

❄️ A Gift from Elvie ❄️

Elvie Josue Vindal received the gift of life when HTC brought him to Michigan nine years ago, at the age of five months. His diagnosis was a nasal glioma (tumor) and another large mass in his nose and eye area. When he was eight days old his parents were told, "Your child will die." There was no medical help in Honduras that could save him. The potential risks of his surgery were frightening, but his parents had bravely agreed, and Dr. Robert Mann and Dr. Laurence Foody successfully completed the procedure at DeVos Children's Hospital in Grand Rapids. "Two days later, he was playing with his balloons, smiling at everyone, and capturing the nurses' hearts," said his host mom, Pat Williams. When his mother heard he was ready to come home, she cried, "My baby will live! Thank you, thank you, thank you!"



September 25, 2005.

Dear Pat,

I always thank you for taking care of me when I was in U.S.A. in 1996. I'm 9 years old. Now I want you to know that my mother told me everything about my story. I'm a miracle, and you are an important part in this story.

Therefore, we continually remember you, you had become a model to the whole world.

Love,
Elvie

This September, Pat received this letter from Elvie (in beautiful handwriting, as you can see). It's surely one of the nicest gifts ever given.



**Healing
the
Children®**

MICHIGAN-OHIO CHAPTER

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Christmas 2005

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*A*t its heart, Healing the Children is about giving. That's our simple but ingenious trade secret. Each service we offer to suffering children—medical expertise, hospital care, food, shelter, clothing—is truly a gift from one human being to another. From a doctor, a nurse, a host father, mother, brother, sister. Picture an outstretched hand holding a new heart, a pretty face, a warm bed, a loving embrace. You're looking at Healing the Children. You're looking at the volunteers who give their time, skill, and love to change the world, one child at a time.

Think about what doctors' appointments, hospitalization, complicated surgical procedures, rehabilitation, medication, food, clothing, and shelter might cost for a single child, and you'll see why the fact that these things are given to us and the children we serve is a magnificent blessing. Our volunteers' giving hands make your gift to Healing the Children more powerful and efficient by multiples, because they allow us, every year, to use donated funds to help more hurting children travel to Michigan and Ohio and to send out more medical teams to serve the children in their own countries.

We hope you know that we view your gifts, too, as flowing from your caring hands to a child somewhere in the world who will soon be able to smile or run or breathe because of you. You'll get her papers in order, put him on a plane, set up a clinic in her village. You'll send him to the doctors and host families who wait with their gifts of healing, home, and love.

From your hands to his, and hers, a future. Thank you.

❄️ Gifts for Wandy ❄️

Wandy Contreras was the recipient of gifts like these. She traveled to Detroit from the Dominican Republic for treatment of her serious gastro-intestinal problems and found a loving host family in Pete and Janie Livingston and their four sons, of Grosse Pointe. Wandy's story, which Janie tells here, is an excellent illustration of the fact that our host families offer HTC children gifts that could not be bought at any price.

*I*f I could have turned back after the first week I just might have done it. Wandy was the third HTC child to stay with our family. The first two were between four and six, and they seemed to adjust to their new environment as if they had lived here before.

But for Wandy, age eight, the adjustment was almost unbearable, for both of us. I know that sounds selfish, since I wasn't the one who had traveled to a foreign land where people spoke a different language. I wasn't dealing with the absence of my family and new neighbors who were strangers. I was not about to undergo extensive surgery with no comprehension of the pain it would involve, the taxing recovery that would follow, or the hoped-for result. I also am a heck of a lot older than Wandy.

All that being said, I still wondered if I was in over my head. My husband, Pete, and I have four boys (ages 12, 10, 9, and 7). Our house is generally filled with lots of commotion and noise. I mean this in a positive way. There is laughter, music (drums, guitar, piano), sporting events of every kind, friends and neighbors hanging about, toys (but not a single Barbie until Wandy arrived)—and while Wandy was here we even purchased a puppy. Commotion . . . yes! Fun . . . YES!!! With all that goes on in a day at our house, I had naively thought that perhaps Wandy would be so overwhelmed that she wouldn't even have time to breathe, much less cry.

Continued on page 2



Wandy and the Livingston boys

❄️ Gifts for Wandy, cont'd ❄️



That's the way it had been with the other HTC kids we hosted. But Wandy cried. She cried and cried and cried for two long weeks. She was never angry, just tremendously sad. I tried cuddling and holding her. Pete spoke Spanish to her. Luke, Grant, Wilson, and Oliver did anything and everything to try to make her smile. (Wilson was bending over backwards — literally doing backbends.) I tried making foods that would taste familiar and played music from the Dominican Republic. Yet despite our efforts, this was not her home, I was not her mom, the boys were not the siblings she longed for, and if she could have, I'm sure she would have said that she'd never signed up for this deal in the first place. (I'm certain this was her mom's idea. She really did know what was best for Wandy.)

So far this seems like a pretty unsettling story; the good news is that there's a happy ending . . . an incredibly happy ending.

Wandy stopped crying after what seemed to be an eternity but really was just two weeks. She just stopped. She either ran out of tears and or realized that she could trust us and that we would do anything for her. She began playing with the boys, laughing, running, jumping, singing, and dancing (oh, my, can this girl dance!). She was silly and fun. The boys began to form a bond with her, and when they found out she could sing the Sponge Bob song in Spanish it sealed the deal. They were friends and will be forever.

Wandy picked up English in no time and even spoke with sarcasm and humor. She was simply a blast to be around, and we are in love with her. While she was here the boys wanted to show her everything, and she was always game. She tried new foods and drinks. She built snow forts and snowmen. She learned to ski, rollerblade, ice skate, jump on a trampoline, and swim. She played soccer and tennis. She tolerated hours and hours of the boys' Little League baseball games and cheered through every inning.

She went to the movies and fell in love with popcorn. She went to a Tigers game and loved the hotdogs.

Wandy tried everything and did it with a smile. I wish everyone could have met her. She was simply



Wandy and the neighborhood

beautiful. She had long, super-curly hair (mind you, I'm the mom of four boys who have super-short hair, so this was quite a challenge). She had a smile that was radiant and a laugh that was deep and infectious. She sang every pop song, she danced every dance, she cuddled in chairs with the boys and fought for the captain's chairs in the car. She stood up for herself when necessary and piled on top of the heap in a wrestling match. She was the perfect fit in our family.

In the six months Wandy was with us she went through a series of uncomfortable tests and two large and successful surgeries. She was born with an imperforate anus and had come here so that her colon

and rectum could be reconstructed and her colostomy removed. Dr. Joseph Lelli performed the procedure at Children's Hospital of Michigan. Wandy made everything seem easy, although we know it was otherwise. She was as brave as any warrior.

On the day before her ninth birthday, we were able to send Wandy home healthy and happy. Her quality of life was far better than before. She felt confident and proud.

We know that the quality of our lives changed just as hers did. We gained a friend for life. Today we find ourselves repeating funny "Wandyisms" with big smiles on our faces. We are better off for just knowing her.

I am so glad I could not turn back. At first I thought I was in over my head; now I know that I am simply just head over heels.

Wandy's pediatrician was Dr. Laura Clark.



Wandy and Janie Livingston



Wandy post surgery



The gang



❄️ Gifts for Anabel and Rashida ❄️



Anabel, ready for surgery



Anabel with a friend



Rashida

Anabel Polanco, age 12, of the Dominican Republic, suffered from a heart defect often seen in HTC kids, tetralogy of fallot. She was fortunate enough to have developed quite normally, although she tired easily and at times even walking to the store was too strenuous for her.

Anabel came to Grand Rapids for surgery at DeVos Children's Hospital. Dr. Rodolfo Neirotti was her surgeon, Dr. Kim Lee was her cardiologist, and Dr. Belinda Chou was her pediatrician. The procedure was a success, and her heart now functions much more efficiently.

Anabel's host family was Tom and Sharon Elders of Grandville. They say she was very social and eager to make friends. "She is typically happy and loves to sing and dance," Sharon says. "After she was feeling well again after her surgery, she blossomed and really enjoyed her stay here. She attended Grandville Christian School and made many friends. She has a personality that is very outgoing and spunky.

"Anabel was a lot of fun to have around. She enjoys living life at its fullest."



Rashida Bridgewater of St. Kitts was also 12 when she came to Michigan. She had hurt herself playing netball and needed corrective surgery on her left hip.

Rashida's surgery took place at Bronson Hospital in Kalamazoo. Dr. Mark Noffsinger was her surgeon, and Dr. Lisa Nagler was her pediatrician. The surgery went well. "Rashida was an easy patient," says Karen Cyr, her host mom. "We converted our dining room into a bedroom for her, using sheets as dividers. She was such a good sport about that. I do child care during the day, so just on the other side of the sheets was a room full of children playing noisily!

"For a while afterward Rashida needed to use a walker, and then she graduated to a cane. She was very excited about that transition, because the walker had slowed her down."

The Cyr family, Karen and her husband Ken and their children, of Portage, found that Rashida fit into their family very well. "Rashida lived with her mother and four siblings," Karen says. "Her mom worked a couple of jobs, and her older sister also worked. It was very apparent that Rashida was used to running the house and looking after everyone; it took a while for her to get used to being the youngest in the family!

"While she was here, Rashida attended West Middle School. She loved Mr. Sang, the choir director, and was

so excited to be a part of the holiday concert. We'd never seen a bigger smile. Rashida always worked hard on her homework; she gave it her all. She was excited about every big project she had to do, and loved to share every detail of what was said about it in class and how she was going to tackle it.

"Church was very important to Rashida. She attended a Protestant church at home, and while she was here she went to a Catholic mass geared to high schoolers. We have a friend who is a priest, and Rashida fell in love with him. Her faith is very significant in her life. As we drove home from the hospital after her surgery, she told us how thankful she was that God had allowed her to come to Michigan and that when she went home she wanted to be baptized. She did indeed get baptized when she got home, and told us about it proudly in a letter."

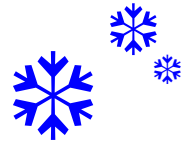
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Gifts for Rafael



Little Rafael Morales, age two, came to Michigan from the Dominican Republic for surgery on his enlarged tongue. His condition made it difficult for him to eat, and of course it was unsightly as well. Rafael underwent two surgeries at Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor. The first one was very taxing. Dr. Steve Kasten used lasers to shrink the extra tissue in his tongue, and Rafael spent two weeks in the hospital afterward. For six weeks after that, his tongue continued to scab over, bleed, and scab over again. As you can imagine, a loving host family was an important component of this scenario, and Rafael found one in Randy and Beth Koch and their family, of Grass Lake. The Kochs insist that the painful healing process didn't slow Rafael down at all in learning to speak English (with a particular emphasis on "Why?"). Randy Koch formed a wonderful relationship with Rafael and wrote the following letter to our Dominican liaison, Vanessa Sanchez.



Rafael at the beach before surgery ...



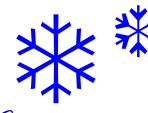
... and after



Zoom!



Hi Vanessa,
 I hope all is well with you and yours this day. It is with great joy and sorrow that we will see Rafael off to the Dominican tomorrow. In the past 13 years we have hosted seven HTC children. We've watched children from many backgrounds settle into our household. We always endeavor to love each child as though they are our own even though we understand they will only stay with us a short time. I suppose the brevity of our time together helps us to keep the perspective that we are caring for someone who will ultimately leave and be reunited with their family. There's always something that keeps us from being too attached to the children who stay with us; maybe it's a way to protect ourselves from being hurt when we have to say goodbye.
 So with this in mind, please let me tell you how much I have come to love Rafael. He has truly won our hearts over completely, and we have come to love him as our own. And so now with tears I send him back to you. Please take very good care of him, for he is now part of my heart. We've laughed and played together, read stories and wrestled. He loves to fold his hands and make sure that everyone prays before they eat their dinner. One of our favorite things to do was read the "going to bed book."
 Would you send this letter on to Rafael's parents? I would love to come and visit him, and he is welcome to visit us at any time. Just let us know, and we will arrange it.
 Yours sincerely,
 Randy Koch



Gifts for Andrea



She was just a baby—a tiny, tiny baby—when her parents put her in the arms of an escort and waved goodbye as her plane took off for the United States. Andrea Gil Torres was three months old, and she weighed six pounds and eight ounces—that's all.

That was on a Saturday. On the previous Tuesday, Laura Cassel had answered the phone at her home in Bloomfield Hills. On the other end was Marge Badowski, an area coordinator for Healing the Children. A baby was being flown in from El Salvador on Saturday, Marge said. Her name was Andrea, she had been premature, and she needed emergency laser eye surgery to prevent otherwise certain blindness. Would Laura, her husband Scott, and their three children be her host family?



Andrea and the Cassels

Laura's response was entirely natural: "THIS SATURDAY?" She says, "All that was running through my head was my son's graduation from high school in one month, my eldest daughter's brief homecoming before leaving for Paris, the upcoming graduation party, and, on top of all that, the fact that my entire family would be descending on my home for the celebration, camping on my floors with mattresses and blankets."

So of course her answer was "Yes, Marge, we would love to have this child."

At that moment little Andrea received an extraordinary gift. Laura believes that she too received an immeasurable gift when she said yes to an impossible request. "Eventually I saw that all I could do was quit relying on myself and start relying on God. It was the only way to accomplish all that lay before me. I also saw that some things are just more important than others. A little girl's sight was far more significant than the impending demands on my time and energy."

Between Tuesday and Saturday there were things to do. Laura says, "Do you know or remember how much equipment is needed for one so small? At the moment I said yes, I didn't! By the time it hit me, I had three days to get a car seat, stroller, diaper bag . . . diapers, bottles, formula, pacifiers, clothes, bathtub, swing, crib, Snuggli . . . the list

goes on. With no time to waste, we got busy and with the help of friends were fully equipped by the time we headed for the airport to



pick up our little guest.

"Andrea was so small, so precious, so tiny, so beautiful, and so . . . fussy!

"It had been a long day of travel from El Salvador for her (as well as her escort). She cried the whole way home in the car, and that was the first time the



'rely on God' message reached my brain. At 4:00 A.M., while she was still crying, I was still working with that message. Finally, finally, she decided to settle down and get some sleep.

"The next couple of days were all about survival. Sleep when she sleeps, realize that showers are completely overrated, and eat only while holding her.

"The next Tuesday arrived, and we had our first appointment with Dr. Antonio Capone and Dr. Michael Trese, retinal specialists. They told us Andrea was a great candidate for surgery and scheduled the procedure for the next day, at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak.

"Nothing to eat or drink after midnight.' We're all familiar with those words, but try explaining them to a three-month-old who eats every three hours. I thanked God for my eldest daughter, who took shifts with me that night so that we could survive surgery day. When a nurse took Andrea from my arms at 10:30 the next morning my neck and arms ached from rocking her hungry tummy through the wee hours.

"I was asleep in the waiting room when Dr. Capone woke me up to tell me that Andrea's procedure was over and that she was fine. He explained to me that her right eye would be her better eye and that she will have what's called ambulatory sight. That meant that this sweet baby would be able to see her parents smile at her, see a sunset, see her own children. I couldn't stop weeping.



After surgery

"We repeated the whole routine on Friday, for the other eye, and again all went well. At her follow-up appointment the doctors told us she could go home to El Salvador in a week. How her parents must miss her! We knew they did, because her father had called us frantically three or four times. They couldn't wait to have her home again.

"As for everything else? It all got done. My daughter's brief homecoming turned into the ultimate bonding experience, my son graduated without a hitch, and Andrea was the star at his party. What a celebration we had with all our family and friends!



Gifts for Guatemala

Medical student Nicola Fynn served as an aide and translator for an HTC medical team when it traveled to Guatemala last spring to evaluate and treat children suffering from urological ailments. She has written a fascinating account of her experiences there, which you can read in full on our website, www.htcmichiganobio.org. What follows is a condensed version of her story.

We landed on a short tarmac with brakes on full and were surprised that customs simply waved us through with our trunks once we mentioned our work. We were fortunate enough to arrive just after two other members of our group, who paved the way with customs and were able to stop the investigation of materials just before the officials opened packages of sterilized instruments. Our hostess, Maria Jose, met us with a brilliant smile, and we were off to the hotel to rest up for a day of clinic. Welcome to Guatemala.

The next day, we stepped into the clinic to find a lobby packed full of concerned, hopeful parents and young, timid patients who ranged in age from weeks to 18 years old and had a variety of complaints, from mild to severe. More than 50 children had been summoned to the clinic that day with the hope that urologic surgery might be the answer to their problems. Each of our two surgeons took an exam room and a translator and began to see patients.

At midday, the lobby was still packed, and it seemed we would never be able to see everyone in one day. It dawned on me somewhere late in our long day of consults how mature these kids were. Some had been waiting patiently on mom's lap for almost 12 hours without whining or pouting, not to mention the time it may have taken for them to get here. In the end, we couldn't help all of them, but we made plans to treat more than half of those who had come for consults, with surgeries planned in the upcoming week.

Once everyone had been evaluated, Dr. Bartkowski and Dr. Ross retired upstairs with their residents to ponder the week's surgery schedule. What could they accomplish each day? Did they bring the necessary equipment for all the cases? Would there be time to follow up after complicated cases? Finally the surgery appointments were made and distributed to the waiting families.

Our first surgical case of the week took three times as long as planned and set a precedent for the week. This poor boy had six surgeries in one. After 12 hours of surgery, Dr. Ross was able to bring down both his testicles, fix a hypospadias, close two fistulas, and place a suprapubic tube. With this first surgery, we also found out just how hot it can get under surgical lights in a windowless OR while draped in latex and plastic. It was more than worth the time and effort, however, when the boy awoke pleased with the results, and his parents couldn't hold back their tears. We had the pleasure of his bright smile and insightful questions for the next few days as he recovered before going home.

La Fundacion Pediatrica took us out for a late dinner once both operating rooms had finished. Despite our engaging dinner conversation, Dr. Ross was still deep in thought, pondering the young boy's surgery, recovery, and future.

Friday night, after packing up the materials that needed to return to the states with us, we went to Portal de Angel for dinner. Dr. Bartkowski and Dr. Ross made touching speeches, and we talked about our plans to stay in touch. We were all exhausted, but only Dr. Niezgodka was tired enough to fall asleep before the end of the meal. Our whole group stole away from the table and watched as the waiter woke her up to present her with the bill. We all had a good laugh, including the doctor.

I left Guatemala much too soon for my liking but with the hope to return. Coming to Guatemala has reminded me of the people and causes that drew me to a career in medicine in the first place, and I hope that my future is full of similar opportunities to reach the underserved in any and all corners of the globe

Our Guatemala team: Donald Bartkowski, pediatric urologist and team director; Jonathan Ross, pediatric urologist; Jeannette Potts, urologist, family practitioner; Joseph J. Kochan III, anesthesiologist; Julie Niezgodka, anesthesiologist, pediatrician; Marc Mitchell and Justin Albani, urology residents; Augusto Torres, anesthesiology resident; Kermit Day, Betty Siska, Gloria Oster, and Mary Kisting, registered nurses; Vicki Lynn Allison, Lori Lewis, Debra Simmons, and Hank Kraft, surgical technicians; Sara Schultz and Nicola Fynn, medical students, translators, aides

