

## Austin doctors help Haitian boy with heart defect

Catholic Spirit, [March 2009](#), In Our World

By Michele Chan Santos  
Correspondent

Luidgy Virgile is a beautiful 2-year-old boy from Haiti. His dark curly hair, ready smile and rambunctious, energetic spirit make people warm to him immediately.

Just six months ago, Luidgy's parents were terrified of losing him because he had a congenital heart defect. But today, thanks to a nonprofit organization in Austin called Heartgift, and to physicians and friends here in Central Texas, Luidgy's heart has been successfully treated, and he can look forward to a long and healthy life.

In March 2008, Luidgy was diagnosed with an atrial septal defect, a hole between the upper chambers of his heart. The oxygenated blood and non-oxygenated blood were blending inside his heart. He also had an atrial flutter — an irregular heartbeat. His symptoms included fatigue and trouble breathing.

Luidgy needed surgical procedures to fix these problems, but this type of surgery is not done in Haiti. In addition, Luidgy's parents could not afford to travel to another country and pay the high medical fees for their son. Elika, Luidgy's mother, is a law student, and his father is a policeman.

"When the doctors in Haiti said Luidgy had to be operated on, we didn't have the money to have an operation," Elika said. "We thought we would lose him."

And then a marvelous series of occurrences took place.

Elika's sister, Nathalie Jacques, works at the Sacre Coeur Hospital in Milot, Haiti, where she met Sister Martha Barlai-Kovach.

Twenty years ago, Sister Barlai-Kovach was in the novitiate for the Daughters of Charity with Sister Teresa George, the vice president and chief operating officer of Dell Children's Medical Center in Austin.

Sister Barlai-Kovach e-mailed Sister George asking if there was any way she could help Luidgy.

Sister George knew about Heartgift, a nonprofit organization in Austin and San Antonio, which provides life-saving heart surgery to disadvantaged children in developing countries where this type of surgery is not available, at no cost to the children and their families. Sister George contacted Heartgift.

In January, Elika and Luidgy flew to Austin. Heartgift arranged for transportation, medical treatment and a French-speaking host family.

Initially, everyone involved expected Luidgy would need open-heart surgery, which requires about a week's stay in the hospital and then several weeks of recovery.

But it was discovered that Luidgy's medical condition could be treated in the cardiac catheterization lab at Dell Children's Medical Center, with surgical instruments threaded to his heart via catheterization.

Dr. Arnold Fenrich, pediatric electrophysiologist with Children's Cardiology Associates in Austin, was able to find the cause of Luidgy's atrial flutter and treat it.

"I identified an area of tissue on the top chamber that would allow me to deliver energy to that tissue to cause a scar and block the path (in order to make his heartbeat normal.) I treated it with radio-frequency energy," Dr. Fenrich said.

Lisa Rodman, the executive director of Heartgift, said Dr. Fenrich's presence in Austin made it possible for Heartgift to bring Luidgy here. Dr. Fenrich is the only pediatric electrophysiologist in Austin and he just recently began practicing in Austin.

"Until Dr. Fenrich came here, the problem wasn't treatable here. If we had heard about Luidgy's problem even six months earlier, we probably couldn't have treated it," Rodman said.

The second part of Luidgy's treatment was closing the hole — the atrial septal defect — between the upper chambers of his heart. Dr. Karen Wright, a pediatric cardiologist with Children's Cardiology Associates, successfully closed the hole.

Amazingly, because both of these procedures were done via catheterization, Luidgy never had to undergo open-heart surgery, which would have been more extensive and would have required a longer, more complicated

recovery.

Luidgy's mother said her heart is full of gratitude for everyone who helped her son get well.

"My travel here has gone very well. I was not expecting to be able to stay with a family. I was not expecting to feel so at ease with the family. I am happy Florence is here with me. I really want to thank the hospital and the doctors because they took such good care of my baby. I also want to thank the Heartgift Foundation for everything they have done. I feel it is such a blessing," she said.

Florence Colantonio and her family hosted Erika and Luidgy during the weeks that they were in Austin.

Many people involved with Luidgy's treatment have remarked on how fortunate it was that so many pieces fell into place. Sister George does not doubt it was all thanks to God.

"Martha and I are distant friends, that she even thought to write me is remarkable. She didn't know about Heartgift, she was just asking if we would be able to help. That's how God works," Sister George said. "If any one of those pieces were not in place Luidgy's treatment would not have happened. That's the providence of people coming together."

For more information about Heartgift, call (512) 637-5114 or visit [www.heartgift.org](http://www.heartgift.org).

---