

RIPPLE EFFECT: PROJECT ACCESS DOCTOR IMPROVES BOY'S SIGHT

by Kathleen Kearns
John Rex Endowment

Ever since Hector Torres was 4 years old, he would turn his head to look directly at whatever he wanted to see. At 17, he had very poor peripheral vision and such trouble seeing at night that he couldn't drive after dark. Hector needed cataract surgery, but his mother's job didn't provide enough income to cover it, and Hector didn't have medical insurance.

Through Project Access, an Endowment supported, physician-led effort that provides health care for low-income and uninsured Wake County residents, Dr. Jerome J. Magolan of Southern Eye Associates agreed to see Hector.

When Magolan discovered the boy had gyrate atrophy, a rare genetic disease, he also evaluated Hector's younger brother and sister. The younger children are fine, but Magolan saw that Hector needed surgery on both eyes to remove the cataracts and insert implants. He also referred the boy to a metabolism clinic to see if the disease could be slowed through dietary changes. Magolan performed the first surgery on Hector's left eye at Duke Raleigh Hospital during the December holiday. Surgery on Hector's right eye is scheduled for his spring break, and dietary treatment will be ongoing. But Magolan has let the family know that, even with these steps, Hector will probably lose his vision in his 30s or 40s.

For now, though, he has clearer sight and better night vision. He is able to drive and is on track to graduate from high school this spring. He's very happy—and very grateful for the surgery.

By the time he was 17 and a student in the Wake County public schools, his peripheral vision was very poor and he had such trouble seeing at night that he couldn't drive after dark. A school system physician realized he had cataracts and recommended surgery—but his mother's job at a dry

cleaner didn't provide enough income to cover the surgery. And Hector didn't have medical insurance.

So in October, school administrator Barbara Danford asked the Endowment for help. Soon Danford was talking with Pam Carpenter, the director of Project Access, a physician-led community effort that has provided health care for low-income and uninsured Wake County residents since 2000. Private donations and grants, including a grant from the Endowment, support the project, which is managed by the Wake County Medical Society in partnership with WakeMed, Rex and Duke Raleigh hospitals.

Danford asked Carpenter if there was a Project Access ophthalmologist who might consider doing Hector's surgery without charge.

Carpenter suggested Dr. Jerome J. Magolan of Southern Eye Associates in Raleigh. Magolan, who had donated medical services through Project Access since the program began, readily agreed to see Hector. When he discovered the boy had a rare genetic disease called gyrate atrophy, he also offered to evaluate Hector's younger brother and sister. He spent hours with the family, completing a battery of tests on all three children and explaining what he found.

The younger children were fine, though Magolan offered to see them again in a year for follow-up. But he saw that Hector needed surgery on both eyes to remove the cataracts and insert implants to improve his vision. He also referred the boy for dietary evaluation, to see if the metabolic disease could be slowed through a low-protein diet and vitamin B-6.

Magolan performed the first surgery, on Hector's left eye, at Duke Raleigh Hospital over the December holiday so the boy



Hector Torres with Dr. Jerome Magolan at a follow-up visit after successful surgery.

wouldn't have to miss any school.

"He can see a lot better—he was not even wearing glasses when I saw him," said Rosa Almanzar, the Project Access translator who accompanied the family on their medical visits. The three children speak English, but their mother understands only a little. "He's very grateful."

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"He understood when the doctor said it," Almanzar said of Hector, "but I don't think it really registered." That news was hard for her to translate, especially when Hector's mother said she was praying for a miracle.

For now, though, Hector has clearer sight and better night vision. He is able to drive and is on track to graduate from high school this spring. He also has a new girlfriend, who he met on the Internet.

"He's very happy," Almanzar said. ∞

*The thirsty garden,
Hot and dusty, cries out,
"God, please rain on me!"*

Marcia Esquibel