



## Press Room

### Annual Report

### . . . on their way

#### Winter 2006

- Welcome from the CEO
- Family Ties
- Hug a dog, Squeeze a duck
- Special Officer Champ
- Doctor and Dad
- Unraveling a mystery to avoid surgery
- In a league of her own
- Sharing Smiles
- New helipad already saving lives
- Children's Champ
- Friends help fund new pediatric ambulance
- Fall 2005
- Summer 2005
- Fall 2004
- Summer 2004
- Spring 2004
- Fall 2003
- The Reporter
- Media Relations
- Meet Our Team

[Home](#) > [Press Room](#) > [. . . on their way](#) > [Winter 2006](#) > Hug a dog, Squeeze a duck

## Hug a dog, Squeeze a duck



Photo by Kats Barry

By Nancy Humphrey

One of the most common sights at the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt - as common as nurses, IV poles and children being pulled around in red wagons - is the inseparable duo of a child and a stuffed animal. In times of uncertainty, like during a hospital stay, a stuffed animal brings comfort.

Children's Hospital recognizes the comfort aspect of having a stuffed animal in your arms and is giving free stuffed animals to two groups of patients. It's a giveaway that has a magnificent payoff - the smile and comfort of a child.

All inpatients at Children's Hospital are given a stuffed Champ (the Children's Hospital mascot) as part of the admissions process, says Amy Casseri, the hospital's director of communications and community relations. The stuffed Champs come in two sizes - one for the smaller babies, like those in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, and a larger one for other patients.

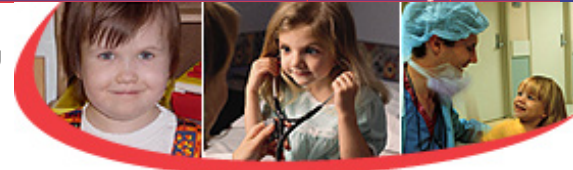
"When the child gets to his or her room, Champ is the first thing they see. It helps soften the formal process of being admitted to the hospital," she said, adding that plans are under way to secure funding so that the Champs can eventually be given to emergency room patients.

Noah Black, 4, of Erin, Tenn., spent some time in Children's Hospital in late November. He jumped off the top bunk of his bed, broke his arm, and then had to have surgery at Vanderbilt.

"He's been carrying Champ around faithfully," said his mother, Jessica Cox. "He walks from one room to the other, carrying Champ. But he won't share. He makes sure that his Sissy doesn't touch his Champ."

Casseri said the hospital has received positive feedback about giving away the Champ dolls.

" Our patients love Champ. You see children walking around the hospital with their



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- Video News

Champ doll, being pulled in wagons with Champ. A picture is worth a thousand words," she said. "Our patients come from every county in Tennessee and contiguous states. Many of our patients spend time alone in their rooms if their parent has to go home or spend time with their other children. These stuffed animals are comfort items. It's been proven, having a stuffed animal like Champ to hold onto helps with the healing process."



photo by: Dana Johnson

For Children's Hospital patients undergoing chemotherapy, another stuffed animal offers comfort - Chemo Duck.

Chemo Duck is a 12-inch stuffed duck, dressed in hospital pajamas and a bandana wrapped around his head. Secured to his chest is a bandage with either a central line or a port (the vehicle used to take chemotherapy directly into the blood stream). And on his arm he wears an arm immobilizer called a "No-no." The arm immobilizer protects peripheral IVs and discourages children from bending the arm to pull at bandages, etc. The stuffed animal is both a comfort item and a teaching tool used to familiarize the patient with cancer protocol and procedures.

For Lu Sipos, it's an endeavor fueled by her heart and a way to help other pediatric cancer patients the way her own son was helped. Soon after Gabe Sipos was diagnosed with rhabdomyosarcoma, a type of fibrous cancer, on Christmas Day in 2002, his mother dressed a favorite stuffed duck in hospital pajamas and a do-rag and added a central line.

"When a child becomes chronically ill, all parental roles are stripped and somebody else is in charge of your child's life," she said. "You don't have much to give as a parent. I changed the duck into a tool to help Gabe, and it gave me back my role as a parent.



Photo by Kats Barry

"It empowered him and me," Sipos said. "It helped him understand what was coming up and helped him work through it all. He seemed to get more at ease over time and became much less nervous about all he was going through."

After sending her husband out to buy every duck he could find like the one Gabe received, she doctored the ducks to look like Gabe's and handed them out to other children in the hospital, until "eventually the money and the ducks ran out." Then, after Gabe was successfully treated at Children's Hospital, she created a non-profit organization called Gabe's My Heart.

Sipos has promised Children's Hospital 300 Chemo Ducks over the next two and one-half years. Another 200 are available through the organization's Web site, [www.Gabesmyheart.com](http://www.Gabesmyheart.com).

"Children's Hospital has been fantastic," she said. "We have very, very strong links to the hospital and owe them so much. They were so instrumental in helping us pilot this program."

Sipos and Gabe recently attended a party at Children's Hospital launching the beginning of the Chemo Duck giveaway. "It was a precious, precious moment seeing that kind of light in a child's eye," Sipos said. "One child told his mom, 'that duck's sick like me.' That's exactly what this is about - a strong bond with a friend, and helping parents educate their child."

Sipos is seeking more donations for her organization, and is applying for grants and looking for a major sponsor to take the project nationwide. "It's a dream," she says.

Meanwhile Gabe is doing well, two years after therapy, and has no signs of recurrence.

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 Vanderbilt Medical Center

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