

# You Gotta Have Heart

Pediatric heart patients from Third World countries get free life-saving surgery from the HeartGift Foundation.

By John Egan

Photography courtesy of HeartGift Foundation

An 11-year-old boy named Erlan boarded an airplane in his native Honduras and ventured off to Austin in September 2006. No one from his extended family in Honduras was able to accompany him, so he traveled alone. Two American dollars were stuffed in his pocket. For Erlan, this was not just some big adventure. It was a life saving mission.

Erlan had been diagnosed with a birth defect called aortic coarctation, which affects about one in every 10,000 people. Simply put, it's a narrowing of the aorta, the major artery leading to the heart. The condition hampers the flow of blood. Without surgery, most people afflicted with aortic coarctation die before they reach the age of 50, medical experts say.

With aid from the Austin-based HeartGift Foundation, Erlan came to Austin to have his heart repaired. All of the expenses associated with his surgery were covered, including his flights to and from Austin. During the several weeks that he spent in Austin, the boy stayed with a host family, and his wide grin and big brown eyes captivated all who met him. Today, Erlan is back home in Honduras. He celebrated his 13th birthday in December, free of the constraints of a defective heart and ready to enjoy the life of a teenager.

Since 2000 the nonprofit organization HeartGift has helped more than 60 children like Erlan—all 14 years old or younger, all from Third World countries, all with broken hearts, all hoping to see adulthood. These children come to Austin because their homelands lack access

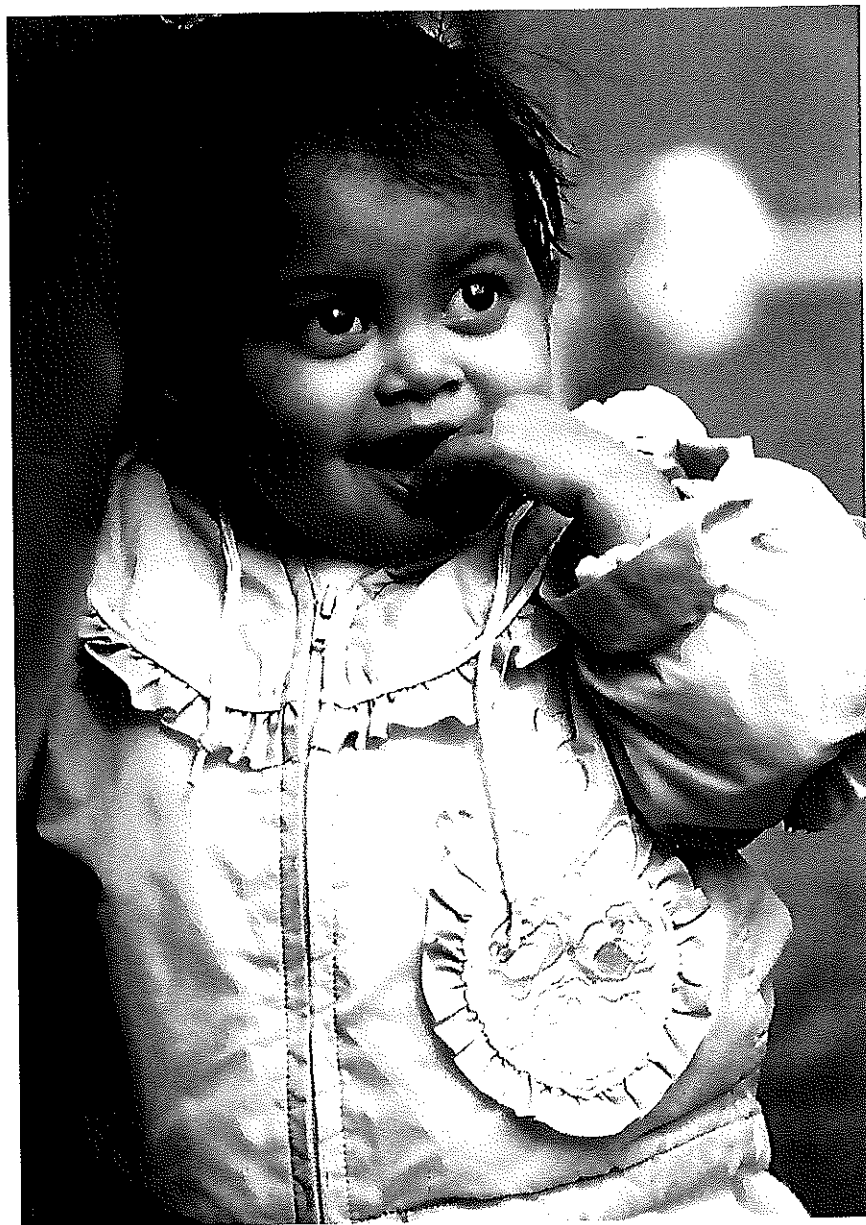
to pediatric heart surgeons—and because this could be their last chance for survival. Every year, HeartGift selects just 12 children from among hundreds of applicants to undergo heart surgery in Austin.

"It's like winning the lottery. I just can't imagine how they're lucky enough to find us and get accepted," says Lisa Rodman, executive director of HeartGift.

A fair share of HeartGift's referrals are routed through nonprofit organizations such as Interfaith Service to Latin America (ISLA) and Gift of Life. But about half of them are e-mailed cries for help from mothers, fathers, and other relatives in search of surgery for ailing children; HeartGift's application requirements are posted on its website ([www.heartgift.org](http://www.heartgift.org)) in 13 languages. For these desperate families, medical care itself may literally be out of reach; the nearest health care clinic could be hundreds of miles away. The cost of the heart surgery, too, is out of reach. At a minimum, the kind of operation these children need costs at least \$150,000 in the United States, according to Rodman.

Sadly, HeartGift can accommodate only 12 patients a year. That's because Austin has just one full-time pediatric heart surgeon, Dr. Kenneth Fox. He performs all the HeartGift operations at the Dell Children's Medical Center of Central Texas. Fox and three other physicians—anesthesiologist Steven Metcalf and pediatric cardiologists Stuart Rowe and Karen Wright—review 20 to 30 cases a month. But only one of those cases is chosen during that analysis. Fox says the medical advi-

**FACING PAGE** Global Love: These photos were taken in Nicaragua when patients Greyling Pindela and Jose Briones returned home from successful surgeries in Austin. Pindela (above) received corrective open heart surgery for Tetralogy of Fallot, a ventricular defect. Briones (below) was born with a ventricular septal defect.



sory board tries to pick what he calls "relatively simple" cases. The doctors pore over each child's medical history, including an echocardiogram, a test that uses sound waves to create a moving picture of the heart. Obtaining that test can be a huge hurdle in a developing country. For instance, one family Rodman has been working with in Zambia must find a way to get their sick child to Kenya for the required echocardiogram.

While the Zambian family pushes through the process, three patients already have been chosen for 2008: Wahab, a 12-year-old Iraqi boy being sponsored by Andrea and Chris Wales of Austin; Henrietta, a 13-year-old Nigerian girl being sponsored by Mort Topfer of Austin; and Zedu, a 4-year-old Nigerian boy being sponsored by Alison and Reese Ryan of Round Rock. In most instances, the mother accompanies the child to Austin.

In addition to financial sponsors like the Ryans, about 250 local medical professionals donate their time to HeartGift. Moreover, community and corporate donors offer time, money, frequent-flier miles, airline tickets, and other necessities. HeartGift raised about \$650,000 in 2007. HeartGift cofounder Dr. Chip Oswalt says about 93 percent of the monetary donations received go toward actual medical care.

"I think it's amazing that all of this is happening in Austin. People are very generous and are really pulling together," Rodman says. Still, she adds, "we are more well known in the international cardiac communities than we are here at home."

Here at home, musician Jerry Jeff Walker and his manager-wife, Susan Walker, have helped put HeartGift on the radar. In 2006 the Walkers sponsored heart surgery for Brian Matute, a six-year-old boy from Belize. Rodman approached the Walkers about Brian's case because she knew they have a home in the boy's country. Brian, accompanied by his mother, Jennifer, underwent surgery in November 2006 to correct an atrial septal defect (a hole between the heart's two upper chambers), a

FACING PAGE & THIS PAGE Two-year-old Samanta Caballero (left) was diagnosed with an atrioventricular septal defect with pulmonary stenosis, while three-year-old Mohammed El Buhaisis (right) was diagnosed with tetralogy of fallot. Both were successfully treated in Austin before returning home.

ventricular septal defect (a hole between the heart's two lower chambers), and pulmonary stenosis (a narrowing of the pulmonary valve that regulates the flow of blood from the right ventricle to the lungs).

"It was incredibly heartwarming to meet this child and see what a difference HeartGift made by mending the hole in his heart and giving him the opportunity to lead a full and healthy life," Jerry Jeff Walker says. The Walkers say they intend to remain involved with HeartGift.

Fox, who also is vice president of the HeartGift board, says: "The change that we see in the kids is remarkable, and their smiles when it's all over and they're better are hard to beat. I occasionally use the experience to help teach my own children that giving back to the community by helping others is important. Sometimes I extend that to remind them of how much they have, since many of these kids have so little."

Fishing buddies Chip Oswald (chairman of the HeartGift board), Ray Wilkerson (HeartGift's treasurer), and Jim Hoover had those under-privileged kids in mind when they hatched the idea for the nonprofit organization in 1999. A year earlier, Oswald had been involved with successful heart surgery in Austin for five children from Kosovo. The three cofounders financed the operations for HeartGift's first three patients.

From those humble beginnings, Oswald, Rodman, and others hope to expand the HeartGift program to other cities this year, including San Antonio and Houston. Each city would have its own board, fund-raising mechanism, and staff, Oswald says. Eventually Rodman would like to see HeartGift programs around the country.

"There's still a much greater number of kids out there than the capacity to treat them all," Fox says. Indeed, a Honduran boy who was awaiting a HeartGift operation died in late 2007, according to Oswald. "What a shame," he says. ■

