

## on his mind

# For You, I Will

L.A. Laker **Derek Fisher**, 34, explains how his daughter's rare illness taught him the true meaning of love

AS TOLD TO REGINA R. ROBERTSON

**B**asketball used to be my top priority. I played in college before being drafted as a point guard by the Los Angeles Lakers in 1996. But after eight years in the NBA, I married Candace and everything changed. No sooner had we blended our families—her son, Marshall, and my daughter, Chloe—than we discovered we were expecting twins.

Nothing prepares a family for having multiple children at once. When Tatum and Drew arrived in June 2006, I had just signed a contract with the Utah Jazz. Caring for them required so much energy, effort and time. But the true test of our family's bond came the following April.

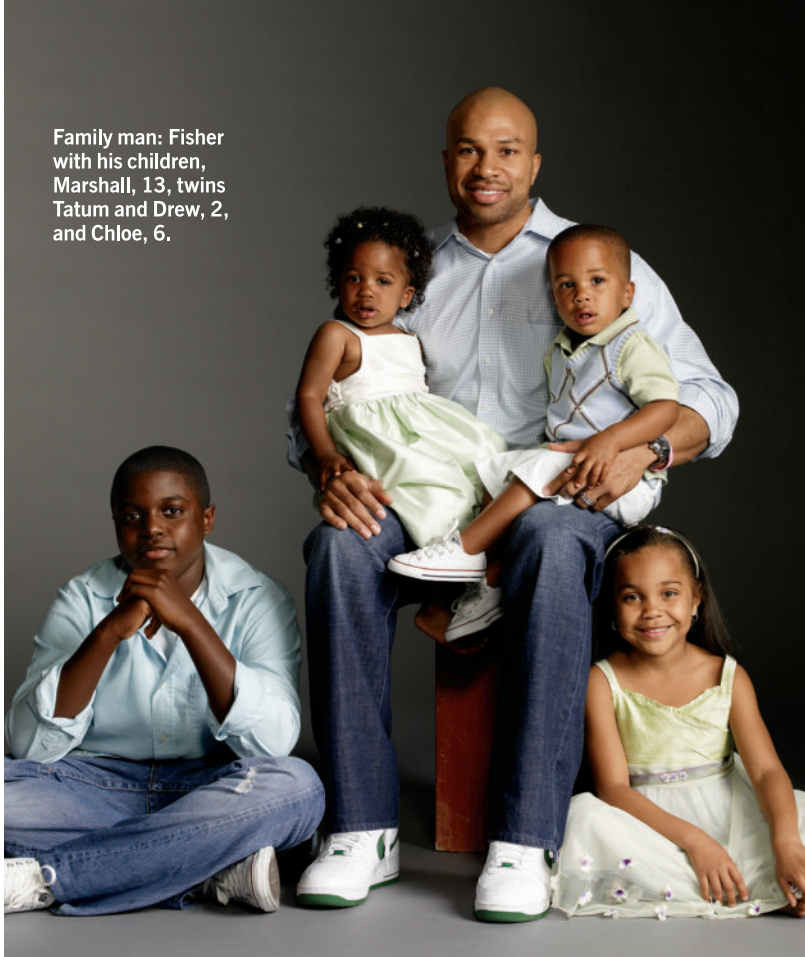
Once the chaos of moving my family to Salt Lake City died down, my wife and I were a month behind schedule for the twins' doctor visit. Candace had noticed that Tatum was having trouble with her balance while crawling, and her left eye appeared to have an unusual fluorescent glow. Our pediatrician referred us to a specialist, who told us that Tatum had just 10 percent of her vision in her left eye and had retinoblastoma, a rare form of eye cancer that strikes children. The recommended treatment was removal of her eye.

I was in shock, but I had to be strong for my wife, who carried a lot of guilt over not having taken Tatum to see a doctor sooner. Luckily we did some research and got in touch with a doctor who specialized in intra-arterial chemotherapy, a treatment that involves injecting medication directly into the eye. We flew to New York for a consultation, and soon after, Tatum underwent an operation that saved her eye.

That was a long, emotional day for me, worrying about our daughter and knowing there was nothing I could do for her but wait. My team was playing game two of the NBA Western Conference semifinals the night of her operation, but basketball was the furthest thing from my mind as I prayed for Tatum's health.

Although the operation was successful, we'll have to monitor Tatum's progress until she's 44 months old. During that time

Family man: Fisher with his children, Marshall, 13, twins Tatum and Drew, 2, and Chloe, 6.



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she'll be at the highest risk for tumors to form in one or both of her eyes. Knowing this, I decided that we had to move closer to doctors and hospitals that specialized in treating her illness. It was a tough choice that put my family's financial future in jeopardy. I had to leave the Utah Jazz, forfeiting the remaining three years on my contract (approximately \$20 million) before I could even consider playing elsewhere. And then there was no guarantee that another team would want me.

The weeks that passed before I was signed to the Lakers were agonizing. Ensuring Tatum's health was priceless, but I wondered if I could still give my children the kind of life I had envisioned

for them. Finally I landed a second deal with the Lakers, which was a blessing because Los Angeles has a superb medical facility where Tatum can receive the best care.

It's been nearly two years since Tatum's diagnosis and operation. And after two additional rounds of chemotherapy, she has regained almost 50 percent of the vision in her eye and the cancer is in remission. As for me, this experience has made me grow and mature in ways I cannot measure. I've discovered new parts of my manhood, places I couldn't get to without loving someone else unconditionally and putting others before myself. Fatherhood will put a man through a lot, but it's a tremendous job, the best in the world—even better than playing basketball.

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