

# Lots of Heart



Sporting spiffy pink star sunglasses that came in her dental goodie bag from Saline dentist Dr. Jennifer McFinton (right), 2-year-old Samaria Sevilla sits in the lap of her guardian Suyapa Moncada. Samaria came to Michigan from her home in Honduras to undergo heart surgery at University of Michigan Hospital.



Dr. Jennifer McFinton prepares to provide Carla Ochoa, 25, a dental examination. Ochoa is in Michigan from Honduras with her 6-year-old son, Luis, who suffers from a congenital heart defect and requires surgery.

## Local dentist aids Honduran children

By Brian Cox  
Staff Writer

Her tears dry now, 2-year-old Samaria Sevilla fiddles with a brand-new toothbrush in the waiting room of the Woodland Family Dentistry in Saline.

She's just had her teeth cleaned and some X-rays taken. She didn't particularly enjoy the experience, but she toughed it out.

In the coming days, Samaria will face an even greater challenge when she undergoes life-saving heart surgery in a strange and cold land.

Samaria is among three children from Honduras who traveled to Michigan in October to receive medical attention for congenital heart defects at University of Michigan Hospital.

The children were brought to the states as part of the Children's Heart Project run by Samaritan's Purse, a 35-year-old nondenominational evangelical Christian organization that runs a range of programs to help people who are victims of war, poverty, natural disasters, disease and famine.

The Children's Heart Project began in 1997 in response to the ethnic conflict in Bosnia, where war had damaged hospitals to such an extent that helping children with heart defects was all but impossible.

That year, Samaritan's Purse brought two children to a hospital in North Carolina for heart surgery. Since then, the project has helped more than 325 children receive critical surgery unavailable in their own country and without which they would have been unlikely to reach their teenage years.

"The bottom line is that these children

need the surgery to survive," said Tracey Stephenson, a member of Grace Bible Church whose family is hosting Samaria and the girl's guardian, Suyapa Moncada, in their home. "Usually the children are toddlers like Samaria who, if they lived in the United States, would have received surgery as infants."

Samaria's attention turns from the toothbrush to other goodies in the bag Dr. Jennifer McFinton gave her for being a brave little girl.

Dental work is a necessary step before any of the children can undergo heart surgery because a patient cannot have any bacteria in his mouth at the time of the operation.

"We've had to do some pretty extensive dental work before they can have surgery," said Stephenson. "Many of (the children) come from countries where little dental hygiene is practiced."

McFinton, who heard of Samaritan's Purse from her receptionist, Lisa Streader, donated her services.

"It's such a small thing for me, but for them it's the one time in their life when they might get proper dental care," she said.

McFinton said she plans to participate in the project again next year.

"It makes me feel really privileged and really lucky that I was born in the United States and that I'm healthy and my daughter

is healthy," she said.

Members of Grace Bible Church in Ann Arbor have participated in the Children's Heart Project for six years. In the foyer of the church is a picture gallery of all the children who the church has hosted.

Tom McParlan's family has hosted children from Kosovo and Mongolia the past two years. This year, they have opened their

home to Carla Ochoa and her 6-year-old son, Luis, and Alis Lagos and her 14-year-old daughter, Alis. An interpreter, Elsa Dheming, is also staying with them.

"It has been a tremendous opportunity for us as a family," McParlan said. "You get attached very quickly and you realize people are the same everywhere — they love their children."

Tom McParlan  
Host parent

Samaria has abandoned the dental goodie bag in favor of the contents of a pink backpack given her by a Grace Bible Church member. She pulls out a doll and an Elmo phone.

There are sacrifices and inconveniences to opening your home to families from another culture, McParlan said. His son, Luke, is sleeping on an inflatable bed in his parents' room. Guests might sometimes leave the shower running all day or open windows when the air conditioning is on, but it's all minor, McParlan said.

"It's more than worth it," he said. "You

get to love people, you get to help people, and God blesses us. That's the way he works."

"It's amazing the number of people involved," said the Rev. Doug Streader, pastor at Grace Bible Church. "All these families gather together for one purpose. It's amazing to see."

Carla Ochoa is 25. She and her son, Luis, are from San Pedrosula, Honduras. The surgery Luis will undergo will allow him to grow up to reach his teenage years, she said through an interpreter as she reclined in a dental chair waiting for McFinton to clean and X-ray her teeth.

"It's a huge deal because you cannot have this kind of surgery back home," said Dheming, who is the coordinator for Samaritan's Purse in Honduras. "The families feel they are really blessed for this opportunity for their kids."

The Ochoas and the Lagosos will remain in the United States for at least six weeks as the children recover from surgery. If there are any complications, their stay may be extended. They will then return home, healthier and with a much improved chance of leading a normal life.

"It's quite a celebration when they do go back," said Streader, "because so much has been accomplished."

Samaria has fallen asleep, with the Elmo phone still clutched in her hand.

Donations such as gift cards to area stores, phone cards, personal services such as haircuts, or other donations may be dropped off at Woodland Family Dentistry at 510 N. Ann Arbor St., in Saline.

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