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First Descents Announces New CEO and 25th Anniversary of Healing Adventures

Nonprofit for young adults impacted by cancer and MS celebrates legacy, looks ahead to growth

DENVER – FEBRUARY 18, 2026 – First Descents, the nationwide nonprofit known for providing free outdoor adventure programs for young adults impacted by cancer and multiple sclerosis, today announced Alex Accetta as its new Chief Executive Officer. This leadership transition occurs just as First Descents enters its 25th year, establishing a strong foundation for future growth.

Founded on August 5, 2001, First Descents has spent the past 25 years helping young adults reclaim confidence, connection, and joy through outdoor adventures at no cost in gorgeous settings around the country. Since its inception, the organization has provided more than 14,000 healing outdoor experiences – including kayaking, rock climbing, surfing, and more – and has created a national community of alumni, volunteers, partners, and supporters. This year alone, 36 Core Programs and 130 Community Adventures, all free, will serve more than 1,600 participants.

“Reaching 25 years is so rare in the nonprofit sector,” said Brad Ludden, First Descents’ founder. “We’re proud of the impact of our mission, the dedication of our community, and the trust that so many people have placed in First Descents over the years. Anniversaries are about more than looking back, though. They’re about reaffirming who we are and where we’re going. That’s why, during this year of celebration, we’re excited to welcome Alex, a culture-shaper who leads with his heart and is genuinely aligned with our values and uniquely positioned to guide us into the future.”

Accetta brings nearly 30 years of higher education and recreation leadership experience centered on advancing belonging, well-being, and transformational learning for young adults. He holds a BA and MA from Stanford University, and an EdD from Portland State University, where his doctorate explored how young adults can gain a sense of their global self.

Across leadership roles at Stanford University and Portland State University, as well as national engagement with NIRSA and nonprofit work with Adaptive Sports Northwest, his work has consistently championed inclusive, recreation- and adventure-based experiences that expand access, foster resilience, and build meaningful community. In this role, he will oversee First Descents’ nationwide adventure programming and steward its long-term growth, building on 25 years of impact while preparing the organization for its next era of expansion.

“I believe deeply in the power of adventure and community to elevate how people see themselves and what they believe is possible,” Accetta said. “First Descents has spent 25 years creating spaces of courage, shared purpose, and belonging, and I can’t wait to get to work to extend our reach and amplify the life-changing support we offer for young adults living with cancer and MS.”

The CEO announcement coincides with First Descents’ 25th anniversary year, which will run throughout 2026 and include storytelling initiatives, alumni engagement, and special events, all geared toward honoring the thousands of people who have shaped the organization over the past quarter century. The anniversary also sets the stage for future expansion, including the development of Montana Base Camp, 35 acres of undeveloped land along the Clark Fork River purchased by First Descents in 2023 to build the Denver-based organization’s first owned-and-operated program site.

For more information about First Descents, new CEO Alex Accetta, and the 25th anniversary, visit firstdescents.org.

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ABOUT FIRST DESCENTS

[First Descents](https://firstdescents.org) (FD) is a global leader in adventure-based healing. Through outdoor adventure, community building, and lifestyle development, FD improves long-term survivorship and quality of life for young adults diagnosed with cancer, multiple sclerosis, and other serious health conditions, as well as for their caregivers and healthcare heroes in those fields. Headquartered in Denver, First Descents has provided more than 14,000 healing adventures over the last 25 years. All programs are free of charge. A Guidestar Platinum-ranked nonprofit, First Descents has been recognized on CNN Heroes and as one of *OUTSIDE* Magazine’s Best Places to Work. Charity Navigator has recognized First Descents with a 4-star rating, the highest possible score for accountability, transparency, and financial stewardship.

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