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Local family opens hearts, home to ailing boy

Wednesday, September 29, 2010 | Macy Hurwitz



Kerin Josue Guevara Castillo and his host mom, Vicki Charpentier. COURTESY PHOTO

A Cedar Park family has opened their home and their hearts to a boy from El Salvador through HeartGift, an organization that brings children to Texas from all over the world to undergo lifesaving cardiac procedures.

Kerin Josue Guevara Castillo, 12, arrived in Austin from El Salvador Sept. 12 to receive an Amplatzer occluder, a device used to mend heart defects in a minimally invasive procedure performed in a catheterization laboratory. HeartGift representative Alison Meador and the Charpentiers, who will host him and his mother Juana for their three-week stay in Cedar Park, met them at the airport.

"It's very different, but (Texas) is very pretty," Juana said.

Kerin was three when he was diagnosed with an Atrial Septal Defect, which is a hole in the membrane that separates the two sides of his heart. Juana took him to a clinic in El Salvador because he had begun to lose a significant amount of weight.

At home in El Salvador, Kerin lives in a home made of tree branches and coconut leaves with no electricity or running water. Juana has to walk to a well and carry the water necessary for the household every day. Things Americans take for granted are completely foreign to the Castillos. " (Last week) we went to pick up my sister from school and it was dark and she saw some people walking and jogging in the dark and she said she was surprised about it because she said, 'we cannot do that in Puerto Parada,'" HeartGift host family matriarch Vicki said.

The thought of being outside in the streets after dark is unthinkable for the Castillos because it is very dangerous to be out after dark where they live in El Salvador.

That is a lifestyle which differs wildly from the ones that children in Cedar Park live, but Kerin has a lot in common with children here. Ice cream is one of his favorite foods, and he loves football, but when he talks about his favorite football team, Real Madrid, he is talking about what Americans call soccer.

Kerin has had his preliminary doctor appointments, and underwent the procedure to close the hole in his heart on Sept. 16. Meador said Kerin is lucky to be able to have his procedure in the catheterization lab. He will have a much shorter recovery time than he would have had he undergone open heart surgery like many people must do with his condition.

"He'll have to lie still until the end of the day...but they'll release him about 5 o'clock," Meador said.

It hasn't all been doctor's offices and hospitals for Kerin though. He was able to watch the

PINK pages OCT. 28
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Charpentier's son, Jonathan, play football for Henry Middle School. Kern and Juana also attended church with the Charpentiers at the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Leander.

The Charpentiers have hosted eight children and their guardians through HeartGift since Vicki heard about the program at church.

She thought that as a Spanish speaker, she could especially help families from Spanish speaking countries.

"They said they bring kids from all over the world but for us it was more easy for us to host those who speak my language so I can communicate better with them," Vicki said.

When HeartGift patients get off the plane, they're often nervous. They've left their homes, come to a strange place where they often don't speak the language and they'll soon very literally place their own or their child's life in the hands of complete strangers. But, many times, the mere fact that there are people to meet them at the airport is enough to allay many fears.

"When they get on that airplane it's such a total leap of faith. They don't really know until they see the people on the other side of the gate...welcoming them," Meador said.

"They are putting the life of that child with somebody they just met. and it's hard, but it's also a blessing," Vicki said.

HeartGift has mended more than 100 hearts for children from all over the globe since the organization was started in 2000. The participating surgeons donate their time, hospitals donate the space and facility time and cardiac device manufacturers donate the medical devices necessary to fix these children's hearts and allow them to live long, healthy lives.

Kerin was referred to the program by Gift of Life International's "Our Hearts are in El Salvador" program. Dr. Karen Wright performed the procedure and installed the Amplatzer occluder into Kerin's heart. The device — which will plug the hole in Kerin's septum — itself was donated by AGA Medical.

For more information on HeartGift, visit the website at www.heartgift.org.

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