

Turning a nickname into a misnomer

Doctors correct cranial birth defect of 9-year-old boy from Philippines

By K.C. HOWARD
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Eleazar de Vergara, shown Friday at the UNLV Dental School, traveled to the United States from the Philippines with the help of the Las Vegas Philippine Medical Mission Inc. The 9-year-old underwent surgery to correct a birth defect. Photo by [Gary Thompson](#).

For centuries people have come to America in search of a new life, but for 9-year-old Eleazar de Vergara the journey was simply about finding his smile.

Eleazar arrived in Las Vegas from the Philippines in June with a rare birth defect, nasal encephalocele. His brain tissue had seeped through a gap in his skull and protruded under his skin, appearing as a bulge on the side of his nose.

His peers teased him at home, a rural town in the south Bicol region. They called him, "butog," or tumor boy.

"He responds to that. I'm so surprised, even the dad calls him that, too. That's his nickname in the Philippines," said Minda Banaria, coordinator of the Las Vegas Philippine

Medical Mission Inc., which brought him here.

The youngest of five siblings, Eleazar was the equivalent of an honors student in second grade. His mother died about a year ago and he moved in with his older sister after his father remarried. And yet on June 17, he found himself half a world away in penguin pajamas at Sunrise Children's Hospital about to undergo surgery.

"He was not at all scared. I think it's more like he wanted this to happen to him, this being a lifetime opportunity for him," said Malou Albano, a physician in the Philippines who is his temporary guardian and translator.

What has happened to Eleazar in the past year is life-altering philanthropy on the part of a number of Las Vegas doctors. They will send him home in a couple of months with healthy teeth, boyish good looks, eyeglasses and toys.

After several dental extractions the day before, Eleazar was quiet Friday morning at the University of Nevada Dental School where he awaited more extractions and a filling. Giving a thumbs up, he smiled when dark glasses were placed over his eyes to protect him from the drill.

"We took him out for ice cream and bought him sunglasses, which he could never wear before because he had that tumor on his face," said Dr. Jaleh Pourhamidi, an orthodontist who is funding Eleazar's dental care in Las Vegas.

"He is a really special, very intelligent kid that was just never able to come out of his shell. I think now that he's finally got that stigmatizing tumor off of his face, he has really come alive," she said.

Pourhamidi's fiancée, University of Nevada School of Medicine's Dr. John Menezes, met Eleazar in the Philippines in February 2004 with the medical mission. The nonprofit organization makes annual visits to the country to improve rural health care.

Banaria, a UMC nurse, and her husband, Frank, are from the Philippines. They started the mission five years ago to help their homeland.

As head of cranial and facial surgery in the division of plastic and reconstructive surgery, Menezes was in the Philippines to fix defects such as cleft palates. The team of doctors and nurses helped more than 800 people during a two-week trip. Eleazar and an 18-year-old girl were the only children he was unable to treat in the operating room, equipped mostly with tools the doctors had brought with them.

The girl suffered a similar defect to Eleazar's, but the 9-year-old's condition was more serious so the mission focused on bringing him to the United States first, Menezes said. They hope the teen girl can come next year, Banaria said.

It took about a year to get the visa for Eleazar to come to the United States. His father, who is out of work, had to take out a loan to get him to Manila. Albano met him there and accompanied him on the rest of the trip. Sunrise Hospital donated its facilities, and two neurosurgeons and Menezes did the operation.

"The sack around the brain that contains the fluid that surrounds the brain, it started to push out through the defect. It swelled out into his face," said Dr. John Anson, a Sunrise neurosurgeon.

Anson removed the bone in front of the skull to work underneath the brain. He sealed the opening at the base of the skull that had allowed the membrane to seep into the nasal area. Menezes, who has coordinated the treatments for the boy, then reconstructed the face.

Nasal encephalocele is rare in the United States where most children with the defect will have it surgically fixed before age 1, Anson said.

Because Eleazar's tumor had grown with him, it had affected his vision, pushing apart his eyes. Local ophthalmologist Dr. Paul Casey said Eleazar also has an unrelated congenital illness that has affected his sight. In his right eye, he has microphthalmia, or what's known as small eye.

"There isn't a lot we can do at this point, because he is not a baby, to get that eye to see," Casey said.

Eleazar will be fitted with prescription eyeglasses before he goes home to protect his left eye and also cosmetically minimize the deformity through magnification.

"You put a magnifying lens in front of that eye, and boom, the small eye looks bigger and his condition is less noticeable," he said.

The dental work he needs is because of insufficient dental care and a lack of fluoride in the water, which has "blasted" his teeth, Pourhamidi said.

Banaria, the UMC nurse, said, "He smiles when we tell him now, 'You don't have butog on your nose.' When you go home let everybody call you Ellie because that's what we're calling you here."

Eleazar is the second patient the mission has brought to the United States, but he is more than just a philanthropic gesture.

"The main thing is just to help people, and at the same time there is a secondary gain to Las Vegas and Nevada and the United States," said Casey, who has done missions in South Africa to help people with cataracts. "It's good to publicize our good side, and we have far and away the best medical care in the world."
