



## Swim Across America Take the Plunge for UCSF

UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals have been on the forefront of research and treatment for childhood cancer for decades. Their robust clinical and research programs have had an impact on pediatric cancer across the globe. Because of the level of expertise UCSF provides, the future is brighter for thousands of patients.

Research is a critical component of UCSF's cancer program. Thanks to remarkable advances in the treatment of leukemia and other cancers – some of which have happened at Benioff Children's Hospitals – cure rates for childhood cancers have risen dramatically over the past 40 years. Today, the overall 5-year survival rate for childhood cancer is nearly 85 percent. That's up from 10 percent in the 1970s.

Even with this incredible progress, the effects of childhood cancer can be long lasting. With continuing advances in pediatric cancer treatments, the population of survivors is growing, and physicians are still learning about the long-term consequences of childhood cancer and its therapies. The disease may affect cognition, education, socialization, and development. It may also increase the risk of other major medical conditions including heart disease and subsequent cancers.

That's why the partnership between Swim Across America and UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals is vital to the future of cancer research and care.

**“I feel like I'm one of the lucky ones, and the reason I raise so much is because I want to give back. I hope that anybody who gets a cancer diagnosis can live a full life like I've been able to live.”**

—Susan Helmrich, three-time cancer survivor and 15-year veteran of Swim Across America

## A Remarkable Impact

Over the past 17 years, Swim Across America has granted nearly \$6 million to the UCSF Swim Across America Research Lab and the UCSF Swim Across America Survivors of Childhood Cancer Program to fund pediatric cancer research and survivorship. Raising funds for pediatric cancer research can be extremely difficult, which is why these funds raised through Swim Across America have literally kept UCSF's cancer research going and helped scientists find new cures for children diagnosed with cancer.

Thanks to Swim Across America, UCSF researchers have been able to:

- **Maintain a dedicated and highly skilled staff of scientists** steadily moving cancer research projects forward despite the ups and downs of grant funding.
- **Pioneer a new treatment strategy for a deadly childhood cancer** called neuroblastoma by specifically targeting a cancer-causing gene that drives tumor growth.
- **Nurture and educate young investigators** who will advance efforts to improve care for young people with cancer and hopefully eradicate the disease once and for all.
- **Take the long view, diving deep into complex mechanisms** that take time and persistence to unravel but are critical to understanding the cancer cell.
- **Expand the survivorship program to serve 2,000 patients** and develop an app to enhance the long-term follow-up care for all survivors of cancer.
- **Offer hundreds of clinical trials to patients looking for answers** and better therapies through clinical research endeavors.
- **Move closer to our goal of curing all childhood cancer**, so that this terrible disease becomes a thing of the past.



**“I am such a believer in Swim Across America that I recruit teams, speak at events, submit stories for their website, give tours of our lab, and of course, undertake my own swim fundraiser every year and volunteer at the swims. Swim Across America is more than a foundation. It is a community. Thank you so much for your unwavering support of cancer research.”**

—Julie D. Saba, MD, PhD, Director of the Swim Across America Research Lab at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital Oakland

**This memorable event is made possible by dedicated swimmers, donors, and volunteers, both on land and on the water. Join us and help Swim Across America and UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals make waves to fight cancer!**

# Swim Across America

## Stories of Impact

### Lydia Braves the Bay

At just 8 years old, Lydia Gerdes was diagnosed with Ewing Sarcoma, a rare cancer of the bones that occurs most commonly in children and teenagers. She spent 8 months in treatment at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals. The year before her diagnosis, Lydia had joined Humboldt Swim Club. Now 12 and in remission, Lydia took her passion for swimming and her commitment to fighting cancer and joined 200 other participants in the Swim Across America Open Water Swim. She says that when she heard about Swim Across America, she knew she wanted to join to support the same oncology programs and research that saved her life.



[READ LYDIA'S STORY](#)

### Dan on Making a Difference

After learning he had a brain tumor, avid swimmer Dan Dunnigan underwent a successful surgery at UCSF in 2013. To show his gratitude for the life-saving care that he received, Dan participates in Swim Across America as captain for Team UCSF Survive, which raises more than \$75,000 each year. During the pandemic, Dan and other dedicated SAA swimmers did individual challenges and rallied their communities virtually. "I will continue to swim and be a part of something bigger than myself. It is a team effort, and we can all make a difference in some way.



[READ DAN'S STORY](#)

### Susan on Taking the Plunge for 15 Years

At 21, Susan Helmrich was diagnosed with vaginal cancer. At 42, she fought lung cancer. When she was 53, she was treated for pancreatic cancer. Now 66, Susan has participated in Swim Across America for nearly 15 years. Her team (Team Susan Survives!) of close to 30 swimmers has brought in a million dollars since they started. Despite everything, Susan says she feels like she's one of the lucky ones, and she just wants to give back – even if that means braving the cold waters of the Bay!



[READ SUSAN'S STORY](#)

## **Julie Saba, MD, on Feeling the Gratitude**

Pediatric oncologist Dr. Julie Saba started her career by caring for patients with cancer. But she found herself so motivated to find new cures that she transitioned to research. Finding dollars for cancer research was a challenge, and Dr. Saba says that Swim Across America has made an incredible difference. Every year, Julie and her team support the event in many ways, from raising funds to volunteering for the earliest shifts on the event day. “I think we all just want to express our gratitude to Swim Across America and to all of the swimmers, the volunteers, the Olympians, the supporters and the cancer survivors who really work very hard all year long to raise money to help us do our cancer research. We wouldn’t be able to do it without the help from Swim Across America.”



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## **Rob Goldsby, MD, on Why the Swim Matters**

The Swim Across America Survivors of Childhood Cancer Program at UCSF Benioff Children's Hospitals, which is directed by pediatric oncologist Dr. Robert Goldsby, helps survivors and their families recognize and cope with the potential late effects of treatment. Goldsby says that continuing advances in pediatric cancer treatments have resulted in a growing population of survivors of childhood cancer, and physicians are still learning about the long-term consequences of childhood cancer and its therapy. “We want to make sure that pediatric cancer survivors are getting the appropriate clinical follow up and that they are knowledgeable about their risks for recurrence of disease and late effects.” The funds raised through Swim Across America will be invaluable to this work.



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