

A NEWSLETTER FOR
FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

Connections

WINTER 2026



The Power of Philanthropy

How Every Gift Drives Extraordinary Care for Kids

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Designing Our Next Hospital

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Rhydian in Community

Our patient ambassador Rhydian not only survived cancer but also has inspired thousands of people at our community events and created lasting impact for our hospitals.

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Roger's Miracle

A new application for advanced technology gave one toddler a second chance and has the potential to give new hope to countless patients like him.



Dear Friends,

In pediatric care, connection is more than a feeling. It's the foundation of everything we do at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals.

When a child and their family entrust us with their care, we meet them with clinical excellence, but also with presence, empathy, and respect. That human connection helps calm fear, build trust, and guide the small choices that add up to the best outcomes: a gentle handoff at the bedside, a moment of laughter to ease a tough procedure, a team that sees and supports the whole family.

As a nurse and leader, I've learned that connection is inspiring. When we role-model it with our colleagues, it spreads naturally — from the day nurse to the night nurse, from child life specialists to imaging technicians — across every service that touches our patient families. It's how we create the healing environment the people in our care deserve.

This issue of *Connections* celebrates the many ways you are part of that circle of connection. You connect with our mission when you join a community event and meet the people your generosity empowers. When you make gifts of flexible funding to our hospitals, you help us meet our patients' greatest needs the moment they arise. When you support our new hospital project in Oakland — a space designed specifically for children and families, where connection is built into every detail — you are standing with us as we build for the future.

However you engage, please know that your partnership strengthens the bonds that carry our patients through their most vulnerable moments. Thank you for being by their side — and ours.

With gratitude,

Judie Boehmer, RN, MN
Chief Nursing Officer, UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals



Where Hope Takes Shape

Honoring Panda Express' Impact on Children's Health

UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals recently hosted a special event recognizing the Panda Cares Center of Hope, a dedicated healing space made possible through the extraordinary generosity of our partner Panda Express. The Center of Hope reflects Panda's four pillars of care — mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health — and supports programs like child life services, art and music therapy, teen activities, and school programming. Panda Express has contributed more than \$14.8 million to our hospitals, including a transformative \$11 million commitment that established one of the nation's first Panda Cares Centers of Hope at our Oakland campus. Their partnership continues to enrich the patient experience and uplift families across our communities.

TOPICS

What it Means to Invest in Our Kids

The Transformative Power of Flexible Funding

Breakthrough programs. Unexpected needs. Life-changing opportunities. Flexible funding makes “yes” possible. Over the past year, discretionary gifts have allowed us to meet our patients’ most urgent needs. Here’s how.



DISCOVERY

Breakthroughs Born From Bold Investment

Every day, scientists at UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospitals tackle the toughest challenges in pediatric medicine so kids can get back to learning, playing, and growing. Discretionary funding has helped spark precision cures for aggressive childhood cancers, advance breakthrough gene-editing research that could cure sickle cell disease, and launch vaccines that protect millions of lives. Flexible donor support fuels innovation at its earliest, most fragile stages, when bold ideas need a champion and the potential for impact is enormous.



SOCIAL SERVICES

Support That Makes Healing Possible

Great health care is about more than just great medicine. It’s about ensuring that families have what they need during the most challenging moments of their lives. Flexible funding empowers our social workers to provide crucial, often life-changing support, including vital medical equipment, transportation, lodging, food assistance, supportive counseling, and family therapy. These resources lighten the financial and emotional load, allowing families to focus on what matters most: helping their children heal.



ACCESS

Keeping Our Promise to All Kids

UCSF Benioff Children’s Hospitals are world-class centers of pediatric excellence as well as a safety-net for Northern California families. More than 70% of the patients who visit our Oakland campus — and nearly half at our San Francisco hospital — are uninsured or underinsured. Flexible investments make millions of dollars in free and discounted care possible, ensuring that all kids have a fair shot at healthy futures.



CHILD LIFE

Protecting the Magic of Childhood

Our Child Life programs — including art and music therapy, our hospital school, and our beloved facility dog program — nurture the emotional resilience that help kids heal. When families reflect on their hospital experience, they consistently cite our child life programs as having played a key role in helping them endure. “Medical treatment was just one piece

of the healing puzzle,” says Dawn, whose daughter underwent cancer treatment. “Child life gave Scarlett these precious, magical, simple moments of joy and laughter.”

These transformative services are not covered by insurance — they exist only because of donors who believe every child deserves comfort, hope, and joy, even amid illness.



Designing the Future of Pediatric Health

A Q&A with Dr. Nicholas Holmes, UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals President



UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland has delivered world-class care to Bay Area families for more than 100 years. In 2031, we will elevate that legacy with a new, modern, child-centered hospital building that will allow us to serve more patients, capitalize on the latest technology, and transform pediatric medicine in Northern California. We spoke with Nicholas Holmes, MD, MBA, president of UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals, about how this project will redefine children's health for generations to come.

There is so much to look forward to about this new building. What are you most excited about?

It's really hard to choose! This project represents so much for our future. We're not just putting up a new building, we're also raising the standard of care for every child across Northern California. In many ways, this new space really completes our comprehensive pediatric health system, firmly establishing UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals as the

anchor of children's health care for families throughout the region. That's huge!

How will the new space enable us to care for more patients and their families?

There are so many important ways. The new hospital will feature a state-of-the-art Emergency Department (ED) that ultimately will be twice the size of what we have now. We are one of only three level 1 pediatric trauma centers in Northern California, so kids are flown into our Oakland ED from all over the state and beyond. This expansion means those children will arrive at a facility that's bigger, more modern, and designed to ease the experience for the entire family.

We're also tripling the number of private patient rooms, from 39 to 137. So yes, we will have more space for more patients, but honestly, it goes beyond beds. It's about giving patients, families, and staff environments that feel welcoming, safe, comfortable, and healing. These details matter when you're going through a difficult health challenge.

In addition to these thoughtfully designed clinical spaces, there will be therapeutic gardens, terraces, and lounges that we hope will make a real difference for our families.

Technology is a significant theme in this project. How will it shape care in the new facility?

Technology is huge for us. In Oakland, our youngest building is 56 years old, and our oldest building is 100 years old. But even in those outdated spaces, our teams have done incredible work, providing high-quality clinical care day in and day out while also pioneering remarkable scientific breakthroughs. We are on the cusp of curing sickle cell disease, for example!

Just imagine what they'll be able to do in a space built for the future. The new Emergency Department, the advanced neonatal intensive care unit, and seven new state-of-the-art surgical suites will be equipped with the technology our teams need to perform at their best.

A new inpatient behavioral health unit will be one of the centerpieces of the new building. Why is this so important to the region?

This is something we're really proud of. It will be the first of its kind for youths in Northern California, and it fills a huge gap in care. Kids in crisis deserve expert, compassionate mental health services close to home, and this unit will provide that.

This new resource also reflects our core belief as a hospital community: Children's health is not just about healing bodies; it's about supporting the whole child. Mental and emotional health are fundamental to that.

Our hope is that this behavioral health unit becomes a destination program in this region — a place families can count on to provide the specialized support that young people need during an incredibly tough time in their lives.

How can our readers get involved in helping make this vision a reality?

Honestly, we can only build this future with the help of our community. Philanthropy is what makes projects like this possible — it's what allows us to dream bigger, move faster, and create the kind of hospital kids in Northern California deserve. If this new space inspires you, we'd love to connect. Every contribution, big or small, helps us take another step toward opening these doors.

To learn more or explore how you can get involved, please contact Jasmine Payne, chief development officer of UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals, at Jasmine.C.Payne@ucsf.edu.



A Hospital for the Next Century

Modern emergency department:

Double the current size, purpose-built for trauma care and rapid response, setting a new standard for crisis care



State-of-the-art surgical suites:

Seven new, fully modernized operating rooms equipped for cutting-edge procedures in cardiology, neurosurgery, cancer, and orthopedics



Advanced neonatal intensive care:

Private NICU rooms, including accommodations for families with multiple infants in care, supporting healing from the very beginning



Dedicated behavioral health services:

A first-of-its-kind, 20-bed inpatient unit designed specifically for youths in crisis, meeting a growing and urgent need



Private patient experience:

Tripling the number of single-patient rooms — from 39 currently to 137 — offering calm, comfort, and privacy for families



EVENTS

The Power of One, The Strength of Many

How one patient — and thousands of partners — are creating lasting impact



When Rhydian walks into a room — whether it's a hospital gala, a golf course, or a meeting with UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital leaders — something magical happens.

Diagnosed with a rare muscle cancer at age 9, Rhydian endured months of grueling treatment with a determination and humor that lifted not only his own spirits but also those of everyone around him. He turned hospital rounds into comedy hour, inspired his care team to join in the laughter, and emerged from his experience with a mission to give back.

Today, as a UCSF Patient Ambassador and Orinda's first Youth Volunteer of the Year, Rhydian channels that same optimism, gratitude, and creativity into the hospital's fundraising events — emceeing, performing music, and sharing his story with disarming honesty. He's more than a voice for patients; he's a reminder of why community matters and how one young person's courage can inspire thousands. Here are just a few moments where Rhydian helped make our events unforgettable.

A CROWD-LIFTING MC



Energy soared as Rhydian took the mic to rally 350 participants at our inaugural Bolt on the Bay 5K walk/run at China Basin Park in San Francisco last fall. He shared stories, cheered on runners, and finished fifth in the race! The event raised more than \$200,000 for UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals, fueling essential programs for patients and their families. The day proved just how powerful it is when supporters like you show up for children's health.

SWINGING FOR MIRACLES

Before the first ball was hit at Marriott's 2024 NorCal Golf Classic last June, Rhydian teed up the crowd with humor and inspiration. Throughout the day, he signed autographs out on the course and infused the event with his signature charm. Hosted in Napa/American Canyon, the tournament raised more than \$150,000 for Children's Miracle Network Hospitals, including UCSF. It was more than a round of golf, it was a gathering of partners committed to making miracles for local kids.



A NIGHT TO REMEMBER



Dressed to the nines, Rhydian delivered a heartfelt keynote address that moved guests and helped raise a record-breaking \$500,000 at the black-tie Children's Health Guild Gala in May 2025. The event celebrated the impact of Child Life programs at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals and George Mark Children's House and brought together supporters dedicated to creating joy and comfort for patients and their families. It was an evening when generosity filled the room.

BOOTS, HATS & HEART

The Grand National Rodeo came to the Cow Palace in Daly City in October, and Western spirit was in full swing as Rhydian shared a special jumbotron message and joined other pediatric cancer patients as a VIP guest. The event raised more than \$5,300 for our Child Life programs, supporting kids facing significant challenges. This lively tradition united families, partners, and the community to celebrate courage and compassion in true champion style.



**Inspired to make a difference and join Rhydian at his next big moment?
Check out give.ucsfbenioffchildrens.org/events for a list of upcoming opportunities.**

Roger's Miracle

How a Groundbreaking Surgery Gave a Reno Toddler a Second Chance



The day after 3-year-old Roger Andrews III had a procedure on his brain, he started talking again.

The Reno, Nevada, toddler began losing his speech at age 2. He'd also developed troubling motor symptoms: arm twitches, eye rolls, and jerky movements that affected his balance. After a local neurologist diagnosed Roger with epilepsy, he was put on a waiting list for an MRI.

"Meanwhile, the medications weren't working, his seizures were getting worse, and his whole personality changed," said Roger's mother, Jackie Laxalt. "We were referred to UCSF, where they did scans and found a tumor in his brain."

Innovation in Action

Peter Sun, MD, a pediatric neurosurgeon at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals who sees patients monthly in Reno, suggested treating Roger with laser interstitial thermal therapy, or LITT, a technique that has been used to treat epilepsy for some time.

"It's less invasive than the standard surgical procedure, which involves removing part of the skull," said Sun, surgical director of UCSF's Pediatric Brain Center. "Instead, a tiny incision is made to facilitate the use of a laser that burns the targeted tissue."

Laxalt called her son's results nothing short of miraculous.

"Roger was out of the OR around 6 p.m. The next morning, he was pointing and saying words," she said. "He's mimicking, he's back on his milestones, he's potty training again. His speech and occupational therapists are blown away."

A Novel Application

Roger's procedure was done by pediatric neurosurgeon Winson Ho, MD, a pioneer in using LITT to treat kids with tumors. LITT has historically been used in children with specific types of epilepsy, not tumors, noted Nalin Gupta, MD, PhD, chief of pediatric neurological surgery at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals.



Roger hasn't had a seizure in months, and he's regaining all the skills he lost. His personality is back. This technique is a miracle.

— Jackie Laxalt, grateful parent

"Using LITT for tumors, the way Dr. Ho has been doing, is a more recent development," Gupta said. "The primary advantages are its minimally invasive nature, faster recovery time, and the potential to still proceed to craniotomy — surgically opening the skull — if you don't get the desired response."

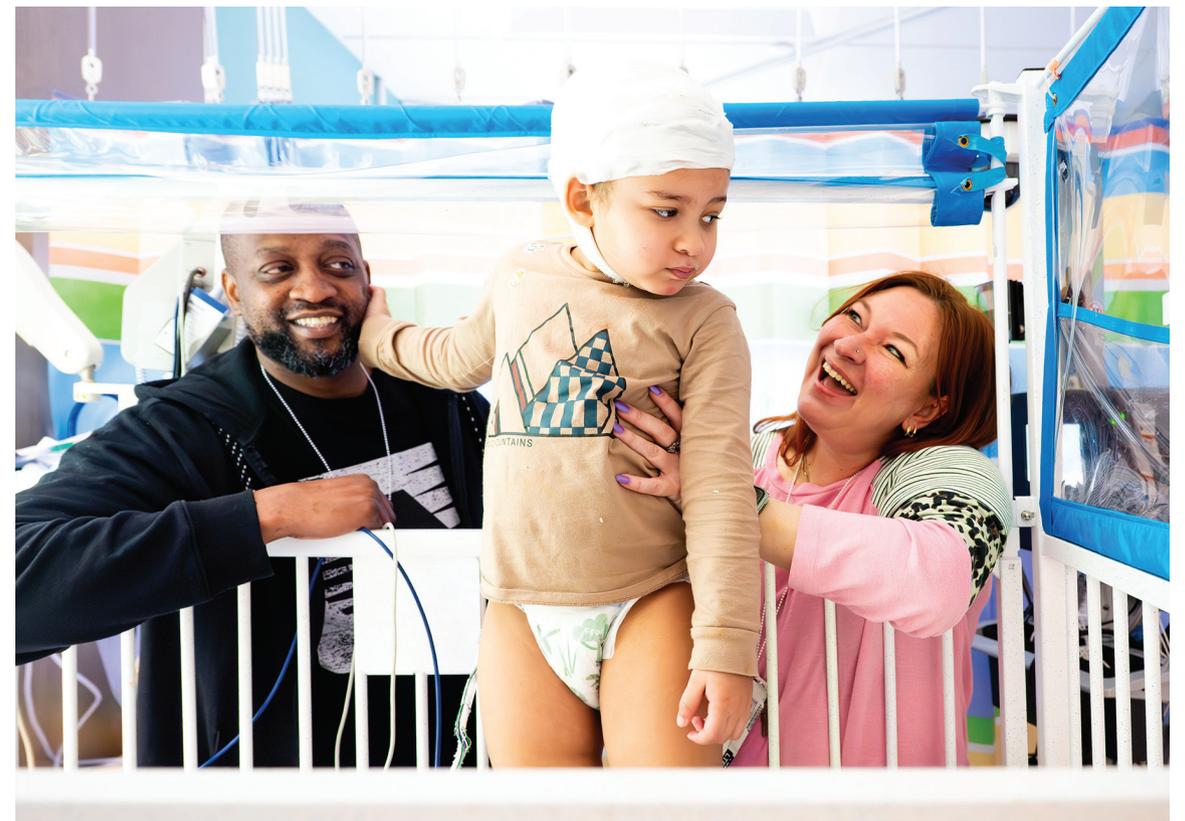
LITT is especially useful for children with lower-grade tumors (those that grow and spread relatively slowly) that are difficult or dangerous

to treat with open surgery. This may be because they are located deep in the brain or near important areas that carry a significant risk of complications, Ho said.

"It can turn a risky surgery into something fairly routine, where the kid wakes up feeling fine and goes home within a couple of days, instead of having a surgery with a seven- to 10-day recovery and inpatient rehab," he said.

Because the research in this area of treatment is limited, Ho will lead a multicenter clinical trial through the UCSF-led Pediatric Neuro-Oncology Consortium to study the long-term outcomes for children who receive LITT to treat low-grade brain tumors that cannot be successfully resolved with other therapies.

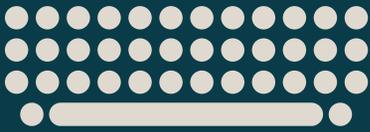
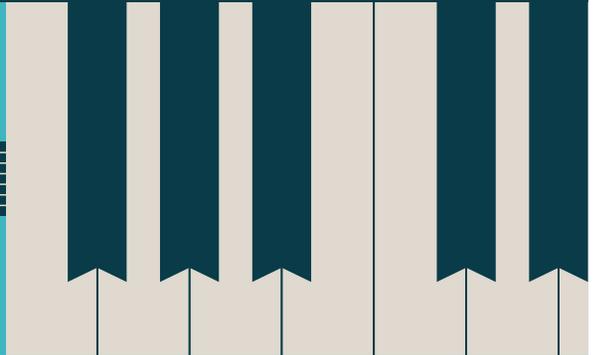
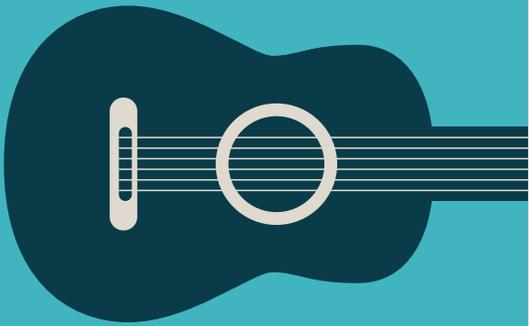
For Laxalt, the verdict on LITT is already in: "Roger hasn't had a seizure in months, and he's regaining all the skills he lost. His personality is back," she said. "This technique is a miracle."



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NOTES & WORDS

SATURDAY MAY 2 | FOX THEATER, OAKLAND



Join us for an unforgettable night!

On Saturday, May 2nd, Notes & Words returns to the Fox Theater in Oakland! Enjoy incredible performances, unexpected moments, and stories that will stay with you long after the evening comes to an end. All proceeds benefit UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals.

To purchase tickets, visit notesandwords.org.

