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Building it for Them

by Carole H. Bartoo

The big red poster is one of the first things you see when you step inside the Centex Rodgers construction trailer, the nerve center for the people building the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt. Images of a little boy, about 1 year old, look out from the poster. In one picture he has light blonde hair, in another he is bald. At the bottom, he is posed with his dad and wears a ball cap and a big grin.



The little boy whose image watches over those charged with building Children's Hospital is Gabe Sipos (shown at right with mother, Lu), a cancer patient at Vanderbilt Children's.

It's natural that those building the hospital might want a daily reminder of the children for whom the hospital is intended, a way of keeping perspective in the endless details of ductwork and floor tiles and concrete.



But there is more to the story than that.

Rob Sipos is one of the construction crew making the dream of the hospital a reality, and the job has taken on a personal dimension the young project engineer could never have imagined. He knows he is building the hospital for his son.

Rob, Lu and their son Gabe have an intricate history with Vanderbilt that goes back to Gabe's birth on New Year's Day, 2002. In fact, Gabe was the first baby of the New Year in Nashville that year; his newborn face greeted the city from television and newspaper pages. Most babies born at Vanderbilt don't have to come back and spend any time at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital, but fate brought Gabe back almost one year later, this time on Christmas Day.



Lu and Rob Sipos hold newborn Gabe on New Years Day 2002.

"A lump behind his jaw had been steadily growing. At first we thought it was related to an ear infection," recalls Lu. "But by Christmas Day we were truly concerned. His right eye was beginning to wander and the swelling was getting worse. That's when we made a trip to the Vanderbilt Children's Hospital Emergency Room."

A CT scan Christmas night showed a large mass behind the right side of his jaw, pressing on his optical nerve. And on that night, as families all over the city settled into the winter evening, Rob and Lu heard the word no parent ever wants to hear. They were told Gabe had cancer. A rare childhood tumor called rhabdomyosarcoma.

"When they called us over to talk about the images, it just snowballed from there," Lu said.

Gabe would need regular radiation treatments and up to a year of chemotherapy to shrink and destroy the tumor in his cheek. The thought of it all was overwhelming. Rob, a Chicago native and Lu, who is originally from Great Britain, have no family in Nashville.

The Siposes, who live in Spring Hill, Tenn., began to lean heavily on friends, church and co-workers for support. But soon, the staff at Vanderbilt Children's became like family. Many of the same doctors Rob had met, coming and going from the construction site, were now his doctors, caring for his son. Rob had been working on building Vanderbilt Children's Hospital for months, but, now the Vanderbilt Children's staff was gathering around his family, helping them to handle the scariest time of their lives.

By July, Gabe was doing normal 1-and-a-half-year-old things. He was running up and down halls, jumping off of furniture, developing an addiction to yogurt. But he was also getting to know nurses by name and losing his hair. Rob tried to keep things as normal as possible for his son. He took him to a company picnic and went down the waterslide with Gabe on his lap. Both father and son were fully dressed. He shaved his head to match his son's. That month Gabe was readmitted briefly to the fifth floor of VCH to deal with a yeast infection in his IV port.

"In difficult times, we pull out a video of kids like Gabe. That's what it's all about, the kids, and the community."
- OTHO WEBSTER, *Centex Rodgers*

"Things have been pretty quiet the last couple of months, this has just come up," said Rob. "But normal is a relative term. I added up how many times we've been in here and it's been 70 times, which seems like a lot, but the alternative..." he let the thought trail off unexpressed. "We feel we're lucky," he said, finally.

Seven months of worry about his son's health and future clearly showed in the circles under Rob's eyes. Every night Gabe is in the hospital, Lu spends there too, sleeping along side her son in the toddler bed. During the day she makes stuffed animals just like Gabe's "chemo-duck" for the other kids on the unit. Since she had to quit her job as a gymnastics coach when Gabe got sick, she says the project keeps her sane.



"I'd like to give her the opportunity to get out and just vent, go anywhere she wants to just get away from this," said Rob. "It's difficult on a relationship, but we're working on it."

The family was straining under lack of sleep and stress, all while the most important project of Rob's young career as a construction engineer was at its busiest.

"The people at Centex Rodgers have been great," said Rob. "I spend my lunch breaks over here with Lu and Gabe and then come straight over here to Gabe's room after I'm done at work. If there's a procedure I need to be here for, I'm here. As long as my project is under control, my hours are as flexible as I need them to be."

"Every time something goes up, I think about how many lives this will impact," said Rob.

"Lives like ours."

- ROB SIPOS, father

For their part, the Centex Rodgers employees are smitten with Gabe. He has come to represent all the children the new hospital is for. "His picture is all over the trailer," said Otho Webster, senior project manager for Centex Rodgers.

"This project has been challenging," said Webster of the massive 600,000-square-foot Children's Hospital. "In difficult times, we pull out a video of kids like Gabe. That's what it's all about, the kids, and the community."

Now the workers at Centex Rodgers are beginning to see excitement in many faces. Doctors and nurses that Rob has seen in the old hospital are getting a glimpse of the future when they visit his construction site.

Meanwhile, the Sipos family is very hopeful for their son's full recovery. The tumor has shrunk by 85 percent and all signs are good that Gabe should finish treatment before Thanksgiving. It would be nice for Rob to be able to see his son begin this New Year in good health again, and for his hospital project to open with one less patient.

"I am very fortunate to be in this position," Rob said. "Where I can make a difference to the wonderful staff at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital for all the care and love they have given Gabe."

It's humbling for anyone to stand before the massive new hospital, especially if you've spent if you've spent any time in the small space the hospital now inhabits within the adult hospital. What's more humbling, Rob has discovered, is to know who the hospital is for — and to know from the part of the heart that aches for a sick child, that they deserve every effort that has gone into building it.

Centex Rodgers gives back

The Original Joe M. Rodgers construction company had a history with Vanderbilt long before they combined with Centex to make Centex Rodgers. For two decades, Centex Rodgers employees have been on the Vanderbilt Campus working on major construction projects and continual renovations; and for just as long, they've been giving back to the campus they work for.

The Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt has been the largest building project ever undertaken on campus, and it's one of the largest in the city of Nashville. Centex Rodgers CEO, Doug Jones, pledged \$120,000 over four years to the project. The company presented that pledge to Dr. Harry R. Jacobson, Vice Chancellor of Health Affairs.

Centex Rodgers has also been a supporter of the hospital through many fund raising events. Last year alone, \$45,000 was donated to the hospital through the Centex Rodgers-sponsored Music City Golf Tournament.

photos by Dana Johnson

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