

Giving Your Whole Heart HeartGift's Mission Of Unparalleled Giving

Eleven-year-old Liu Yan and his family—father, mother and younger sister—live in a house that was damaged in China's massive Sichuan earthquake in 2008. The roof leaks constantly. Only one room in the house is dry, so all four family members sleep in the only bed in that room. The family can't afford to repair their home.

Sadly, they couldn't afford to repair Yan's failing heart, either. That's where the Austin-based HeartGift Foundation stepped in. In August 2010, Yan and his mother traveled from the Fufeng region in China's Shaanxi Province to Houston. In early September, Yan underwent life-saving heart surgery—financed by HeartGift—at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston.

Since its incorporation in 2000, the nonprofit HeartGift Foundation has brought more than one hundred children from developing countries to the United States for operations to fix their damaged hearts. Yan's surgery would have cost about \$135,000 without the support of HeartGift.

Yan suffered from Tetralogy of Fallot (teh-TRALL-o-gee-of-fal-O), a common but complex congenital heart defect. Despite his healthy

outward appearance, it was unlikely that Yan would have lived past his late teens without the surgery. Because of congenital heart disease, one of every one hundred children born in the developing world will never see his or her first birthday. It was that statistic that helped spawn HeartGift.

"We realized the need for this kind of help," said John "Chip" Oswald, MD, co-founder and chairman of HeartGift. He is also the president of Austin's Cardiothoracic and Vascular Surgeons. "The HeartGift program has really taken off and has totally surprised all of us with its success."

Indeed, the organization has flourished. HeartGift now maintains chapters in Austin, San Antonio, Houston and New Orleans, with a Dallas chapter in the works. In its ten-year history, HeartGift has recruited dozens upon dozens of donors and volunteers, including host families for patients and their guardians, to aid HeartGift patients. The aid includes the time and services of health care professionals (more than two million dollars worth of work in 2009), as well as money, clothing, frequent-flier miles and other items donated by supporters. In 2009, HeartGift volunteers contributed more than fourteen thousand hours of time to HeartGift.

The seeds of HeartGift were planted twelve years ago. In 1998, five children from Kosovo came to Austin for desperately needed heart surgery. Each of the children returned home with mended hearts. The following year, Dr. Oswald and two friends, Jim Hoover and Ray Wilkerson, devised the idea for HeartGift. The HeartGift Foundation became a 501(c)(3) organization in June 2000. Four months later, Vicky Salinas Dominguez of Honduras had heart surgery in Austin, becoming HeartGift's first patient.

Fast-forward to May of 2010. HeartGift's 100th patient was Yorlene Valezka Martinez Centeno, a 4-year-old girl from Nicaragua who had surgery at Dell Children's Medical Center of Central Texas. Like Yan from China, Yorlene had Tetralogy of Fallot, a congenital heart disease that actually comprises four defects. After the operation, Yorlene went back to Nicaragua to live with her mother, sister and grandmother; her father works six months of the year in neighboring Costa Rica.

"When the HeartGift Foundation was incorporated ten years ago, it was hard to envision that we would be saving the lives of more than a hundred children with heart problems," Oswald said. "Each of these individual children should have their story told at least a hundred times. As the years pass, we will reach more milestones, enlist many more volunteers and save many more children—one gift at a time."

Austin philanthropist Mort Topfer gave a big gift to Yorlene by sponsoring her surgery in the Spring of 2010.

"Improvement of our health care system has been an issue close to my heart for many years," Topfer said. "Sponsoring Yorlene's surgery offered an opportunity to extend the life of a young child and to be part of HeartGift's mission of saving the lives of children from around the world."

Another child who has benefited from the gift of surgery from HeartGift is Zainab Hussein. Born in May 2009, she and her mother came to Austin for Zainab's surgery to fix Tetralogy of Fallot last year. Zainab's father, Ahmad Hussein, considered HeartGift "the light and hope for our current darkness which we live in."

The Austin heart surgery for German Cruz Mencias almost didn't happen last year. Because of political upheaval and rioting in Honduras, all four of the country's international airports had been closed. But German made it here—thanks to a free flight from Continental Airlines—to undergo a catheterization procedure at Dell Children's Medical Center to correct a heart condition called pulmonary stenosis. The pulmonary valve opens to let blood flow from the right ventricle to the lungs.

German, who was 8 years old at the time, lives with his mother and stepfather in a one-room adobe house in Honduras along with a younger sister and brother. German is a fourth-grader at a school near the town of Catacamas, about 90 miles northeast of Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras. German loves to play soccer but, before the operation, he tired easily because of his heart condition.

Reese Ryan is one of the HeartGift volunteers who enables children like German to lead healthier lives. Ryan, a HeartGift board member who is co-owner and chief financial officer of the Round Rock Express, said: "It is amazing to be involved in such a worthwhile organization comprising physicians willing to donate their time and talents to help these deserving kids."

For more information about the HeartGift Foundation, visit www.heartgift.org.



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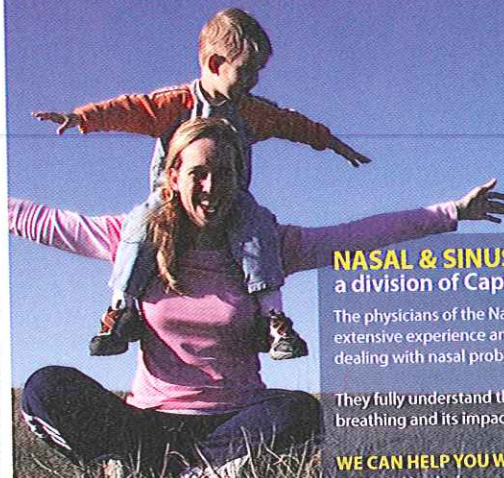
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