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6-year-old girl off on mercy trip

BY ARMAND NOCIUM

ANOTHER girl with a feeble heart takes her own journey of hope.

Mika Agustin, 6, accompanied by her mother and an aunt, yesterday flew to Canada to undergo heart surgery, for free.

Mika has a congenital heart ailment known as ventricular septal defect (VSD), which is said to afflict about 5 percent of little children.

In layman's terms, Mika was born with a life-threatening hole in her heart.

In taking the mercy trip, she is following in the footsteps of Love Joy Castillo of Negros Occidental, who was 4 when she had a successful heart operation in that North American country in December 1997, also for a hole in her heart.

"It was after reading the story of Love Joy in the *INQUIRER* that I decided to write the Herbie Foundation to help my daughter,"

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Mika's mother Luzviminda Agustin said yesterday before boarding the flight that would take them to Canada. With them was Mika's aunt, Beatrice Antonio.

Mika is scheduled to undergo operation at the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children, one of the world's largest pediatric health science centers, where Love Joy had her own open-heart surgery. The Herbie Foundation runs a free heart surgery program in the hospital.

Mika's surgery will take place on Oct. 13, according to the Canadian Embassy in Manila.

Yves Beaulieu, the secondary secretary and vice consul of the Canadian Embassy, said that while the Toronto hospital will cover Mika's surgery and other medical needs, Filipino and Canadian residents of Kamsack, Saskatchewan, Canada have offered to pick the tab for the other expenses that the girl and her companions will incur in their two-month stay.

Canadian Airlines and Cathay Pacific also offered to provide free plane tickets for Mika, her mother and her aunt.

Like Love Joy's mother, Ms Agustin is a teacher. Her husband is an employee of the census and statistics office in Tuguegarao,

Cagayan.

The Agustins have six children.

Ms Agustin said a local doctor had told them they would need P100,000 for Mika's operation. "I thought I would never be able to save that much money to give my daughter a normal life," she said.

She quoted the doctors as saying that Mika's condition makes her susceptible to major medical complications, or even death in her teen years.

Hope came when Ms Agustin read about Love Joy's story in the *INQUIRER* in 1997. She wrote the Herbie Foundation describing her daughter's condition and asking for help.

She got a reply after three months: Canadian doctors told her they had chosen to make Mika a beneficiary of their free heart surgery program.

At the Ninoy Aquino International Airport just before boarding time, Mika was the picture of a healthy girl. She frolicked at the Naia departure lounge, apparently ignoring the bustle around her. She was hugging a stuffed white bear.

"You'll see real bears at the Toronto Zoo," the Canadian Embassy's Beaulieu told her.



THANKS to Love Joy, Mika Agustin, 6, is now at the Toronto Hospital for Sick Children for open-heart surgery. She's shown with her mother Luzviminda Agustin (center) with Canadian Vice Consul Yves Beaulieu and Ditas Laurel, Canadian Airline country manager, before the Agustins' departure Friday.

ROGER MARGALLO