ARRIVAL

Mom, Dr. Jerry Fortino, Tanya Gillespie, Nancy Gill and Stan Gill
Children's Hospital

Nancy Gill with Damali at Children's Hospital with Dr. Kelly.
Visiting
All Better...

Have a safe trip home, Damali!
Jamaican toddler is set for open-heart surgery

Coordinated plan helps out effort

By Ashley Hopkinson
Staff writer

Like most toddlers, Damali Ferguson knows how to keep his mother on her toes.

As he ran in circles around a conference room in an Algiers apartment complex Tuesday, it was impossible to tell the 22-month-old has a congenital heart condition that, as an infant, left him gasping for air.

His chance at a life-changing surgery comes today at Children's Hospital on Henry Clay Avenue, almost 2,000 miles from his home in Kingston, Jamaica.

Without the open-heart surgery, performed on hundreds of babies each year, chances are slim that Damali will survive to adulthood, said Deb LeBlanc, cardiac surgery coordinator at Children's Hospital.

Damali's condition—tetralogy of Fallot—is caused by a combination of four heart defects that cause a dangerously low supply of oxygen to flow through the heart and the rest of the body.

See HEART, B-2

METRO

Boy's mother nervous, hopeful

HEART, from B-1

Pediatric heart surgeon Joseph Caspi and Timothy Petitt will perform the six-hour operation today. This type of surgery, the third in Louisiana in the last year, is part of a coordinated effort between Gift of Life, HeartGift Louisiana and Children's Hospital. HeartGift is a Texas-based foundation that provides heart surgeries to children who don't have access in their home countries.

Damali's 24-year-old mother, Yolader Gayle, said they were referred to HeartGift through the Baptist Hospital for Children in Kingston.

The first scare came when he was 3 months old, she said.

"He was wheezing really bad, and the doctor said they wouldn't call it asthma because he was too young," said Gayle, who arrived in New Orleans on Sunday. "So we went to a private doctor and she said, 'Do you know his heart is murmuring?'

Damali has a small hole between the two bottom chambers of his heart and an overriding aorta that sits above that hole. There's restricted blood flow to his lungs and pulmonary valve irregularities.

Typically, surgery to correct the problem costs $135,000, but through the HeartGift foundation, $15,000 will be paid by donors by Jeff and Lara Woodham of Lubbock, Texas. The surgeons volunteer their services, and the hospital underwrites the rest, said Stephanie Brossard, director of HeartGift's New Orleans chapter. Damali and his mom are being housed by members of the Algiers chapter of the Rotary Club.

Gayle, a student at Jamaica Theological Seminary, said that Damali was selected for the corrective surgery in May.

"I was happy knowing he's getting the help because otherwise I could not afford it," she said. "It was good news." Even in countries like Jamaica, advances in some areas of medicine, there's no infrastructure and medical equipment to support cardiac thoracic surgery, LeBlanc said. In the United States, the condition is typically fixed at birth, but in developing countries, the condition can go untreated for years, she added.

"Around the world, there is just a very sparse amount of surgical facilities, and they don't have the technology or trained professionals," she said.

An estimated 98 percent of the world has no access to pediatric cardiac care, according to the American Association of Thoracic Surgery.

During the surgery, doctors will open Damali's chest, close the hole between the two bottom chambers of the heart and correct narrowing areas above and below the pulmonary valve. While he will likely take six weeks or more to recover fully, he has a very high chance of making a full recovery, LeBlanc said.

"He's one of the lucky ones," she said.

Most children with tetralogy of Fallot experience more pronounced symptoms of lethargy.

On Tuesday, Damali hopped around the room, pushing a toy truck, taking books off a bookshelf and skipping down in search of "Barney." With the surgery less than 24 hours away for her first child, Gayle said only one thing counts her down.

"I just pray," she said quietly, wiping her face. "I'm worried; I'm nervous, but hopefully it's successful — and he will have a normal life." Whizzing by his mother at lightning speed, Damali bounced around for a few more minutes before choosing a comfortable spot to rest on her lap.
Getting Around!
Thank you to all the people who helped Gift of Life, Rotary, HeartGift and Children’s Hospital make Damali’s surgery and recovery a success. We know we must have missed someone, but please know that your contributions were sincerely appreciated.

Tracy Bayley
Bob Becker
Heather E. Bell
Stephanie Berault
Debbie Bresler
Dr. Joseph Caspi
Leslie Ehret
Rick Erdlen
Jerry Fortino
Carolyn Fortino
Nancy Gill
Stan Gill
Tonya Gillespie
John Hopper
Alicia & Eric Irmscher
Adrian Jutner
Adrianne Jutner
Claire Koch
Deb LeBlanc
Glinda Schafer
Doris Steib
Laura & Jeff Woodham
As I reviewed the many photos and emails with Heather as she put this memento together, I noticed that we didn't have photos of all the volunteers, so we've tried to list all of the generous people that gave of their time and resources on the acknowledgement page. Also, my thoughts were about Rob Raylman with Gift of Life, the staff at Children's Hospital, Stephanie with HeartGift, and my fellow Rotarians, who always step up when needed, as well as many people who volunteered, but were never called upon. We've all made many new friends.

I would like to share with you a few of my favorite quotes that come to mind.

“Many hands make for light work.” - Scottish Proverb

“They also serve that only stand and wait.” - John Milton, English Poet

“God bless us, everyone.” - from Me and Tiny Tim

Nancy Gill
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