

From the Editor: **Eyes are opened to a new future**

About two years ago, Jesus Hernandez asked his mom to buy him a guitar. “I’m going to learn to play,” he told her, “and I’m going to learn to sing.” That’s what a lot of us call Plan B.



Jesus Hernandez (left) and his friend and driver Jim Gilmore of Green Valley

Jesus, who’s 17 and lives in Nogales, Sonora, was born with regular eyesight but it started fading by the time he was 6. In fifth grade he could barely make out the huge words printed in a book, and not long after, he could see just faint shadows out of one eye and nothing from the other. Jesus Hernandez was blind.

When he was about 15, his public school told him there was nothing more they could do for him. The boy who wanted to become an engineer was told he’d have to leave.

Jesus figured learning to play the guitar would mean better tips as he begged on the streets of Nogales. Because that’s what life is like for the poor and disabled in Mexico. Many become beggars. That’s just the way it is.

Six surgeries

Jesus, the only child of Susana Lopez Gutierrez, hadn’t always been without hope. He has undergone four cornea transplants since 2007 with the help of Green Valley-based St. Andrew’s Children’s Clinic. Each time, his body immediately rejected them. All efforts appeared to be exhausted; everybody was ready to give up.

Almost everybody. One doctor thought there might be a chance to save Jesus’ sight, but it would require a huge collaboration that some considered impossible. Her name is Dr. Ann McColgin, a Tucson eye surgeon who has donated her time and talent to St. Andrew’s for about 10 years. She knew the last option for Jesus was an artificial cornea transplant. It meant that a tremendous number of entities would have to come together at just the right time — and everything would need to be donated.

“I didn’t know if we could make it happen,” she told me.

The surgery would be difficult, costly and rare for Arizona. It involved the ring of a living cornea surrounding a plastic, or artificial, cornea. The first step was glaucoma surgery to insert a tube to relieve eye pressure. It was Jesus' fifth operation, and it worked.

The sixth surgery — where Dr. McColgin would implant the plastic cornea — looked like a possibility. She knew Jesus was a candidate, but it takes more than that. Armed with information on updated equipment and techniques, she got the ball rolling on donations of everything from both parts of the cornea to surgery center time to an assist from a VA doctor with an incredibly busy schedule. That was just the beginning. Alongside to help were people like Jim Gilmore, a volunteer driver (and much more) for St. Andrew's, who was a regular on the Nogales-Tucson run as he took Jesus and his mom to doctor visits over the past couple of years.

"It was a sad story from the beginning," Jim told me. "His mom and him, they never went anyplace without each other. They were attached at the hip." But at some point, everything clicked. The operation was scheduled.

Into surgery

On April 14, Jesus Hernandez went into surgery blind. When the bandages were removed, he had his life back. He smiled, then he cried. Everybody cried. For the first time in 10 years, Jesus could see. "I'm wearing red tennies, she's wearing a skirt, the sky — it's so blue!"

His mother, Susana, wept as she told me the story less than two weeks after the surgery. "He told me, 'I'm going to get on a bus and ride around Nogales and see things!'" And he did just that. My entire family is happy, they are so happy," Jesus said. "Thanks to God, this is what we've been waiting for."

The path is still a cautious one, and expensive. Jesus needs contact lenses for protection and will take anti-rejection drugs and antibiotics his entire life. St. Andrew's has committed to helping. He has a follow-up appointment May 26. Then life really changes. Jesus will take exams in another month and hopes to be back in school soon. "It's his dream to be able to study," his mom says. The desire to be an engineer has been revived.

As for Susana, she fights for a smile as she acknowledges the surgery has touched her life, too. The little boy who had rarely left her side in 10 years is suddenly independent — and thriving "He's been with me since he was little," she said, wiping away tears. "But this, this is a good thing."

It's about money

Jesus Hernandez's case is among many in Mexico, where the level of treatment and cost are out of reach for most people. McColgin says a lot of people go blind and remain that way even though we have the know-how to help. "It comes down to money, really," she said. They rely on groups like St. Andrew's to come through, and people like us to join in.

But for now, for just a short while, McColgin, St. Andrew's, their volunteers and a lot of people and organizations who gave Jesus his world back are pausing to celebrate a big win. And as for

that guitar his mom bought him, Jesus Hernandez still has it. “But today I play because I want to.”

— Dan Shearer

St. Andrew’s Children’s Clinic is no stranger to the Green Valley News. We love what they do and hope you do, too. Learn more at: www.standrewsclinic.org.