

Susie Burke, RN, MA, CPNP, CPHON

Susie Burke, who has worked as a pediatric oncology nurse for most of her 44-year career, has seen too many examples of cancer stealing a child's sunny, carefree outlook and replacing it with feelings of isolation and hopelessness. She says it's all too common for children going through cancer, especially at the beginning, to think they will never feel healthy and strong again, nor be able to return to doing the things they love.

Thankfully, Camp One Step stands ready to show these brave young people that friendship, connection, fun and adventure are still possible. That's why Burke became a volunteer with the organization back in 1983 and has served in a variety of roles ever since, including full-time medical director.

"Everything we do at camp brings a positive energy and provides a connection with others who get what you've been through, without even having to speak about it – unless you want to," says Burke, a pediatric nurse practitioner who retired from Camp One Step in 2026. "There's just an intuitive understanding that's always there."

Burke is a firm believer in the power of Camp One Step for children who are newly diagnosed, in treatment or survivors. She's eager to share what she knows with her fellow medical professionals, so they can make families aware of the many Camp One Step options that exist, all for free.

And this doesn't only mean sleep-away camps. For those who are unable to be part of in person experiences or simply want a virtual option, there's [CONNECTED](#). This is the digital arm of Camp One Step that provides single or multi-day "live" programs that participants pre register for, as well as [on-demand activities](#) that live on the website. The online programming initially was created in 2020, after the pandemic forced the organization to pause in-person camps and activities. Today, CONNECTED is going strong, with hundreds of children participating all year long.

Burke says some children can't attend in-person camp due to the circumstances of their illness at the time, and those families are grateful for the interactions and fun distraction that CONNECTED brings. They see it as a bright spot in an otherwise long day. But she says another benefit of digital programming is that it can serve as an entry point into Camp One Step for those who are just getting to know the organization.

"It can be difficult to go through diagnosis and treatment and then send your child away to camp, especially when you have not yet formed a relationship with Camp One Step," Burke says. "Some families need to get to know us and build trust before they feel comfortable. Some do this through Family Camp or the Day Camp experiences for younger children. And some do it by participating in CONNECTED."

She says it's nice to see campers getting introduced to CONNECTED while they're on treatment and might not have the stamina or endurance to go away for a week of camp. "Kids have the

chance to come into the Camp One Step family very early and develop relationships and a comfort level. Then down the road when they're feeling better and have their energy back, they can think about expanding their involvement into in-person camp."

Burke says the virtual options can also fill a need for families who live too far away to get to an in-person camp. "We want to continue to expand these opportunities across the country," she says, adding that there are currently CONNECTED campers zooming in from Arizona, Virginia, Washington and other states.

CONNECTED's scheduled programs are led by a creative and engaging team of volunteers over Zoom and include things like cooking demonstrations, craft projects, science experiments – and plenty of jokes. There are also informal breakout groups for campers – and even their parents – to connect and offer support. After signing up, families receive a package with the supplies they'll need for the planned activities. And it's all free, thanks to Camp One Step's great development team and generous donors, according to Burke.

Burke says she has seen virtual campers taking part from hospital rooms, cars, kitchens, vacations – wherever they happen to be. "This tells me they don't want to miss it, no matter what else might be going on."

CONNECTED programs can be interactive, with participants working together virtually or with parents and siblings joining the fun. Or they can be done individually, because some participants prefer to keep the screen off or take part on their own time. The idea is for everything to be flexible and engaging, meeting participants where they are.

For even more flexibility, Burke recommends CONNECTED's on-demand activities, which are user friendly and always ready to go, and can be done independently at any time. The on demand categories include STEAM, wellness, food, online games, and songs and playlists.

Burke is making sure hospitals far and wide know about CONNECTED, to help increase participation among children and families who are dealing with pediatric cancer. But she's also a big fan of in-person camp for those who are able to participate. In fact, her involvement as a Camp One Step volunteer goes back to 40 years ago when she was just starting out as a nurse and wrote to Camp One Step founder Dr. Edward Baum about volunteering at summer camp.

Burke says she initially had the idea because she was finding her work on the pediatric cancer floor to be so intense and, at times, sad. "Survival rates were not what we see today. And as a nurse in the inpatient units, you're with kids at their sickest times," she recalls. "I wanted to see them experiencing normal childhood things and enjoying life."

After her first time volunteering at camp, Burke was hooked. She says camp renews the spirit of medical professionals. They hear that laughter and see the joy and the connections campers are experiencing after being in the hospital for so long, and it helps them realize why they do what they do.

Burke says many of the healthcare providers who volunteer as medical staff at camp have

similar reasons for getting involved. “One nurse told me she had been ready to leave the specialty because it is so intense and emotionally draining. But then she discovered camp and was energized by the resilience and spirit the kids bring to everything they do. Now she says she’s okay as long as she gets a regular dose of camp.”

As full-time medical director for Camp One Step from 2018-2026, Burke has played a big role in establishing volunteer education and developing processes that support the health and safety of kids while at camp. There are now up to 70 medical volunteers working at each Summer Camp, and they include professionals with backgrounds in pediatrics, oncology, emergency medicine, neurology and more.

Camp One Step recently received a Gold Ribbon Accreditation from the Children’s Oncology Camping Association, in recognition of the organization’s ability to provide a medically and psycho-socially safe environment for individuals and families affected by childhood cancer. Burke says the Camp One Step team is proud of this national accreditation because it gives families added peace of mind as they send their children to camp. Many families also feel comforted when they find out a beloved nurse or doctor will be on site at camp. This is why she’s always working to expand the team with volunteers from many of the pediatric oncology centers.

The magic of in-person camp has to be experienced in order to be fully understood, according to Burke and other staff and volunteers. It’s not uncommon to see kids showing each other their scars or feeling confident enough to remove a wig, because camp is such a safe place full of others who understand.

In-person camps, which range from Summer Camp to Utah Ski Camp, are for children up to 19 years old who are in various stages of treatment or in remission. The experiences give kids of all abilities the chance to play, laugh and learn, be adventurous, make new friends and greet old ones, and share support and inspiration. When campers age out, they may also have the opportunity to progress into a counselor role and possibly become future camp leaders. This is a wonderful way to give back to the organization that has given so much to them, Burke says.

Camp One Step even plans opportunities for parents, guardians and siblings, which can really bring families together when they need it most. “There’s something for everyone,” Burke says.

“Sometimes a camper or a family just needs to stop and breathe, to laugh again, and camp – even in the virtual format – provides that opportunity.”