

CELEBRATING A

# DECADE IMPACT



CACTUS  
CANCER SOCIETY

2024 - 2025

ANNUAL  
REPORT



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# Growing Over Time

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When Cactus Cancer Society first launched, it was grounded in a simple, powerful idea: young adults facing cancer need each other. What began with one part-time volunteer (our CEO, Mallory Casperson) quickly grew into a thriving community shaped by the voices of those it served. From a small blog and a handful of programs to a robust nonprofit with a staff of six, three boards, and a dedicated team of faculty and facilitators, we now reach more than 3,800 young adults each year through creative, connection-driven support. Over the past decade, our focus has remained the same: to end isolation for young adults facing cancer through creative coping, community-building, and storytelling. Along the way, we've evolved in name and in scope, transitioning from Lacuna Loft to Cactus Cancer Society to better reflect the strength, resilience, and growth at the core of our work. Through it all, our vision has never wavered and our impact has only deepened. In our programs, young adults have gathered to laugh, cry, create, and heal together. What we've built is more than a nonprofit. It's a thriving, resilient community rooted in authenticity, creativity, and care.



# What We Do

Cactus Cancer Society is an innovative nonprofit offering free, online psychosocial support programs for young adult cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers (ages 18-45), with a mission to end isolation and empower individuals through creativity, connection, and emotional support. We provide a safe space for vulnerability and self-expression, where participants can learn coping strategies, connect with peers who understand their experiences, and engage in creative, evidence-based workshops that address the emotional and practical challenges of cancer. All programs are delivered virtually and at no cost, making them uniquely accessible regardless of diagnosis, location, financial situation, or inpatient status. With a diverse and growing global community, our programs offer proven mental health benefits and ensure that no young adult faces cancer alone.

# Our Mission & Vision

Cactus Cancer Society's mission is to provide a safe space where young adults facing cancer can connect, cope, and thrive with one another in an online community through creativity and expression. Our vision is to end isolation among young adults facing cancer.



# Our Values

## **Courageous Creativity**

We believe there are an infinite number of ways in which we can use creativity and expression as a means to make sense of our realities, to spark new thinking and problem- solving, and to reimagine what is possible for us and the future we want to live in. We also believe that creativity is an important method for courageously processing our experiences and learning to cope with the difficulties that life and cancer can bring.

## **Inclusive Community**

We believe there are an infinite number of ways in which we can use creativity and expression as a means to make sense of our realities, to spark new thinking and problem- solving, and to reimagine what is possible for us and the future we want to live in. We also believe that creativity is an important method for courageously processing our experiences and learning to cope with the difficulties that life and cancer can bring.

## **Resilience & Fortitude**

Like the cactus in our name and logo suggests, we believe the young adults in our community are tough; they are strong, adaptive, and resilient. We empower them to thrive in the midst of challenging situations through finding their voice and telling their story.

# What's In A Name

In 2021, we changed our name from Lacuna Loft to Cactus Cancer Society to better reflect the strength, resilience, and growth at the core of our work. But what does that mean? Why “Cactus?”

A cactus is strong. It's resilient. It survives—thrives—in the harshest conditions, in places where not much else can. For many young adults facing cancer, the experience can feel a lot like that: isolated, overwhelming, and out of step with the world around them. But just like the cactus, they have an incredible ability to adapt, grow, and blossom, even in the most unlikely circumstances.

Our logo includes the image of a terrarium: a self-sustaining ecosystem that nurtures life and provides protection. That's what we strive to be, a supportive, creative, and safe space where young adults facing cancer can breathe a little easier, connect with others who get it, and feel less alone.

We're called a society because we're a community built by and for young adults who are navigating life with cancer. No matter who you are or where you are, you belong here.

When we rebranded to Cactus Cancer Society in 2021, we didn't do it lightly. We spent 9 months listening through surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one conversations, so we could create something that truly reflects the people we serve and the heart of what we do.

This name, this look, this community...  
It's all inspired by the strong and resilient  
young adults we serve.



# Our Team



**Mallory Casperson**  
Co-Founder &  
Chief Executive Officer



**Aerial Donovan**  
Co-Founder &  
Chief Program Officer



**Lauren Creel**  
Chief Operations  
Officer



**Scarlett Callahan**  
Development  
Coordinator



**Christina Kosyla**  
Program  
Coordinator



**Stephen Heaviside**  
Program  
Coordinator





# Our Guest Faculty



**Myleena Grenis**  
MSW, LISW, CADAC



**Dennis Heffern**  
LCSW



**Anne Katz**  
PhD, RN, FAAN



**Jean Rowe**  
LCSW, OSW-C, CJT

# Our Board of Directors

Betty Roggenkamp, MSHC

Bryan Walker, MS

Kelly Miragliotta

Patricia McDonald, MBA - Treasurer

Shelly Whitsitt, MBA - Secretary

Vikki Christian



# Our Young Adult Cancer Survivor Advisory Board

Brandie Langer  
Bryan Walker  
Chris Stroh  
Christian Bullock  
Christina Kosyla  
Claire Greco  
Deltra Kroemer  
Diana Cejas  
Erin Leibowitz  
Kelly Miragliotta  
KM Hammond  
Kyle Smith  
Marnie Norris  
Mary Clare Bietila  
Nick Ross  
Stephen Heaviside  
Yamilet Cendejas  
Yolanda Murphy



# Our Scientific & Medical Advisory Board

Anne Katz, PhD, RN, FAAN

Austin Wesevich, MD

Betty Roggenkamp, MSHC

Brad Zebrack, PhD, MSW, MPH

Brynn Fowler

Catherine Benedict, PhD

Darcy Flora, PhD

David Victorson, PhD

Erin Price, MSW, LICSW, OSW-C

Heidi Adams

Ian Scott, MSW

Jen Currin-McCulloch, PhD

Jennifer Peckham, MS

Julie Larson, LCSW

Karen Wernli, PhD

Marlaine Figueroa Gray, PhD

Michael Fu, MD, MBA

Mindy Buchanan

Paige Malinowski, MSW, LCSW

Rebecca Block, PhD, MSW



# A Note From Our CEO

Dear Friends,

This year, we celebrated a milestone that still feels a little surreal, 10 years of Cactus Cancer Society.

A decade of creativity. A decade of connection. A decade of building a safe space where young adults facing cancer can show up exactly as they are, explore new ways to cope, and settle into a community where they are not alone.

When cancer collides with young adulthood, a time meant for independence, identity, and possibility, it leaves a unique mark. At Cactus Cancer Society, we've spent the last ten years listening to those stories, making space for healing through creativity and expression, and designing programs that meet young adults where they are.

This year, thanks to your generosity and passion for our mission, we continued to grow. We reduced waitlists, expanded program capacity, and welcomed more young adults into our community. The young adults in our programs told us they felt less alone, less anxious, and more able to use those creative coping skills to manage the unexpected. That's the impact you've created. That's the power of this community.

As we step into our next decade, we're more committed than ever to making sure that every young adult facing cancer has a space to connect, cope, and thrive. We know the road ahead won't always be easy. We also know we're not walking it alone, because you're right there with us.

Thank you for being a part of our journey. Here's to the next 10 years!

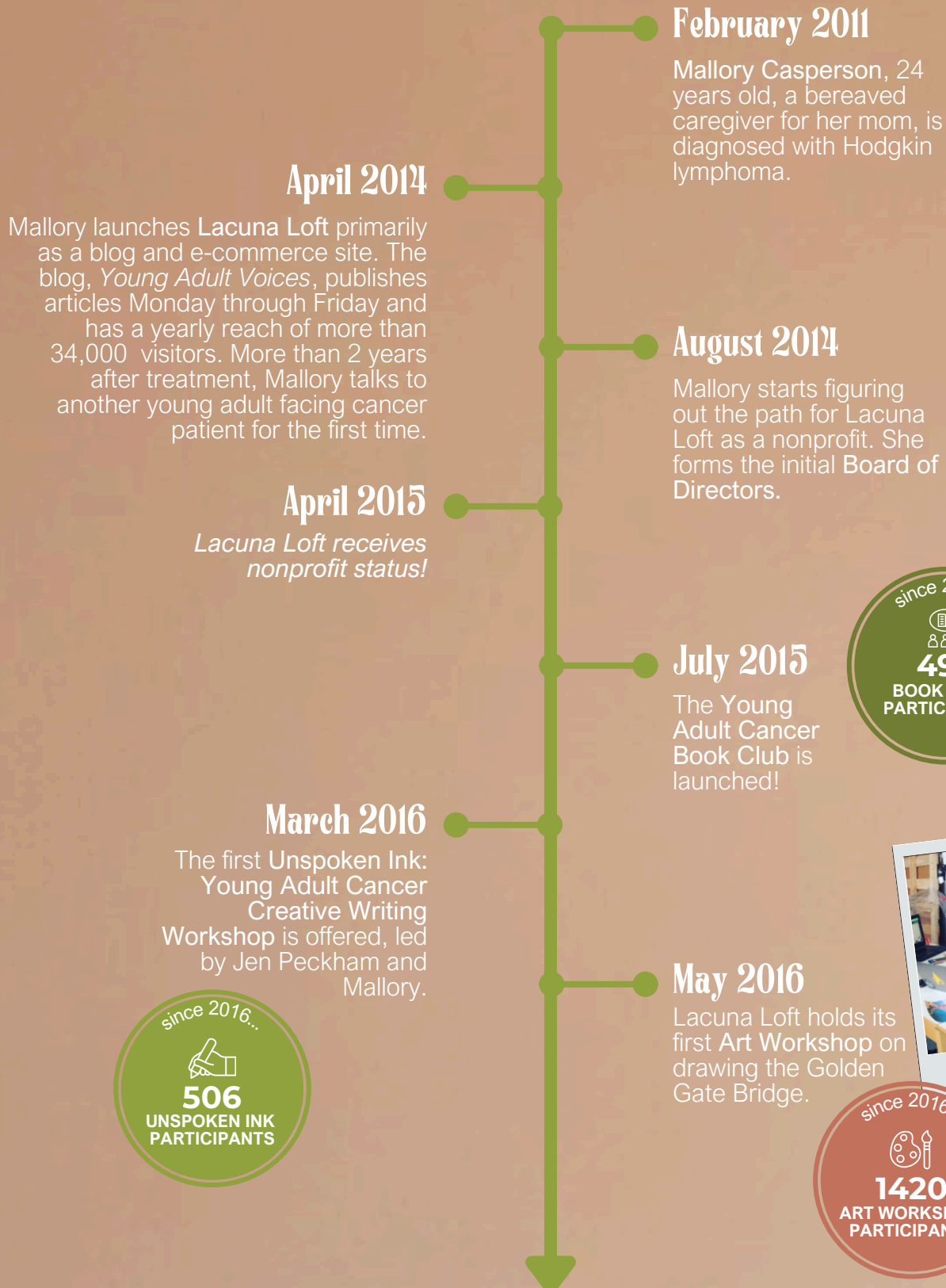
With deepest gratitude,



Mallory Casperson  
Co-Founder & CEO  
Cactus Cancer Society



# A Decade of Impact





**March 2018**

The Young Adult Cancer Survivor Board is formed.



**July 2019**

Lacuna Loft officially welcomes its second employee: Aerial Donovan, Chief Program Officer!



**December 2020**

Lacuna Loft holds its very first YA Cancer Gabfest, an annual online survivorship conference in partnership with Elephants and Tea!



**August 2021**

Lauren Creel is hired as Chief Operations Officer and Lacuna Loft rebrands as Cactus Cancer Society



**CACTUS  
CANCER SOCIETY**

**April 2022**

Christina Kosyla joins the team as Program Coordinator and Cactus Cancer Society launches Inside the Terrarium



**July 2022**

Cactus Cancer Society hires Stephen Heaviside as a second Program Coordinator!

**March 2024**

Scarlett Callahan joins the team as Cactus Cancer Society's Development Coordinator!



**April 2025**

*Cactus Cancer Society celebrates its 10th Anniversary!*

# Flourishing

## After a Decade: Data from 2024-2025

After ten years of growing with and alongside the young adult cancer community, Cactus Cancer Society continues to thrive, and so do the people we serve. This year's impact reflects not only the strength of our programs, but the depth of connection, healing, and empowerment they foster. From measurable decreases in anxiety, depression, and psychological distress to significant increases in confidence, creative coping, and community, our participants are telling us what we already know: this work matters. Backed by generous donors, trusted partners, and a sustainable financial foundation, we remain deeply committed to ensuring that every young adult facing cancer has access to support that is personal, creative, and meaningful.

# Impact at a Glance

Each year, thousands of young adults facing cancer turn to Cactus Cancer Society for connection, creativity, and support... and they keep coming back. This snapshot highlights the reach and resonance of our programs: how many people we served, where they came from, and how strongly they believe in what we do. The numbers tell a powerful story of a community that is growing, engaged, and deeply impacted.

**90** — programs held over 153 sessions

**3,818** — participants attended Cactus Cancer Society programs this fiscal year

**50** — states and 15 countries represented

**99%** — would recommend Cactus Cancer Society to other young adults diagnosed with cancer

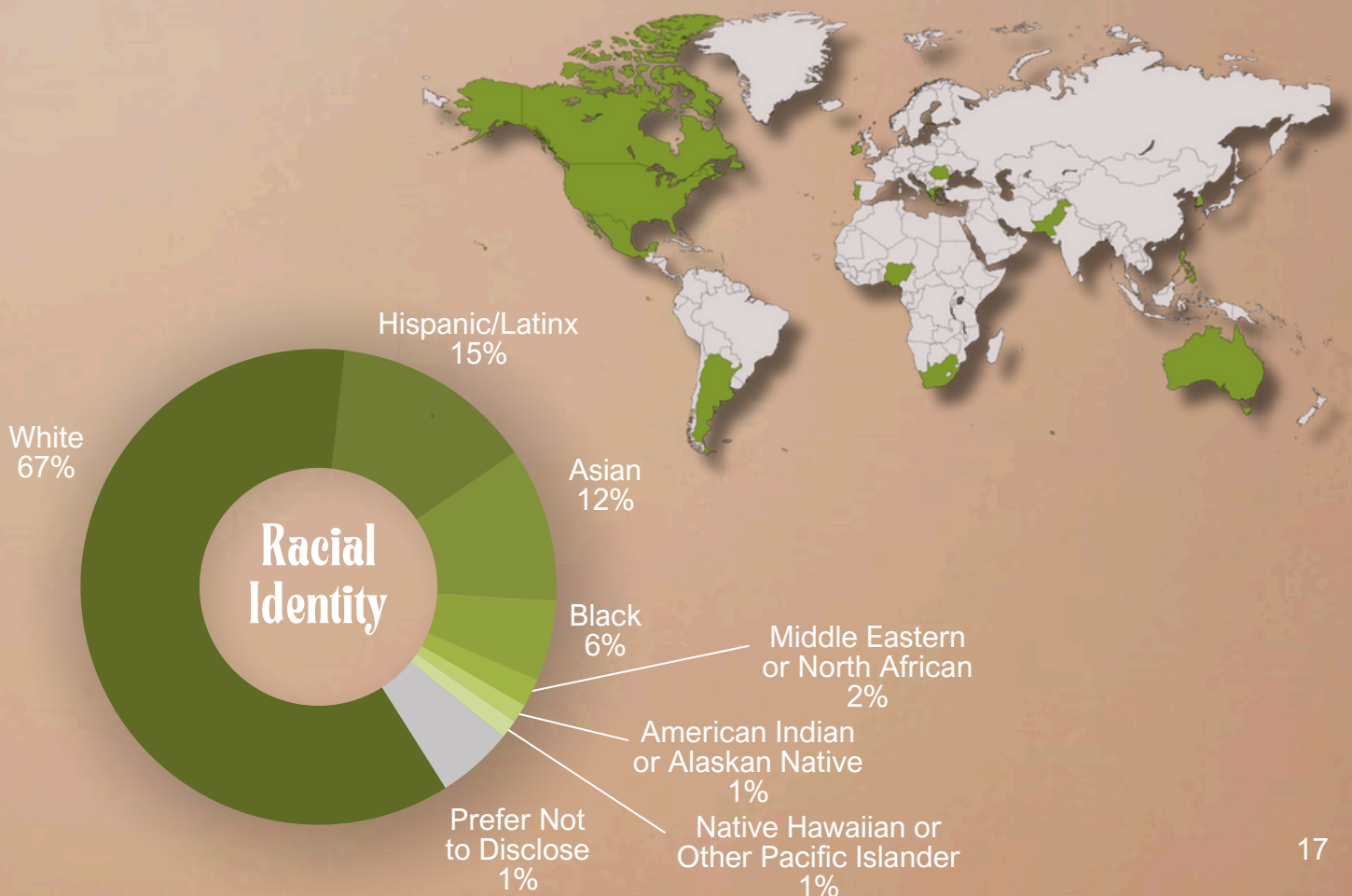
**96%** — want to participate in future Cactus Cancer Society programs

**12,132** — continuing education credits awarded to nurses and social workers

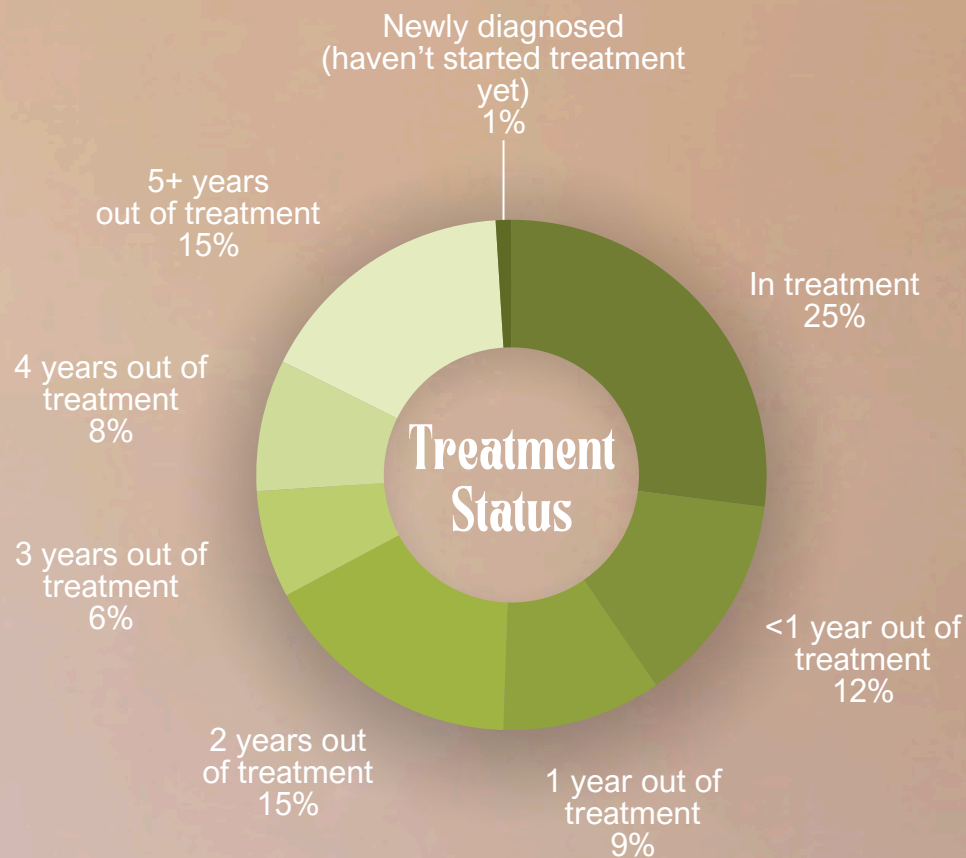


# Our Participants

This year, Cactus Cancer Society welcomed 3,818 program participants from all 50 U.S. states, Washington, D.C., and 15 countries around the world. Participants lived in a variety of communities, with 35% residing in urban neighborhoods, 53% in suburban areas, and 11% in rural settings. Our intentionally inclusive, all-online programs are designed to bring together young adults facing cancer across all racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities in spaces that foster connection, creativity, and support. Programs are accessible to anyone with an internet connection, regardless of diagnosis, geographic location, financial circumstance, or inpatient status, helping ensure survivorship support reaches those who need it most. As a result of this accessibility, the racial demographics of our participants closely reflect the U.S. population, and 21% of participants self-identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community.



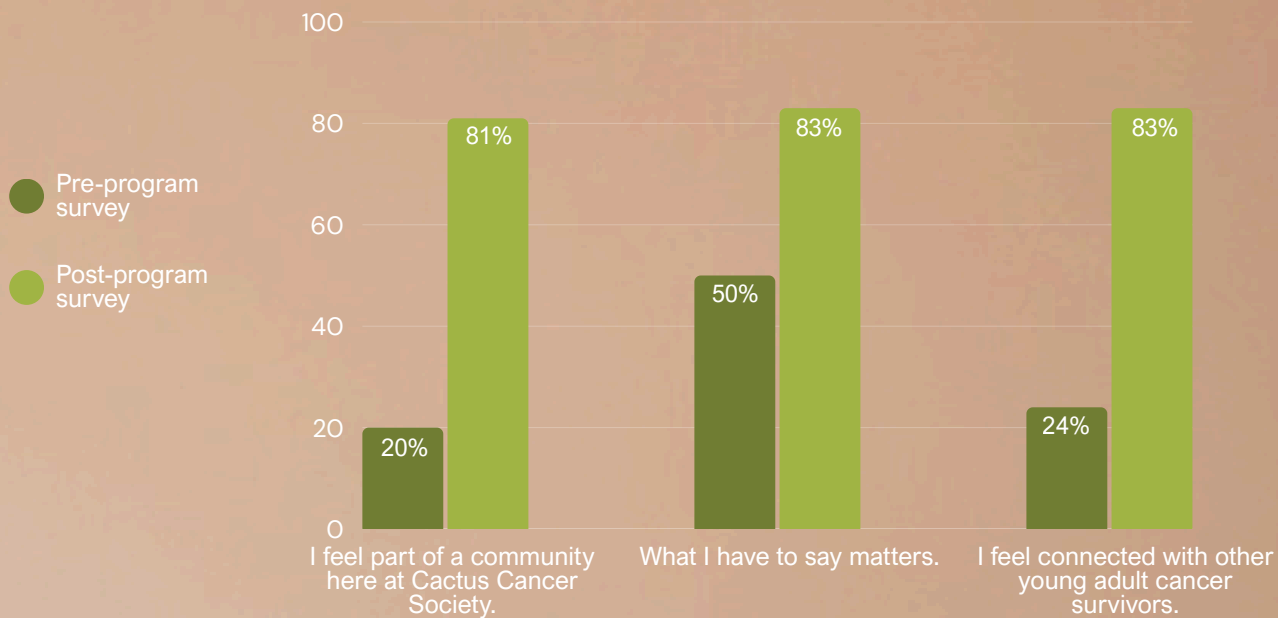
Treatment status among our community members varied widely. Twenty-five percent were in active treatment, 12% were less than one year out, 38% were between one and four years post-treatment, and 15% were five or more years beyond treatment. Our programs supported individuals across 39 different cancer types, with the most common being breast cancer (32%), Hodgkin lymphoma (15%), and non-Hodgkin lymphoma (8%). Additionally, 20% of participants were facing metastatic cancer, and 13% were navigating chronic cancer.



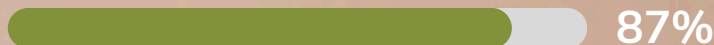
# First Connections

This year, we measured the effect of our programs on individuals attending for the very first time, and the impact was astounding. Participants reported significant decreases in anxiety, depression, and psychological distress, along with meaningful increases in empowerment, creative coping skills, and a sense of connection and community. These shifts underscore the power of intentional, accessible support to transform the emotional well-being of young adults facing cancer.





I feel less isolated after participating in this program.



I feel less isolated after getting involved with Cactus Cancer Society.



If you met another young adult who had just been diagnosed with cancer, how likely is it that you'd recommend a Cactus Cancer Society group or workshop to a friend?



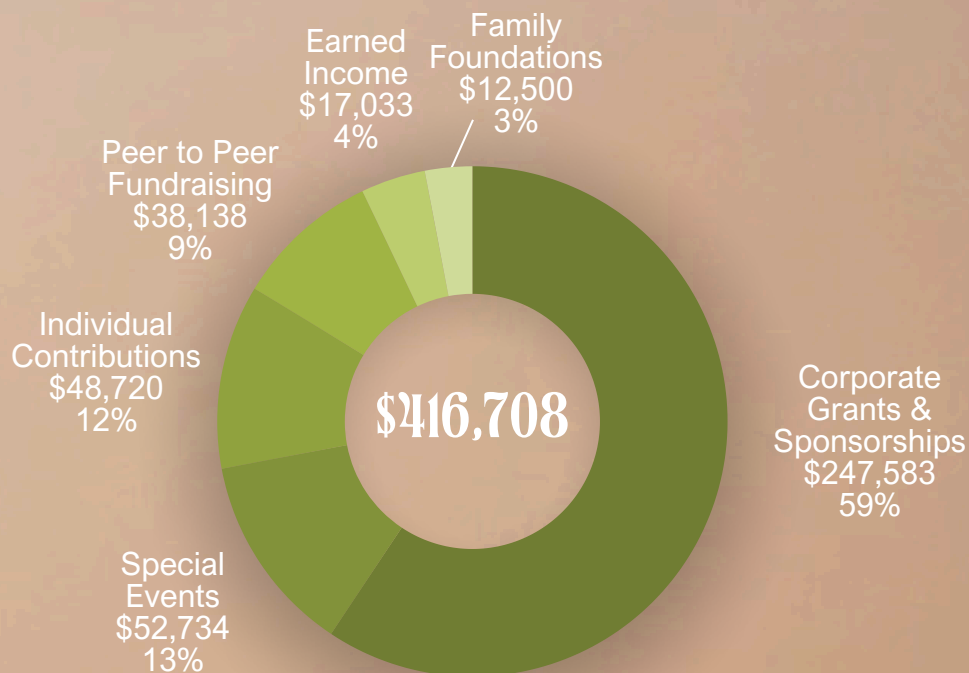
I am definitely interested in other groups and creative workshops facilitated by Cactus Cancer Society.





# Summary of Income

This year's incredible impact was fueled by the generosity, creativity, and commitment of our community. From corporate partners and individual donors to the overwhelming success of our Young Adult Cancer Advocate of the Year peer-to-peer fundraising competition, every contribution helped make our mission possible. Our 10th Anniversary Gala brought supporters together in celebration, while earned income from our shop, continuing education course, research support, and other small sources added a meaningful boost. Together, these diverse streams of support ensure that young adults facing cancer can continue to access life-giving programs that foster creativity, connection, and healing.



Cactus Cancer Society was supported by **380** generous donors this fiscal year. We want to thank each and every one of you for joining us in this important work.

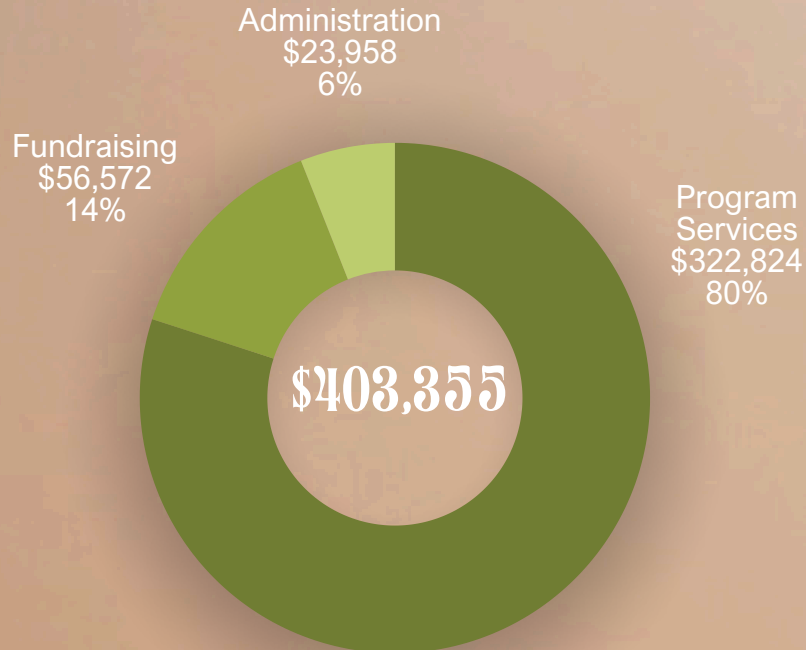
# Our Partners

We are deeply grateful to the corporate and community partners who make our work possible. Their generous support fuels our programs, strengthens our reach, and helps us continue building a vibrant, creative community for young adults facing cancer. Thank you for helping us flourish.



# Summary of Expenditures

Every dollar we spend is rooted in our mission to connect young adult cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers through dynamic, interactive online programs. We remain deeply committed to reducing isolation and building community, and this year, our spending reflected that focus. The majority of our expenditures directly supported program delivery, with additional investments in the administration and fundraising needed to sustain and grow our impact. We continue to steward our resources with care, ensuring that our work remains meaningful, effective, and accessible to all who need it.



# Empowering

## Young Adults to Tell Their Stories

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At Cactus Cancer Society, we believe that every young adult facing cancer has a story worth telling, and that sharing those stories can be a powerful tool for healing and connection. Through programs like our Story Mapping Workshop, Survivorship Series, and YA Cancer Gabfest, we create spaces where young adults are empowered to reflect on their experiences and share their stories in ways that feel authentic and meaningful. Whether through art, conversation, writing, or shared laughter, these programs help participants reclaim their voices and feel less alone. Together, they form a vibrant tapestry of lived experience, resilience, and community.



# Story Mapping Workshop

The Story Mapping workshop blends the power of storytelling with the art of graphic representation, empowering young adults who are at any stage of their cancer experience to find their voice, tell their story, and thrive by honoring the challenges and gifts inherent in any cancer experience. Facilitated by fellow cancer survivors who understand the nuances of the cancer experience, this four-part series invites participants to explore their journeys through a combination of drawing, writing, collage, and a custom-designed sticker set created by our team. By mapping their stories visually and narratively, participants begin to reclaim their voices and recognize the resilience they've built along the way. By creatively and courageously processing experiences together, our community members open themselves up to all the lessons coping with cancer and the difficulties of life can bring. By sharing their stories, our community members promote healing through connection. **This past fiscal year, we hosted one four-session series, welcoming 17 young adults into this unique and empowering experience. After completing the workshop, 100% of participants reported feeling less isolated, and 100% said they felt like part of a community at Cactus Cancer Society—a powerful reminder of what's possible when young adults are seen, heard, and supported.**

# Survivorship Series

The Survivorship Series is an immersive 8-week experience designed to foster connection, creativity, and community among young adult cancer patients and survivors. By bringing together some of our most beloved programs, such as art workshops, journaling sessions, game nights, and informal hangouts, we create a consistent space where participants can show up authentically and deepen relationships with one another week and week. Unlike drop-in programs, the Survivorship Series welcomes a dedicated cohort of young adults who journey through the program together, forming deep bonds and a sense of belonging. Facilitated with intention and warmth, each session offers a different doorway into expression, validation, and peer support. **This past fiscal year, three 8-week cohorts, serving a total of 59 participants. Two followed our classic model, while one featured an added focus group component, inviting participants to share their opinions and insights on specific topics at the end of each session.**

# YA Cancer Gabfest

YA Cancer Gabfest is a week-long virtual conference created *by and for* young adults facing cancer, presented in partnership with Elephants and Tea. Grounded in the belief that young adult cancer patients and survivors are the true experts in their care, the event amplifies their voices while creating space for real-time connection with peers, caregivers, healthcare providers, and nonprofit professionals. The 2024 theme, “Amplifying Survivorship: Your Mixtape for Connection and Community,” wove together sessions on healing through creativity, sex and cancer, uncomfortable emotions, everyday glimmers, creating rituals, and more. Participants engaged in survivorship crash courses, interactive panels, and a deeply moving storytelling open mic. This year’s YA Cancer Gabfest also featured two pre-conference sessions: one presented by The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society and another hosted by Servier, offering additional learning and support.

All sessions were held via Zoom with a strong emphasis on face-to-face interaction, ensuring every participant had the opportunity to be seen, heard, and connected in real time. **Across five days, we hosted 17 sessions, with 885 individuals registered and 403 unique participants attending. Each of the crash courses and panels drew between 82 and 185 attendees. Participants received the 52-page YA Cancer Gabster Magazine, a beautifully curated conference guide filled with articles and reflections from speakers and AYA community members.** At its heart, YA Cancer Gabfest is more than a conference; it’s a dynamic, interactive space where young adults come together to learn, share, laugh, grieve, and celebrate the complexities of survivorship as only they can.

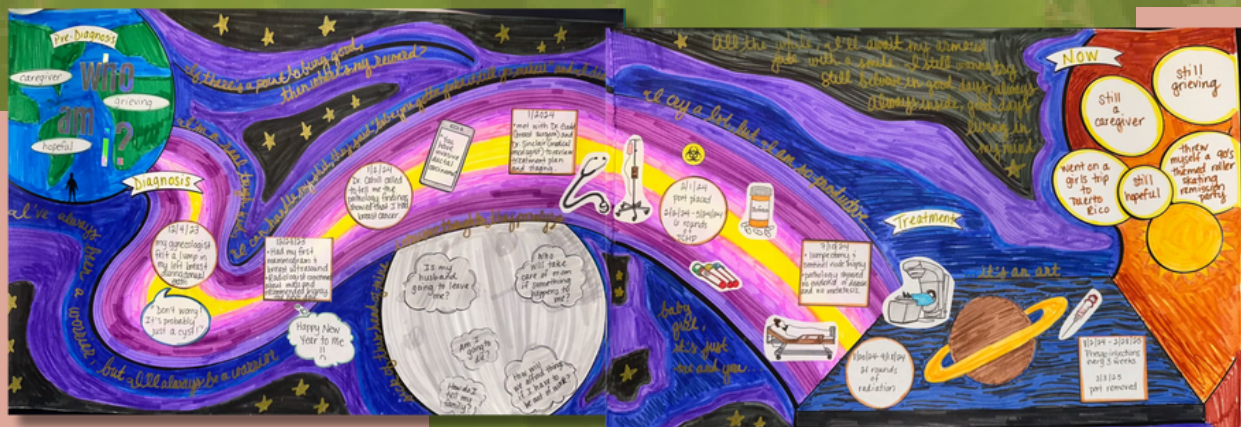


**"It's great to find a community to connect with others that understand whole-heartedly your experience."**

—Survivorship Series Participant

“Thank you for creating a powerful program of a healing creative community for us to share our stories and connect with each other. Being a young adult diagnosed with cancer can feel very isolating, but Cactus Cancer Society creates safe spaces with others who truly get it.”

—Story Mapping Workshop Participant





# Expressing Our Creativity

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Creative expression can be both healing and transformative, especially for young adults facing cancer. Rooted in art therapy practices, programs like our Art Workshops, Coffee & Oodles, and Creative Arts Book Club offer opportunities to explore emotions, tell personal stories, and connect with others through drawing, writing, collage, and more. Whether through 30-minute drop-in sessions or multi-week journeys, participants are guided through creative exercises that not only support emotional processing, but also foster resilience. These programs remind our community that through creativity, they can find strength, make meaning, and experience joy even in the midst of uncertainty.



# Art Workshops

Art has the power to heal, connect, and reveal what words sometimes can't. Our monthly Art Workshops invite young adult cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers to express themselves through hands-on creative projects while building meaningful connections with others who understand what they're going through. Participants receive a free supply box with everything they need to join from home, making the experience accessible, fun, and stress-free. **This past fiscal year, we hosted 13 Art Workshops, bringing together a total of 258 participants.** Highlights included a Pride-themed workshop celebrating the LGBTQ+ community in June, and a special session that paired art-making with a focus group conversation. **After participating, 100% of attendees said they would recommend Cactus Cancer Society to other young adults diagnosed with cancer—a testament to the power of creativity and shared experience.**

# Creative Arts Book Club

In our new Creative Arts Book Club, young adult cancer patients and survivors become the authors, artists, and illustrators of their own one-of-a-kind books. With a creative journal full of open-ended prompts, participants are invited to write, doodle, sketch, collage, and make the pages their own. No artistic experience is required, just a willingness to play and explore. The four-week experience begins and ends with live Zoom gatherings to spark creativity and share reflections. In between, participants work on their journals independently, staying connected through light, low-pressure prompts and encouragement from the Cactus Cancer Society community. Each person receives a free copy of the journal along with colorful art supplies to make the experience even more fun. **This past fiscal year, we held three Creative Arts Book Clubs for a total of 45 participants, including a special cohort for young adults facing glioma, which also incorporated a focus group component at the end of each session, giving participants the opportunity to reflect not only on their creativity, but on their lived experience and care needs as well.**

# Coffee & Oodles

Coffee & Oodles is where creativity meets community in the most relaxed and inspiring way. This weekly 30-minute drop-in session blends the joy of doodling with the freedom of creative writing, inviting young adults facing cancer to respond to prompts in whatever form feels right—drawing, writing, or a mix of both. Each session includes space for participants to share their work in a nurturing, supportive environment alongside peers who understand the challenges of facing cancer. **This past fiscal year, we hosted 43 sessions of Coffee & Oodles, welcoming 331 participants into this flexible, expressive space that continues to be one of our most popular and cherished programs. In addition, we held one in-person session, titled Oodles of Thoughts, at CancerCon in Austin, Texas, where 41 participants gathered to explore creative reflection and connection in real time.**

# Oodles of Doodles

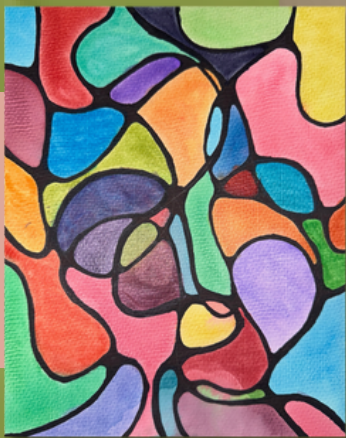
This special edition of our beloved Coffee & Oodles program was offered in partnership with The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, designed specifically for young adults navigating a blood cancer diagnosis. Over four weeks, participants explored creative expression through a blend of drawing and writing prompts, responding in whatever form felt most natural and meaningful to them. The program combined two live Zoom sessions with flexible, self-paced engagement in a private online forum, where participants could continue their creative work, share reflections, and connect with one another between sessions. As always, the focus was on building a safe, supportive space for expression, connection, and creativity among peers who “get it.” This unique collaboration brought the heart of Coffee & Oodles into a new format that honored both structure and flexibility, and empowered participants to reflect, create, and share on their own terms. **This past fiscal year, we held one four-week session of Oodles of Doodles, serving 20 young adults facing blood cancer.**

“I have recommended Cactus Cancer Society to every young adult I know with cancer. Their programs have really helped me cope with my diagnosis and funnel all of my feelings of loss, sadness, grief, and deep pain through creative mediums. I have also really appreciated meeting other young adults with cancer and finding commonalities in how I'm feeling. It has made me feel less alone.”

—Art Workshop Participant

“This has been an amazing way to connect with young cancer survivors from across the US and elsewhere. I have more hope and feel more resilient. Thank you.”

—Creative Arts Book Club Participant



# Processing

## Our Experiences Through Writing

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Journaling can be a powerful tool for healing, especially when guided with care and intention. Through programs like 90 Minute Reset, Lost & Found, The Bridge, and It's a Wonderful Life, certified journal therapist and social worker Jean Rowe, LCSW, OSW-C creates safe, supportive spaces for young adults to explore their emotions, reflect on their experiences, and connect with others who understand. Whether navigating grief, rediscovering joy, or rebuilding a sense of intimacy, these workshops invite participants to process the complexities of life with and after cancer, one word at a time. Each program helps transform isolation into connection and reflection into growth.

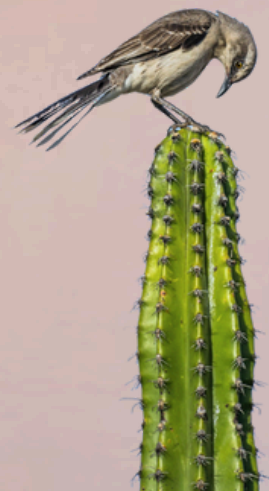


# 90 Minute Reset

In the midst of life's chaos, whether it's global uncertainty, personal grief, or the quiet, daily challenges of survivorship, 90-Minute Reset offers young adult cancer patients, survivors, and caregivers a moment to pause, breathe, and reconnect with themselves and one another. Led by certified journal therapist and social worker Jean Rowe, LCSW, OSW-C, this virtual journaling workshop creates space for deep reflection and shared understanding. Over the course of 90 minutes, Jean gently guides participants through a series of journaling prompts, followed by time to write, reflect, and share in community. It's a simple yet powerful format that helps participants tap into their inner voice, process emotions, and find connection through journaling. **This past fiscal year, we hosted two sessions of 90-Minute Reset (*The Great Pumpkin in the Fall* and *Where The Light Gets In* in the Spring), welcoming 33 participants into this restorative and thoughtful space. 100% of participants reported feeling that their voice matters after participating in these journaling programs.**

# Lost & Found

Facilitated by certified journal therapist and social worker Jean Rowe, LCSW, OSW-C, Lost & Found is a gentle, three-week journaling workshop designed to help young women cancer survivors begin navigating intimacy, body image, and dating after diagnosis and treatment. Through thoughtful prompts, guided reflection, and compassionate discussion, participants are invited to reconnect with themselves, welcome a compassionate understanding of their bodies now, and create ways to open their heart to intimate opportunities after cancer. Whether they're thinking about dating again or simply seeking to understand themselves in a new light, this program offers a safe, affirming space to explore vulnerability, tenderness, and empowerment. It's about dipping a toe back into the waters of intimacy with honesty, courage, and community. **This past fiscal year, we offered the program once, welcoming 12 participants. After the workshop, 100% of participants reported feeling connected with other young adult cancer survivors—a powerful reflection of the support and community fostered in this unique space.**



# It's A Wonderful Life

The holiday season can be joyful, but also complex, especially for young adults navigating cancer. This holiday season journaling workshop offers a gentle, three-week space to reflect, recharge, and approach the season with greater intention and self-compassion. Led by certified journal therapist and social worker Jean Rowe, LCSW, OSW-C, the workshop helps participants create personalized plans for reducing stress, reconnecting with meaningful traditions, and tending to their emotional well-being. Together, participants explore the tension between holiday expectations and lived reality, especially when the world expects cheer, but their inner landscape tells a different story. Through guided journaling and honest conversation, the group finds connection, clarity, and even moments of joy between the wrapping paper and the emotional weight the season can bring. **This past fiscal year, we offered the workshop once, welcoming 23 young adult cancer patients and survivors into this reflective and restorative program. After the program, 100% of participants said they were interested in joining future creative workshops and support groups with Cactus Cancer Society.**

# The Bridge: Where Before and After Meet

Grief and loss are often invisible companions to a cancer diagnosis, showing up in unexpected ways and lingering long after treatment ends. The Bridge: When Before and After Meet is a four-week journaling workshop designed to help young adults facing cancer gently explore the emotional weight of loss in all its forms, whether it's the loss of health, identity, relationships, or the future they once imagined. Led by certified journal therapist and social worker Jean Rowe, LCSW, OSW-C, this program offers space to acknowledge pain, process complex emotions, and begin to move toward healing. Through thoughtful prompts and shared reflection, participants find language for what can feel unspeakable and support in knowing they are not alone. The heart of this workshop focuses on the “before and after” of a cancer diagnosis, the multilayered impact it brings, and learning how to carry cancer’s complexity with greater self-compassion. **This fiscal year, we hosted one four-week session of The Bridge, serving 19 participants. 100% of participants said they felt less isolated after participating in The Bridge.**

“I felt really seen and supported through this month of writing. It brought comfort, perspective, and encouragement.”

—Lost and Found Participant

“I love that Cactus Cancer Society's programming focuses so much on tools to help process, because the atmosphere is always healing in community. Having tools to heal with and for yourself but also together with others is really nice.”

—Where The Light Gets In Participant

“Every time I join a session, even if I'm having a rough week, it has helped tremendously to feel less alone.”

—It's A Wonderful Life Participant

“This community is a balm for your soul.”

—The Bridge Participant

# Building

## Community in the Midst of Isolation

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Facing cancer as a young adult can often feel isolating, but at Cactus Cancer Society, no one has to go it alone. Through programs like the Guys Discussion Group, Builders Workshops, and our annual Holiday Party Hangout, we create spaces for genuine connection, laughter, and support. Whether through deep conversations, shared creativity, or casual celebration, these programs help young adults form meaningful bonds with others who truly understand their experience. Even in the hardest moments, community remains at the heart of everything we do.



# Guys Discussion Group


For young men affected by cancer, honest conversation and emotional support can be hard to come by. Our monthly Guys Discussion Group, led by social worker Dennis Heffern, LCSW, provides a dedicated space for connection, vulnerability, and real talk. Each month, participants come together to discuss anything and everything in a setting where openness and mutual understanding are encouraged and respected. **This past fiscal year, we hosted 12 sessions, with a total of 182 participants finding community and strength through shared experience.**

# Builders Workshops

Builders Workshops offer young adult cancer patients and survivors a chance to slow down, connect, and create... one brick at a time. In these 2-hour virtual gatherings, participants engage in a meditative LEGO-based activity designed to foster reflection, creativity, and a sense of calm. Each participant receives a free supply box of LEGOs mailed directly to them, making it easy to show up and take part in a shared experience with others who understand the ups and downs of the cancer journey. These workshops blend mindful play with meaningful peer connection, providing a fresh and accessible way to explore self-expression and build community. **This past fiscal year, we hosted four Builders Workshops for a total of 62 participants, including one session specifically for young men facing cancer.**

# Holiday Party Hangout

The Holiday Party Hangout is our annual end-of-year gathering that brings together young adult cancer survivors for an evening of connection, laughter, and light-hearted fun. Held in a casual virtual setting, this event offers a chance to unwind, play games, and share stories, whether about cancer or anything else, with people who truly “get it.” It’s a joyful, low-pressure way to mark the season and find community during what can be an emotionally complex time of year. **This past fiscal year, we hosted the event for 14 young adults, who joined us for a night of games, conversation, and shared celebration.**



“Seriously, I cannot thank you enough for the relief and peace this brings me for two hours. These activities bring me joy, laughter, and sense of accomplishment in a beyond difficult time.”

—Builders Workshop Participant

“Cactus Cancer Society is a breath of fresh air. Thank you for an activity to focus on that is not geared around cancer or how bad you feel. The best part is being able to talk about anything and know everyone will know what you are referring to without needing to go in the back story. There is always someone that you can find connection with.”

—Builders Workshop Participant

“THIS is the group I needed when I was diagnosed and when I was going through treatment.”

—Builders Workshop Participant

“The space Cactus Cancer Society gives me makes me feel more normal. Sometimes I feel like I talk about cancer “too much” or I’m ~the cancer girl~ but when I go to Cactus Cancer Society programs, I feel like I can be myself. When I say things related to my diagnosis or treatment, people \*get it.\* It’s nice to have that space and also just a lot of fun to have a creative outlet.”

—Builders Workshop Participant

# Educating

## Through Dialogue and Discovery

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Sharing knowledge and lived experience helps young adults facing cancer feel more informed, empowered, and prepared to navigate what lies ahead. Ask A Cactus and the Young Adult Voices Blog offer young adults facing cancer opportunities to learn directly from experts and from each other. By providing access to trusted information and real-life experiences, these programs help educate young adults so they can better understand, navigate, and advocate for themselves throughout their cancer journey.

# Ask A Cactus

When young adults face cancer, they're often met with more questions than answers. Ask A Cactus bridges that gap by connecting our community with trusted experts on the topics that matter most. In each campaign, young adults facing cancer are invited to submit their own questions around a selected theme. Those questions are then answered directly by a featured expert, and responses are shared in a series of short, easy-to-digest videos. These campaigns live as evergreen content on our website, offering accessible, trustworthy information any time of day or night. **This past fiscal year, we featured an Ask A Cactus campaign on clinical trials, led by Laura Zitella, RN, MS, ACNP, a nurse practitioner at UCSF with 30 years of experience supporting adolescents and young adults with blood and bone marrow cancers. Her insights provided clarity, encouragement, and expert guidance to help our community better understand their options and advocate for their care.**

## Young Adult Voices Blog

Young Adult Voices is Cactus Cancer Society's blog, where contributors from across the young adult cancer spectrum share their stories, insights, and creativity to help end isolation and build connection. Each post offers a glimpse into the real experiences of patients, survivors, and caregivers, ranging from personal reflections and hard-earned advice to celebrations of identity, resilience, and community. This past fiscal year, topics included how engaging in the creative process builds resilience, Pride Month and the LGBTQIA+ experience, opportunities to contribute to vital research, a celebration of Cactus Cancer Society's 10-year anniversary, tributes to our Young Adult Cancer Advocates of the Year, and Fresh Ink, a collection of original creative writing from our community. These courageous storytellers remind every young adult diagnosed with cancer that they are not alone. Someone else has walked this path, understands what they are feeling, and is ready to extend a hand. **We published 29 blog posts through Young Adult Voices this year, amplifying the lived experiences and wisdom of our community.**



# Fifteen Minutes

by Anjali Kapoor-Davis

*Posted as part of the  
Fresh Ink series on our  
Young Adult Voices Blog*

Soak for fifteen minutes in Epsom salt  
to heal the sore. How could anything heal  
in fifteen minutes? Fifteen minutes is

an eternity to soak in a tub of warm water  
with no suds to conceal the flesh. Eyes  
struggle to find a place that the mind does not

criticize. Unshaven legs bob up and down  
slowly remembering the motion of a swim  
stroke. There is not enough room here for laps.

Adjusting each cheek to ensure a seal does  
not occur in the fiberglass cubicle. Mango  
shaped breasts lay lazily on the curves of

the waist. The firmness has given way  
to squish. Will fifteen minutes be enough  
time to forgive myself? Self-loathing comes

easier to me. Is it long enough to heal the soul?  
Fifteen minutes is not enough time for a doctors  
appointment when the diagnosis is cancer.

Calendars fill with doctors' appointments  
instead of lunches with friends, kids play dates,  
and vacations. In fifteen minutes, life changes.

Fifteen minutes, he made me wait again in the  
hot car. I should be happy that he is making friends  
and not clinging to my side but I miss those days

when it was just us. His childhood seems to have  
flown by in fifteen minutes. I would love fifteen more  
minutes to play on swings, cuddle on the couch,

or make mud pies in the yard once again. I start  
the music on my phone nestled in a basket of rolled  
up washcloths ready for scrubbing. I need a

distraction for these fifteen minutes,  
I can't bring myself to just exist.  
I am more than I can handle for fifteen minutes.

# Equipping

## Healthcare Professionals to support Young Adults

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Supporting young adults with cancer requires a unique understanding and the tools to meet their distinct needs with empathy and insight. Through programs like The Full Picture of AYA Cancer and The Pause Project, Cactus Cancer Society equips healthcare professionals with both knowledge and nourishment. From continuing education opportunities to guided journaling sessions focused on provider well-being, these offerings help clinicians deepen their connection to the young adult cancer community while also caring for themselves. When we support the supporters, everyone benefits.

# The Full Picture of AYA Cancer

The Full Picture of AYA Cancer is a continuing education course designed to deepen understanding of the adolescent and young adult (AYA) cancer experience among social workers, nurses, and allied health professionals. Delivered as an online, on-demand series, the six 90-minute sessions feature expert-led presentations on key topics such as sexuality, fertility, emotional health, survivorship, and AYA-specific resources. The program emphasizes why cancer in young adulthood is distinct and how providers can respond with empathy, insight, and effective support. The course offers up 9 continuing education credits and continues to play a vital role in strengthening the quality of care available to the AYA cancer community. **This past fiscal year, 2,067 professionals participated in the course. Of those, 1,348 completed all six sessions, resulting in the distribution of 12,132 continuing education credits.**

## The Pause Project

Healthcare providers carry an immense emotional load, often without space to process their own experiences. The Pause Project is a monthly, 30-minute virtual journaling workshop created specifically for healthcare professionals who serve the young adult cancer community. Facilitated by a fellow provider and licensed clinical social worker, each session offers a thoughtful prompt, quiet time for reflection, and a chance to connect with fellow healthcare providers in a grounding, no-pressure environment. This program is our way of giving back to the people who give so much. It's a reminder that self-care isn't a luxury—it's essential. **This past fiscal year, we hosted 4 sessions of The Pause Project, supporting 15 healthcare professionals in taking a moment to breathe, reflect, and reconnect with themselves.**





Marketing materials for our healthcare provider-centered programs



# Celebrating

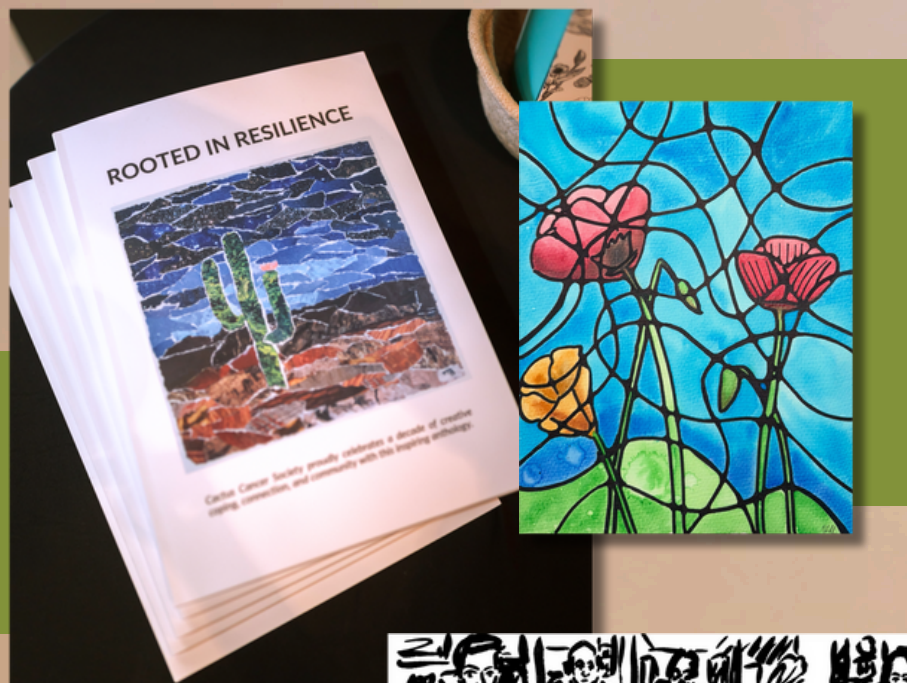
## With Our Community

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This year, Cactus Cancer Society celebrated our 10th anniversary as a nonprofit, marking a decade of impact. We came together to celebrate the incredible community that has driven our mission forward over the past ten years. Through the Rooted in Resilience anthology, the spirited Young Adult Cancer Advocate of the Year competition, and a memorable 10th Anniversary Gala, we celebrated the creativity of our community, recognized outstanding advocates, and honored beloved community members and partners. These special moments united program participants, supporters, and partners in a powerful celebration of resilience, hope, and the bright future we continue to build together.

# Rooted in Resilience Anthology

Rooted in Resilience is a limited-edition anthology that celebrates the vast and vibrant community that has made Cactus Cancer Society what it is today. Featuring stories, poetry, artwork, and photographs from 72 program participants, board members, facilitators, and community members, this beautifully designed collection captures a decade of creativity, strength, and shared experience. Curated from across our programs, the anthology is both a tribute to the individuals who have shaped our mission and a tangible reflection of the resilience and connection at the heart of our work. It is both a celebration of the past and a lasting tribute to the creativity at the heart of our community.



# In-Person Art Workshop

On the morning of our 10th Anniversary Gala, we invited community members to experience a rare in-person version of our programming through a joyful and creative Art Workshop. This lighthearted gathering brought together about 30 participants to craft personalized hanging mobiles using paper, charms, and imagination. The morning was filled with laughter, connection, and creativity, offering a tangible glimpse into the heart of our mission. Surrounded by co-founders, staff, and fellow community members, participants experienced firsthand how creative coping can spark connection, healing, and joy.





# 10th Anniversary Gala

Cactus Cancer Society's 10th Anniversary Gala was a joyous and inspiring celebration of a decade dedicated to ending isolation for young adults facing cancer. Hosted at Tarocco in Berkeley, California, over 60 guests gathered from our diverse community, including program participants, staff, board members, donors, corporate sponsors, friends, and family, all in honor of the impact of Cactus Cancer Society's work and the creativity of those we serve. The day began with an intimate in-person art workshop attended by about 30 community members, setting a reflective and creative tone for the evening.

The evening began with a champagne toast celebrating young adult cancer survivors, followed by a curated art gallery and auction featuring original artwork created by members of our community, gift baskets, and other in-kind donations. Bidders participated both in person and online from across the country, with over 70 items sold, raising vital funds to support Cactus Cancer Society's programming. The gala also featured an interactive art installation where attendees wrote heartfelt notes of encouragement to young adults facing cancer. These messages will be distributed in our program supply boxes, spreading hope far beyond the event. The night concluded with a delicious, elegant tapas-style dinner and celebratory birthday cupcakes.

Throughout the event, uplifting speeches and awards highlighted the dedication and resilience within our community, including special recognitions for engaged program participant Betsy Becker, beloved program facilitator Jean Rowe, generous supporter Servier, and our visionary CEO Mallory Casperson. The atmosphere was celebratory, inspiring, intimate, and energetic, reflecting the spirit of Cactus Cancer Society.

Thanks to the generosity of five key sponsors, the passionate support of attendees, and contributions from the Young Adult Cancer Advocate of the Year competition, and proceeds from the auction, the gala raised over \$90,000, a remarkable achievement that will fuel our mission for years to come. This milestone event not only honored our past but also energized us for the future, reaffirming the power of connection, creativity, and community.









# Young Adult Cancer Advocate of the Year

In celebration of our 10th anniversary, we launched the inaugural Young Adult Cancer Advocate of the Year (YAAY) competition: an eight-week fundraising challenge that brought together nine passionate community members committed to ending isolation for young adults facing cancer. Together, the candidates raised an incredible \$38,822 in support of our mission. The race came down to the final day, with the top two contenders raising over \$11,000 combined in just 24 hours. In recognition of their extraordinary efforts, we proudly awarded the title to both winners, Cody Morrison and Ashley Landi, during our 10th Anniversary Gala. Their dedication will directly fund over 700 supply boxes for young adult participants in our programs.





# Survivor Art Gallery

As part of our 10th Anniversary Gala, we hosted a powerful and inspiring art gallery featuring original work created by young adult cancer survivors from across our programs. The collection included stunning neurographic art pieces, expressive mixed-media collages, intricate embroidery, and even a vibrant patchwork installation. Each of the 46 art pieces served as a deeply personal reflection of the artists' experiences, resilience, and creativity. Guests were invited to explore these visual expressions of hope, healing, and identity, then bid on them through a silent auction that extended beyond the event to online supporters nationwide. Proceeds from the art gallery auction directly support our programs, helping to ensure that Cactus Cancer Society can continue showing up for young adults facing cancer with creativity, connection, and compassionate community for years to come.







**CACTUS**  
CANCER SOCIETY

## A Million Thanks Wouldn't Be Enough

We want to express the most heartfelt gratitude from all of us at Cactus Cancer Society. Your belief in our mission, your generosity, and your willingness to show up for young adults facing cancer make everything we do possible. Whether you participated, donated, shared your story, celebrated with us at our gala, or cheered us on from afar, you are part of this thriving, resilient community. A million thanks wouldn't be enough, but we hope you feel our deep gratitude in every word, every program, and every connection we create together.

