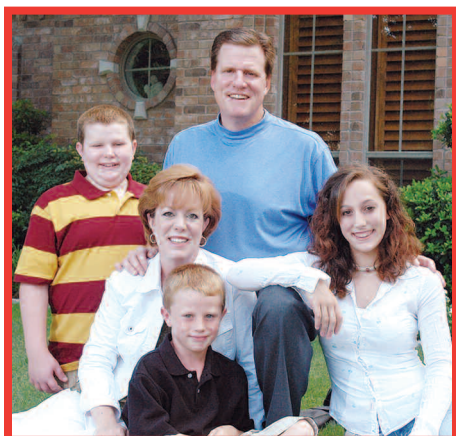


A FAMILY'S JOURNEY

Editor's note: Ralph Stow has shared his family's story at several events supporting the wePromise Campaign for Children's Medical Center Legacy, including the Campaign launch party in June. Stow is a prominent independent businessman, father of three and the 2003 Plano Citizen of the Year.

On a fall afternoon in 2003, Mitchell Stow, 11, noticed that the school blackboard was harder for him to see than it used to be. He already wore glasses, so his family didn't think it was a big deal — just time for a new prescription. But a few weeks and five doctors later, the Plano family found themselves referred to Children's, where an MRI scan revealed the cause of Mitchell's vision trouble: a multi-chambered craniopharyngioma brain tumor pressing against his optic nerve, hypothalamus and brain stem.

"We live a pretty charmed life. Everything has been successful for us, and we are thankful for everything we have. So when something like this comes about, it is really pretty alarming," said Mitchell's father, Ralph Stow. "It helped that the people at Children's were able to provide an immense amount of data and research studies to help us understand and make informed decisions about what was happening to our son."



Susan and Ralph Stow, center, with their three children: Mitchell, 13, left; Jack, 8; and Ellen, 15. The Stows have drawn even closer together during the course of Mitchell's diagnosis, treatment and recovery.

Treatment options

Dr. David Sacco, a neurosurgeon on the medical staff at Children's, met with the Stows during their visits and consulted with the multidisciplinary neuro-oncology tumor board at Children's to ensure Mitchell's treatment options were analyzed by experts from a variety of disciplines.

"My experience with other North Dallas children's hospitals gave me an incredible appreciation for Children's. It's a night and day difference; certainly in terms of quality of

facilities and the general attitude of the place," Stow said. "I think it has a lot to do with the fact that Children's is just for children, and that they plan for the fact that when a child is really sick, a parent is going to be present to help their child through the experience."

Initially, a shunt was used to drain the tumor and delay the need for surgery, though this solution wasn't viable long-term. But as specialists were preparing to attempt radiation therapy, a complication arose in the form of an unrelated tumor found in Mitchell's abdomen. He had to recover from the surgical removal of the abdominal tumor before he could continue brain tumor treatment.

After recovering from abdomen surgery, a new MRI showed that the craniopharyngioma had spread into a fourth area of Mitchell's brain. After consulting with specialists at top children's hospitals around the country, the Stows decided their only viable option was surgery, and that the best place to entrust their son was to Children's and into Dr. Sacco's skilled hands. Doing so meant their son undergoing a delicate procedure and a few weeks of recovery at the hospital.

First-name basis

"When I was spending a lot of time at Children's, I was on a first-name basis with the woman who ran The Whistle Stop (coffee shop). Every morning when I would go down to get a cup of coffee, she was there. She would ask about my son, and I would ask about her son. It was one tiny thing, but everyone in that whole facility — from the people down in the diner, to the coffee shop, to the nurses that came in at four in the morning — had the same attitude. It wasn't just a job, it was what they did as a career, and their commitment and compassion showed. You go through some real easy things and you go through some real tough things sitting in that room," Stow said.

Mitchell underwent a craniotomy on Dec. 29, 2004, and the outcome was very successful. Three of the four chambers of the



Mitchell Stow, 13, of Plano was treated for a brain tumor at Children's. He is among the 31,000 patients from the Legacy service region who received care at Children's in 2004.

tumor were removed completely, and radiation treatment killed the remainder. At his most recent MRI, he was given a clean bill of health.

Peace of mind

Mitchell will return to Children's quarterly for several years for MRIs, and will remain on a long-term drug regimen, which has some side effects, but for the most part life has stabilized.

"He has had absolutely no degradation to any quality of life areas, such as motor skills, vision, hearing, balance or IQ, and is hitting a golf ball farther now than he did before he was sick. He does a lot of creative things, including drawing a lot of 'geometric color' pictures and is highly involved in activities with our church. And a few weeks ago, he celebrated his 13th birthday," Stow said.

"This has been more of a journey than an event — we've had all these surgeries and hospital stays and uncertainty. But if you look at it rationally, life is just the hand that you're dealt. You play it. You don't ask for it, you don't cause it — it's just there. So the Lord's gotta' plan for you. But the big thing for us is all the side things that happen because of it — weeks in the hospital, three kids, trading off day-shifts and night-shifts. And that is where Children's has had such a huge impact on us — it's just like an insurance policy: You never know when you are going to need it, but when it's there, you appreciate it so much for what it is. You realize that almost nothing instills greater peace of mind than having a miracle surgeon like Dr. David Sacco or a place like Children's nearby to take care of your kids."