

“I promised her I’d help other sick kids”

One little baby can change the world. The proof: Suzanne’s Sweet Pea. She’s given 3,000 kids a reason to smile . . .

Holding her baby girl close, Suzanne Letherman dozed in a recliner, only half-asleep. If she could have stayed awake 24/7, she would have. Because their precious time together was slipping away too quickly. So all it took to rouse her that night was her husband Pete’s gentle touch.

“Honey,” he whispered through tears, “I think it’s time.”

Time to say goodbye.

For six-month-old Grace Elizabeth Letherman, there would be no first words or first steps, no ballet recitals or birthdays.

And as Suzanne kissed her downy-soft head for the last time, she didn’t know how she’d go on.

But Grace would show her the way . . .

Blissful. That’s how the Granger, Indiana, mom remembers the nine months she carried Grace. Because everything had *seemed* fine.

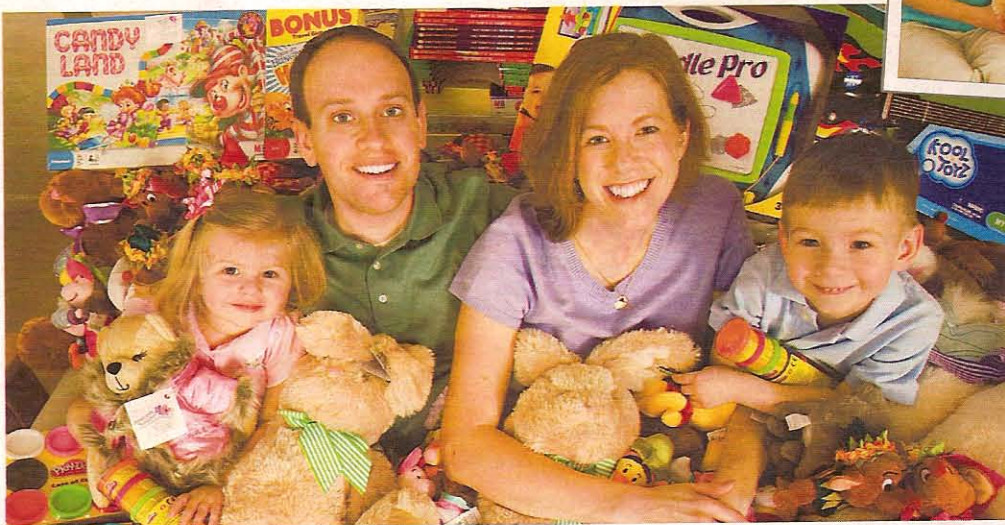
Well, almost everything. As a first-time mom, Suzanne couldn’t be sure, but . . . “The baby doesn’t seem to move that much,” she worried. Other moms-to-be talked about somersaults; she felt only a gentle stirring.

Looking back, it was a sign. But prenatal tests were normal. So she relaxed. I guess my baby’s just mellow, she thought.

Then, in the delivery room, instead of a healthy cry, Suzanne heard . . . silence.

And doctors didn’t know why Grace had trouble breathing and nursing and couldn’t wave her arms and legs like other newborns. So as other babies born that day went home from the hospital, Grace remained.

They’ll find out what’s wrong



“We hope we’re making her proud,” say Suzanne and Pete, with Cecilia, Andrew and the toys, games and stuffed animals they give to sick kids in honor of their baby girl, Grace (inset).

and make her better, Suzanne told herself. Because every day, she fell more in love with the baby girl who rarely cried despite everything. Who could barely move, but somehow found the strength to turn her head toward Daddy when he cooed “my little Sweet Pea.”

So when the diagnosis came, it was devastating.

“We’re sorry,” doctors began . . . but Grace had a rare, incurable disorder called spinal muscular atrophy; she would get weaker and weaker until she slipped away.

There was only one thing left to do. “We’re taking her home for however long she has left,” Suzanne and Pete choked.

But taking one last look around the pediatric ward, Suzanne couldn’t help thinking about the children still there. Kids aching to just be kids.

So as she bundled Grace up for a bittersweet homecoming, she made a promise.

“Sweet Pea,” she whispered, “Someday, in some way, I’m going to help other sick kids.” In your honor. And the thought brought her peace.

A mother’s promise

Six weeks later, just after Mother’s Day, Grace was gone. After, even though she’d barely made a sound, the house felt so

empty without her in it.

Yet as weeks turned to months, Suzanne remembered her promise. Still . . . Pete and I are just ordinary people, she thought. How can we make a difference?

But sifting through memories in her mind of those months at Grace’s bedside, it came to her.

She’d seen how kids with everything from broken bones to cancer lit up when someone brought them something new to play with or hug.

That’s it! she decided. We’ll give them each a reason to smile.

After her first toy delivery to a hospital, Suzanne’s heart felt lighter. And as word spread, donations in Grace’s memory poured in. Enough for toys, teddy bears and games for 3,000 children.

And at five big hospitals, kids forgot where they were for a little while and just played. And at night, they drifted off to sleep easier with a cuddly new friend.

Now, from Sweet Pea Foundation (www.sweetpeafoundation.org) headquarters—their kitchen—Suzanne and Pete even send out care packages to sick children in other states. Their helpers: son Andrew, three, and daughter Cecilia, 17 months—both born healthy.

Every year on Grace’s birthday, the Lethermans release balloons to their Sweet Pea in Heaven. And every day now, in her name, they make someone smile. Like she did.

Did you know?
You can join a walk-a-thon to help find a cure for Grace’s disease at www.curesma.org/walknroll.shtml.

4 ways you can help sick babies

- **Click here.**
Visit www.thechildhealthsite.com: Your click helps pay for healthcare for babies and children in need.
- **Wrap them in caring.**
Knitters, crocheters and anyone handy with a needle and thread are wanted at www.newbornsinneed.org, a group that makes and donates 500,000 blankets to hospitalized babies a year.
- **Sort through those boxes.**
Got gently used baby clothes stored away? Send them to Babies in Need (www.babiesinneed.org). Volunteers will send them to families struggling to make ends meet while paying medical bills.
- **Make a “cuddle kit.”**
You can boost a family’s spirits without spending a bundle! Baby caps, socks, little stuffed animals and bibs are affordable, adorable and appreciated; call your local hospital to find out how to drop off items.

