

Ducking Cancer

By SYLVIA SLAUGHTER
Staff Writer

If Lu Sipos and Bonnie Woodward have their way, little children with cancer throughout the United States will have a special buddy, a little yellow duck, to tell their troubles to.

The idea for Chemo Duck began less than a year ago in Vanderbilt Children's Hospital, where Sipos' son Gabe was a very, very sick baby who lay between life and death.

Gabe was just barely a year old then, and fretting and weak and helpless from rhabdomyosarcoma, a cancer of the head and neck. He lay in bed beside a duck, a gift from a family friend.

The predecessor of Chemo Duck was just a stuffed yellow duck, fairly generic, except for his oversized orange beak, which made Gabe smile.

Sipos, the daughter of a seamstress, took the little duck home for an extreme makeover.

She dressed it in blue hospital pajamas patterned after a real pair of hospital pj's, tied a bandana that matched Gabe's around its head and added a chemotherapy port on its chest and a blood pressure cuff.

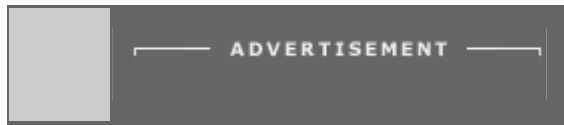
She didn't stop there. She borrowed empty syringes from her son's nurses and gave them to Gabe, who began playing that he was the doctor, the one in control.

Gabe would pretend to give Chemo Duck medicine through his chemo port. Gabe would snuggle with Chemo Duck at night. Gabe would smile at Chemo Duck's big orange beak when he wouldn't smile at anyone or anything else.

Other little children with cancer at the hospital took to Gabe's duck.



ERIC PARSONS / STAFF
Bonnie Woodward, left, is helping her friend Lu Sipos, center, find a sponsor for Chemo Duck, a toy Sipos designed for her son Gabriel when he was fighting rhabdomyosarcoma, a rare form of head and neck cancer. Woodward also had a similar kind of cancer.



Lu Sipos and husband Rob went out and bought every stuffed duck they could find, and Lu took to her sewing machine again, dressing them like Chemo Duck and passing them out to other children in the hospital.

Vanderbilt doctors began to notice the growing popularity of the family of Chemo Ducks and the camaraderie between the doctors' young patients and their big-beaked buddies.

Melissa Rhodes, a Vanderbilt doctor, told Lu Sipos that she gave Chemo Duck a complete "checkup" before she touched one of her cancer patients.

"Chemo Duck reduces a child's anxiety," she told Sipos.

Though Sipos was happy for the confirmation, she just has to look at little Gabe, now 2, to know the magic his Chemo Duck performs.

"Gabe is cured of cancer," his mom said, "but he's still treating Chemo Duck. . . . It's one of his favorite toys a year later."

Because she sees the bond between her son and his duck, Sipos wants that bond for every little child with cancer. She wants the child to receive it for free.

Sipos just needs a sponsor, someone or some group or some company to manufacture 10,000 of the little ducks for little kids like Gabe.

"We will find that someone," her friend Bonnie Woodward says. "I won't stop until we do."

Woodward understands the need for comfort when undergoing chemo: A year and a half ago she was cured of a head and neck cancer similar to Gabe's.

Last fall she first saw Chemo Duck at a cancer benefit she and her husband, Tom, attended.

"I had the most profound feeling when I saw that duck," Woodward said. "I didn't know why. I was just drawn to the duck."

She didn't know Lu Sipos then. She knew nothing about Gabe's cancer. She just knew that she couldn't get the little duck with the biggest, brightest, most orange beak she had ever seen out of her mind.

She set out to find the woman who outfitted the duck, the woman who was looking for someone to help her place Chemo Duck in other little kids' arms.

Upon meeting, Woodward and Sipos found that their lives, like the proverbial ships, had passed in the night.

They have been at the same hospital at the same time, driven the same back roads — as near neighbors, Woodward is from College Grove; Sipos, Spring Hill — and at the same benefit where neither saw the other, but both focused on that little stuffed yellow duck's beak.

"Before my cancer, I used to be an executive with a telecommunications company," Woodward said. "I know a little about marketing. . . . I know that Lu and I can find a sponsor to manufacture and distribute Chemo Duck. . . . Anyone who has had a child with cancer knows the need to help that child."

Initial quotes the women have received from potential sponsors for a two-year supply of Chemo Ducks run from approximately \$25,000 to \$50,000.

Sipos and Woodward want a sponsorship for 10,000 ducks, enough that can be distributed to children in cancer units.

They soon plan to add information about Chemo Duck on a Web site Lu Sipos has named gabesmyheart.com.

There, parents will learn all about Chemo Duck — and will see the prototype of the duck with the big beak that made — and still makes — Gabe Sipos smile.

Sylvia Slaughter writes for The Tennessean. Reach her at 259-8053 or at sslaughter@tennessean.com.

How to help

Any individual, company or organization that wants to sponsor or help sponsor the manufacture and distribution of Chemo Duck for children with cancer throughout the United States is asked to contact either Lu Sipos at 302-1355 or Bonnie Woodward at 790-6029.

Childhood cancer statistics

In the United States:

- Cancer kills more children than any other disease;
- Cancer takes more children's lives than asthma, diabetes, cystic fibrosis and AIDS combined;
- Each day 46 children are diagnosed with cancer;
- Every year 2,300 children die from cancer;
- One in every 330 people develop cancer before the age of 20.

Sources: National Childhood Cancer Foundation (www.nccf.org) and the Candlelighters Childhood Cancer Foundation (www.candlelighters.org)

Support for families

A local chapter of Candlelighters, a group for caregivers and parents of children with cancer, has been revived in a partnership with Gilda's Club. The group meets at 6:30 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month at Gilda's Club, 1033 18th Ave. S. The group's mission is to raise awareness of childhood cancer, to educate the public about signs and symptoms of the disease and to ease the stress on parents of newly diagnosed children. For more information, call 329-1124 or 302-1355.