

A NEWSLETTER FOR
FRIENDS AND SUPPORTERS

Connections

FALL 2026



Surrounded by Care

How Social Services Builds a Team
of Support Around Every Family

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Eating Disorders

We spoke with UCSF researcher Marissa Raymond-Flesch, MD, MPH, who is exploring new ways to understand and treat eating disorders, from psilocybin-assisted therapy to GLP-1 medications.

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Connected by Care

Through years of specialized care for complex medical conditions, Cait found connection and purpose at UCSF. Today, she's pursuing a career in nursing and helping improve the experience for other patients.

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The Power of Endowment

Years after a clinical trial transformed Lew Parker's life, his family's endowed professorship continues to advance pediatric epilepsy care by supporting new generations of leadership at UCSF.



As we move through another year of growth at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals, I'm proud to see the strength of our health system reflected in our best *U.S. News & World Report* rankings yet.

We are now tied as the no. 2 children's hospital in the state of California. For the first time, four of our specialties rank among the nation's top 10, and we improved in five of the 10 ranked specialties. These results continue the progress we've seen year after year and reflect the exceptional care our teams provide every day.

That progress is about so much more than any one specialty or program. It's about the investments we're making across the board in the people, places, and ideas that strengthen care across our health system. Our new hospital in Oakland and the expansion of our Pediatric Blood Disorder Research Center a few blocks away are examples of how we're creating new environments for clinicians, researchers, and care teams to collaborate, innovate, and advance care for all kids.

The stories in this issue of *Connections* reflect that same spirit of progress. You'll meet a physician-scientist pursuing new approaches to treating eating disorders and learn how philanthropy is strengthening pediatric neurology for generations to come. You'll also see how our social services teams and child life specialists help families navigate complex medical journeys, and how programs like Project Cheer bring our community together in support of children.

Each story offers a different perspective on what it takes to provide better care for children. Together, they demonstrate a health system that is continually learning, growing, and working to meet the needs of every family we serve.

Your generosity helps make that progress possible. Thank you for your partnership.

Sincerely,

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



Our Community Goes the Distance

A sea of green shirts. Cheering supporters along the waterfront. Patients and families crossing the finish line alongside the physicians and care teams who saw them through some of life's hardest moments. At Bolt on the Bay, every step told a story about the community behind UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals.

On August 22, 450 walkers and runners gathered at China Basin Park for the annual Bolt on the Bay 5K, raising over \$250,000 for children's health. But the community behind Bolt was in motion well before race day. Leading up to the event, participants rallied friends, families, and their own networks, generating 70% of the total funds raised through personal appeals. Much of that support provides flexible funding that helps our hospitals respond to the needs of children and families as they arise.

One step, one gift, one community at a time, Bolt showed just how far we can go together.

Care Beyond Medicine

Medical care treats illness. Social workers help families navigate everything else. They listen, advocate, and connect children and caregivers with the practical, emotional, and community resources that help healing take hold.

Food and Essentials

Easing the financial strain of a child's illness



Equipment and Supplies

Preparing families for life at home



Community Resources

Building support close to home

Lodging

Keeping families together during treatment



Transportation

Making every appointment possible



Mental Health

Supporting families through fear, grief, and uncertainty



Advocacy and Guidance

Elevating family voices, strengthening communication with care teams, and helping navigate difficult decisions



Education

Keeping children connected to learning



Looking Beyond the Diagnosis

Every family arrives with different needs. One may need a car seat before a newborn can safely leave the hospital; another may be struggling after missing weeks of work to care for a sick child. Social workers listen to each family's story, identify what could stand in the way of care, and tailor their response to what matters most.

From Stability to Possibility

Limited resources often require social workers to focus on families with the most urgent needs. A recent gift has stabilized social services across our hospital system, allowing teams to respond more consistently. These funds have also created breathing room to look beyond immediate demands and begin planning for the future.

Building the Future

With additional donor investment, we can:

- **Assess every referred patient**, not just those with the most urgent needs,
- **Reach thousands of additional families** with social services annually,
- **Expand housing opportunities**, ensuring timely support for those in need,
- **Strengthen community partnerships** that support families after they return home.



We meet families where they are. By understanding what matters most to them, we can help remove barriers to care and make an incredibly difficult experience just a little bit easier.

— Rosa Solorzano, LCSW, who, with Shabren Harvey-Smith, LCSW, manages social services at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals in San Francisco and Oakland

Where Could We Go from Here?

How one physician-scientist is reshaping research in adolescent mental health



Growing up in New Mexico, Marissa Raymond-Flesch, MD, MPH, saw firsthand how teen pregnancy, violence, and substance use shaped the lives of young people. Those experiences sparked her interest in adolescent medicine and continue to shape her work at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals, where she studies eating disorders, psilocybin-assisted therapy, and GLP-1 medications.

You started out focusing on reproductive health and moved into eating disorders. What shaped that journey?

Research is expensive, and it's a privilege to do it. I really try to stay grounded in one question: *What is the most impactful thing I could be doing right now?*

When I first entered adolescent medicine, reproductive health felt like the most impactful place to start because of what I had seen growing up and in clinic.

Then COVID hit. The number of young people presenting with eating disorders literally skyrocketed. They weren't just more numerous, they were much sicker too. It quickly became the most urgent need in front of me.

That's when I started asking myself, *What new ideas do I have? What box haven't we opened yet? Where could we go from here?*

I remember one patient in particular who was incredibly ill. I realized I had nothing else to offer her. I went to lunch with a colleague to process how helpless I felt, and for the first time I said out loud, *"I keep having this crazy idea about doing a psychedelic trial for patients with eating disorders."*

She said, *"You have to do that trial."* That's really when it started.

How did you turn that vision into a study?

I had already been following some of the psychedelic work happening at UCSF, especially the MDMA trial for post-traumatic stress disorder. What stopped me in my tracks wasn't simply that people got better but that they stayed better after treatment ended.

Usually, if you take away the intervention, people regress. Here, people continued improving. I remember thinking, *"This is something totally different."*

That led to SPANYA [Study of Psilocybin for Anorexia in Young Adults], a donor-funded study

of psilocybin-assisted therapy for young adults with anorexia nervosa. Participants age 18 to 25 receive two supervised doses of psilocybin — a naturally occurring psychedelic compound found in some mushrooms — as well as psychotherapy before and afterward, and extensive medical and psychological screening. From the beginning, young adults who have dealt with anorexia and parents who've supported a child have helped shape the study.

Why psilocybin?

First, we zeroed in on serotonin, a brain chemical involved in mood and behavior. We know it is implicated in anorexia. But people who are profoundly malnourished aren't producing enough of it for medications like SSRIs [selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors] to work well. Psilocybin works differently. It mimics the role that serotonin plays in the body.

We also think psilocybin may create greater cognitive flexibility. At its core, anorexia is an illness that pulls people into incredibly rigid patterns of thinking and behavior. A colleague of mine sometimes describes it as being like a snow globe. When you shake a snow globe, everything that had settled begins moving again before it resettles. We think psilocybin may create a similar effect where people step out of those deeply entrenched patterns long enough for therapy to help them build new ones.

What are you seeing so far?

We're tracking traditional outcomes like weight and eating disorder behaviors, but it's too early to predict what the final data will look like. I can tell you that some of the most meaningful changes are what patients tell us. Some describe noticing hunger cues they hadn't noticed before. Others simply talk about living more fully. One participant told us they'd joined two new clubs. Those may sound like small things, but for someone whose illness has become so isolating, they are massive.

Your research has also expanded into GLP-1 medications. What drew you there?

I think one of the privileges of being a researcher at UCSF is that you get to keep asking, *What's the next thing we could try?*

As GLP-1 use became more widespread, people started talking about food noise — that continuous experience of thinking about what you're going to eat next. Many people on GLP-1s report that it was just gone. That fascinated me. It made think that these medications weren't just changing the body, they also were changing the brain. I wondered whether they could help people with binge-eating disorder by interrupting that cycle.

But there's another side to this. These medications are already being prescribed to people as young as 12, even though we know very little about their long-term effects. Some clinicians worry that they could even make eating disorder behaviors worse over time.

With philanthropic support, we're following young people after they've been prescribed GLP-1 medications by other providers. By tracking eating behaviors, mood, cognition, food noise, and other outcomes, we're building evidence to better understand how these medications affect adolescents and whether they could eventually treat binge-eating disorder.

What continues to draw you to new ideas?

Being a scientist is genuinely a creative process. I get to think about new ideas alongside extraordinary colleagues from different disciplines.

The suffering I witness drives the need for more ideas, and I follow the ideas that have good science behind them. If I feel like our team at UCSF can investigate those ideas safely, then I think they're worth exploring. Getting to see changes in a patient who's struggled for so long is deeply moving.

Tell me about a new project that you're excited about.

UCSF was just awarded a grant from the federal government to become the National Center of Excellence for Eating Disorders. This grant will allow us to reach many more pediatricians, primary care providers, and others to increase early detection and treatment for patients with eating disorders. It will amplify our impact and reach. I can't wait to get to work on it!

CAIT'S CALLING TO CARE

As a child, Cait Joseph was always happiest in motion and in connection with others.

She spent her early years climbing trees, backpacking with the Girl Scouts, and greeting nearly everyone she encountered. In high school, Cait — standing 6 feet, 4 inches tall — threw herself into volleyball. Soon there were club teams, recruiting camps, and conversations with college coaches.

But beneath the surface, another story was quietly unfolding.

On their own, Cait's health issues did not seem alarming. She developed unusual rashes. Common illnesses lingered longer than expected. Around age 9, the fainting began. Then another symptom would emerge, only to fade again.

"There were always these little things," Cait's mom, Allison, recalls. "We just handled them one at a time. Looking back, you can see they were breadcrumbs. We just had no idea where they were leading."

Things came into sharper focus when, at age 11, Cait passed out while riding her bike to school. A teacher driving behind her recognized what had happened and pulled into traffic, shielding

Cait from oncoming cars until she regained consciousness.

"Every time something happened, I'd deal with it and keep moving," Cait says. "I just wanted to keep living my life."



Illness has taken so much from her. But it hasn't taken who she is.

— Allison, Cait's Mom

Life Interrupted

By the time Cait reached high school, the symptoms that had quietly followed her through childhood became impossible to ignore. Her body had become increasingly unpredictable. She fainted without warning. Severe allergic reactions sent her to the emergency room. Eventually even eating became painful.

Still, Cait kept moving forward. She poured herself into volleyball and friendships, determined to hold onto the life she loved. But during her senior year, a volleyball injury required surgery. A second injury required another surgery — which was followed by devastating news: She would never play volleyball again. Before she had time to grieve

that loss, COVID arrived, abruptly ending her senior year and shrinking Cait's world even further.

As the months passed, Cait's health continued to decline. Trips to the emergency room became routine, offering temporary relief before the cycle began again. Local physicians in Sacramento had exhausted many of the available options, leaving Cait's family searching for a team that could step back and consider the whole picture.

That search brought the family to UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals, where specialists across gastroenterology, neurology, cardiology, pain medicine, and other disciplines worked together, to understand a complex condition that crossed traditional boundaries of care.

"We never stopped looking," recalls pediatric gastroenterologist Yvette Wild, MD. "Every answer led to another question, but we never stopped looking for ways to help Cait live the life she wanted."

More than Medicine

Two days after Christmas 2021, Cait arrived at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital San Francisco expecting another brief admission. She stayed for 141 days.



By then, eating had become nearly impossible. Even drinking water caused intense pain. Feeding tubes failed. Her body reacted unpredictably to treatment. Specialists across the hospital continued searching for answers while her world gradually narrowed to the four walls of her room.

"It felt like everything I wanted was on the other side of this glass wall," Cait recalls. "I could see the life I wanted happening around me, but I couldn't reach it. I wasn't just fighting to stay alive. I wanted to live."

Meanwhile, the people caring for Cait made sure that the life inside those walls remained full. Nurses came to her room after long shifts simply to sit and talk. Child life specialists found opportunities to celebrate Cait's milestones — her birthday, holidays, even prom. During rounds, conversations with physicians stretched beyond test results to the future Cait still hoped to build.

Before long, Cait became part of the hospital community. She made cards for patients, helped prepare occupational therapy activities for younger patients, and befriended other teenagers on the unit who were struggling with hospitalization.

"By the end of her stay, everyone knew Cait," recalls nurse Devon Farrell. "We used to joke that she was the mayor of the hospital because she remembered everyone's story, and every person who walked into her room left feeling a little better."

Finding Purpose

Today, Cait is building that life. While her medical challenges remain, she is pursuing a career in nursing, inspired by the care she received at UCSF.

"I want to be the kind of nurse who listens and advocates for people the way others did for me," Cait says. She has also found her way back

to volleyball — this time as a coach, supporting a young athlete discovering the same joy she once found on the court.

Cait also remains active in the hospital community. She serves on the UCSF Youth Advisory Council, working to improve the patient experience, and helps plan the patient prom and Halloween celebrations — beloved moments that once carried her through her own hospital stay.

In September, Cait was honored at the Dreamfest Concert for UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals with the 2026 Colin Powell Medal of Courage for her resilience, compassion and unwavering commitment to others.

For Allison, the award simply affirms what she has always known about her daughter.

"Illness has taken so much from her," she says. "But it hasn't taken who she is."

THE GIFT THAT KEEPS GIVING

Today, Lew Parker rides the school bus home on his own.

For most families, it's an ordinary milestone. For the Parkers, it's something they never imagined would be possible.

A few years ago, we shared Lew's story of severe epilepsy, which brought terrifying seizures that could strike every hour, leaving his family in a constant state of vigilance. Today, thanks to a groundbreaking clinical trial at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals' Pediatric Epilepsy Center of Excellence (PECE), Lew is a thriving high school student who has been seizure-free for years. Now that his health has stabilized, Lew's mother, Jen, has found space to reflect on their family's journey in a forthcoming memoir.

As Lew's life has opened up, so has the legacy his family created.

In gratitude for the care that changed their son's future, the Parkers established the Murphy Parker Endowed Professorship in Pediatric Epilepsy, and their investments also helped launch PECE, a groundbreaking model of wraparound care for families affected by epilepsy. At the time, Jen says, their motivation was simple.

"We thought we were thanking Joe," she says, referring to Joseph Sullivan, MD, the neurologist whose expertise and compassion guided their family through Lew's most difficult years, and the first recipient of the professorship. "I don't think we understood the perpetuity of it."

Years later, the impact of that decision continues to unfold. The Parkers' gift has become a permanent resource for pediatric epilepsy, helping UCSF invest in exceptional

faculty members and sustain groundbreaking research and care.

"An endowed professorship is an important gift to the future," says S. Andrew Josephson, MD, dean of the UCSF School of Medicine. "It gives us the ability to recruit and retain important leaders in the field, but its impact reaches much further: Each person who holds that professorship brings new ideas, advances discovery, and shapes the care we provide for generations of patients. The Parkers' generosity will continue to make a difference in ways that likely none of us can fully anticipate today."



From left, **Vic, Lew, and Jen Parker.**

The result is a legacy that extends far beyond Lew's extraordinary journey, creating new possibilities for children and families affected by epilepsy well into the future.

With Lew thriving, Jen Murphy Parker is set to publish her first book. Her forthcoming memoir, Fault Line Boy: A Mother's Reckoning with Epilepsy, reflects on her family's experience caring for a child with severe epilepsy and the resilience they discovered along the way. The book will be published by She Writes Press on November 17, 2026.

Project Cheer: A Holiday Tradition

Every December, Chelsea and Shekar Srinivas head to Target with an unusual mission: fill a shopping cart with toys for children spending the holidays at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland.

And they mean *fill it*.

"It's a lot of toys," Shekar says. "The cart is full and overflowing."

For a couple of hours, they walk the aisles thinking about children they've never met: What would a toddler enjoy? What might appeal to an older child? What could bring a little more joy to a holiday spent in the hospital?

The tradition began about a decade ago with Shekar and his late partner, Allison, who had cystic fibrosis and knew firsthand what it was like to spend time in the hospital as a child. After Allison passed away, Shekar kept the tradition going. When he met Chelsea in 2023, she embraced it too.

Now, the tradition is entering a new chapter. Shekar and Chelsea welcomed their daughter at UCSF in 2025, and last December, at



8 months old, she joined them for her first hospital shopping spree. Chelsea looks forward to the day when their daughter is old enough to help choose gifts herself, learning that the fun of the toy aisle can also come from picking out something special for another child.

That spirit is at the heart of Project Cheer, UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals' annual holiday giving campaign. For families whose children are receiving care during the holidays, maintaining cherished traditions can be difficult. Project Cheer helps bring the season to them, providing gifts and opportunities to choose something special for their children, create moments of celebration, and focus on being together.

For Shekar and Chelsea, the experience of choosing just the right toys for young patients has become part of the joy of giving. This year, UCSF hopes to give families that same opportunity by encouraging donations of gift cards. A gift card can give a parent the chance to fill a shopping cart of their own, picking out the toys and gifts they know will bring their child the most joy.

And Chelsea hopes people know that making a difference doesn't require an overflowing shopping cart. "Every gift, even \$50 or \$75, can make such a difference," she says.

For information about how you can support Project Cheer, visit givingtogether.ucsf.edu/projectcheer or scan the QR code.



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On this GivingTuesday, December 1, make twice the difference for kids like Ripley.

Born with a serious heart defect, Ripley underwent open-heart surgery at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals shortly after birth. Today, he's an active 10-year-old who loves riding his bike, playing soccer, and just being a kid.

On December 1, people everywhere will come together for GivingTuesday, a global day of generosity. But you don't have to wait. Your gift today can help more children like Ripley receive the expert care they need to grow and thrive.

And thanks to our generous partners at NutriSource Pet Foods, your gift will be matched dollar for dollar, up to \$250,000.



Give today and bring twice the health, hope, and healing to children and families who rely on UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals. Scan the QR code or visit tiny.ucsf.edu/2026kids to make your gift.

