



Cloudy, showers today, High 73.
Clearing, mild tonight, Low 67.
FORECAST, B-6.

En route to a new life

■ Hector Diaz and his family fly to Minnesota today, where he will undergo a bone marrow transplant for treatment of sickle cell disease.

By **KAREN A. DAVIS**
Journal Staff Writer

PROVIDENCE – For five years, Clara Diaz watched helplessly as her son Hector, now 6, suffered crisis after crisis - from excruciating chest pain to pneumonia to an enlarged spleen caused by clogged blood vessels.

For years, Diaz and her husband, Hector Sr., have faithfully followed doctors' orders, making sure their son drinks lots of water, receives monthly blood transfusions and steers clear of the threat of infection.

Still, Clara Diaz feared that there would come a day when she would see the sickle cell disease block oxygen to his brain and cause her slender, bright-eyed boy to suffer a stroke.

"He has been through a lot," Diaz says, recalling her son's 23 hospital stays and a handful of "really scary episodes."

"I don't want to be sitting in my chair waiting for my son to have a stroke," she said.



ALL IN THE FAMILY **Y:** While Hector Diaz, 6, and his sister Amber, 8, are in Minnesota, some of her bone marrow will be transferred to him in an unusual operation that could help in his battle against sickle cell disease.



TAKING A BREAK: Matt St. Peter, Angel Planes founder, and Hector have a little fun together at Hasbro Children's Hospital. St. Peter will travel with Hector to Minnesota.

"That's about the only thing that hasn't happened to him."

Diaz credits divine intervention and the help of angels for making it possible for Hector to undergo an operation that could spare him from further suffering.

The flight is being provided at no cost by Angel Planes Incorporated., a four-year-old organization started by local teen pilots that provides free air transportation to seriously ill children and their families.

Today, Hector, his parents and his 8-year-old sister, Amber, will fly from Boston's Logan Airport to Fairview Hospital in Minnesota, where Hector will undergo a partial bone marrow transfer that could help in his battle with sickle cell.

As for Angel Planes - an organization founded by Moses Brown senior Matthew St. Peter and his brother, Christopher, a sophomore at Purdue University - Diaz said she feels extremely appreciative and lucky to have it cover the transportation costs that the family could not easily afford.

Turn to **HECTOR**, next page

Hector

continued from Page One

Amber — Hector's only sibling, was discovered to be a 100-percent match with her brother - will serve as bone marrow donor. That match has convinced Diaz that her family has been not only lucky, but blessed.

"A 100-percent match? That was something God made happen," Diaz said. "It's not every day that you find a donor like that in your own home."

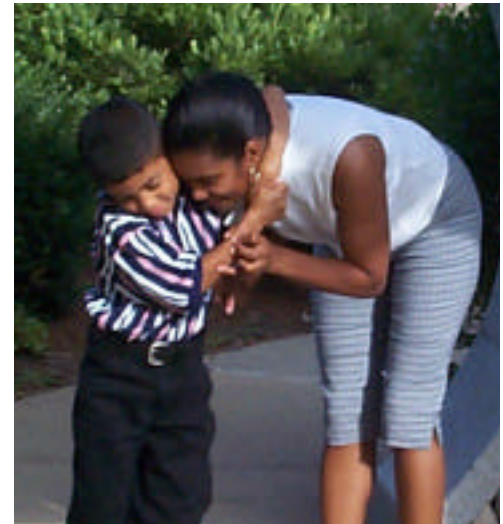
Months ago, Clara Diaz took a voluntary lay-off from her jewelry manufacturing job to care for Hector; her husband is currently unemployed. Hector's medical expenses are being covered by Rite Care.

Hector will be one of less than 20 sickle cell patients nationwide to undergo a bone marrow transplant and reportedly the first from New England to receive the treatment. While such transplants are often done on cancer patients, Fairview is one of the first hospitals to offer the treatment to patients with sickle cell - a hereditary disorder that causes red blood cells to take the shape of curved sickles, rather than doughnuts, causing them to block small blood vessels.

In the United States, the disease is most

YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND:

Matt St. Peter and Hector discuss their upcoming trip to Minneapolis. At right, Clara Diaz offers a little hug and some encouragement to Hector.



common in African-Americans and Hispanics from the Caribbean, Central America and parts of South America.

Diaz said her family was introduced to Angel Planes by Betty Leef, a registered nurse at Hasbro Children's Hospital. Leef had learned about the Providence-based charity after reading newspaper articles about its latest trips. In May, Angel Planes flew a 3-year-old girl from her home in Calcutta, India, to Johns Hopkins Medical Center in Baltimore.

Last year, the student-run charity flew Natasha Puerta, a Central Falls girl who needed an intestinal transplant, to Nebraska for her operation. Despite the effort, Natasha later died.

Angel Planes calls upon volunteer pilots who use their own planes or arranges other ways to fly ill children and their families to destinations of hope. The charity raises money by sponsoring a November walk-a-thon and other fundraising initiatives.

The charity arranged to have a car pick up the Diaz family at their Olneyville home. Angel Planes founder Matthew St. Peter, 17, will accompany the Diaz family to Minnesota.

"This really is something great....I hope they continue to do this for a lot of other families," Clara Diaz said last week, as she rushed to pack for her and Hector's three-month stay in Minnesota. Amber and her father will return to Providence in about two weeks, so that Amber can return to the Robert Bailey Elementary School, which Hector also attends.

Like most 6-year-old boys, Hector spends countless hours playing pretend with his action figures, driving race cars on computer games and trying to keep up with his sister.

Recently, however, Hector has questioned why he can't "do everything that Amber does," such as go swimming or to summer camp, his mother said.

Since learning that the operation could allow him to participate in such activities, Hector has been excited about the trip.

As for Amber, she has told her mother that she's willing to do anything to help her brother, as long as "she doesn't have [to feel] pain," Diaz said.