

The Dallas Morning News

One girl's tragedy saves another's life

5-year-old receives heart from foster child who died after beating

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By SERGIO CHAPA / Al Día

Note: I did this story on Christmas Day 2006 after following the death of another girl who died while in Child Protective Services custody. This story was featured on the front page and prompted the two mothers to meet in a press conference three days later.

Five-year-old Claire Fowler runs, plays and dances like any other girl her age thanks to an early life-saving Christmas gift from the grieving family of another North Texas girl.

This year Claire was diagnosed as having a heart condition that required a transplant, and in October the Irving girl was placed near the top of a list of people awaiting organs.

Two months later, during the early morning hours of Dec. 6, another family's tragedy turned into a lifesaving miracle for Claire and children from two other Texas families.

Six-year-old Katherine Frances died late Dec. 5 after a severe beating at her foster home in DeSoto.

Police say the 14-year-old son of her foster parents repeatedly body-slammed the girl because she wet the bed.

Claire's mother, Sarah Fowler, said Katherine's death makes her daughter's recovery bittersweet, but she and her family are grateful to Katherine's mother, Marbella Frances, for choosing to donate the girl's organs.

"We're really happy. ... Christmas came early," Ms. Fowler said.

Ms. Fowler said her daughter was born with restrictive cardiomyopathy, a heart condition that became evident in July when Claire suffered from chronic pneumonia.

"She was always able to play for a little bit, but it wouldn't take that long before she felt tired and would have to sit down," Ms. Fowler said.

After exhaustive medical tests, doctors determined that Claire needed a new heart. Early on Dec. 6, the family learned that a suitable one was available.

Shortly after receiving the news at 1 a.m., the family arrived at the hospital, and Claire was prepped for her 6:30 p.m. surgery.

The surgery went well, Ms. Fowler said, and Claire's new heart quickly went to work.



"It started beating right away, and they didn't have to use a defibrillator," Ms. Fowler said.

She said the family didn't initially know where the organ had come from. They learned about Katherine's death from the news media and a group that oversaw the donation.

"Being in the hospital, we were sheltered from current events," Ms. Fowler said. "Later on, I went to Univision.com, where I learned the whole story."

Claire's recovery

Claire spent 10 days in the hospital recovering from the transplant during what her doctors considered a "flawless postoperative period."

"After one week, she was running laps inside the hospital," said Ms. Fowler's boyfriend, Marion Cramer. He said the girl is taking medicine to prevent her body from rejecting the new heart.

Claire spent Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with her mother and Mr. Cramer, making the rounds with relatives. They later enjoyed a Christmas afternoon meal at the North Dallas home of Ms. Fowler's former sociology professor B.J. Fischer and his wife, Liz.

Still wearing a mask to ward off germs, Claire danced around the Fischers' home and announced she wanted to go swimming.

Ms. Fowler said her daughter was confused about why she needed a new heart, but she had explained to Claire that it wasn't her fault and that she had been "born that way."

Ms. Fowler has put her plans to become a teacher on hold to take care of her daughter.

Mr. Fischer, who taught Ms. Fowler in a class at Collin County Community College, said he's helping his former student and Claire move out of their Irving apartment and into an affordable home that will better suit the girl's medical needs.

"She needs a home with no molds, with good ventilation to make sure it is dust free," he said.

Donor's family

Claire and her family may soon get to meet the family of her donor.

Domingo Garcia, an attorney who represents Katherine's mother, Marbella, said his client hopes to set up a meeting this week.

"She felt a part of her daughter was alive because of the donation of the organs," Mr. Garcia said.

It's that sentiment that sparked the grieving mother's interest in donating Katherine's organs when officials approached her at the hospital, said Pam Silvestri of the Southwest Transplant Alliance.

"She wanted something good to come out of this," Ms. Silvestri said. "It was important to her that her daughter's death not be in vain."

Other recipients

Ms. Silvestri said Katherine's liver and one of her kidneys were transplanted into two other children.

"They were able to turn a tragedy into a miracle for several families," she said. "Three people's lives were saved thanks to Marbella's decision."

The 14-year-old boy accused of killing Katherine remains in custody on suspicion of murder. The girl's mother has filed a \$15 million lawsuit against the private agencies hired by the state to oversee the girl's care.

Katherine, who was removed from her biological mother after allegations of neglect, was the third child in 16 months to die in a foster home that had been overseen by Mesa Family Services.

Receiving the life-saving gift was no sure thing for Claire. There are close to 95,000 adults and children on a national waiting list for donated organs, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing.

Although 25,000 receive transplants each year, Ms. Silvestri said, an average of 6,000 die every year while waiting for an organ. Children are the most critical recipients, she said, and their needs are the most complicated.

"For children, it has to be a child's organ. ... For a child, body size is important," she said.

Although Texans can register as organ donors on their driver's license registration, Ms. Silvestri said, her organization has created a more convenient way to sign up through its Web site, www.organ.org.

There is no compensation and no cost to donate organs. A list of requirements is available through the Web site.

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