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Congregation helps girl receive open-heart surgery

Because of efforts spearheaded by the Westminster United Church congregation in Kamsack, a girl from the Philippines will have open-heart surgery in Toronto in two weeks.

Many Kamsack residents have been eagerly awaiting news from the Herbie Foundation of the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto regarding the scheduling and confirmation of open-heart surgery for five-year old Mika Agustin of the Philippines, former resident Neal Stone, of New York City, said.

Last week, Kamla Sharma and Cindy Fiore, foreign patient coordinators for the Herbie Foundation, confirmed that Agustin would have surgery on Oct. 13.

"We remain committed to helping foreign children worldwide receive medical treatment through the foundation, however we can, and look forward to meeting Mika and her family in Toronto next week," Fiore said.

Through a major community effort spearheaded by Westminster United Church, Kamsack residents have thrown their support behind a 14-month fundraising initiative to provide room, board and transportation to Agustin and her family during their stay in Canada.

"Without the support of Kamsack residents, Mika's trip would not have been



HUMANITARIAN VISAS: Mika Agustin, front, her mother Luzviminda, right, and aunt Beatriz Antonio, were photographed at the Canadian Embassy in Manila last week when they received humanitarian visas allowing them to journey to Canada where Mika is to receive open-heart surgery.

possible," said Stone, who while working last year in the Philippines for a year as a volunteer human rights worker, had met Agustin.

"In speaking with Mika's parents last Tuesday, they were near tears with gratitude for the caring efforts of people in this community and this country towards their daughter," Stone said.

In the course of the last two weeks, Stone has worked closely with the Canadian Embassy in the Philippines from his home in New York City to ensure the issuance of humanitarian visas from Immigration Canada. In addition to visas, airline tickets, temporary medical insurance and billeting in Scarborough, Ont., an orientation for the family in Toronto when they arrive have been arranged.

As well, Canadian Airlines International and Cathay Pacific have issued compassionate airfare for the family from Ninoy Aquino Airport in Manila to Pearson International in Toronto, and back.

Speaking on behalf of Canadian Foreign Affairs in Makati City, Philippines, Yves Beaulieu, embassy vice-consul said that "the warmth and cooperation shared across such a distance between the people of both countries - people who may

never physically meet each other - is a model for relations between Canada, the Philippines, and others in the world."

The office of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Philippine vice-president, issued a statement last week wishing Agustin well on her journey to Canada.

Mika will arrive in Toronto tomorrow (Oct. 1) with her mother, Minda, and her aunt, Betty Antonio. Her father, John, will stay in their hometown, Tuguegarao, and care for the remaining three siblings during the two months that Mika is in Toronto.

Preoperative testing will begin at the hospital on Monday, and will continue through Oct. 11. Stone will visit the family in Toronto Oct. 14 to 17.

It is anticipated that Mika's mother will converse from Toronto following the surgery with Kamsack residents on Oct. 17 during the Sunday morning church service from Westminster United Church.

Mika's stay at the Hospital for Sick Children will also be filmed in Canada as part of a Life Network documentary called Little Miracles showcasing the lives touched by the Herbie Foundation. It will air on the network at a yet-to-be-determined date.