



Offering a World of Hope

By Lisette Hilton
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Texas, Louisiana programs give much-needed treatment to children from abroad, while nurses reap rewards as well.

Children's suffering in the developing world often goes unheeded. Pediatric health problems routinely cared for here in the U.S. progress in the developing world to severe deformities and early death for many.

But there are places in America that make it their business to reach out to these children. Two, locally, are the HeartGift program, through Children's Hospital of Austin, and Shriners Hospitals for Children in Shreveport, La.

Big hearts in Texas

HeartGift program medical volunteers did their first case on a pediatric cardiac patient in 2000. Today, 38 children from around the world have received lifesaving open heart surgery, at no cost to the families.

Children are referred to HeartGift through individuals who go on missionary trips, as well as international aid organizations, such as Rotary International's Gift of Life program, says Lisa Rodman, executive director for the HeartGift Foundation. Children have traveled from the Dominican Republic, Syria, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Belize, Cameroon, Honduras, Palestine, and Mexico.

HeartGift's medical selection committee, made up of cardiovascular surgeons and pediatric cardiologists, reviews cases referred for treatment, looking for children in developing countries, or in countries that cannot provide the care, who need single-site repair. The children must be younger than 14 years and have no chromosomal abnormalities.

"We get many more cases referred to us than we can help, unfortunately," Rodman says. Some of the more common procedures that HeartGift surgeons perform include repairing tetralogy of Fallot and ventricular septal defects.

While there are no other HeartGift programs in Texas, Rodman says the HeartGift model is easily replicated in any community with a children's hospital.

"We'd love to have satellite or chapter programs all across Texas," Rodman says. "Cardiologists and surgeons are doing pro bono care at those hospitals, and I think a program like ours can take the administration off their hands."

Surgeons donate their services and hospitals agree to charge HeartGift only \$15,000 for each operation. Children and their families also live for free in the U.S. at host families' homes while the children have their surgeries and recuperate.

This fall HeartGift shared the stage with the likes of the World Health Organization and AmeriCares, describing its work at the International Cardiac Outreach Conference in Memphis, Tenn., Rodman says. And the foundation recently received its first international grant, a \$60,000 award from the

Edwards Lifesciences to continue its work in the Dominican Republic.