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Woman receives 'gift of life' from dying neighbor, friend

CHICAGO (AP) — They were neighbors, schoolmates and friends. But between them, they had one sound heart.

"The first thing that went through my mind is that a friend of mine is dead," 18-year-old Maria Ortiz said Wednesday from her bed at the University of Illinois-Chicago Hospital, where she is recovering from heart transplant surgery after receiving a surprise gift — the heart of a high-school friend.

"Now I've got a chance . . . and I'll be real happy because I know the girl and I know most likely how she was and I'll feel better than having a stranger's heart in me," she said.

Ortiz lived all her life with a weakening heart muscle.

After an attack Nov. 6, she was brought to the intensive care unit at Illinois Masonic Hospital, where doctors feared she had only a few days left.

Ortiz began trying to accept that she might never get to see her 4-month-old daughter grow up.

In a waiting room nearby, her mother, Carmen Geliga, struck up a conversation with another woman whose daughter was in the same unit with a neurological disorder that had left her brain dead, but with a healthy heart.

Geliga had no idea then that their daughters had exchanged greetings at the neighborhood pool and talked occasionally in the halls at Roberto Clemente

High School before Maria dropped out.

"I wanted to ask her, but I couldn't, because it seemed very cruel to come out and say, 'Please, give us her heart,'" Geliga recalled.

Instead, she went home and prayed.

When she returned to the hospital, Geliga learned the woman had asked to speak with her.

"I had sorrow for her because she was losing her daughter and it's hard to accept because her daughter was leaving and mine was going on me also. . . . Then she just says to me, 'I want to donate my daughter's heart so that your daughter can go on living.'"

Both girls were moved to the University of Illinois Hospital,

but neither Ortiz nor her mother knew the donor was a friend and other friends of the two teen-agers made the connection.

Doctors have pronounced the transplanted heart "an excellent match," and say Ortiz' chances for survival are promising.

Candace Wiberg, organ procurement coordinator at the hospital, said doctors bypassed a standard protocol for choosing a recipient from among all eligible patients because the donor's mother "likely wouldn't have donated, unless she knew Maria would get it."

Ortiz says she has occasional bouts of sadness over her friend's fate, and promises one of her first trips when she returns home will be to visit her friend's mother.

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Police officer makes use of toys for auto accident investigations

FREERPORT (AP) — When the finer points of his occupational specialty require further study, Police Officer Paul Leach opens the box of metal toy cars and begins to play.

"I know it looks childish," Leach said, laughing. "My kids say 'Daddy, can we play with them when you're done?'"

Through their juvenile exterior, the mite-sized vehicles illustrate a growing trend in law enforcement of which Leach, 37, recently became a part.

With two hefty handfuls of equipment that include a calculator, plumb bob, video camera and his Matchbox racers, Leach is able to reconstruct the scene of an automobile accident. It is an unloved art form that takes a good amount of physics and detective work to do right, he said.

"It's boring and brings lots of complaints, that's why people don't like it," Leach said. "I love math."

Though some Department of Public Safety troopers have similar training and all city officers learn the basics, Police Chief Charles Bankston said Leach is the only one in southern Brazoria

County certified as an accident reconstructionist.

"He's good at it," Bankston said. "He's studied it hard."

He added that it was an aspect of police work expected to become more important in the future.

"Accidents have become so complicated these days," Bankston said. "Somebody needs to know how to do it."

To gain his certification, Leach took 140 hours of investigation classes and did well enough to be invited to the advanced school at Texas A&M University along with about 20 others from across the state, he said.

It was an opportunity the city's traffic enforcement officer couldn't refuse, one he has worked toward since he began in the profession 13 years ago.

Leach said he would talk with longtime state patrolmen, who utilized car damage, skidmarks, momentum, drag factors and rotational energy in their investigations.

"You started finding out there may be more to

an accident than meets the eye," he said. "It's a combination of all these things that make it tick."

Learning the basics of the subject piqued his interest.

"I got the bug," Leach said. "I thought there was an opportunity to better myself."

He has since traveled back to College Station for lessons on braking systems and crush measurements.

On an accident investigation scene, he will normally arrive with about \$1,800 in equipment. Leach purchased all of it himself, as a way of preparing for possible future work for an attorney or as a teacher outside of law enforcement.

Leach said answers to some accidents can be arrived at to a near degree, the results of a field where even the shards of a broken headlight studied in a laboratory can help solve the puzzle.

The toys are used to play with different scenarios. By tying the back wheels or pushing the cars down a wooden ramp, Leach said it becomes easier to get a feel for what really might have happened during a crash.

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