholarship, there is a huge amount of paperwork. So, if you’re a parent who doesn’t have an office job or doesn’t have access to a laptop during the day, it’s really tricky.”

## Bright Bodies

In 2021, the Healthy Lifestyles Clinic launched the Bright Bodies program to provide more

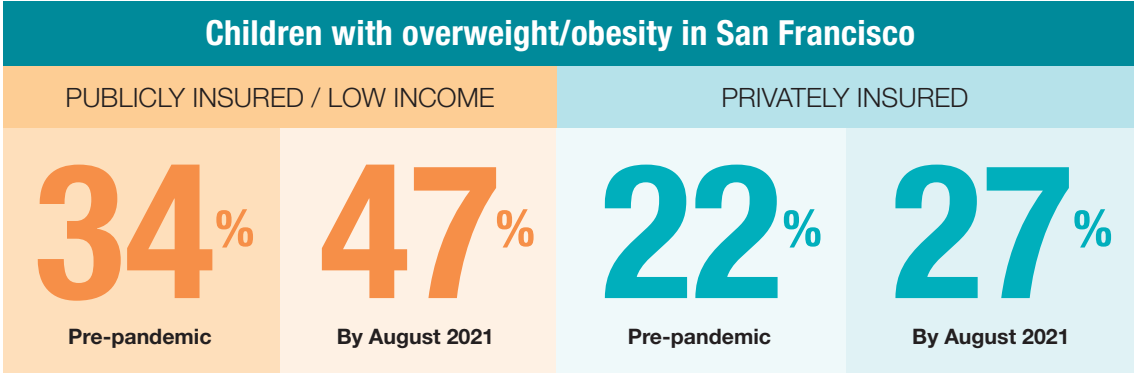
hands-on support for exercise and nutrition. Patients participate in fun, intensive physical activities outdoors and learn about healthy dietary changes. Clinic staff members also work with parents to help them enroll in CalFresh, access other food resources, and apply for scholarships to physical activity programs.

Alex and his family were regulars at Bright Bodies and took advantage of several Recreation and Parks classes, which Beck credits as instrumental to his recovery. “We see so many patients like this,” she says. “Patients lose weight, their blood sugar normalizes, their liver inflammation improves. For some, like Alex, the benefits go well beyond what we can measure. Kids learn to swim or join a basketball team – activities with physical but also far-reaching social benefits.”

According to the US Preventive Services Task Force and the American Academy of Pediatrics, intensive health behavior lifestyle treatment programs like this should be the standard of care for obesity prevention. But due to funding constraints, ZSFG is among the few hospitals in the nation offering them.

The intensive case management offered through the Healthy Lifestyles Clinic and the Bright Bodies program are funded entirely through a variety of short-term grants. When these grants expire, Beck’s team has to stop offering popular resources like food vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables and scholarships for sports programs – resources that have become a lifeline for patient families.

“We are always looking for opportunities to get this work funded because the impact is so clear,” Beck says. “We see huge benefits for these kids. This is the kind of prevention work I’ve always been excited about.”



Source: Maxwell et al. “Changes in BMI prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic among children: a retrospective cohort study in San Francisco, CA,” <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-20311-4>.



## CLINICAL CARE

# Coming Home

*Dr. Anthony Ong was diagnosed with hemophilia shortly after he was born, and he spent most of his life in treatment at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals. Now 33, Ong is back at UCSF as a physical therapist working with children being treated for cancer and blood disorders.*

### What was it like growing up with hemophilia?

There are a lot of growing pains when you grow up a little bit different. We all have differences, whether it's your sexuality or your nationality, or something else. Mine happened to be related to health. I was lucky because a lot of my family members are in medicine, so I grew up in a really positive environment when it came to my condition.

### When did you start treatment at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland?

I have been at Children's Hospital Oakland for as long as I can remember. It wasn't just a hospital to me, it was a community – a second home. I had my annual checkups and hospital stays, but I also spent a lot of time with the hemophilia community here. There were events, holiday parties around Christmas, summer camps. There was always something going on.



### What inspired you to go into medicine?

I was really active as a kid, and I was an athlete in high school and college. I got hurt a lot, and – this might sound weird – I really enjoyed the rehab process. I enjoyed the pain of growth and development and recovery. The human body really fascinated me. So physical therapy just seemed like the right fit.

### What made you decide to return to UCSF?

I always felt like I wanted to come back. And as I went through school, I realized I wanted to work in pediatrics. As a physical therapist, when you work with kids, your job is to play, to make things meaningful and fun. That really drives me as a professional. I also realized that I wanted to give back to the community that gave me so much.

### How has your experience as a patient influenced your work as a provider?

I try to be the provider that I always wanted. Doctors want to make you better, but when you have a genetic condition, you don't get better. This is just my life, right? So, I don't set out to make kids better.

My goal is to empower them to focus on what's possible. To make sure that when they leave here, they feel they can go out there and succeed.

### What's it like working with children being treated for cancer and blood disorders?

It's so unique. My job is to get them moving and make them happy through play. Sometimes it's easy, like before they start a treatment cycle. We hang out, we play hopscotch, tag, or hide and seek in the halls. Sometimes it's harder. They're going through treatment. They're in pain and miserable. So, we play more low-key games or do some gentle stretching. Sometimes they can't get out of bed. They can't move. Their muscles don't work. So, I shift from being a coach to being a friend. I just listen.

Sometimes it's great. It's the most rewarding experience to watch them grow, complete treatment, and ring the bell. You go home knowing you did your job. On the opposite side, not everyone is that lucky. Some of them lose their fight, and you feel like you lost a friend. But this is what we signed up for. We are here for the good, the bad, all of it.

### Do you ever share your own experiences with your patients?

All the time. I think kids like to know that there are people like them out there. There's a certain level of unspoken camaraderie when you know you're not the only one.

## ONCOLOGY

# CHRIS' STORY: NEVER GIVE UP



Chris Ramirez always loved baseball.

As a junior at Capuchino High School in San Bruno, Chris was a utility man with a powerful arm. He could pitch, catch, field grounders, and track down fly balls. His versatility and positivity made him a team favorite.

But during his senior year, as winter gave way to spring and friends grew excited to celebrate the end of an era, Chris felt ... off. There were headaches and other strange symptoms. "I was supposed to be worried about senior prom and graduation," he says. "But one day, I had a stroke."

Chris was rushed to a local hospital, where a CT scan revealed a mass in his brain. Doctors diagnosed a brain tumor and told Chris' mother, Sara, a single parent, that her son might only have a few months to live. But they also referred Chris to UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals – ranked as the best in Northern California for cancer care. Nalin Gupta, MD, performed a successful surgery to remove the tumor and gave Chris a revised prognosis: With rigorous treatment, a full recovery was possible.

Chris dove into chemotherapy with the spirit of an athlete. "As they say in baseball, I was gonna go down swinging," he says. "I didn't want to

feel sorry for myself. I wanted to go out there and do the best that I could." Chris recalls being less worried about cancer and more concerned about reassuring his mom that he would be OK and getting back to baseball.

Sara and Chris fought back together. Chris lost his sense of taste for everything except Sara's cooking, which soothed him at his lowest moments. And even while in the throes of treatment, Chris worked hard to get back to the baseball field, returning for his team's two final games. After graduation, the Make-A-Wish Foundation offered Chris the chance to suit up with the Los Angeles Dodgers for spring training – a lifelong dream come true.

Today, Chris is a healthy 32-year-old father who has hung up his baseball cleats in favor of a life devoted to pediatric cancer advocacy; he regularly appears as a speaker and a volunteer at local events. He says he wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for his mother's love and the dedication of his care team at UCSF, which not only saved his life but also treated him like family.

"I am beyond grateful for what they did for me," Chris says. "They cared for me like I was their own child. They told me everything would be OK, and it was."

"I know UCSF will find a cure for pediatric cancer someday. Until then, I will lend my voice and my story to make sure kids like me never give up. I know that's why I'm still here."

Chris with son Alexander, 5.



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## Join us on April 5!

Notes & Words is a magical, one-of-a-kind evening. With readings from best-selling authors and musical sets from talented acts, this is a night of smart, satisfying entertainment that you won't want to miss. All proceeds benefit UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals.

To purchase tickets, visit **[notesandwords.org](https://notesandwords.org)**.

