

Nashville's 2002 New Year's baby just turned 18. A cancer survivor, he now gives support to other kids like him.

Jessica Bliss | Nashville Tennessean
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They went by the nickname "the three bald buddies."

A trio of rowdy boys who ran through Vanderbilt hospital squirting syringes like water guns and pulling each other down the hallways in a red wagon.

They were several years apart in age, but close as could be.

Three children facing cancer.

Gabe Sipos could never forget those days. The now 18-year-old high school senior squeezes a stuffed animal in his hands as he thinks about the playfulness — and the pain.

The fluffy yellow duck was a gift to help him cope during chemo when he was younger. He named it Connor, after one of the boys in his bald-headed threesome.

His friend Connor lost his fight with cancer. But Gabe did not. Now, that duck has become a symbol of the love and support he offers other kids like him, and like Connor.



Gabe Sipos, 18, talks with his mom, Lu Sipos, about their Chemo Duck Program on Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2020, in Thompson's Station, Tenn. Sipos was diagnosed with cancer just before his first birthday, and now is on the board of Gabe's Chemo Duck Program, which his mom started in 2004.

Mark Zaleski/ For The Tennessean

Through a nonprofit organization founded by Gabe's mother and run with his help, he sends thousands of Chemo Ducks to sick kids and hospitals across the country. Each plush toy wears blue hospital scrubs and a bandanna and has a tiny IV line for chemotherapy.

The stuffed animals are meant to help children better understand their treatments and to provide comfort during a time of confusion and fear.

Getting to this point has been a remarkable and often difficult journey for Gabe, who made a notable entry into the world 18 years ago.

Nashville's New Year's baby

He made headlines just by being born.

When the clock struck 12:55 a.m. on Jan. 1, 2002, Gabe arrived in the world a healthy 7 pounds, 6 ounces — three weeks early and full of promise.

He was Vanderbilt's first baby delivered in the New Year, earning him a distinctive title.

When Gabe's mom first held the boy in her arms, she was exhausted from nearly 36 hours of labor. Her new tiny human sounded to her like a baby goat and had the most perfect lips she had ever seen.

She told the news crew that visited the hospital that day: "I would like for him to be a positive influence on the world in whatever small, minute way.

"I'd like for him to grow up to be a healthy adult mentally and physically, that's all really, I don't need a doctor or a lawyer, just a happy, happy positive person."

He was positively wonderful.



Gabe Sipos, 18, who battled cancer when he was a toddler, holds a photograph taken when he was one-year-old on Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2020, in Thompson's Station, Tenn. Sipos was diagnosed with cancer just before his first birthday, and now is on the board of Gabe's Chemo Duck Program, which his mom, Lu Sipos, started in 2004.

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But on Christmas Day 2002, Gabe Sipos returned to the hospital where he had been born not even a year before. His parents had noticed swelling behind his right jaw. Antibiotics weren't working, and his right eye had started acting funny, not following objects like his other one did.

They brought him to the ER, expecting they would be told it was nothing and sent home. But doctors started ordering MRIs. Then they did a biopsy. Lu Sipos held her baby as doctors inserted a long, thick needle into Gabe's neck just under his chin.

"It was devastating for a new parent," she says. "It was very, very frightening."

They met lots of different doctors that night. Ear, nose and throat. Oncology. Neurology. Everyone. Cancer, though, still wasn't in her thoughts.

Later that night, while her husband slept in the room close to their son, the oncology team returned and asked to talk. Lu said she could speak to them outside, leaving her family in peace, but doctors insisted that Gabe's dad should come, too.

When he awoke, Rob Sipos knew instantly the news would be bad.

Doctors diagnosed Gabe with a rare, nearly unpronounceable cancer known as rhabdomyosarcoma. The soft tissue disease usually appeared in children's arms or legs.

Gabe's grew in the sinus passage on the right side of his face.

Finding solace in a stuffie with a big orange beak

In order to fight the cancer, Gabe had to undergo chemotherapy — a treatment that poisoned him almost to the brink of death before he could thrive.

Gabe completed six weeks of radiation therapy and nearly 10 months of chemo. Complications, such as when he had trouble breathing or when a port on his chest became infected, required week-long stays on the fifth floor of Vanderbilt.

All the while, Gabe clung to a new stuffed animal. One with over-sized orange feet and a big beak. The duck, a gift from Lu's friend, was the only thing that made him smile.

For Lu — who felt lost in her inability to help her son — it also provided a point of connection.



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She dressed the stuffed animal in a pair of blue hospital pajamas, which she patterned after a real pair of PJs and sewed together herself. She tied a green, lady-bug covered bandanna — one that matched Gabe's — around the duck's head. Then she added a chemotherapy port on its chest and a blood-pressure cuff on its wing.

She borrowed empty syringes from the nurses and gave them to Gabe. He began playing doctor, pretending to give the duck medicine. Lu also role played with her child, showing him how the doctors would administer treatment.

"Little kids, for the most part, don't understand all the big changes that are coming," Gabe says. "All the weird medicines they have to take. The IVs and the shots.

"It got to the point where I wanted the doctors to treat chemo duck before they treated me."



Gabe Sipos, then just a month shy of his second birthday, plays with his bubble machine at his home in Spring Hill on Wednesday Dec. 3, 2003.

File / Sanford Myers / The Tennessean

Other little boys and girls at the hospital also gravitated to Gabe's duck. When Lu and Rob saw the smiling faces, they went out and bought every stuffed duck they could find. Lu dressed them up and gave them to the kids.

She wanted that bond for every child dealing with cancer.

With that as inspiration, Lu started an organization in 2004 called Gabe's Chemo Duck Program. Now, she and Gabe give ducks to thousands of children across the country.

'It's something that makes me a little different — just like my birthday'

Gabe's first duck wasn't just a toy but a tool.

Through the help of child life specialists and medical professionals, Lu designed others. The duck encourages healing through the power of play, and it also comes with a book to help kids and their families understand what they are going through.

Gabe sits on the board of the nonprofit, which is called Gabe's My Heart, and has steadily increased his roles and responsibilities throughout the years, touring hospitals and giving away ducks.

"It's really heartwarming," he says.

It's brought him purpose. Gabe is a senior at Summit High School in Spring Hill now. He plans to attend college at Austin Peay State University. He wants to become a radiation technician and later advance in the field of oncology radiation.

He plans to continue to be the positive influence on the world his mom wished for that New Year's Day 18 years ago.



Gabe Sipos, 18, who plays bass guitar and is a Pink Floyd fan, sits in his house on Wednesday, Jan. 22, 2020, in Thompson's Station, Tenn. Sipos was diagnosed with cancer just before his first birthday, and now is on the board of Gabe's Chemo Duck Program, which his mom, Lu Sipos, started in 2004. Mark Zaleski/ For The Tennessean

But his lifelong struggles also show the paradox of cancer survival.

Radiation stunted the growth of his jaw bones. Chemotherapy damaged his vocal cords.

His back teeth don't have roots, held in only by the gums. His right ear is numb, filled with scar tissue and unable to hear. There is an imbalance to the symmetry of his face.

"I've come to look at it, not as a hindrance, but as something that makes me a little different — just like my birthday," he says. "It's just something that makes me a little more unique."

Looking up and looking forward

At least once a year, Gabe returns for checkups at the hospital where he first received his treatment.

It happens to be a hospital his dad helped build.

Rob served as project engineer for the construction of Vanderbilt Children's Hospital. He was assigned to the project just after Gabe was born. It became personal a few months later, when his only child was diagnosed with cancer.

Rob shaved his head when chemo caused his son's hair to fall out. And, as Rob built the place where Gabe would one day continue cancer treatment, he took special note of the spaces that would make hospital stays easier for families like his.

There was a model train set — complete with engines and gates that the children could control with the push of a few buttons — that he thought would be Gabe's favorite.



Gabe Sipos, then just a month shy of his 2nd birthday, reacts as his toy truck tries to make the steep climb at his home in Spring Hill Wednesday December 3, 2003.
File / Sanford Myers / The Tennessean

Focused all his son's life on Gabe's illness, Rob never expected to face his own. In 2015, at 45 years old, Rob was diagnosed with spinal cancer.

He had major surgery and two bouts of radiation. During his treatment, he better understood his son. He learned what Gabe had been living with all these years. But his journey would end differently. Rob died two years ago.

"I looked up to him in a lot of ways," Gabe says. "But, as I realized that he was actually gone, I started to realize that he looked up to me in a lot of ways, as well."

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How to give and how to get a Chemo Duck

Chemo Ducks are available free to parents hoping to give one to their child and for hospitals who would like to give ducks to their patients.

Individuals can also order or donate Chemo Ducks for children and families they know who are living with cancer.

More information can be found here: chemoduck.org/order-ducks

To donate in support of a child or hospital visit gabes-chemo-duck-program.kindful.com. Every \$50 gift provides a duck and huggable hope for a child.

About childhood cancer

In the United States:

- After accidents, cancer is the leading cause of death in children ages 1 to 14.
- Approximately 11,050 children under the age of 15 will be diagnosed with cancer this year.
- The most common cancers of children are leukemias, brain and central nervous system tumors and lymphomas.
- Because of major treatment advances in recent decades, 84% of children with cancer now survive five years or more.

Sources: American Cancer Society (cancer.org) and the National Cancer Institute (cancer.gov)

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