When Nehemiah McConnell was nine, he began having seizures and was prescribed medication – but unfortunately, the seizures continued. An MRI in April 2013 showed something no parent is ever prepared to hear – he had a brain tumor. The 10-year-old was immediately referred to John Gachiani, M.D., central Iowa’s only fellowship-trained pediatric neurosurgeon.

“It all happened very fast,” says Gabrielle McConnell, his mom. “Nehemiah had the MRI on a Wednesday, we met Dr. Gachiani on a Friday and he had surgery that Monday at Mercy.”

“As a parent, when you have a child who has to have this procedure done, there is a lot that goes through your head. I was very nervous. It lasted six hours, and it was a very long six hours, but they did a really good job of keeping us informed and I got through it with a lot of prayer.”

The pathology results revealed a dysembryoplastic neuroepithelial tumor, sometimes called DNET. It is a low-grade tumor that is typically cured by surgery, but that can recur. Because of the tumor’s size and placement, Nehemiah had a second surgery to remove the rest. When another growth appeared, he had a third surgery in December 2015.

Dr. Gachiani performed all three surgeries and continues to treat Nehemiah with follow-up scans and medication for continuing seizures. Gabrielle describes him as a good communicator who is also caring and very personable.

“He’s been so helpful about working with us, and getting us in if Nehemiah has a problem,” she says. “He was never in a rush to get us out of the hospital after surgery—he took his cues from how Nehemiah was feeling. He always asks Nehemiah about his grades and how he’s keeping up in school—he’ll encourage him and tell him how important it is.”

“He had such great care from everyone at Mercy—with three surgeries, we got to know them pretty well. I really liked all of his nurses and child life specialists, and he got to see some of them again when he was invited back to help with a mural at the hospital!”

Now 14, Nehemiah has also bonded with a furry member of his care team who is with him all the time and will go to high school with him this fall – a yellow lab named Inspire, his therapy dog. He barks whenever he senses Nehemiah is about to have a seizure, and the two have formed a strong bond.

“Many of his seizures happen early in the morning, like 5 a.m., and it gives me a lot of peace of mind to know that Inspire will let us know right away that something’s going on,” she says.