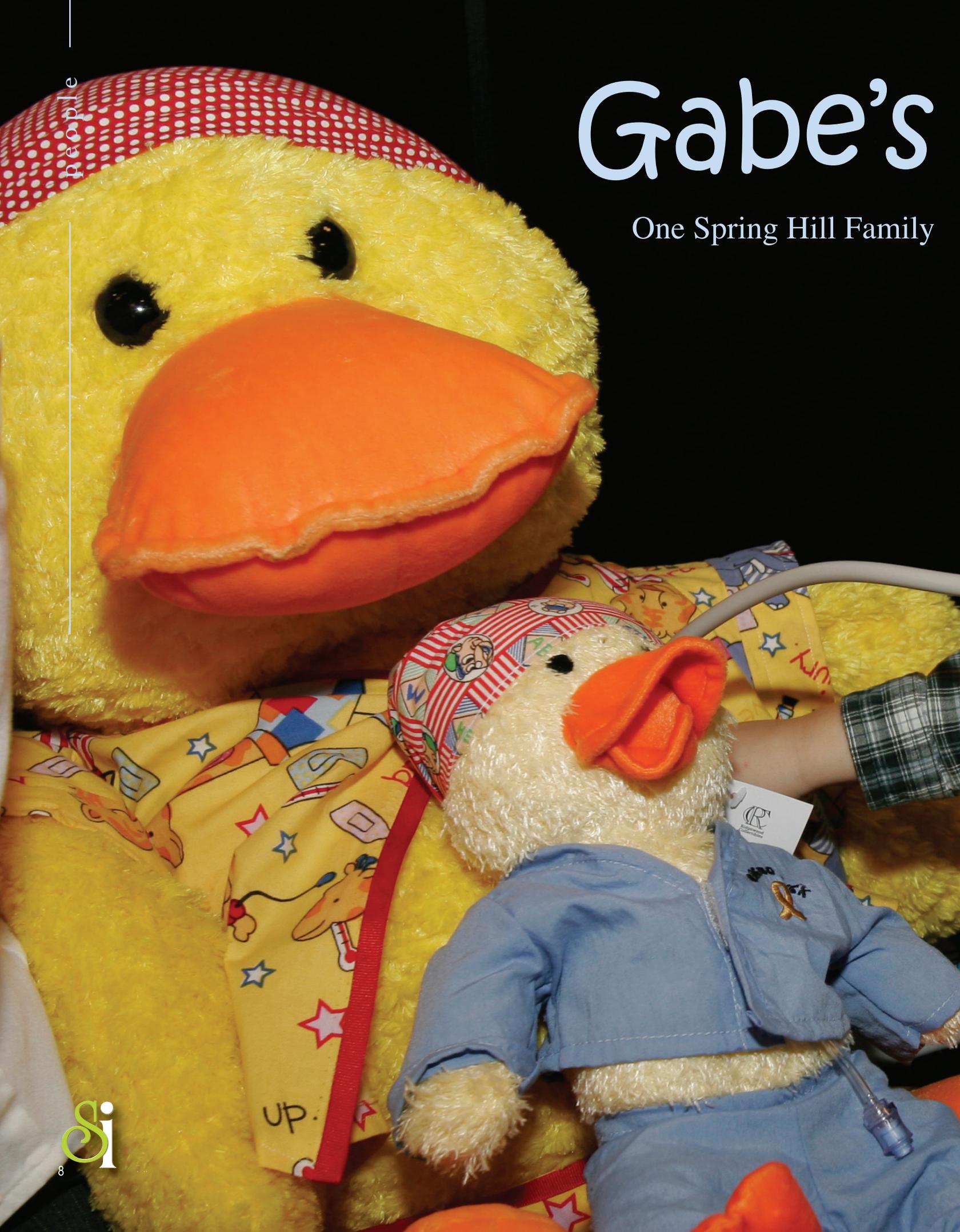


# Gabe's

One Spring Hill Family



# Story:

## Copes with Childhood Cancer

— BY JULIE RYBOLT WILKERSON —

photo by Kats Barry

Some say the events surrounding one's birth often foreshadow the life that person will lead. Whether this is an old wives' tale or not, Gabe Sipos' birth was extraordinary, suggesting something remarkable about this young child and the life that would impact others.

# On the day he was born,

Gabriel Sipos was the apple of his parents' eyes and the media darling of early 2002. The firstborn child at Vanderbilt Hospital in 2002, Gabe continued to set records as Nashville's first baby of the New Year.

Born to Rob and Lu Sipos of Spring Hill, Gabe's celebrity status was documented with interviews and live television feed from local media—an atypical entry into the world.

**Gabe Sipos is, however, anything but ordinary.**

The mother-child connection probably saved Gabe's life. Within a year of his leaving Vanderbilt Hospital as a newborn, Lu noticed a lump behind Gabe's jaw. Thought to be related to an ear infection she had treated, Lu noticed that the swelling had increased. And, then she noticed his wandering right eye. **Something wasn't right.**

It was Christmas Day—a holiday celebration in homage to one special baby boy. Could this holy day mark special favor for Lu's and Rob's bundle of joy?

The Sipos packed up their beloved son and rushed to Vanderbilt Children's Hospital Emergency Room for a medical opinion. They received a diagnosis—a rare childhood tumor called rhabdomyosarcoma—with the uneasiness only parents of severely ill children can completely understand.

**Gabe had cancer—and he was not even a year old.**

Neither one of the Siposes is from the Nashville area. Rob is a Chicago native, while his wife Lu hails from Great Britain. No family surrounded them that Christmas Day when they received Gabe's diagnosis. But, soon they would come to know that they were surrounded by family, their Vanderbilt family, with all of the medical personnel who treated Gabe and all the other families of pediatric oncology patients who, like the Sipos, made the daily or weekly trek to Vanderbilt Hospital for treatment.

Radiation and chemotherapy were immediately ordered for Gabe. Even with the support of these new friends and confidants, the journey ahead was daunting. Living suddenly revolved around their little boy's health issues and the demanding schedule of chemo, radiation and doctor visits.

The Sipos' story is one of connection—human beings connected by love and similar experiences, medical communities who deliver treatment options gathered from research from treating other cancer patients, and the connection with something bigger that continued to guide them through this particular struggle, as in the very convenient employment opportunity Rob was given before Gabe was even thought to be ill.

You see, Rob was employed with Centex Rodgers at the time of Gabe's diagnosis. He was a project manager working on the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt Hospital even before the Sipos understood how rhabdomyosarcoma would affect their lives.

“The convenience of being onsite made dealing with Gabe's treatments much easier on my family,” Rob said. “And,



Gabe Sipos with his mother, Lu, and father, Rob.

imagine the satisfaction of building this new facility—a Children's Hospital, of all things,” he added, “that would help cure Gabe's illness and those of other children,” he said. “Work became a bit more satisfying, that's for certain.”

Gabe became a beacon of purpose for those working on the Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt.

As time rolled by, Lu began to surface again amidst the normal flow of things. Gabe's treatment was working and she gave her thoughts to the needs of other families who would first hear the news, “It's cancer.” She decided what would help the most would be to help ease their child's transition into cancer treatment.

She remembered her own experience. When Gabe went in for his first chemo treatment, Lu was ready. She dressed a large yellow duck with hospital pajamas, just like the patients wore at Vanderbilt, added a do-rag and a central line or port for the animal's “chemotherapy”. She also added an arm immobilizer, just like the little patients wear when receiving chemo to protect the line from coming out when young arms move about.

And, ta-da! Lu invented a new coping toy for cancer patients.

For Gabe, this properly dressed stuffed animal made a huge difference in his ability to work through the mental struggle of physical illness. He could “practice” the doctors’ techniques on his fuzzy yellow “patient” and “talk” to his mom about the pain and fear associated with shots, ports, and other anxieties he had.

Dubbed “Chemo Duck,” this new toy was an instant hit and a valuable learning tool for the young patients and their families. Lu instructed Rob to buy every duck he could find that day to dress other ducks for other newly diagnosed children.

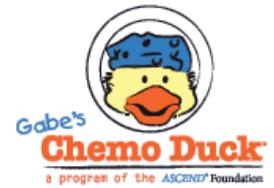
“Children’s Hospital (at Vanderbilt) has been fantastic,” she said. “We have very, very strong links to the hospital and owe them so much. They were so instrumental in helping us pilot this program (Chemo Duck),” Lu said. “Chemo Duck is a phenomenal friend for young cancer patients, but now that he is here, I feel the need to help other family members learn how to cope.”

To this day, Lu continues her work with pediatric cancer patients and their families. Her work with Chemo Duck led to her development of Gabe’s My Heart, a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization whose mission is to gather healthcare professionals, cancer survivors and business professionals to “come together with the purpose of providing reassurance and assistance to families whose children are being treated for cancer,” according to the mission statement on Gabe’s My Heart website.

And, while Lu initially worked to provide Chemo Duck for all newly admitted pediatric cancer patients to Vanderbilt Children’s Hospital, she has since licensed that aspect of her work to another nonprofit called the Ascend Foundation.

Lu now has time to focus on growing new programs for Gabe’s My Heart, such as the series of workbooks for kids she’s developing, as well as a coping plan for parents, Survival kits for families during their first week of treatment, and hosting/coordinating parties for families of kids in treatment.

**Gabe Sipos is now four years old and is considered cancer free.**



If you would like to help support the work of Lu Sipos and the families she helps through Gabe’s My Heart, feel free to contact her for volunteer opportunities and donation submissions at [www.gabesmyheart.com](http://www.gabesmyheart.com).

For information on Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt, go to [www.vanderbiltchildrens.com](http://www.vanderbiltchildrens.com). For information on Chemo Duck or the Ascend Foundation, go to [www.chemoduck.org](http://www.chemoduck.org)



photo by Kats Barry