

Shared Liver Transplant Bridges Cultural Gap Between Families

By Steve Bates
Washington Post Staff Writer

It was nearly midnight when surgeon Stephen Dunn got the call: A young woman was dead, but with luck her liver could save another person's life. While Dunn raced through the streets of Philadelphia to pick up the organ and prepare to transplant it, he thought of two boys who were near death and the wrenching choice he faced.

Should he give the liver to 8-month-old Steven Nuss, the more seriously ill of the two? Or was there a decent chance to save both Steven and 4-year-old Waldo Garcia, whose time also was running short?

Dunn rolled the dice. He sliced the liver in two and transplanted a piece into each child.

The rare, risky operation on Oct. 25 at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children not only gave the two chil-

dren a chance to see Christmas this year and for many more to come, it also forged a unique bond between two youths—and between two families—whose backgrounds are as different as any can be.

Steven is from a virtually all-white community in rural Pennsylvania; Waldo came to Alexandria from a city in Bolivia. Steven's family speaks no Spanish; Waldo's mother knows only a few words of English. Yet as Dunn took a scalpel to the two boys a month ago, their mothers held hands. They cried together, learned a lot about each other, and found out even more about themselves.

"I was sure she was feeling the same things I was," Leslie Garcia, Waldo's mother, said through an interpreter. "The same fears, the same desires."

Michelle Nuss, Steven's mother, also had that certainty during those

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Ten-month-old Steven Nuss and Waldo Garcia, 4, share toys in a hospital playroom a month after their transplant.

May Face Prison Drunk Drive Daughters on Fatal Ride



INSIDE

Limits Test

■ A term-limit provision in Arkansas will be the subject of argument Tuesday in the first such case to reach the Supreme Court.

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The 'Martyr' Who Killed Militant Islamic Cousins Took Different Paths

By Barton Gellman
Washington Post Foreign Service

KALKILYA, West Bank—For

Israel, not to slay his enemies but to build their houses in illegal construction jobs. Souwi, the son of Abatli's mother's brother, left his home and neighborhood and disappeared into a

Children From Different World

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tense hours, and she has ever since. "Even though we don't speak the same language, the emotions are the same," she said. "We're all human. We all bleed red."

The split-liver operation that Dunn performed is possible because the liver usually can regenerate itself after being cut to a smaller size. It was the fourth liver-splitting operation Dunn had performed; only about a dozen such operations are documented in this country, he said.

The technique was tried briefly at the University of Chicago in the late 1980s, but the survival rate was poor. Dunn says some European surgeons have improved the technology, and all eight of his recipients are doing well.

Dunn, who says he knows of no other surgeons performing the same operation in this country, hopes others will follow as the shortage of donated organs worsens.

"We had kids dying on our waiting list," said Dunn. "This is an important step forward."

As is the case with most transplants, the donor was anonymous. Officials of the Philadelphia area organ donation network say only that it was a woman in her thirties. But, the officials add, her pancreas, both kidneys, part of a lung and her heart were given to other desperately ill people. The recipients are black, white and Latino; they are young, middle-aged and elderly.

The Garcia family, which came to Alexandria from Santa Cruz, Bolivia, had found no doctor in their homeland who could properly diagnose and treat Waldo's biliary atresia. The disease causes the bile ducts to become blocked.

Leslie and Waldo Garcia came to the United States on temporary visas to seek better medical care for Waldo.

"I had no money, no friends," recalled Leslie Garcia, 42. "I felt like I fell out of the sky." Local Latino groups helped her, but the medical news was no better: Without a transplant, Waldo would die.

A District-based nonprofit group, *El Banquete del Millon y del Amor*, raised most of the \$200,000 Waldo needed for transplant surgery. Non-Latino residents of the region contributed about \$75,000, and most of the rest was raised from local Latinos—including a check for \$100,000 from one man who insisted on anonymity.

But no amount of money could buy a liver. And Waldo was behind



Leslie Garcia, left, with Waldo, says the transplant changed her views of America.

Steven Nuss on the waiting list, because Steven was in worse shape.

The Nuss family, which has lived in Honesdale, in the northeast corner of Pennsylvania, for four generations, also leaned on its community for financial help. Pancake breakfasts and firehouse fund drives produced the money for surgery.

As the weeks passed, Dunn told the families of another option, should no suitable organ become available through accidental death: The surgeon could remove part of the healthy liver of Waldo's father, Waldo Sr., or Steven's father, Keith, for transplant to their own child. That would be a last resort, because of the danger to the adults. The families agonized, and waited.

When the phone rang late on Oct. 24, Dunn and Kathleen Falkenstein, the transplant coordinator at St. Christopher's, conferred. The dead woman had the proper blood type; the liver probably would be large enough to be separated.

But would it be healthy enough to use for both boys? That could be determined only after it was cut.

As Dunn left to pick up the organ from another Philadelphia area hospital, the decision had been made

to tell Steven's family that a liver was available, but to tell Waldo's family only that one might be available.

It would be several more hours before a biopsy showed that Waldo would be able to receive the second piece.

Excitement mixed with fear as the 17-hour operation began, with side-by-side operating rooms and two medical teams. Dunn's secretary, Alma Ortiz, who is bilingual, went to the waiting room to check on Waldo's parents about one hour into surgery. The two mothers, who had just met, were seated together, hand in hand.

When one would become particularly distraught, the other would touch her arm or shoulder, or make a gesture of comfort. Hardly a word of English or Spanish was exchanged, Ortiz recalled. None was needed.

In the three hours it took Dunn to slice through and minimize bleeding in the donor organ, another doctor removed Waldo's liver in preparation for transplant. Waldo's mother requested that she be able to see his failing organ.

"I touched Waldo's liver," she said.

lds Have a Liver in Common



PHOTOS BY JAMES A. PARCELL—THE WASHINGTON POST

ans. Michelle Nuss said Steven's operation made her realize how little contact she has had with other ethnic groups.

"I wanted to see what was causing him all that pain."

As the evening of the 25th wore on, the elder Waldo began giving Michelle Nuss the thumbs-up sign after hearing from medical personnel that the operation was going well.

"He would say, 'Steven good, yes?'" Nuss would reply with the same gesture, saying, "Waldo good, yes?"

In her diary, Nuss, 28, recalled wondering that night about the nationality of the woman whose liver was helping the two boys. Would it matter if the dead woman were white, black, Latino, none of the above, she asked herself. Would a member of the Ku Klux Klan refuse a life-saving transplant if the only donor were black, she mused.

As she examined her own views, she realized how little contact she had had with other ethnic groups during her life.

To see the strength and determination in the eyes of Waldo's parents, to learn that Waldo Sr. had been an accountant in Bolivia, "changed my thinking. A lot."

Previously, Nuss said, she had only the vaguest notion about Latinos:

"I thought of poor and deprived. Streets of dirt."

The preconception that Leslie Garcia had about Americans also was in for revision, she said. In Bolivia, "I had heard a lot of people comment that people in the U.S. were cold, very non-caring. Everything was calculated."

"Now I see people here are very humanitarian," she said. "It changed my whole way of thinking. People in the U.S. have a big heart."

The mothers discovered that each has a girl, nearly 2 years old, who has been watched by their fathers at home for much of the past month while the mothers slept in their sick children's hospital rooms.

"We have so many things in common," Michelle Nuss said to Leslie Garcia last week.

As the boys recovered from the transplants, Waldo's thoughts often turned to Steven. "Every day he asks me, 'Can I go see Steven now?'" said Leslie Garcia.

Waldo gave Steven a toy sword as a symbol of the younger child's courageousness. Steven presented Waldo with a quintessential American gift—a Mr. Potatohead.

Waldo returned to Alexandria last

Friday; Steven is expected to be released from the hospital soon. Through a translator, Waldo said that he was happy to share an organ with Steven and hopes they can remain close. "I want to see him again," Waldo said.

Both boys will require frequent medical checkups for as long as they live, Dunn said. Because so few spli-liver operations have been done, there isn't enough information to predict their life spans, he noted. A series of transplants might be needed.

Right now, that doesn't seem to bother the Nuss family. "What an incredible thing—to look at my son and see his color coming back to normal," said Michelle Nuss, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Whatever time we have will be a blessing."

Leslie Garcia smiled as she contemplated the future of the two families, even after hers returns to Bolivia: "We can send pictures back and forth . . . They will be together again."

"I don't know where or when. I just know it will be done."