

2024

ANNUAL REPORT

FIRST DESCENTS



OUR MISSION

First Descents provides life-changing adventures for young adults impacted by cancer and other serious health conditions.



ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



"I haven't had any other type of experience that has changed me so much in such a short time. I entered my FD trip unsure, nervous and worried — but five days later, I walked away a different person. Someone who was more self-assured. Someone who was kinder to herself. Someone who held her head up just a little bit higher."

On a random Sunday morning in May of 2018, Francie "Savage" Kinney woke up to a puzzling case of double vision. Two days later, she walked herself into an ER, only to completely lose control of the right side of her body later that day.

"At the age of 35, I was gobsmacked," she shares. "At first I thought I was having a stroke, but when that didn't pan out, my medical team had a hard time deciding what was going on."

It's a common theme for so many with an eventual MS diagnosis: Savage wound up being in the hospital for a month trying to regain some of what she had lost physically, mentally and verbally. She had to use a walker to leave the hospital.

"As someone who had taken up running in 2014 and then ran five half-marathons, many 10Ks and several 5Ks, it was a very surreal and sobering moment," she says.

It was only after a difficult recovery from spinal surgery later that year that she finally received an official multiple sclerosis diagnosis of relapsing-remitting. Now, after six years of treatments, Savage has made progress: "I started as a walker-dependent person, and I'm now an independent walker who sometimes has to use a hiking stick."

She discovered First Descents through an MS group. "I had missed being outdoors and in nature. I'm very heat intolerant with my MS and am still gaining a lot of my strength and energy back," she says. "The idea of being on the river to keep me cool in the summer was very enticing to me."

The river Savage chose to cool off in was the Rogue in Oregon, in July of 2024. But because she also deals with other health issues on top of MS, she doubted her ability to complete the full week.

"I never went to summer camp as a kid, so I wasn't sure what to expect from spending such a large chunk of time with strangers," she says. "I also was concerned I wasn't in good enough shape to participate, and between that and my heat intolerance, I was worried that I'd be sitting inside all week."

Her fears wound up being unfounded: "There were fit people in my group, but there were also people like me — it was a variety of physical and mental abilities." She came away from the experience with a new group of friends with similar MS diagnoses who check in on each other regularly and are already planning a reunion.

In addition, she continues to pursue outdoor adventures every chance she gets, including participating in FD's locally led Community Adventures. "I love that Community Adventures keeps you active throughout the year," she says. "They also keep me connected to this new family I have found."



LETTER FROM THE FOUNDER



At First Descents, growth means more than increasing numbers—it's about deepening our impact, broadening our reach, and continuing to strengthen the relationships that make our work possible. Every river we run, trail we hike, and rock wall we climb represents a story of resilience and connection. These experiences, shared side by side, are the foundation of a community that is not only thriving, but growing stronger every day.

In 2024, we delivered 36 weeklong programs across the country, creating life-changing adventures for young adults impacted by cancer and multiple sclerosis, as well as for caregivers and healthcare workers in oncology

and MS. As always, these programs were designed with care to prioritize safety, rejuvenation and a deep sense of belonging. In addition, our inspiring alumni led a record 116 Community Adventures nationwide, reflecting a powerful expansion of our mission at the local level to bring more people together more often, and closer to home.

As our programming continues to expand, so too does our footprint. As we head toward our 25th year of service in 2026, we're proud to be laying the groundwork for new First Descents sites across the country—strategic hubs that will allow us to serve thousands more participants, build stronger local communities, and create lasting access to adventure and connection.

These efforts are powered by our Go Beyond Capital Campaign, an investment in the infrastructure that will fuel our mission well into the future.

Whether it's alumni strengthening bonds on Community Adventures, athletes becoming advocates through the Out Living It Project, or our healthcare partners championing Prescribe Adventure to their patients, our network of passionate changemakers is driving First Descents forward in extraordinary ways.

As always, the true heart of our progress lies in the meaningful relationships we foster with our participants, alumni, staff, volunteers, donors and partners.

Our community continues to be united by a shared vision: to provide healing through adventure and redefine survivorship for generations to come.

To all of you who support that vision: Thank you. Your commitment, generosity and belief in what we do are what make this growth possible. Together, we're not only expanding our reach; we're building on a movement we started in 2001—one rooted in compassion, community and the transformative power of adventure.

With gratitude and excitement for what lies ahead,

Brad "Cosmo" Ludden
Founder of First Descents

WHY IT WORKS

17%

REPORTED DEPRESSION
BEFORE FIRST DESCENTS

100%

REPORTED INCREASED ABILITY TO COPE
WITH CANCER AND ITS EFFECTS

81%

REPORTED INCREASED SELF-EFFICACY,
INCLUDING CONFIDENCE IN PHYSICAL,
EMOTIONAL AND INTELLECTUAL
ASPECTS OF LIFE

99%

WANT TO STAY INVOLVED

7%

REPORTED DEPRESSION
POST-PROGRAM

Cancer is the leading disease-related cause of death in adolescents and young adults (AYAs). About 87,000 AYAs are diagnosed with cancer annually.

Multiple sclerosis is the most common neuroinflammatory disease affecting young adults. MS is most commonly diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 40.

FD programs address the following psychosocial issues among the young adult community:

- Higher rates of depression and psychosocial distress
- Lack of peer support and community connection
- Higher rates of isolation and alienation
- Decreased self-confidence and ability to cope with life's challenges
- Lack of positive body image and belief in physical abilities
- Decreased hopefulness about the future
- Disruption of normative milestones of adulthood

**Sources: seer.cancer.gov, National Institutes of Health, National Multiple Sclerosis Society*

The image is a composite. The left half shows a group of people in kayaks on a river, with a large, forested mountain in the background. The right half is a dark blue overlay with white text and white contour lines. The text is arranged vertically, showing four key statistics.

OUR HIGHLIGHTS

1,437

PARTICIPANTS SERVED

36

TOTAL WEEKLONG PROGRAMS

\$9.29M

FUNDS RAISED

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



Expand Programs

Cancer is on the rise among adolescents and young adults (AYAs), with an estimated 87,000 young adults ages 20–39 expected to receive a diagnosis annually for the foreseeable future as rates continue to rise year over year. At the same time, the majority of MS diagnoses continue to impact those between the ages of 20 and 40. These statistics highlight an urgent and growing need for age-appropriate support and community for these underserved populations. In response, First Descents is focused on strategic, thoughtful expansion to serve more young adults than ever before. We're actively seeking permanent program homes and dramatically increasing the number of local, peer-led Community Adventures across the country. This dual approach ensures that young adults impacted by cancer and MS have consistent access to a supportive, empathetic community—and more opportunities to embrace the healing power of adventure and an Out Living It lifestyle.



Build Community

In 2024, we hosted 29 more Community Adventures (CA) than in 2023—a testament to our commitment to expanding access to year-round, locally led programs that reflect the same inclusive, equitable and healing ethos as our core offerings. These CA serve as vital, ongoing touchpoints for young adults to nurture critical peer relationships built through fun activities like hiking, paddleboarding, rock climbing and whitewater rafting. As we look ahead, continuing to grow CA remains a top priority, with a goal of expanding the quantity, quality and geographic reach of these events. An Alumni Ambassador Program will launch in 2025 to further enhance local engagement and support CA.



Prescribe Adventure

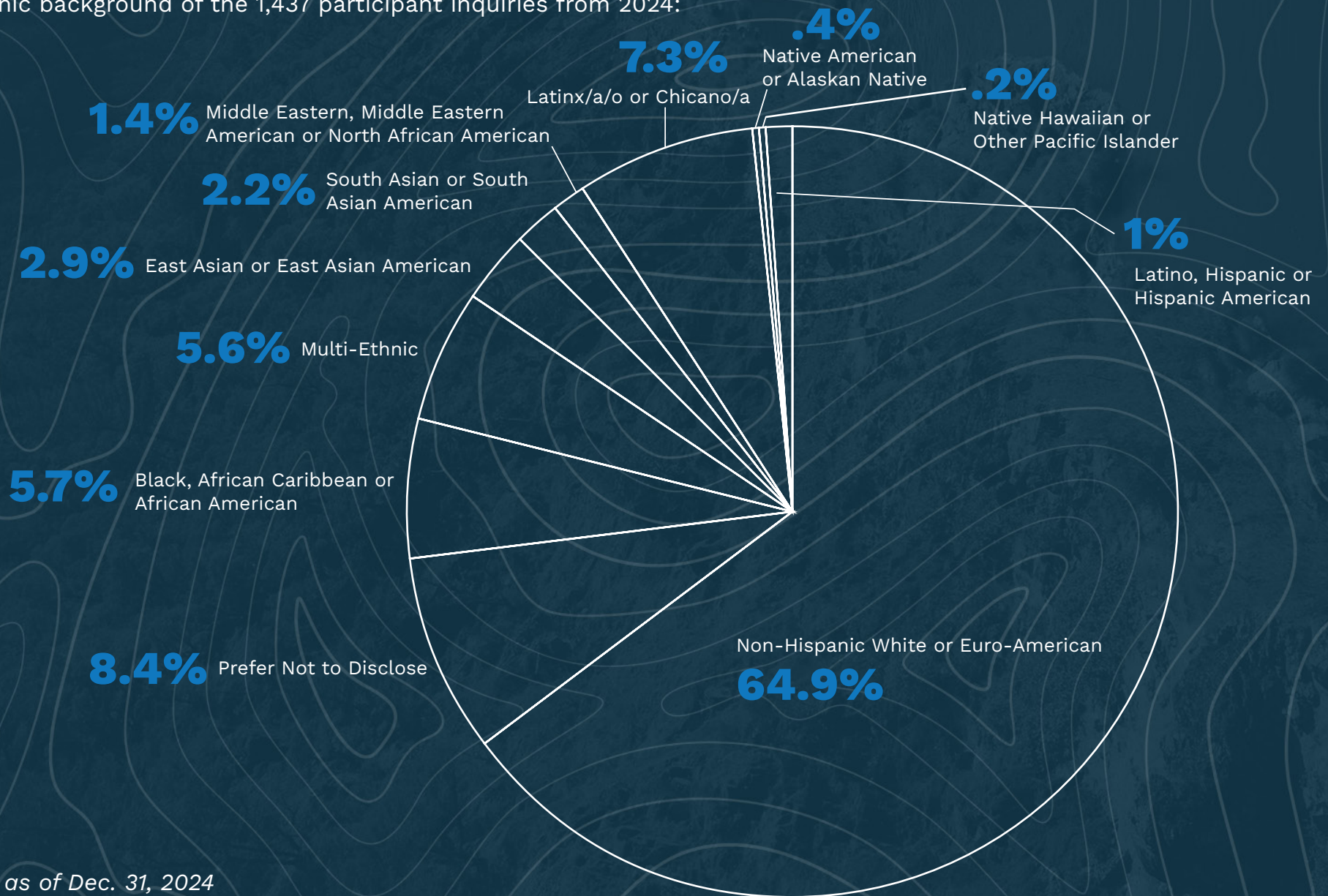
First Descents partners with the medical community through its Prescribe Adventure initiative to engage healthcare professionals in empowering their patients by referring them to experience community connection and life-changing adventures with FD. FD is dedicated to reaching more young adults earlier in the treatment process through its ever-growing network of healthcare professionals, with a stated goal for 2025 of driving 2,000 inquiries, revamping our relationship management approach and strengthening our engagement of JEDI partners and influencers.

Sources: National Cancer Institute, National MS Society



BUILDING COMMUNITY

In 2024, First Descents continued its commitment to reaching those traditionally underserved within the young adult oncology and MS communities, as well as caregivers and healthcare workers in those fields. The numbers below highlight the ethnic background of the 1,437 participant inquiries from 2024:



**Data as of Dec. 31, 2024*

COMMUNITY ADVENTURES

Community Adventures are all about connection and shared outdoor experiences. These free or low-cost adventurous activities — hiking, biking, paddleboarding, climbing and more — are coordinated around the country by local community members. Adventures are available for all skill levels and range from 1-2 hours to daylong or multi-day excursions, and they are open to anyone ages 18+, including patients, friends and family, supporters and partners.



"The community at FD is a big thing for me. The adventure is what got me into it, but the community is what keeps me coming back. It's the people I meet, it's the experiences with those people, that we have a similar experience that not a lot of people can relate to. It's just like everyone has a shared bond, and it's really easy to talk and easy to get to know each other. That's been really fun, to have that friendship outside of the organized programs."

– Mandy "Twiggy" Goff, Community Adventures Leader and Future Alumni Ambassador

114

COMMUNITY ADVENTURES

996

ATTENDEES

41

LOCATIONS NATIONWIDE

PRESCRIBE ADVENTURE



Research shows that FD's Core Programs improve survivorship, and in 2024, FD reached more young adults through its growing network of healthcare professionals than ever before. FD revamped resources to better assist healthcare professionals in sharing information about the healing power of adventure with their patients. In addition to establishing 219 new healthcare contacts and 59 new healthcare partners, FD increased the number of medical centers and healthcare organizations referring patients over the previous year. FD also updated its Prescribe Adventure Kit (PAK) — which includes participant brochures to educate patients about FD's programming — resulting in more orders, from 90 PAKs in 2023 to 113 in 2024, thereby increasing FD's reach in healthcare institutions.

"It has been a pleasure to partner with First Descents. Several ANGEL Advocates and cancer Survivors have signed up—or expressed interest in signing up—for a healing adventure with them. These experiences offer a safe, supportive space to explore the outdoors, build community, and embrace personal transformation. This is an incredible opportunity and a beautiful way to support Survivors and Thrivers on their healing journeys."

– Tigerlily Foundation



Through the Prescribe Adventure campaign, First Descents partners with medical facilities and healthcare organizations nationwide to empower their patients by referring them to experience community connection and life-changing adventures with FD. In 2024, FD continued to expand efforts to engage more healthcare professionals in oncology and multiple sclerosis fields.

Highlights included:

- Completed partnership data reconciliation including: account organization, standardized processes, and linking 15,000+ unmapped inquiries to affiliated hospitals.
- Established contacts and shared materials with 59 new healthcare partners, including 5 NCI-designated cancer centers (Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center, University of New Mexico Cancer Center, UCLA Health Jonsson Comprehensive Cancer Center, Abramson Cancer Center, Herbert Irving Comprehensive Cancer Center)
- Established 219 new healthcare contacts
- Developed partnerships with patient advocacy organizations that represent a variety of patient communities, including: American Cancer Society, MS, I'mpossible, Fight Colorectal Cancer, Healing Works Foundation
- Attended a number of healthcare events and conferences:
 - » Consortium of Multiple Sclerosis Center
 - » Academy of Oncology Nurses and Patient Navigators
 - » CancerCon
 - » Young Survival Coalition
 - » AYAs Take Chicago
 - » Association of Pediatric Oncology Social Workers

“Thank you so very much for the generosity of making these amazing programs possible. For an entire week, I was able to unplug and connect with a wonderful group of humans who just ‘get it.’ I came home from my trip refreshed and relaxed with an eagerness to return to nature as soon as possible.”

– Rutledge Cancer Foundation Patient

**Rutledge Cancer Foundation, through the Wyatt Donahue Memorial Fund, partners with First Descents to honor Wyatt’s deep love for the outdoors. Through the Fund, RCF also covers transportation costs to ensure participants can fully access FD’s life-changing experiences.*





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THE CONSORTIUM OF
MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS CENTERS

OUT LIVING IT PROJECT

Whether pushing personal limits or rallying supporters, the Out Living It Project offers a dynamic platform for FD community members to make a lasting impact, either through their own unique fundraisers or to join existing projects and races, all with the goal of raising awareness of and funding for young adults dealing with cancer and MS.

In 2024, Team FD athletes competed in high-profile races across the country, including the Leadville Trail 100 Run and Leadville Trail 100 MTB, the Ragnar Snowmass Trail Relay, the TCS NYC Marathon, SBT GRVL, Race 2 Adventure and Boulderthon. **To date, the Out Living It Project has raised \$8.2M across 2,490 projects with 46,561 supporters.**



\$388,295

RAISED

2,848

DONATIONS

120

CAMPAIGNS



Molly Vaskey
Out Living It Project Fundraiser

"When I almost lost my leg to cancer, I didn't just fight to survive—I chose to 'out live it.' First Descents gave me the platform to turn my pain into purpose and show other young adults that you get to choose what's possible after a diagnosis. Running the Leadville Trail 100 as a three-year survivor isn't just a race—it's a declaration: I'm still here, and I'm out living it every step of the way."



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Program Coordinator Catherine “Peachy” Carey
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FINANCIALS

In 2024, our generous community generated more than \$9.29 million, representing an exceptional fundraising year that included \$3,528,417.45 toward our Go Beyond Capital Campaign.

In recognition of our financial transparency, Guidestar once again awarded FD with its coveted platinum ranking.

www.firstdescents.org/documents



OPERATING REVENUE

\$5,770,237

TOTAL OPERATING REVENUE



www.firstdescents.org/documents

OPERATING EXPENSES

\$4,704,457

TOTAL OPERATING EXPENSES

\$312,150

7%

GENERAL ADMINISTRATION

\$1,070,072

23%

DEVELOPMENT

\$3,322,234

71%

PROGRAMS

*71% of 2024 expenses were allocated to programming,
providing 1,437 unique adventure experiences for our
community.*

www.firstdescents.org/documents

GIVING SOCIETIES

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Always Keep Pedaling Foundation
Amy “Wildflower” Lin
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Wacky Warriors

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Zach Calkins

INNOVATION FUND

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Rise Above It (RAI)

20 YEARS OUT LIVING IT

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