

# SPOTLIGHT

*A chance to get to know the young adults with cancer in your community*

**For the January 2021 *Spotlight*, we could not be more thrilled to feature  
Chris Birmingham**



Chris and Libby explore the rainbow lakes of Yellowstone.

Five years ago, 22 year old Chris Birmingham was diagnosed with melanoma. He underwent surgery and then a clinical trial for a vaccine. Now, at 27 he is able to call himself a survivor.

AYA@USC: What was the last day before your diagnosis like?

*The last day before my diagnosis wasn't particularly memorable, but the day I received my diagnosis is a decent story. The morning of my diagnosis I had planned a nerdy date to an old used bookstore. Libby and I were just starting to fuel up on coffee and donuts when I got a call from an unknown number. On the other end of the line was a nurse, calling to let me know that the mole I had removed had tested positive for melanoma and that I needed to see an oncologist. It was only after the call was completed that I thought to ask, what exactly is melanoma? Determined not to let some scary news deter us, the date continued after a short break, albeit with a very different tone. Instead of browsing the shelves for our usual fare of sci-fi and fantasy, I found myself drawn to new areas I had never explored. It was on that date that I discovered The Tao of Pooh, a book that led me to a new understanding myself and the world of suffering I had no idea I was about to enter.*

AYA@USC: What has been the 'Rose' and 'Thorn' of your cancer experience?

*My cancer experience was an entire rosebush of blooms and thorns, but the greatest of all blooms was the relationship that blossomed with my now fiancé, Libby. She is my life-partner and has been my greatest advocate and supporter throughout my cancer experience. The sharpest thorn was living with the dread that there was always more negative news to come, further news of spread or recurrence.*



Chris met other AYAs for the first time at Cancer Con.



Chris works on robots to assist the elderly with activities of daily living in Bristol or to help stressed students in Los Angeles.

AYA@USC: Do you have any 'cancerversary' traditions?

*I am not good with dates so most of the time I forget until after it passes.*

AYA@USC: What is one thing you wish people knew about cancer?

*I wish people knew that cancer is a journey that doesn't stop with just death or a cure. It is a journey with many twists and turns. It can have lasting impacts that we live with for the rest of our lives. I think xkcd says it best... <https://xkcd.com/931/>*

AYA@USC: Are there any quotes or sayings that you have remembered or found helpful?

*It may be cliché but I adopted "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger" as my life motto because of cancer.*

AYA@USC: Have you been forced, or chosen to change your life in any meaningful way because of your diagnosis?

*Cancer changed my life in so many ways, but one of the most meaningful was in forcing me to figure out what was most important. Things come and go, achievement only provides temporary happiness. It is only relationships that can provide lasting meaning and joy.*

AYA@USC: Was there any art that helped you or that you would recommend? Did you have any musicians/songs that you found yourself listening to? Books that you found yourself reading? Movies/TV shows that you found yourself watching? Comedy, art, theater, etc.

*It isn't for everyone, but I would recommend Buddhism, Plain and Simple. It has helped me to learn how to live in the moment and set aside some of the anxiety cancer produces.*



AYA@USC: Between need to do, have to do, and want to do- how do you spend your days?

*I am a PhD student at USC. I spend most of my days trying to program social robots to interact with people in positive ways. I am also involved with the USC AYA community, where I volunteer as a patient advocate and help organize and plan events for cancer patients and survivors. For fun I love to go hiking and rock climbing or anything outdoors.*



Chris making friends on a First Descent trip to Leavenworth.

"I hope that young adults with cancer know they are not alone. There are other people out there who understand what you are going through. The AYA community is here and ready to welcome you."



Chris with his Sister, Jessie and Mom, Margaret exploring Santa Monica Pier.



Chris and Libby avoiding the bears while exploring Yellowstone.

You can learn more about the AYA@USC program by visiting <https://aya.usc.edu/>



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