

## Six-year-old gets a life-saving operation

Written by Special to the Filipino Reporter  
Sunday, 27 November 2011 20:32

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**Suzzane Castillo in front of her birthday cake. She is surrounded by her mother Mary Ann and the doctors at St. Francis Hospital, The Heart Center in Roslyn, N.Y.**

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Six-year-old Suzzane Castillo of Tres Martires, Cavite, Philippines, has something to be grateful for this Thanksgiving Day after her childhood fantasy to be able to run along with her friends will finally be fulfilled.

Suzzane recently underwent a successful life-saving operation to repair a congenital heart defect at St. Francis Hospital, The Heart Center in Roslyn, N.Y., through the Gift of Life of Great Neck, N.Y. that has been saving ailing children from around the world.

Dr. Sean Levchuck, chairman of the hospital's pediatric cardiology and one of the leading experts in the field, donated his services when he performed the procedure.

He was assisted by a team of doctors and nurses, including pediatrician Dr. Samuel Bangug, the only Fil-Am member of the group.

Born with a condition known as patent ductus arteriosis (PDA), the debilitating condition of Suzanne is caused by a hole between the aorta and pulmonary artery that allows oxygen-rich blood to mix with oxygen-poor blood.

If left untreated, it can cause the heart muscles to weaken and eventually result in heart failure.

Dr. Bangug said Suzzane's condition was not diagnosed until she was four.

"The child was in and out of the hospital for what doctors believed was recurrent pneumonia," Bangug, a 1988 Manila Central University medical graduate from Ilagan, Isabela, Philippines, told the **Filipino Reporter**.

"They didn't know that Suzzane's problem was actually from the heart."

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Using a minimally-invasive catheter-based procedure, the doctor was able to plug up the hole in Suzzane's heart.

"As a father myself, it gives me great pleasure to see Suzzane celebrate her birthday like other children her age," said Dr. Levchuck, who has operated on dozens of children through the hospital's longstanding partnership with Gift of Life Foundation headed by Frank Macchio, chairman.

"For me, this is what Thanksgiving is all about," he added.

Suzzane didn't get a chance to celebrate her sixth birthday on Nov. 2 because she was on her way to New York with her mother, Mary Ann, for the emergency procedure.

On Nov. 18, however, her doctors and St. Francis gave Suzzane a party to celebrate not just her birthday but also her new life and a healthy, active future.

"When we asked Suzzane what her birthday wish was, she said she only wanted to be able to run and play with her friends," Dr. Bangug told the **Reporter**.

"She couldn't play because of her condition. But now that her heart is functioning normal, she can run as much as she wants to."

Suzzane's mother, Mary Ann, 27, said she can appreciate the spirit of Thanksgiving even though it's not celebrated as extensively in the Philippines.

Her husband, Ronald, a jeepney driver, can't wait to see his daughter finally be able to become physically active with feeling tired.

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The mother and daughter are said to be going back to Cavite end of November.

They are hosted in the U.S. by Rotary Club (Oceanside-Island Park) and are currently staying at Ronald McDonald's House in New Hyde Park, N.Y.

The Castillos consider Suzzane's treatment a true blessing or "*bukod-tanging pagpapala.*"