

# San Antonio Express-News

SERVING SOUTH TEXAS SINCE 1865

SPECIAL REPRINT

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16, 2003

1B

S.A. DOCTOR BEGINS 4-STEP PROCESS

## The start of a new ear

9-year-old Panamanian is getting surgeries to fix a birth defect.



BY NICOLE FOY  
EXPRESS-NEWS MEDICAL WRITER

Born with just a flap of skin for a right ear, 9-year-old Guido Benites has endured taunting for as long as he can remember.

On his schoolyard in Panama, classmates poked fun at the boy who tried to hide the defect under a mop of shaggy brown hair.

“Oreja chica, oreja grande (Little ear, big ear),” they’d shout.

With the help of his parents, Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso and Dr. J. Arturo Bonilla, a San Antonio surgeon, Guido goes back to school this week with the outline of a new ear taking shape where only a lump of skin had been.

Guido was born with a defect called unilateral microtia, in which one ear is incomplete or missing. The defect affects one in every 6,000 to 12,000 children.

Guido’s mother, Argelia, works for an institute for disabled children that receives funding from the Panamanian government. The head of the institute told Moscoso about Guido’s plight and desire to visit



PHOTOS BY ROBERT MCLEROY/STAFF

Dr. J. Arturo Bonilla (right), a San Antonio surgeon, is one of a group of doctors who use human cartilage to sculpt new ears. In the first phase, he removed small parts of Guido Benites’ ribs to form the framework of an ear. The next step will be to craft an ear lobe.

Bonilla, who performs surgeries at Methodist Children’s Hospital in San Antonio.

Moscoso then helped speed up the visa application process for Guido and his mother. She also arranged for the government to cover their airline tickets to the United States.

Without the assistance, his mother said, Guido might have been the object of stares for the rest of his life. Now, Guido has undergone the first step in a four-

step process that doctors say will result in a new, fully formed ear.

“All I could think about was my baby — that’s what my motive was,” she said. “Desperation drove me here.”

Guido was born with a normal left ear. But on the right side of his head, only a flap of loose skin resembling an ear lobe existed. Although part of his eardrum is intact, Guido has severe hearing loss in the affected ear.

“He hears like you would hear if you stuck your finger in your ear as tight as you can,” Bonilla said.

Bonilla is one of a small group of doctors who use human cartilage to sculpt new ears for children with microtia.

In the first phase of the process, Bonilla removed small parts of Guido’s sixth, seventh and eighth ribs, carved the rib cartilage into the shape of an

SEE PAGE 2

# Doctor building new ear for boy

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

ear and inserted the creation under Guido's skin.

Asked if he's touched his new "ear" yet, Guido forcefully shakes his head.

"No, no ... Ugh!" he said, as if cringing at the thought of it.

Guido's reaction is relatively common, Bonilla said. Many children, although excited at the thought of having a "normal" ear, are used to feeling skin where an ear might be. So it takes time to become comfortable with the new shape suddenly forming under that skin, he said.

Guido and his mother recently returned to Panama, but they expect to return in about three months so Bonilla can fashion an ear lobe.

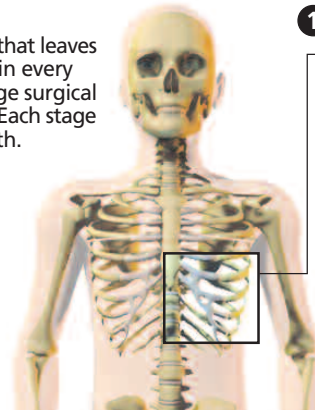
The goal of the next step will be to make Guido's ear appear more "real." Three months after the second surgery, Bonilla will cut the rib cartilage framework from the head and raise it slightly.

A skin graft from Guido's upper buttock area will be used as the underside of his ear.

After that, Bonilla will take a skin graft from Guido to form the tragus — the bump in front of where the ear canal should be. Another specialist will drill

## Building an ear

Unilateral microtia, a birth defect that leaves one ear incomplete, occurs once in every 6,000 to 12,000 births. A four-stage surgical process is used to rebuild the ear. Each stage is separated by about three months.



### 1 BUILD A FRAME

■ Rib cartilage is harvested from the child's own 6th, 7th and 8th ribs.

■ The cartilage is shaped into a framework and inserted beneath the skin.



### 2 FORM A LOBE

■ The flap of skin where an ear would normally be is used to form the ear lobe. An incision is made in front and behind the skin, which is then rotated into place and sculpted into an ear lobe.

### 3 RAISE THE EAR

■ The framework is cut and raised slightly from the head to appear more like a real ear.  
■ A skin graft from the upper buttock area is used to form the underside of the ear.



### 4 FINISHING TOUCHES

■ Using another skin/cartilage graft, the tragus — the bump in front of the auditory canal — is formed.

■ After the final stage, children go to other specialists to drill an ear canal, make an eardrum and work on the middle-ear structure.



Source: Microtia-Congenital Ear Institute, Dr. J. Arturo Bonilla

ROBERT ZAVALA/STAFF

Guido's ear canal and improve his middle-ear structure.

Bonilla has been performing similar surgeries since 1996. He estimates Guido is about the 700th child he has operated on.

"This surgery has changed my life, my husband's life and my son's life," Guido's mother said. "It's something we've all hoped for since he was born. It's truly a dream come true."



The Panamanian government paid for Guido Benites, 9, and his mother, Argelia, to fly to the United States.