

Ailing Child, Mother Find Hearts of Gold; In a Borderline Case, Girl to Get Cardiac Care

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Body

When federal immigration agents nabbed Leydina Henriquez and her daughter, Keysi, as they tried to sneak across the Mexican border into Texas last Christmas Eve, there was every reason to believe the pair would quickly be deported to their native Honduras.

But Keysi, a thin, impish girl of 9, has a hole in her heart. In fact, say cardiologists at Children's Hospital in Washington, she has numerous holes in the wall between the two lower chambers of her heart, plus a malfunctioning valve and intense pressure in the blood vessels in her lungs.

Despite years of heart treatment in Honduras, Keysi's problems kept worsening. So last winter her mother, who had been living illegally in Washington for three years, decided to fly home and bring the girl back, hoping that, by some miracle, she could be cured in the United States.

"I knew I was taking a great risk, but if I had left her in Honduras any longer, I knew she was going to die," said Henriquez, 29, who lives with her husband, Jose, an undocumented Mexican immigrant, in an apartment on 13th Street NW. "I put her in God's hands."

Indeed, the hole in Keysi's heart has touched an extraordinary variety of people -- from usually skeptical U.S. Border Patrol agents who gave her special permission to enter the country to cardiac surgeons who have agreed to operate on her for a fraction of their usual fees.

Doctors at Children's Hospital will perform open-heart surgery on Keysi next month, and a local nonprofit foundation, Marcelino Panevino, has pledged to raise the money to pay all her medical expenses.

At a deportation hearing Wednesday in Arlington, immigration officials agreed to allow Keysi and her mother to remain here until at least October, when they will assess the girl's medical progress.

Henriquez, who was separated from Keysi's father years ago, entered the United States illegally in 1994, leaving Keysi and another daughter with her mother. Working at a discount store in Washington, Henriquez regularly sent money home for Keysi's heart medication, but the girl never improved.

Henriquez decided to sneak Keysi into the United States. She paid a smuggler \$ 3,000, and they started walking across Mexico.

The odyssey took two months. Henriquez lost 23 pounds. Keysi ran out of heart medicine. The smuggler abandoned them just before they reached the border at Brownsville, Tex. Henriquez tried to cross on her own, with Keysi and several other Hondurans, but she ran right into the Border Patrol.

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"I thought we were finished, but I told them about Keysi's heart," Henriquez recounted. "By then . . . she was very weak, and her face was purple." Immigration officials at the border, who turn back 90 percent of the people they catch entering illegally, granted the pair permission to remain for several months on humanitarian grounds.

Henriquez used the rest of her savings for airfare to Washington. She took Keysi to a clinic, which sent the girl to Children's.

Cardiologists at the hospital said the girl would need expensive open-heart surgery.

Henriquez was out of money and uninsured and had no right to government assistance. But surgeons, social workers and officials at Children's were so moved by the little girl's case that they agreed to reduce the total charges from \$ 57,000 to \$ 39,000.

"We can't save all the children with heart disease in the world, but when a compelling case comes before us, whether or not they are residents, it is our moral obligation to help," said Thomas Hougen, a cardiologist at Children's.

Without the surgery, he said, Keysi would live only another 20 years; with it, she may be able to lead a normal life.

Hospital aides contacted the Marcelino Panevino foundation, established by the Rev. Eugenio Hoyos, of St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church in Falls Church, to help sick immigrant children.

"It's precisely because she is here illegally and has no access to help of any kind that we want to get involved," said Jay Marks, vice president of the foundation. "Some of our members were once illegal, so they know what it's like, and now they want to carry on the American tradition of lending a hand."

For Keysi and her mother, an equally important display of compassion has come from immigration authorities. Under a new immigration law that took effect April 1, it is much more difficult to win a permanent exemption from deportation, but officials have twice extended the pair's temporary permission to stay.

"In light of the new law, we need to find innovative ways to help people in a crisis," said William J. Carroll, district director for the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Arlington. "We hope this case demonstrates the concern we really have for people."

Henriquez and her daughter are scheduled for a deportation hearing Oct. 9. Henriquez is about five months pregnant -- her child is due the same week as the hearing and will automatically become a U.S. citizen if born here. She hopes that might help her win the right to remain permanently.

Meanwhile, Marcelino Panevino officials said they are not sure whether they can raise all \$ 39,000. When Keysi spoke on a Spanish-language radio show Thursday, the station was flooded with callers, from a disco owner who contributed his weekend receipts to a little girl who offered her Barbie doll.

"It is so much more than we ever dared hope for," said Henriquez, folding laundry in her apartment while Keysi sucked on a popsicle. ". . . God saw my struggle and heard my prayers. He did not let her die on the road, and He will not let her die now."

Graphic

Photo, juana arias, Leydina Henriquez and her daughter, Keysi, are looking ahead to better times. Keysi, 9, will undergo heart surgery next month. In a happy moment, Leydina Henriquez and daughter Keysi are far from their time of desperation in December at the Texas-Mexico border.

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