

## **Women's Committee**

The Women's Committee meets regularly, sometimes as a whole and, more frequently, in working groups to plan and assist with specific events. Through these efforts and with the support of the US Chess staff and Executive Board, women's and girls' chess continued to grow in 2023-24, with new initiatives and many first-time events.

### *Women's Leadership*

Last summer, long-time committee member Leila D'Aquin was elected to the Executive Board; she continues to serve the committee as board liaison and as a volunteer in our Girls Club rooms at national scholastic events. US Chess welcomed its first full-time Director of Programs, DeVaughn Croxton, this year, and he quickly embraced the committee's ongoing initiatives, offered fresh ideas for girls' and women's programming, and dedicated himself to the development of more and better opportunities for female players. Carol Meyer continued to support our efforts in her exemplary work as Executive Director (ED) throughout the fall and winter, and, while we were sad to see her leave after 6½ years at the helm, we are thrilled that Carol continues to support the federation and our committee's goals; we look forward to her volunteer service in the future. Following Carol's announcement that she would be leaving US Chess in February to become CEO of a larger non-profit, Ranae Bartlett, who had become the Director of Operations last fall, was named interim ED. After a national search and competitive recruitment process, the Board selected Ranae as the new ED. Additionally, long-time managing editor Melinda Matthews, who was integral in the development of Safe Play, was named Safe Play Manager and chair of the Safe Play Advisory Group.

### *Award Recipients*

Female US Chess award recipients this year included WGM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova, Woman Chessplayer of the Year; NTD Martha Underwood, Accessibility & Special Circumstances Person of the Year; and the 2022 U.S. Women's Olympiad Team (GM Irina Krush, IM Carissa Yip, IM Anna Zatonskih, WGM Tatev Abrahamyan, and WGM Gulrukhbegim Tokhirjonova), Outstanding Team Performance.

### *Senior Women's Chess*

The Inaugural U.S. Senior Women's Championship, organized by 87-year-old spitfire Elizabeth Shaughnessy, founder of The Berkeley Chess School, and underwritten in part by Jim Eade, the Eade Foundation, and US Chess, took place in Berkeley, California, from November 3-5, 2023. Twelve women, ages 54 to 82, competed in the long-awaited event, with three-time U.S. Women's Champion WGM Anjelina Belakovskaia winning the title.

Following the senior women's championship, the players proposed that US Chess, which has in recent years sponsored an official representative team in the Open section of the FIDE World Senior Team Championship, also send a USA women's delegation to the event this July in Krakow, Poland. On March 15, 2024, the Executive Board unanimously passed a resolution committing parity in funding for Open and Women's official representative delegations to the

World Senior Team as well as a separate motion providing equal amounts of funding for appearance fees for the 2024 Open and Women's delegations. This year's women's delegation will include both an Over 50 Team and an Over 65 team.

### *Girls Clubs at National Scholastics*

The Hyatt Regency in Orlando was the setting for the December 2023 National K-12 Grade Championships. Led by the dynamic duo of Krista Alton, a committee member, and her husband, Arthur, of the Tampa-based Altons 4 Chess Academy, the Girls Club room hosted more than 200 girls over the long weekend. The Altons kept the girls busy with trivia contests, holiday crafts, a chess tower-building contest, an "Around the World" chess game, and raffles for lots of prizes. We were honored to have as special guests eight-time U.S. Women's champion GM Irina Krush and WIM Carolina Blanco. Irina and Carolina wowed the girls with lectures, game analysis, chess puzzles, a tandem simul, and the always-popular Human Chess game. In Human Chess, each player acts as a chess piece on a giant vinyl board. The weekend's special guests choose historical games of prominent women players and, acting as the game's opponents, calls out moves; the living chess pieces move accordingly. Afterwards, the game is analyzed. For the first time since the Girls Club started featuring Human Chess, it was offered both Saturday and Sunday in Orlando. It was a huge hit with waiting lists, as many parents wanted to join in!

In addition to lessons, post-game analysis, and fun chess-themed activities, the Girls Club was created to offer girls the opportunity to meet other chess girls in a social setting. Toward that end, December saw the post-pandemic return of our ever-popular Girls Club Nail Salon, and the teen girls were treated to a pizza party, hosted by Teen Chess Ambassador Laurel Aronian and her mother, Karen. Sunday morning featured a Town Hall meeting at which parents and girls exchanged ideas for improving the chess community and making it more welcoming for girls.

The Convention Center in Baltimore, Maryland was the site of High School Nationals in April. Our Girls Club special guests were WGM Sabina Foisor and Expert/attorney, Rochelle Ballantyne. The 2012 documentary *Brooklyn Castle*, in which Rochelle was featured as a teen, was streamed throughout the weekend. Sabina and Rochelle kept the 150+ girls who visited engaged with lectures, game analysis, puzzles, and a tandem simul. We stamped countless hands with our signature queen stamps and gave away our popular "Empowering Women and Girls Through Chess" pencils, Guatemalan "worry dolls," and miniature "lucky ducks." The tiny ducks are so popular that some TDs have dropped by the Girls Club to ask for one! Thanks to the generosity of committee member Robin Ramson, we gave away lots of raffle prizes in black and white chess bags. We also hosted a "donut social" for girls and parents Saturday morning, set up the nail salon again (where not only girls but even some parents did manicures), and presented another of Laurel and Karen Aronian's teen pizza parties.

We always seek to gather data about chess girls' and their parents' perspectives during these events; Robin Ransom introduced a new and successful means of doing that. As girls and parents were greeted, they were given a yellow paper on which to respond to the prompt "I like the Girls Club because ...". As answers were received, they were taped to the wall, creating a montage of the girls' thoughts, which ranged from the fun-loving "There are donuts," "No stinky boys!" and "We have a nail salon," to the serious "It's a calm space where I can relax" and "It's important

for girls to meet role models who look like them.” Along with Rochelle, Sabina, and several committee members, Ranae Bartlett and Melinda Matthews joined our Sunday Town Hall, where Ranae spoke about her vision for US Chess in the future, and Melinda spoke about becoming Safe Play Manager and explained the Safe Play program.

A record-setting 520 girls participated in the 19th Annual All-Girls’ National Championship in Chicago, organized by the Renaissance Knights and the Kasparov Foundation. The Women’s Committee hosted a busy Girls Club table in the main hall, again stamping hands and distributing pencils, “lucky ducks,” and “worry dolls.” We asked girls to scan our new QR code and complete a survey so we can work to improve the chess community for girls.

Elementary and Middle School Nationals will take place in the coming weeks. WIM Alexey Root and WIM/FM Maggie Feng will be our special guests at Elementary Nationals in Columbus, Ohio, offering game analysis, lectures, a tandem simul, and leading Human Chess. The Altons will again lead games, crafts, and a chess tower-building contest, and give away raffle prizes. We will show the movie *Queen of Katwe* Saturday afternoon and will again hold a donut social and a Town Hall Meeting on Sunday.

WIM/Orthodontist Dr. Carolina Blanco and Expert/Chess Traveler Adia Onyango are scheduled as our special guests at Middle School Nationals in Atlanta. The club will offer game analysis, lectures, simuls, raffle prizes, the nail salon, and a donut social; we will continue our giveaways of pencils, “lucky ducks,” and “worry dolls”; and we will be stamping red queens on girls’ hands, all which have become popular in our “branding” for the Girls Club rooms!

The Girls Club rooms are important gathering spots for girls and their parents. Repeat visitors look forward to enjoying a respite from the sometimes-raucous hallways during national scholastics. The club is a place where girls have fun, meet other girls and parents, and feel supported by the women in the chess community. In the decade since it was first conceived, the Girls Club room has become an integral factor in helping to empower more women and girls through chess. We appreciate and thank the US Chess staff and Executive Board for their support.

### *Chess for Cure*

From April 19-21, 2024, Women’s Program grant recipient Discovery Chess Learning Academy, led by Kala Kanapathy-Bagley, presented the Inaugural Chess for Cure event to raise funds for women’s cancer research at Cleveland Clinic. On Friday evening, 120 people — including medical professionals, university faculty, chess players, politicians, and students — from Akron, Cleveland, and across the country attended a Gala fundraiser at the Hilton Garden Inn in Akron, Ohio. US Chess was represented at the event by the Executive Board and senior staff members as well as by several members of the Women’s Committee. Former U.S. Women’s champion WIM Alexey Root, American Chess Magazine founder and editor Pete Tamburro, and NTD Martha Underwood joined them at tables sponsored by keynote speaker and US Chess Board member, Leila D’Aquin, an attorney, mother, chess player, and cancer survivor who shared the story of her chess and cancer journeys. Other speakers included Ohio State Representative Casey Weinstein, Women’s Committee Co-Chair Maureen Grimaud, *Chess.com*’s Judith Sztaray, the

Akron Director of Economic Development, and physicians who spoke about women's health. Entertainment included a live band, a silent auction, and a classical Indian dance. Sixty-five girls played in the Ohio Girls' Championship on Saturday; 13 players from across the country (seven adult women and six girls) competed in a Women's Regional Championship Saturday and Sunday. All told, Chess for Cure raised more than \$17,000. We hope to see Chess for Cure events replicated throughout the country.

### *Women and Girls Regional Events*

The following regional women's and girls' events have been held recently or are scheduled soon:

In August 2023, 60 girls played in FEMchess's inaugural All-Girls Scholastic in Fremont, California.

The 6th Annual National Chess Day Women & Girls Regional Tournament was held October 14th, 2023, at the Washington Hilton in Washington, D.C.

FEMchess presented its second All-Girls Tournament in Fremont, California, on January 20, 2024.

The Southwest Regional Chess Championship was held in Flagstaff, Arizona, March 24, 2024. Levi Hanie directed the event in which 29 girls in grades K-12 competed.

The Inaugural Western States Regional Chess Championship for Women & Girls was held April 13-14, 2024, in Seattle, WA. Thirteen women and 27 girls participated. Side events included blitz, a pizza lunch, a puzzle solving competition, and a lecture, Q&A, and simul by WIM Megan Lee.

The Inaugural Girls' & Women's Mid-South Chess Championship will be held on May 4, 2024, at Lausanne Collegiate School, 1381 W. Massey Rd, Memphis, Tennessee.

Unruly Queens will present the Inaugural Boston Chess Festival on June 9, 2024, from 11 a.m.-4 p.m.

### *Online Girls Chess Club*

US Chess is collaborating with *Chess.com* to hold an online Girls Chess Club that mimics the Girls Clubs held at Scholastic Nationals. The club offers chat, forums, online events such as blitz and club matches with other all girls' clubs, and information about US Chess activities and events. The club may be found at [www.chess.com/club/U.S.-chess-women](http://www.chess.com/club/U.S.-chess-women)

### *The Committee's Ongoing Projects and Goals for the Future*

- Working with Girl Scouts of the USA and Camp Fire to develop chess merit badges and awards

- Continuing to develop the connection between women's chess and women's health initiatives
- Developing young leadership to support the future of women's and girls' chess
- Helping affiliates and organizers develop stronger ties with their local/regional female bases.