

**Not Entirely Dead:
Workplace equity and inclusivity for
young adult cancer survivors**

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Design

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University of Washington

Abstract

Not Entirely Dead:
Workplace equity and inclusivity for
young adult cancer survivors

Eason Yang

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Art, Art History and Design

The hard work of defeating cancer is often seen as an unfavorable career gap. But fighting cancer is one of the toughest jobs an individual will ever have and it deserves a place on any resume. The competencies cancer survivors cultivate through adversity are Super-Abilities, not disabilities or liabilities, as current workplace biases might suggest. Grit, determination, resilience, ownership, dedication, empathy: these are the important skills companies look for in prospective hires.

Since I have the privilege of being Not Entirely Dead, I created an initiative to drive a narrative of hope and possibilities. Named for “No Evidence of Disease” (a medical term) and “Not Entirely Dead” (an inside joke for cancer patients), NED is a social enterprise championing the 600,000+ young adult cancer survivors (ages 19–39) in the U.S. who are ready to work again.

Not

Workplace equity and inclusivity for
Young adult cancer survivors

Entirely

Dead

EASON YANG





FOCUS



EMPATHY



OWNERSHIP



EXPERIENCE



DETERMINATION



MULTI-TASKING



STRENGTH



GRIT



PERSERVERANCE



ASSERTION



TENACITY



SELF-DISCIPLINE



DEDICATION



THOUGHTFULNESS



RESILIENCE



CONSCIENTIOUSNESS



CONFIDENCE



PROACTIVITY

Every once in a while, a social movement comes along that changes everything. And we have been very fortunate to live in an age most likely diversity and inclusivity will change the world this decade or possibly continues to the following decades. NED is a social enterprise celebrating equity and inclusivity for young adult cancer survivors in the workplace.

The Organization

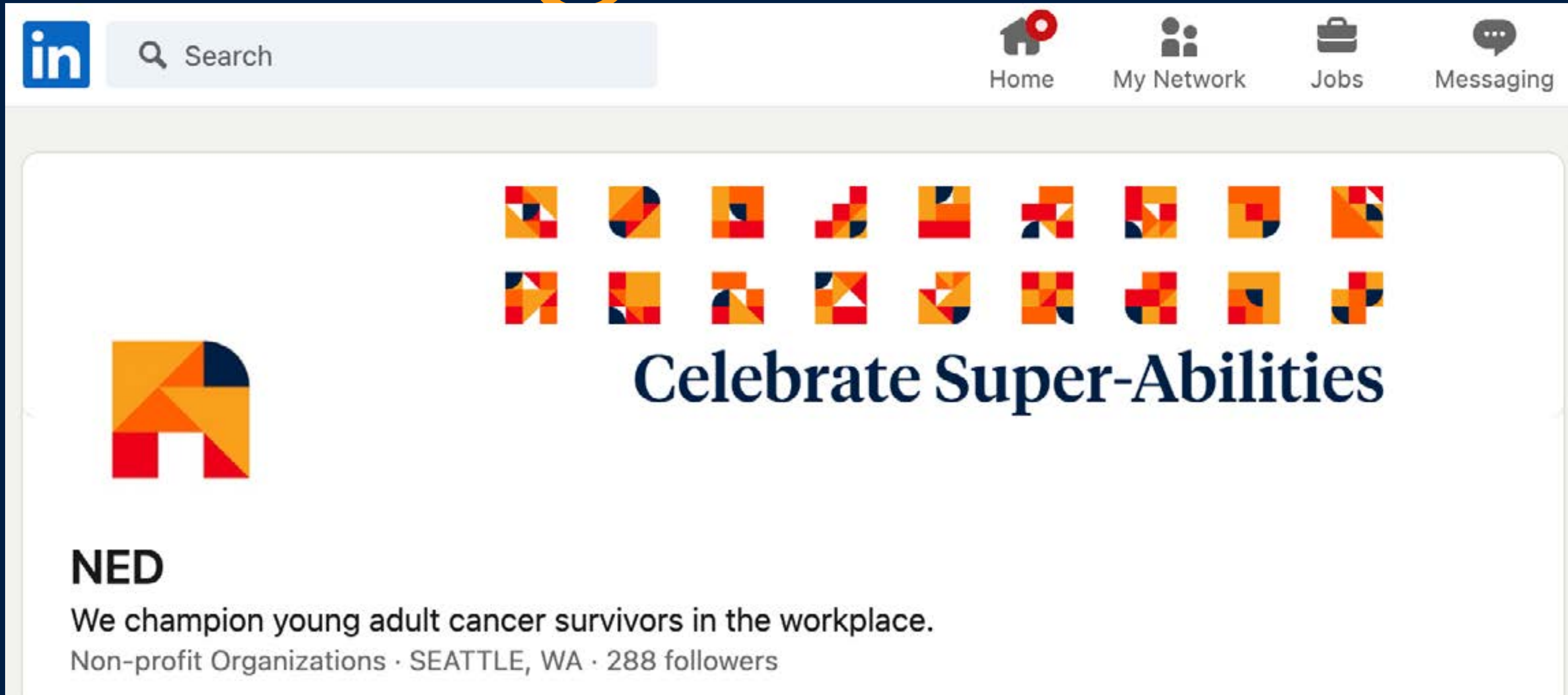
The Cause

The Brand

NED Advocacy

NED Social Movement



The Organization



The image shows a LinkedIn profile for an organization named NED. The profile header includes the LinkedIn logo, a search bar, and navigation icons for Home, My Network, Jobs, and Messaging. The main content area features a large, colorful geometric logo on the left, a grid of 18 smaller versions of the same logo in two rows, and the text "Celebrate Super-Abilities" in a bold, dark blue font. Below the logo and text, the organization's name "NED" is displayed in bold, followed by the description "We champion young adult cancer survivors in the workplace." and the details "Non-profit Organizations · SEATTLE, WA · 288 followers".

in Search

Home My Network Jobs Messaging



Celebrate Super-Abilities

NED
We champion young adult cancer survivors in the workplace.
Non-profit Organizations · SEATTLE, WA · 288 followers

Introducing NED

Three years ago, when I posted a message to my LinkedIn network that I needed help returning to work after a hiatus for cancer treatment, I thought I'd resume my career within a year. I never foresaw that returning to work would be as formidable as going through treatment. Prior to my diagnosis, I'd been working as a creative director at Uber. But my "cancer work" had created a five-year gap on my resume, a gap I still haven't been able to bridge despite a concerted effort. This gap continues to grow.

How can young adult cancer survivors, many of whom are establishing career paths when diagnosed, re-enter the workforce?

How does someone address their resume gap when trying to return to work after cancer?

Can survivors talk openly about it, or should we hide our past?

Time off for cancer treatment is not the same as taking family leave or embarking on a six-month adventure around the world. While these are more publicly acknowledged and accepted breaks in one's career, the length of time for cancer treatment is unpredictable. Not everyone is willing to discuss it in the context of a work environment, and the weight and darkness of the narrative follows survivors everywhere.

Workplace stigma, unconscious bias, and misperceptions about abilities, productivity, and reliability force cancer survivors to carefully consider how our cancer stories are shared with potential employers.

For these reasons, I'm starting a nonprofit organization called NED to help young adult survivors (ages 20–39) bridge the inevitable career gaps that come with cancer experience. I've chosen to call this organization NED because it stands for both "No Evidence of Disease," the term used by medical professionals and "Not Entirely Dead," an inside joke among survivors.

*The organization's aim is twofold:
to empower survivors to return to work with confidence
to educate and enable employers to hire more inclusively*

NED provides an opportunity to build mutual understanding and trust between survivors and employers. It's also a social support service that young adult survivors need. The organization offers them a safe place to cope with post-treatment experiences together. It disrupts the outdated models of support services and reaches survivors at their points of need.

NED is a collaborative space where employers will be proud to participate. It connects them with a group of potential employees who have unique experiences during which they have cultivated life-saving skills and competencies. These competencies—including ownership, decision making, self-management, teamwork, dedication, and resilience—help survivors get through

the toughest situations. Coincidentally, they are important skills that most companies are looking for in their employees.

NED is not only about diversity, equity and inclusion that is highly valued in the industry now, but also about fighting the invisible barriers that haven't yet been identified by most companies.

How does NED work?

Survivors join NED voluntarily by donating their professional stories. In return, they will get a job title to match their work experience if it's needed to mediate the career gap on their resume. Unlike traditional jobs, the years at NED transparently reflect the years survivors have been fighting cancer.

NED grows organically by crowdsourcing survivors' stories. The larger the company is, the more significant impact we can create for cancer survivors. Eventually, survivors and employers will build this community together as a social service with peer groups and career support.

**A COMMUNITY
OF CANCER SURVIVORS**

**A SERVICE
FOR EMPLOYERS**

**A PLATFORM
CONNECTING THE TWO**

The Cause



Life Interrupted

In 2016, at the age of 33, I was diagnosed with cancer. At the time I was focused on my career in the tech industry, leading a design team in a highly competitive company in Silicon Valley. Like many cancer patients though, I had to leave my day job to focus on the job of a lifetime: treatment.

In October 2018, after a series of treatments and setbacks, including a dozen cycles of chemotherapy, a stem cell transplant, and three surgeries, I flew from Beijing to Indianapolis to meet the world-famous oncologist, Dr. Laurence Einhorn. I was convinced that Dr. Einhorn was the only doctor who could save my life.

It has been three years since I had a reboot in Indiana. I am NED — cancer-free. In this time I've returned to design school to focus on research studies in social good and practice teaching and professorship. I've trained to become a distance runner and just finished the Seattle Marathon this past Thanksgiving (running a marathon is recognized as the No.1 cancer survivor cliché activity globally!). Rather than hiding my diagnosis, I've become a visible cancer survivor. I hope to be a mentor and advocate of the community.

Like many young adult cancer fighters and survivors, I do have one ultimate goal — regaining a sense of normalcy. For me, that means finding value and purpose again, including contributing to society and returning to work. Cancer has upended everything in mine and my family's lives, but it hasn't changed why I love the work I do.

Second Chances

“Now that I've survived I'm realizing I don't know how to live.”

– Suleika Jaouad, New York Times bestselling author of *Between Two Kingdoms*

Cancer isn't something that happens once. It permanently changes a person's life. When someone has beaten cancer, there's often an expectation that it's time to live a BIG life — to travel the world, devote a life to saving the planet, or at the very least, finish a marathon. Survivors are reluctant to be victims of the illness, they are encouraged to do what anyone else can do. There's also a mentality that because survivors have been given a second chance at life, we've got to make the most of it. But what many cancer survivors crave more than anything is quite the opposite — a return to normalcy, resuming the life we had before the cancer diagnosis.

Returning to work after cancer can enhance psychological well-being and represent regaining a sense of normality and control. Work is essential for an individual's identity and provides a social connection. However, a career gap caused by cancer is systemically problematic in the hiring process and makes cancer survivors unattractive.

Minding The Gap

Even for healthy people, the long-term unemployed face steep odds. Peter Cappelli, the director of the Center for Human Resources at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, found that some employers regard applicants with long periods of unemployment unfavorably — even if many are reluctant to admit it. He says: “Employers don’t often articulate why but the idea, they believe, is that people who are out of work are damaged in some way, which is why they are out of work.”

Stigma and workplace discrimination have been identified as prominent challenges to employment following cancer. Stigmatizing perceptions can create beliefs that some individuals are less valuable, less capable, and have less to offer to society. For example, cancer survivors have been characterized as burdens to the health care system, the workplace, and their co-workers across international contexts. Furthermore, survivors’ professional networks may erode since many tend to socially vanish to coordinate cancer care for months or years.

Returning to work following an illness such as cancer is most likely to be successful if there is open communication, transparency, trust, and a rhetorical working partnership between employers and employees. Both groups note a need for improved communication and understanding, education about workplace accommodation, more community resources and support regarding return to work processes.

Shifting Narratives

Career gaps are common in the workplace. But unlike the intended plans such as having a baby or going to graduate school, a career gap caused by cancer isn’t by choice. Anecdotes from “medical leaves” at different hospitals are neither conversational nor advantageous to a career. The discomfort of the narrative is a communication barrier in most cultural norms around health and suffering. It takes empathy, in-depth understanding, and education among all stakeholders to fix this communication gap.

Conversely, the unfavorable stories that survivors tend to hide in the hiring process are often inspiring to the public. Fight-to-live stories are heroic because people recognize fighting cancer is probably the most difficult “job” in the world. For instance, American cyclist Lance Armstrong returned to his career and became the only rider to win seven Tour de France titles after beating cancer.

In fact, there are many similarities between a regular job and fighting a major life disruption. Young adult survivors must multitask on a regular basis, including choosing the appropriate treatment protocol after diagnosis; understanding health insurance benefits during and after treatment; adjusting to permanent physical effects, such as disability or infertility; managing mental health post-treatment; confronting lasting uncertainties; and coping with unemployment, sometimes long after treatment ends. Fighting cancer is a full-time job with no mental health breaks or vacations.

The Brand



FOCUS



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OWNERSHIP



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MULTI-TASKING



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PROACTIVITY

Named for “No Evidence of Disease” (a medical term) and “Not Entirely Dead” (an inside joke for cancer patients), NED is a community, a platform, and a service that will champion the 600,000+ young adult cancer survivors who are trying to return to the workplace.

Creating and managing a brand means being a designer, a copywriter, a brand strategist, a creative director, an executive producer, a marketer, an entrepreneur, etc. Most importantly, be an owner and be personal. That is why I eventually came up with the idea of “seeing the light from the dark” after testing dozens of concepts and developing hundreds of iterations. It represents that I always have the strongest will, even facing the deepest dark, and it also tells a story all cancer survivors share in common—we don’t give up. The light in our hearts gets us through the toughest situations.



N is for normalcy

The cancer care sector is where you will find most brands representing caring-Maggie's, everyone's home of cancer care, anger-Stupid Cancer, or heartbreaking emotions-Imerman Angels. But it is rare to see a brand fueled with confidence and communicates that cancer survivors are ready to move forward with life again. That is, finding a sense of normalcy. NED steps in to help cultivate confidence in cancer survivors and rebuild a "normal life," starting from reconnecting careers that can also be seen as reengaging with society.

Cancer is a word, not a sentence. Even though it's difficult to move on, we try everything we can to move forward. Live again, work again.

Power of a second chance

NED started from an unwanted personal experience: my cancer diagnosis. It wasn't just my personal life that was interrupted-my work life was, too. Post-treatment, I didn't know how potential employers would react to my career break spent fighting cancer, or the consequences of mentioning it during an interview.

I became frustrated that I had to hide my cancer experience from potential employers. It's the unwanted experiences that are usually the most difficult to talk about and respond to, but defeating cancer is an experience that shaped me, and I wanted to share that with my potential employers without fear of being labeled as a liability.

While most cancer-related organizations focus on emotions and the present, we are about shaping the possibilities for the future. Since we have the privilege of being Not Entirely Dead, we own the problem and refuse to be fallouts.

Incremental progress

The world has always recognized cancer survivors are super-abled human beings. Closing the career gap is becoming a single-minded mission that creates a top-of-mind acknowledgment that super-abled human beings are just super-abled and valuable employees. NED seeks to develop a collective community that cultivates career confidence in cancer survivors and promotes their super-abilities which are also the competencies employers look for throughout the interview process. NED is being built “bird by bird,” piece by piece. Our initiative originated from a thesis from the Master of Design program at the University of Washington. I spent several months conducting research and interviews to learn how to craft NED into a strong advocate for young adult cancer survivors in the workplace.

Creating a brand is a process, and making a social impact takes time and incremental progress. Like any other startup, I have created NED while designing and prototyping-learning from audiences on different platforms and touchpoints. NED’s LinkedIn page is the starting point for engaging two audiences-employers who have a deep need for super-abled candidates and cancer survivors who are ready to rock the workforce again. After all, fighting cancer is one of the toughest jobs an individual will ever take on. Ultimately, a website will be the most comprehensive storytelling platform for NED and an experience tailored for both audiences. Across all the touchpoints, a dynamic brand system keeps the brand consistent and communicates in one voice. We are confident, collaborative, and succinct.



mountain
& action



make
lemonade



inclusion



ribbon



defeat



club



empower



together

poppins



NED



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Proudly standing

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PROUDLY STANDING

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Proudly Standing

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Proudly Standing

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PROUDLY STANDING

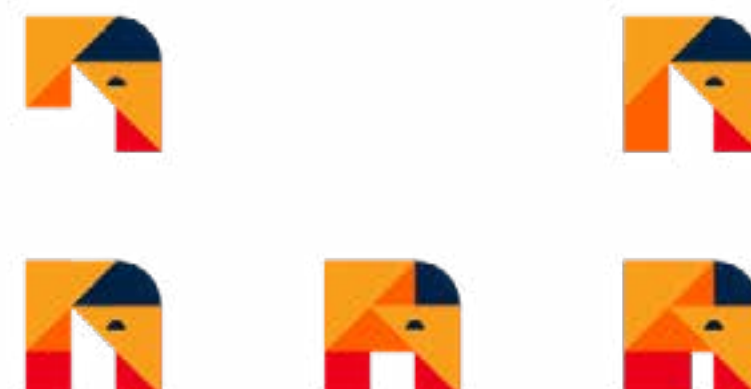
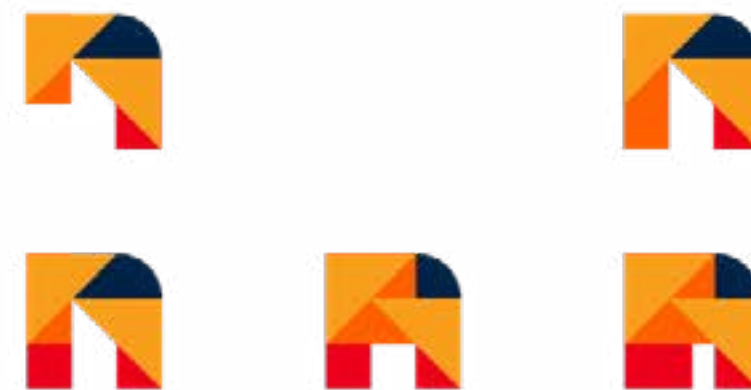
Ned.



N E d



N E D



NED Advocacy



DEDICATION

Eason

Multidisciplinary Designer
NED since 2018



CONNECT

“

I'd never been interested in distance running before cancer. I lacked the patience (not to mention, I'd never understand the point). However, after I lost my strength from my cancer treatment, I couldn't play most sports. Running seemed easier than anything else.

So that became my exercise. It was meditative, giving me time to reflect on what my body had been through. Also, running a marathon is recognized as the No.1 cancer survivor cliché activity globally. I have a competitive streak and figured why not try it myself? I was curious to see what all the hype was about.

While it was certainly possible for me to run a full marathon, I didn't quite know how to train. I knew I had to be super self-disciplined so I came up with a plan. Starting small, I ran a quarter-mile on the first day, adding a quarter-mile every day until I could run 26.2 miles. That first quarter-mile was torture, but it didn't kill me, so I stuck with it. I began to like the incremental progress I could make physically and psychologically. I rebuilt my self-confidence by committing to the little things.

Although my plan didn't exactly go according to plan (it took me more than a year and a half to run my first 10K), I finally participated in the Seattle marathon in November 2021 – four full years after my first quarter-mile attempt straight out of recovery from chemotherapies.

Just like marathon training, starting an initiative like NED requires dedication. My mentor at the University of Washington, Annabelle Gould, often reminds me of author Anne Lamott's precept: address challenges "bird by bird," one step at a time.

Problems don't always have obvious solutions. Sometimes the move is taking it day by day until the solution finds you.

”

DETERMINATION

Eason

Multidisciplinary Designer
NED since 2018



“

What doesn't kill you today will try again tomorrow. Nothing describes the ferociousness of battling cancer better. Cancer tried to take me down quite a few times, confirming I was able to fall down seven times and rise eight.

When I had a recurrence in 2018, I was running out of options for treatments. I had to find more cutting-edge research in the medical world under a time crunch. I was committed to doing whatever it took to help find my cure, and fortunately, I did – on the other side of the world. My savior (read: ideal doctor) was based in Indianapolis, while I lived in Beijing.

I made the hard decision to abandon my current treatments and fly 10,000 miles to Indiana to restart from scratch. That meant giving up 2 years of hard work, admitting epic failures, and facing more unknowns. But even the smallest chance of my survival made it worth risking everything.

When I woke up from anesthesia after my surgery, a young resident doctor came into the room to check on me. I asked her how I looked. She took a look at me and said one word: "badass." I liked this new positioning: I heard the confidence of a second chance.

It has been three years since my reboot in Indiana. I am NED and have recently made a few more major life decisions. I've returned to graduate school to focus on research studies in social good. I've trained to become a distance runner and finished the Seattle Marathon. Rather than hiding my diagnosis, I've become a visible cancer survivor and an advocate of this community.

I am no stranger to rejection, including from my own body. I know better than anyone how to fight and get knocked down and get back up and fight again.

”

OWNERSHIP

Eason

Multidisciplinary Designer
NED since 2018



“

NED started from an unwanted personal experience: my cancer diagnosis. It wasn't just my personal life that was interrupted – my work life was, too. Post-treatment, I didn't know how potential employers would react to my career break spent fighting cancer, or the consequences of mentioning it during an interview.

I became frustrated that I had to hide my cancer experience from potential employers. Unwanted experiences are usually the most difficult to talk about, but defeating cancer is something that shaped me. I wanted to share this with my potential employers without fear of being labeled as a liability.

My experience is relatable to 600,000 other young adult cancer survivors and their families in the U.S. and millions worldwide. Since I have the privilege of being Not Entirely Dead, I want to advocate for this community. I started NED to help these survivors find agency to move forward with their lives again. No one should have to do it alone.

We face unknowns about how prospective employers might react to our career break spent fighting cancer. But a quiet societal change is taking place in how people view career gaps. NED aims to unite all groups of people whose careers are impacted by resume gaps. Together, we will disrupt unconscious bias in the workplace.

”

EMPATHY

Jordan

User Researcher
NED since 2014



“

Before cancer, I thought strength came from fierce independence. After college, I moved cross-country twice and switched careers three times by myself. I thought I was being resourceful and considerate by avoiding help from my family and friends.

When I was diagnosed with cancer in the second year of graduate school, I was frozen. The surprise made me fearful. I remember sitting on the sofa with my cat and feeling as though the new uncertainty in my life surrounded me, like dust floating through air lit by a bright sunbeam.

My greatest comfort in the midst of all this uncertainty (besides peanut butter M&Ms) was that I was not isolated. I was never alone if I couldn't bear to be, especially on days when I was feeling sorry for myself, or grouchy from steroids, or when I was just in pain and unable to leave the sofa. To help keep my spirits up, my friends offline and online messaged me regularly, brought me treats to keep me eating, and took my mind off of the overwhelming pain from chemotherapy side effects. In short, the support I received from family and friends made all of the difference in surviving cancer treatment.

The support of my family, friends, and colleagues throughout my cancer experience taught me that real strength is rooted in human connections and community. This realization has transformed the way I work and uncovered my professional strengths in terms of coordinating work among interdisciplinary teams.

Now, I seek challenges in software product development, particularly around solving issues related to technology access. I believe everyone who can work and wants to work deserves accessible tools to do their job productively and in a way that encourages social and professional inclusion.

More workplaces should embrace the viewpoints and problem-solving that come from diverse experiences such as serious illness, disability, and caregiving.

”

STRENGTH

Zach

Writer and Editor
MED since 2007



“

I was a soldier stationed at one of the most isolated military bases in the United States. I had just graduated from the Defense Information School, was in the best shape of my life, and I was ready to take on the world as a photojournalist.

I was also sick, and no one knew why. One doctor thought the sickness was in my body, and another one thought it was in my head. It turned out to be cancer.

If being diagnosed with cancer in the army taught me anything it's that no one likes a weak man. No one. Soldiers are supposed to be strong, and weakness confuses them. As a soldier you're expendable government property. Being a soldier with cancer is like finding out that hell has a basement because you're defective government property.

I felt weak because I thought I was physically powerless, and I felt ashamed because I thought I did something wrong. I hated my body, and for a long time, I couldn't look at myself in the mirror because I could only see what was missing.

Cancer broke me in a bad way, and I struggled to put the pieces back together because they didn't fit. I'd changed; I wasn't the same person anymore. It forced me to evaluate my life, and question what I was doing with it.

Crying by yourself while wearing camouflage in a locked bathroom at an oncology clinic really puts things into perspective. I thought I was tough because I was a soldier, but I didn't know shit about life until I had to earn it.

I used to think I was weak, but that's because my strength came from the approval of other people. I've survived the army, cancer... and being hit by lightning (a story for another time). My strength comes from my story, and I can't be killed by conventional means.

”

GRIT

Julia

Writer and Editor
MED since 2018



“

As I stepped out from a narrow path lined with cedar trees, the view of the mist surrounding the mountains took my breath away. It was typhoon season in Japan, and through shifting fog I could see spots of the long, curving line of the Kumano Kodo trail I had walked for the last five days.

In a way, I had been here before. But this time, I felt different. This time, I walked not only to find myself; but to regain strength in solidarity with millions of others. This time, I walked with the grit of a cancer survivor.

I started the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage on the anniversary of my cancer diagnosis.

At 34, I was just married and had a new home in Tokyo. Though we spoke no Japanese, we were committed to embracing uncertainty and a home here. Nothing could have prepared me for cancer: surgery, chemotherapy, radiotherapy, a rocky, slippery path of treatments, burdened by the weight of side effects.

There's a Zen Buddhist saying that goes "No Mud, No Lotus." If you know how to make good use of the mud, you can grow something beautiful. This wisdom helped me trust the process, even in the darkest hours of my cancer battle and on the toughest of trails.

Rain began to fall. I pulled a poncho over my heavy backpack and carefully navigated the moss-covered rocks. I looked down at my tired feet and saw my boots were caked in mud. I had only a few more kilometers to go before reaching the sacred hot springs. As I put one foot in front of the other, I realized the silent bond I shared with other cancer survivors. The uncertainty of cancer, though involuntary and painful, helps us handle future uncertainties along our life and career paths. Even when everything's shit, we keep going. Grit will be one of many beautiful gifts we bring home.

”

Social Movement

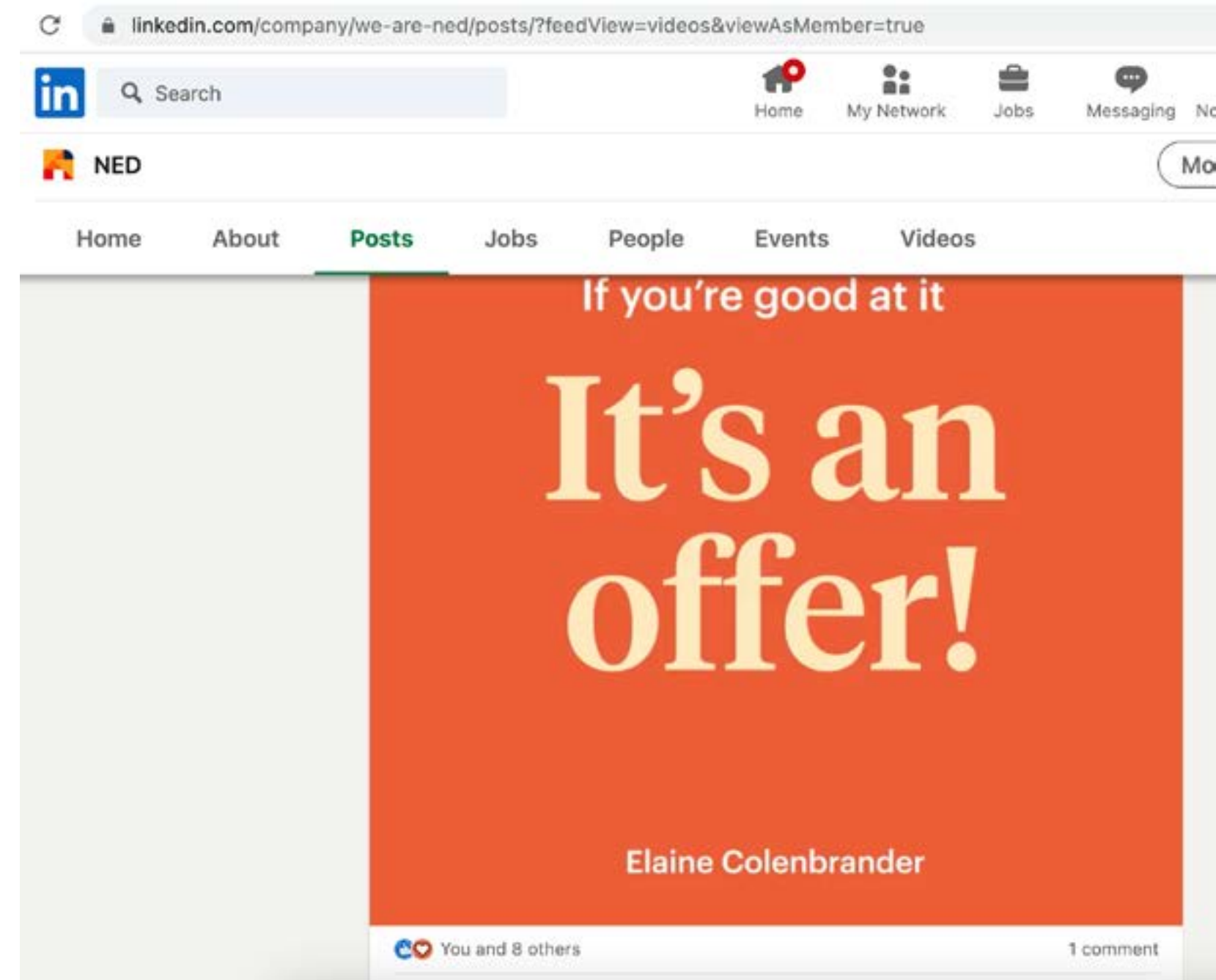


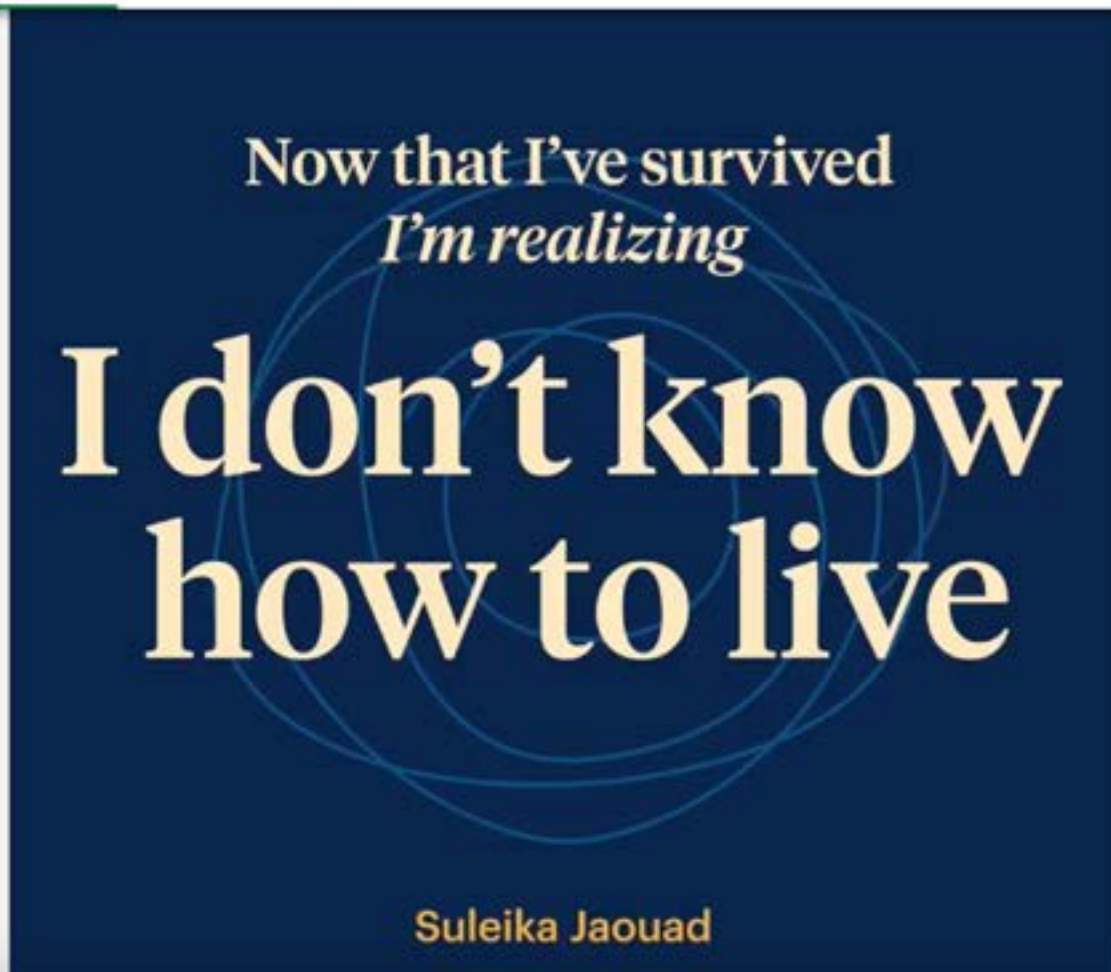
Every once in a while, a social movement comes along that changes everything. And we have been very fortunate to live in an age most likely diversity and inclusivity will change the world this decade or possibly continues to the following decades. NED is a social enterprise celebrating equity and inclusivity for young adult cancer survivors in the workplace.

Ned is a community cultivating career confidence in cancer survivors.

Ned is a service offering super-abled candidates to employers.

Ned is a platform engaging industry leaders to create equitable workplaces and inclusive career pathways.







**A career gap
caused by cancer
is the elephant
in the room**



You embody determination

You demonstrate growth through adversity. There are 16.9 million cancer survivors of all ages in the U.S. who can relate to your experience.

Companies want resilience

U.S. businesses spend a trillion dollars each year on the recruitment and retention of employees equipped with Super-Abilities. NED knows where to find employees who possess these qualities in excess.

