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40 From Our 40: Pete and Suzanne Letherman & Sweet Pea Foundation

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Pete with daughter, Grace Elizabeth.

"We were in our late 20s and we would leave the hospital and see college kids lined up to go to bars or people on the streets shopping or going about their daily lives, walking past the hospital and wonder how they could be so unaware of all the worry and struggle inside." Suzanne continued, "Our lives had turned upside down. It felt like we just were those kids. Our experience changed our perspective. And now, we share our story so more people know what life is like for families with a child inside a hospital."

Grace Letherman was born in South Bend, IN on November 1, 2002, to parents Pete and Suzanne. She had been delivered by C-Section and was immediately transferred to Riley Children's Health in Indianapolis. Suzanne could not leave at that time because of her own surgery, but Pete made the trip to Indianapolis to be with his daughter. He found himself trying to acclimate to the new city and hospital and booked a night in a hotel that was located on the IUPUI campus, keeping him close to his daughter.

The hospital soon shared that he and Suzanne would be able to have a room at the Ronald McDonald House (RMH). At the time, they did not know what that was or what a blessing that would be. They soon learned that it was truly a home away from home, though their young niece firmly believed they were living at a McDonald's restaurant while they were away, caring for Grace.



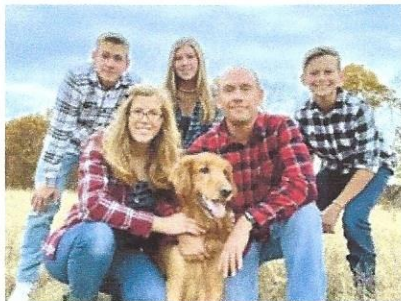
Suzanne and Grace Elizabeth.

The Letherman's spent six weeks at Riley seeking answers to what was causing Grace's low muscle tone. "We found ourselves asking, 'Why is this happening to us?'" recalls Pete, "But we would look around the dining room at the House and realize it was happening to everyone else there too in one way or another. It helped us realize we were not alone."

They not only found comfort from the other families staying at the House, but also in the normalcy the House provides. "I loved doing laundry. It felt so good because it was a normal thing I would do at home," said Suzanne. Pete added, "It may seem small, but it was huge. Making our own dinner or sitting on the couch to watch a basketball game are all things I would do at my own house and that created a real sense of normalcy in the middle of this incredibly stressful time when I found myself navigating so much unknown."

When asked what they would tell a family just arriving, they shared that families should be sure to take advantage of the opportunity to just unwind and refresh for the day ahead. "It is a long road and you need to take time for yourself. It is so important to refresh your mind and rest." They also shared how much the house can really help families manage their costs.

Grace was eventually diagnosed with a rare form of Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) and passed away in May of 2003 while resting peacefully in her mother's arms. Their journey sparked a light in Pete and Suzanne and they promised Grace that they would find a way to help children in the hospital.



The Letherman family today.

They founded the Sweet Pea Foundation in 2003 with the mission of helping sick children and their families with non-medical assistance. The goals of the Foundation were established in sequence with the Lethermans' journey with Grace. The first goal was to create an endowment that would perpetually support a room at the Ronald McDonald House of Central Indiana. Secondly, the organization set out to provide toys and activities for children while they are receiving care in a hospital. There is a significant amount of waiting when caring for a child in the hospital. Pete and Suzanne found that a new toy or book was a great distraction while waiting for test results or the doctors to make rounds. In addition, it has been said that "play is the work of children" and activities that allow a child to play helps the healing process.*

The foundation is an Adopt-a-Room partner, which underwrites the operation of a room for a year. To date, the Foundation has donated over \$55,250. "When I think of Ronald McDonald House, I think of a loving community," said Suzanne.

We are so grateful to the Sweet Pea Foundation for their help creating that sense of community for future guests and humbled to know how much impact providing the normal comforts of home can have on families with a child experiencing a medical crisis.

* Source: Sweet Pea Foundation

BY STACY CLARK