

Nonprofits extend a healing hand to Katmandu

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The young Tibetan monk traded his customary maroon and gold robe for blue pajamas Tuesday morning and followed a nurse down a hallway at Dell Children's Medical Center in Austin. After waiting four years, 11-year-old Norbu Tulku was about to have the hole in his heart fixed.

Getting here took the combined efforts of a host of people and nonprofits who banded together to arrange Norbu's first plane trip, a series of flights from Nepal to Austin; coordinate individual benefactors and organizations who worked out the logistics of his surgery; and find a host family for Norbu and Tashi Dorgee, a 30-year-old **monk** who served as his translator and guardian.

Frail and shy, Norbu had spent the week before the surgery touring the Austin area, a dramatic departure from his daily regimen of prayer and classes in Nepal. He flashed a large smile when he talked about sightseeing, swimming and playing video games. "I want to see a longhorn before I leave," he said.

Norbu joined the Shechen monastery in Katmandu, Nepal, at age 5 with his parents' blessing. By age 7, the monks noticed that he wasn't growing normally, and doctors in Katmandu diagnosed his heart defect but could not treat it. The monastery couldn't afford to fly him out of Nepal for the surgery. And without the surgery, the boy had a 50 percent chance of dying in his 20s, said Dr. Kenneth Fox, Norbu's Austin surgeon.

A California-based nonprofit called the Next Right Thing learned about Norbu's situation and agreed to pay for his airfare to the United States. Meanwhile, the HeartGift Foundation, an Austin-based charity that helps children born with congenital heart disease in developing countries, made the arrangements for his surgery. On Tuesday, Fox performed an atrial septal defect closure, placing a small Gortex patch over the hole between the two upper chambers of Norbu's heart. U.S. doctors usually spot and correct the defect in infants before their first birthday, Fox said.

The procedure is the specialty of the HeartGift Foundation. Norbu was the 10th child to receive an operation through the foundation in 2007. "I feel very blessed to be a part of this," said Lisa Rodman, HeartGift's executive director. "I feel like I get to see all the doctors and all the volunteers involved at their very best." Even though the doctors and nurses donate their time for each surgery, the foundation pays the hospitals an average of about \$15,000 for medical supplies and the use of their facilities, Rodman said. She said the foundation expects its Heart 2 Heart Golf Classic in Austin on Oct. 11 to cover most of Norbu's medical costs. Dzogchen Center, a local Buddhist community that practices the same style of Buddhism as Norbu and Dorgee, has provided them a place to pray. The monks have stayed in the house of a host family from that community, and other members have driven them around Austin and to medical appointments.

Norbu left the hospital Friday afternoon and will return to Nepal in about three weeks if his doctors are satisfied with his recovery. "Everything went off just as anticipated, and Norbu had a very speedy recovery," Rodman said. "We expect that he will grow be a healthy, strong young man."

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