



## **The best Father's Day ever: A new house, child on the mend has Michael Ford counting his blessings**

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Her big blue eyes sparkle and a sliver of a smile breaks out on Gracie Ford's face as she snuggles in her daddy's arms.

Ask her where her favorite place to be in the world is and, in a barely audible voice, she says, "Right here."

There's no question -- 6-year-old Gracie is Daddy's girl. Her father, Michael Ford, wouldn't have it any other way.

Ford, 30, is especially grateful this Father's Day for Gracie, his two sons, and a four-bedroom, two-bath house in Dearborn that was given to him and his wife so that Gracie could be closer to the

C.S. Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor. The little girl is being treated there for cancer.

Until they moved into the house given to them by a nonprofit foundation, the family lived in the Flint area. They needed an angel of hope.

A week before Christmas, Ford was laid off from his job as a welder. A few months earlier, he'd gotten a call at work informing him that Gracie was being transported by ambulance from Hurley Medical Center in Flint to the hospital in Ann Arbor.

It turned out that the headaches his daughter had been complaining about for weeks were being caused by a tumor growing and pressing against the back of her brain.

Doctors rushed her into surgery to remove the tumor the next day -- Aug. 30.

In the months that followed, Gracie underwent weeks of radiation; she is still getting chemotherapy.

She lost her hair.

She lost weight, dropping from 43 pounds to 29. "Watching her lose weight like that was almost as hard as the surgery itself," her father says. "She went to skin and bones."

**Gracie had a type of brain** cancer called medulloblastoma. It's a highly malignant cancer that grows rapidly and often metastasizes to other parts of the brain and spine. The tumor was the size of an egg, says pediatric oncology nurse practitioner Rhonda McDougall, who has gotten to know the family.

If Gracie's tumor hadn't been discovered, her condition would have gotten progressively worse, McDougall says.

"There is nothing her parents could have done to prevent it," she says. It was hardly the life Ford envisioned 11 years ago when he married his childhood sweetheart, Tabitha.

He's a Flint native who lived for a while with his grandparents in Arkansas, near Tabitha's family. He was walking through a store in town when she spoke to him. He doesn't remember what she said, but he remembers how beautiful she was.

"She had these big blue eyes and long blond hair. For a pretty girl like that to just come up and start talking to me, I just didn't know what to say," he recalls.

They were 15. Four years later, they married.

Children came right away -- in exactly the order he wanted. Two boys, Gage, 11, and Garrett, 9, and then Gracie.

Tabitha had hoped for a daughter first, but Ford reasoned that a little girl needed big brothers to protect her.

"It was the best day in my life," he says of the day Gracie was born in May 2006. "A beautiful little girl to join our two sons. And she's been attached to me ever since."

It's just a coincidence that all the names start with G, he says.

"We were looking through a book of little girl's names, and I really liked that one."

Gracie sounded graceful, and beautiful, just like his little baby girl. From the start, daddy and daughter were inseparable.

When she learned to walk, she followed him. She said Da-Da before she said Ma-Ma.

Even when her mother would go to change her diaper, she'd say, "Nope, Daddy do."

"He's her best friend," Tabitha Ford says. "She adores him. I couldn't ask for a better husband or dad for our children."

Nurse McDougall marvels at the bond, too.

"You can tell she's a Daddy's girl," McDougall says. "When we interface with the family, she always wants to sit on Daddy's lap. He's a very loving, hands-on father. Oftentimes, dads are the breadwinners, so it's hard for them to be present. But I can think of only one or two times when he hasn't been here for her treatments."

The Ford sons say they don't feel neglected. "We know she's his little princess," Gage says matter-of-factly.

Besides, they get plenty of daddy time, too. They especially enjoy playing catch and wrestling outdoors and videogames indoors with their dad, they say. "We usually beat him," Gage says proudly.

"And he makes the best steaks," Garrett adds.

**Michael Ford says** he felt like his world caved in on him when he got Gracie's diagnosis. "I just

hoped and prayed and talked a lot with a friend who had a daughter with a health problem.

"I was hurt. I was angry. I was scared," he says. "For me, I thought this was the end of the world. I didn't know what to do. I thought, 'Why God? Did I do something wrong so you're punishing my little girl?' "

Then a few months later, when he lost his job, he thought things had gone from bad to worse.

It ended up being a blessing in disguise.

"I could take Gracie to and from her doctor's appointments. My wife had pretty much been doing all of that and she's not from here ... she didn't feel comfortable driving all the time from Flint to Ann Arbor," he says.

Money was tight, but the family managed.

Ford relied on a lesson learned from his own dad.

"He might not have been able to get us everything we wanted, but he made sure we had everything we needed," Ford says of his father, also named Michael Ford.

The family was at home near Flint, in a house they were renting, when they got a call he initially thought must be a joke.

"She says, 'How'd you like a house?' I said, 'What are you talking about?' "

The caller explained that Wells Fargo had donated the house to Angels of Hope, a nonprofit foundation that provides financial and other assistance to children with cancer and their families, and they believed the Fords would be the perfect beneficiaries of the gift.

"What we do for families every year is a gift," says Angels of Hope volunteer board member Steve York, a dad himself. "Here is a family, their whole world kind of stopped. We were able to take a family with three gorgeous kids and almost give them a new lease on life."

"We can't thank them enough," says Tabitha Ford, who earned her bachelor's degree in human services from the University of Phoenix a couple weeks before Gracie's diagnosis.

The Dearborn house makes a perfect home for the Ford family.

The four-bedroom, two-bath house in Dearborn is much bigger than the three-bedroom, one-bath

house they had been renting. There's a patio where Ford can grill his steaks, a fenced-in yard where the children and their dog, a brown and white pit bull named Mack, can play, and a finished basement with a little cove off to the side that has been turned into a playhouse for Gracie's dolls and stuffed animals.

And, most important to the Fords, it has cut their hospital commutes by more than half.

"It just blew me away," Ford says. "I didn't know what to say."

And, now that Gracie's hospital visits have become less frequent and are easier to get to, Ford has begun to look for work again.

Gracie's treatments should be completed by the end of the year, barring any complications, McDougall says. Her blond hair will grow back after the treatments end.

"We expect she will do well and live a normal, healthy life," McDougall says.

**Not everyone has rejoiced** about the Fords' good fortune.

One acquaintance has complained that the family is being given too much. They also got a trip to Disney World earlier this year through the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

But, says Ford, "I'd give it all up. Everything, this house, the car I worked and paid for, everything, for her to not have what she has.

"We didn't ask nobody for this," he says. "But I tell you what, you hear so much about the bad things going on in this world and how bad some people are; it takes something like this to help you realize how many good people there are out there."

This will be his best Father's Day ever, he says.

Tabitha Ford says she'll probably prepare his favorite meal -- chicken and dumplings to enjoy at their new house today.

But Michael Ford says he's already got the best presents.

"I've got two healthy boys and she's doing so much better," he says, nudging the little girl snuggled into his side. "That's the best Father's Day gift. It can't get better than that."