

San Antonio Express-News

SERVING SOUTH TEXAS SINCE 1865

SPECIAL REPRINT

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2001

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To hear anew

Five children who were born without ears will undergo surgery this week

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For five South Texas children, the Thanksgiving holiday will mark the start of a challenging journey, as they begin a series of surgeries to repair a birth defect that has impaired their ability to communicate.

Rein Olivarez, 10; Kevin Reyes, 9; Brandy Lopez, 9; Stephanie Sanchez, 7; and Cheyenne Davila, 5, all were born without ears. They have an inner ear structure within their skulls, but no ear canal and only a flap of skin on the side of their heads.

The children have worn hearing aids since infancy. Still, they don't hear well and have struggled with language skills. They also have endured the blatant stares of strangers. This week, Dr. J. Arturo Bonilla will carve cartilage from their rib cages and sculpt the framework of one new ear for each of the children. Kevin, Brandy, Stephanie and Cheyenne each are getting their first ear. Rein has already had one ear built and is beginning the surgery on the second.

They'll all be home from the hospital by Thanksgiving Day, but the holiday will be a painful one.

"They'll feel like they have broken ribs," Bonilla said.

Still, the kids are excited and looking forward to the day when they will have ears, just like their siblings and schoolmates.

"She's anxious to get it done," said Rein's mother, Ruby Maloney. "She's



PHOTOS BY ROBERT MCCLEROY/STAFF

Dr. J. Arturo Bonilla demonstrates a template that will be used to fashion ears for Rein Olivarez and four other youngsters who will be undergoing surgery this week at Methodist Children's Hospital. The children all were born without both ears.



Amado Reyes (left) and his son, Kevin, listen to Dr. J. Arturo Bonilla at Methodist Children's Hospital during a recent consultation.

already talking about getting her ears pierced."

Bonilla, who will operate at Methodist Children's Hospital, is one of a handful of surgeons in the country who specialize in reconstructive surgery for children's ears. The youngsters have a congenital defect called bilateral microtia, in which ears are missing on both sides of the head. This bilateral, double-defect is very rare; one in 60,000 to 100,000 infants is born with it. Unilateral microtia, in which one ear is missing, is

more common, occurring once in every 6,000 to 12,000 births.

Doctors don't know what causes microtia, which literally means "little ear." One theory is that the babies suffered a decreased blood supply to their ear while in the womb. Others have questioned environmental factors or certain medications that the mothers took during pregnancy.

Elena Reyes still gets upset when she remembers how nurses whisked her son, Kevin, away immediately

after his birth.

"They said he didn't have ears," said Reyes, of San Antonio. "I was scared."

Two hours later, she was allowed to see her son, and the mother-child bond formed instantly.

"It didn't turn out to be that bad," she said. "I was just shocked when they said that."

At the age of 6 months to 12 months, each of the five children was fitted with a headband to hold bone-conductor hearing aids that amplify sounds. It was a struggle to keep the devices on the infants, the parents said. As they got older, the youngsters accepted the hearing aids better, but they still do not hear well and speaking came slowly to each of them.

Building an ear is a long process, requiring four surgeries, with about three months in between each procedure, Bonilla said.

In the first, he cuts a piece of flexible cartilage from the child's rib cage and sculpts it into a framework, which then is attached beneath existing loose skin on the side of the head. Later surgeries insert skin grafts to perfect the shape of the new ear. Once their ears are formed, the children will go to other specialists to drill an ear canal, make an eardrum and work on the middle-ear structure, which often is deformed.

"The whole goal is to get the hearing aid out, to get them an ear and to get their hearing as normal as possible," Bonilla said. "Once you do that, the results are dramatic."