



Mostly cloudy, High 55.
Cloudy tonight. Low 35.
FORECASTON C-8.

METRO EDITION

A phone call in the night offers new hope for Natasha

■ Within hours, an 8-year-old Central Falls girl who has battled for life since birth is in a Nebraska hospital receiving a new small intestine.

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OMAHA, Neb. — The call came at 8 p.m. Wednesday.

Gloria Puerta, of Central Falls, had just come home from shopping with her 8-year-old daughter, Natasha. A nurse from the University of Nebraska Medical Center was on the line.

She said a small intestine might be available for Natasha, who was on the transplant waiting list. There was another child ahead of her, but she would get the organ if it wasn't compatible with that child.

CENTRAL FALLS

Gloria's heart started to pound. She began to change her clothes and tried to pack at the same time. After so many years of battling for her life, maybe Natasha could live like a normal child.

Gloria called her husband, Francisco, at work. Then she called Gary St. Peter, the father of two teen boys who founded Angel Planes Inc. orporated. The organization had agreed to arrange a charter flight to Omaha for her at a moment's notice.

At 11:30 p.m., the nurse called and said it wasn't looking good. Best to go to sleep, she said. But at 2:15 a.m., the phone rang again. The organ was waiting for Natasha. They had six hours to get to Nebraska.

In the early hours on the day before Good Friday, the Puertas raced across the darkness to

Norwood, Mass., to board the Cessna Citation II that would take them to Omaha.

FRANCISCO PUERTA marvels at his daughter's strength.

Natasha has fought to live since she was a baby. Born with a defective liver, at four months she became the youngest and smallest baby ever to receive a successful liver transplant.

Not long after, the doctors realized her small intestine didn't function, either. The small intestine is where the body absorbs most of the nutrients from digested foods. When it doesn't work, patients have to be fed intravenously, or else they starve to death.

Natasha has never eaten normal food.

Every night for eight years, Gloria Puerta has attached a catheter to one of Natasha's central veins to feed her while she slept. But veins get infected after repeated use, and Natasha was running out of usable ones. If she didn't get a small intestine transplant, she would eventually die.

As of Jan. 13, there were 99 people nationwide awaiting an intestine transplant, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing. First performed successfully in the mid-1980s, the procedure is still rare, but the survival rate has been rising steadily.

At the University of Pittsburgh, where two-fifths of the world's intestine transplants have been performed, surgeons last month reported a 68-percent survival rate for children after five years.

Natasha's pediatric surgeon encouraged the Puertas to have her treated at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, which has been doing intestine transplants since 1990 and in November opened the brand-new \$61.5-million Lied Transplant Center.

Gloria and Natasha had been there three times before yesterday.

When Natasha was put on the waiting list, the Puertas were given a beeper and told they could be called any time. The organ, which would come from a child who died, would deteriorate quickly, so they would have to be there in six hours.



MERCY FLIGHT : Francisco Puerta carries his daughter Natasha onto a private plane in Norwood, Mass., early yesterday for a flight to Omaha, Neb., after learning that a small intestine was available for the 8-year-old girl, who was on a transplant waiting list.

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The flight to Omaha takes four hours, so the Puertas knew they needed a private plane. It would cost about \$12,000, beyond their means – she is a caseworker at Progreso latino, and he works at a thermoplastics company.

Progreso Latino started to raise money for them, and Angel Planes offered to help. The non-profit group, started by two teen pilots, Chris and Matt St. Peter, arranges flights for families who don't have the means to get medical treatment for their children.

After reading a story in The Providence Journal, Secretary of State James Langevin teamed up with the St. Peters and raised \$11,800 from corporations to charter a plane from Eastern Air Charter, in Norwood, Mass. Angel Planes donated \$2,000 more.

The Puertas knew that Natasha would have to spend at least three months in the hospital – possibly more than a year, depending on how well her body accepted the new intestine. Progreso Latino and others have been raising money to help the Puertas. A couple of weeks ago, they learned that a foundation was willing to pay for their stay in Omaha when Natasha got her transplant.

THEY BOARDED the plane just after 4 a.m.

In the seven-passenger Cessna, Francisco and Gloria Puerta settled kitty-corner to Natasha.

NATASHA rests in her mother Gloria's arms at the airport in Norwood, Mass., before the flight to Omaha.



Francisco lifted her and adjusted her pillow. Gloria placed a blanket on her and stroked her face.

Francisco looked at his watch. He worried that they wouldn't get there in time. As the pilot turned up the throttle, Gloria crossed herself. A full moon followed the plane.

"My poor son," Francisco said, breaking the silence. "He didn't sleep, he went to bed at twelve, he got up with us at two, and he has to go to school today. It's not going to be a good day for him."

Natasha asked to see a picture of Derek, 14.

Francisco dug one out of his pocket and gave it to her. He also pulled one out of the baby Jesus. Natasha showed it to Chris and Matt St. Peter, who accompanied the Puertas.

"Hey Dad, there's a spider on your head!" Natasha said. Then she laughed, "April Fools!"

Francisco took her tiny hand in his. Natasha dozed off, and Gloria slept next to her, shielding her face from the light.

"If it was only the operation," Francisco said, "But the worst part is afterwards, because there will be months of recovering. I pray to my God that he doesn't make my girl suffer."

Francisco checked the time: 6:30 a.m. Gloria wondered aloud whether the organ would be any good by the time they got there. Francisco didn't want to think about it.

They arrived at 8 a.m., Nebraska time, and jumped into a battered old taxi. On the highway, Francisco noticed the fuel gauge was pointing to empty. Do you have gas in that car?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's full, but the gauge is broken."

"How can you tell it's full?" Francisco insisted.

Ten minutes later, they pulled up to the Lied Transplant Center. Francisco grabbed his girl and ran in.

Soon they were surrounded by nurses who made calls and got Natasha ready for the operation. They drew blood and took x-rays. Natasha cried intermittently. She was scared.

Gloria stroked her face and held her hand. Francisco looked on from a distance. Soon Natasha was getting drowsy from a sedative. She was ready to go into the operating room.

Francisco took the picture of Derek and rubbed it on Natasha's chest, making kissing sounds to comfort her. As the nurse wheeled her down the corridor, they told her once again that they loved her, that she'd be fine.

Francisco followed as far as he could, then watched until Natasha was out of sight.

THEY SPENT the day in the surgery waiting room with about a half-dozen strangers.

Every so often, a phone would ring. An elderly woman who volunteers at the hospital would answer and bring the waiting parents to the phone to get the latest news from the surgeons.

About 10:10 a.m., the Puertas got a call saying Natasha was about to be cut. Around noon, they got another call. The surgery was going fine. About an hour later, they went to check into their room. A man from North Dakota helped them with the biggest suitcase. his teenaged son, who has cerebral palsy, was getting a leg operation.

"You never know [what it's like] until you have a child like that," he told them. "You learn to enjoy the simple things."

JUST BEFORE 4 p.m., Dr. Deborah Sudan, the surgeon who performed the transplant, came in to say the operation was over. She returned about 4:30 p.m. Natasha was doing well, she told them. She took them to see her in the pediatric intensive care unit.

"I felt so bad to see my poor girl sedated, with a ventilator," Francisco said later. "But I knew it was for the good, and she's going to be better. Maybe the quality of her life will improve."

They were exhausted, but the hours of sleeplessness and worry meant nothing anymore.

"I'm so relieved to see her," Francisco said. "I cleaned her face a little and took care of her. She had to know that her Daddy was there."

Donations to the Natasha Puerta Fund, an account in Citizens Bank, can be made in care of Progreso Latino, 616 Broad St., Central Falls, RI 02863. The fund will help the Puertas with expenses not covered by insurance. For more information, call 728-5920.



ALL ABOARD: Gloria and Natasha talk during the trip to Nebraska.