

## Saving Grace's memory: Couple's loss of daughter leads them to help others

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Pete and Suzanne Letherman of Granger know it's the small comforts that get families through the waiting and uncertainty in the wards of a children's hospital.

Sometimes a stranger's gift of a stuffed toy or a new book to read to an ailing child brings brief solace between the medical tests and the consultations with doctors.

It did when the Lethermans were going through that ordeal with their "Sweet Pea" -- their first-born child, Grace Elizabeth.

The 6-month-old died from a genetic muscular disorder in May 2003, but in the years since then, her parents have sought to make help other families get through the hard times at hospitals.

In its first five years, the nonprofit Sweet Pea Foundation that the Lethermans started has purchased more than 2,500 toys and delivered them to children's hospitals and pediatric units in Elkhart, South Bend, Indianapolis and Chicago. The organization has supplied more than 100 other larger gifts, such as hand-held video game systems, DVD players and crib aquariums.

"For us, those kinds of things were more beneficial than focusing on the disease that brought our daughter into the hospital in the first place," Suzanne Letherman said.

Pete Letherman recalled the days his family spent at Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis and Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago, where Grace was treated for a condition known as spinal muscular atrophy.



"There's a lot of waiting," he remembered. "You have a period of time where you meet with doctors and there's testing, but you have this time in between when you're just waiting. Those toys are the things that help you and your child get through the difficult time together."

In addition to delivering toys in person, the Lethermans have mailed about 40 "Grace E-Grams," or care packages, to young patients.

Last fall, they reached a milestone that the Lethermans consider their biggest accomplishment: meeting a fundraising goal to permanently endow a room at the Ronald McDonald House of Indiana, an organization they felt strongly about helping after Grace's death. Families of inpatient children can stay for free or discounted rates at the Indianapolis facility.

The couple delivered a \$3,500 check there in October, enough money to sponsor Room No. 43 for a year.

"That was just a fun day to be able to do that," Pete Letherman said of making the donation.

Beth Johnson, executive director of Ronald McDonald House, said it marked the first time that someone has endowed a room beyond an annual sponsorship for a year or two.

"They're just a family that really wanted to give back," Johnson said. "It's just so wonderful that someone who has experienced that situation wants to help others who may be going through the same thing."

A Ronald McDonald House in Chicago also will benefit from the foundation's monthly gift that will fund a one-night stay for a family there.

All told, the volunteer-run foundation has raised about \$120,000, largely from a core group of donors across the United States. Annual fundraisers such as a golf tournament and St. Patrick's Day event also bring in money. Local schools and businesses help by organizing toy drives.

All proceeds go toward the foundation's mission of helping sick children and their families, the Lethermans said.

"We get support from all over the country," Pete Letherman said. "It's such a humbling experience to get contributions from these people who relate to our story."

It's a story the Lethermans have begun sharing with their son, Andrew, 3; and daughter, Cecilia, 20 months. The parents keep pictures of Grace around the house, and the siblings play with their late sister's toys.

On Grace's birthday, the family visits her gravesite and releases balloons into the air; then they go to dinner at a Granger restaurant.

"We make it a positive," Suzanne Letherman said.

In the future, the Lethermans hope to grow their "Seeds of Grace" campaign by sponsoring activities and programs at children's hospitals. They also want to establish stronger relationships with Elkhart County-area hospitals and with organizations doing similar work as Sweet Pea Foundation.

"We know we're not making a huge difference, but we're making a difference," Suzanne Letherman said. "This is our way of remembering Grace, too."

