

For Honduran girl, **HeartGift** is God's gift

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Mari Betanco believes in miracles.

She's never doubted that God knows what he's doing, she says. Not when her first two children died shortly after birth. Not when her daughter Cristy was born one month early. Not even when Cristy was diagnosed with a heart defect that threatened to kill her by age 12. Betanco always believed that God had a plan. And that plan, she says, included **HeartGift**.

Repairing hole, malformed valve

It is 7 a.m. on a recent Wednesday at Children's Hospital, and 6-year-old Cristy Betanco sits playing with a pink paisley teddy bear. Her mother rests nearby, her face taut with tension. Cristy and Mari are from Olancho, Honduras. They don't speak English, but interpreters have told them this: Minutes from now, a pediatric heart surgeon will cut into Cristy's chest to start a 3 1/2-hour surgery that may save her life.

Cristy has a congenital heart defect called tetralogy of Fallot. A severely malformed valve is reducing blood flow into her lung arteries, and there is a large hole between the pumping chambers of her heart.

In short, her body can't get enough oxygen.

After her diagnosis, Cristy's family worried about what would happen to her. Honduran doctors couldn't provide the medical care necessary for such an involved procedure. And heart surgeries in the U.S. cost thousands of dollars.

Mari turned to **HeartGift**, an Austin nonprofit group that provides free heart surgeries for children from underdeveloped countries.

A special arrangement

Dr. Kenneth Fox stands under the fluorescent lights of the operating room, opening the pericardial sac protecting Cristy's heart.

Getting to this point was an ordeal. It took two men to pull a hysterically screaming Cristy away from her mother outside the operating room. The minute the door closed, Mari dissolved into tears. **HeartGift** Executive Director Lisa Rodman held her as she cried.

Now, while Mari sleeps in the pediatric intensive care unit's waiting room, Fox begins to repair Cristy's heart. Her chest is wide open, her thumping heart in plain view. An anesthesiologist tinkers with her tubes.

"Come Sail Away" by Styx plays nearby.

Surgeries like this usually cost \$127,000, Rodman says. Through an arrangement with Children's Hospital, **HeartGift** pays \$15,000. Corporate donors usually donate another \$8,000 to cover additional medical and travel expenses.

Meanwhile, Fox and hundreds of medical professionals across town have donated their time and expertise to do the 53 surgeries **HeartGift** has sponsored since 2000.

The operating room hums with activity. Monitors beep. Staffers talk. Cristy sleeps.

Giving thanks

Mari is raw from crying.

Cristy is her miracle baby. Her first two children died in Honduras from complications of prematurity. Their lungs weren't strong enough. But Mari wouldn't give up on Cristy, who was also born early. She prayed and prayed. Cristy lived.

God did that, Mari believed. He kept Cristy healthy while Mari searched for a doctor to fix her daughter's heart. He brought **HeartGift** to them. All miracles, Mari says.

When the surgery is over, Cristy's medical team rolls her hospital bed to the pediatric intensive care unit. She is still unconscious. There are tubes in her nose and arms.

Mari sees her baby. It went well, Fox says.

Cristy will be fine, Mari knows. God knows what he's doing. God has a plan.

Mari starts sobbing again - this time, from relief.

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