We are thrilled to announce that The Santa Cruz Volunteer Center granted fiscal sponsorship to us, Fiona's Family House, on August 16th, 2016. We are committed to providing support and community building for young adults with advanced cancer (YAs), and to helping educate local healthcare professionals about the unique needs and concerns of YAs.

Life changes instantly, and in a dramatic fashion, for anyone who receives a cancer diagnosis. When that diagnosis is for an advanced stage, metastatic cancer, the upheaval is greatly amplified; when the person receiving that diagnosis is a young adult (YA) in his or her prime, the experience is particularly surprising and dismaying. This is especially true for young parents, who bear the additional burden of managing their children's emotional responses to such a devastating situation.

And now, for reasons as yet unknown, the increased incidence of certain kinds of cancer are increasing in young adults at alarming rates. One notable example is colorectal cancer: over the past two decades, the rate of adults over 50 who are diagnosed with colorectal cancer has steadily decreased while the rate for adults 40 and under has increased by almost 2 percent per year, and is expected to continue doing so, which strongly suggests that healthcare providers need to increase their awareness of this issue. Because YAs represent such less than 5 percent of diagnosed cancer cases every year, researchers oncologists, and social services providers have little experience in working with their issues.

We have started Fiona’s Family House to focus on two critical needs in Santa Cruz County and elsewhere: to provide community-based support for young adults with advanced cancer and their families, and to educate healthcare professionals in our area about the unmet needs of YAs.

Among other things, it is lonely and isolating to be a cancer patient in your 20s or 30s. It’s possible that you may have young children, you are probably building your career, you’re a fairly new homeowner, and your relationship with your partner is trying to settle into a steady rhythm. Your friends and coworkers are bewildered and unsure how to relate to you, because pretty much none of them has any experience with a friend in their age group who is dealing with such a serious disease. This situation tends to worsen over time, as a number of friends who initially reacted by reaching out and spending time with you have now gotten caught back up in their lives and you’ve become an afterthought.

Your parents and family members are there for you, but they provide the kind of friendship that you’re used to having in your life. Your primary partner is incredibly supportive, but even s/he is unable to fully comprehend what it’s like to be struggling with pain, constant and overwhelming fatigue, and the relentless medical appointments. You spend as much time as possible with your children to provide for their needs, which can amplify you need for more meaningful interactions with people your own age.

You miss being part of a community of friends, which has become difficult because it’s not possible for you to get out and about like you used to do; going off on adventures with others is possible once in a while; even when you are able, you often need “special handling,” and that adds to your reluctance to participate. You seek out support groups to fill the gap, but you discover that pretty much all of the cancer support groups in the area are filled with people who are more than twice your age. There’s support and empathy there, but most of the other patients are unable to fully grasp what it’s like to deal with advanced cancer while having to make a living, manage a household, and raise a young child whom you love dearly.

We have started Fiona’s Family House to help build community-based support for YAs and their families, starting in Santa Cruz and eventually expanding to other areas. We plan to create three programs that will facilitate community support for YAs: 1) direct financial support for YAs who need help with subsistence needs in the face of overwhelming healthcare bills and loss of work income, 2) development of YA-related educational resources and programs for local healthcare providers, and 3) eventually create a home-based space for support tailored for YAs and their families.

We believe Santa Cruz, a community with a rich history of innovation, openness, and support, along with a robust group of alternative healing professionals is an ideal place to pilot such a project. The concept is simple: in community we are stronger, in family we are stronger, and by imparting knowledge through direct practice and advocacy, YAs live richer and more empowered lives, gaining strength through their diagnosis.

We are actively seeking donations from individuals, groups, and businesses; please visit [www.fionasfamilyhouse.org](http://www.fionasfamilyhouse.org) to donate and learn more.