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Section: Main

Page: A1

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Answering the call of a lifetime

15-year-old Niskayuna girl receives long-awaited intestinal transplants

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NISKAYUNA - The Bowman family had a rare few minutes to relax Wednesday evening. Then the call came.

The machines that sustained 15-year-old Taejah Bowman beeped and purred as Raymond Bowman heard the miraculous news: Doctors at the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh had secured the organs his daughter needed.

At 7 a.m. Thursday, the transplant surgery began. During the next 22 hours, Taejah received a new stomach, pancreas, liver and small intestine, including duodenum.

Nationwide in a given year, fewer than 10 young people have an intestinal transplant like Taejah's.

Dr. Rakesh Sindhi, one of her surgeons, said the staff was hopeful.

Some of her risk of rejection, he said, is because she had so many previous operations and transfusions, and the intestine is more likely to be rejected than other organs.

Still, she seemed to be doing well, he said.

This was her second transplant - previously she had part of her small intestine replaced - and her success with that was a good augur, Sindhi said.

"We expect her to do quite well," Sindhi said.

At 5 a.m. Friday, three hours after her daughter came out of surgery, Wendy Harris finally saw Taejah. They had planned to spend the day shopping for Taejah's sweet 16 dress.

"I told her to squeeze my hand, and she squeezed my hand. It's scary, it's stressful, it's very emotional," said Harris, who lives in Niskayuna and shares custody with Taejah's father.

"The stress level is so high, you just keep praying and hoping and just going," she added. "You just take one day at a time, that's how you get through it."

Taejah was born on May 10, 1991, with part of her intestines outside her body. Complications from corrective surgery led to her losing a section of the digestive organ. Doctors said she would get her nutrients intravenously for the rest of her life. She got lucky. On June 26, 1996, Taejah received an intestinal transplant. Then she could eat.

Sitting on her couch last week before going to Pittsburgh, tugging at her trendy crocheted cap, she said, "I love to eat. Pizza, soul food like collard greens, I eat almost anything."

Throughout her childhood, she had countless checkups, her father said.

"Anything that was transplant-related, we would get on a plane," and head to Pittsburgh, he said.

Her first transplant lasted about 10 years. Last summer, she threw up, couldn't eat and spiked fevers. "I don't remember that much of August," Taejah said. "All I think about really is the day I went in, my intestines got removed."

That was on Nov. 3. Her bowel had twisted, a rare but not unknown occurrence in transplant patients, Sindhi said. She was hospitalized for three months, including two months in intensive care.

When she got home, tubes fed her 16 hours a day. Her father and stepmother, Lakia, slept by a baby monitor so they would hear the machine alarms if something malfunctioned.

"We sleep with what sounds like 10 million crickets in the room," Raymond Bowman said.

This weekend her extended family will camp out at the hospital in Pittsburgh. Harris found a room at a local hospitality house. She may have to call it home for almost a year.

While Taejah has health insurance, her family must cover the motel stays and food while in Pittsburgh. To meet the family's spiritual and financial needs, their church, the Duryee Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church on Hulett Street in Hamilton Hill, held a worship service on April 21 in Taejah's honor.

"It's a family, and you miss her when she's not there with the children singing," said Donald LeFevre, standing outside on the church steps with his wife, Verna. They know Taejah's family well, including her stepmother's father, Schenectady Councilman Joseph Allen.

"We don't have millionaires. We have to depend on one another," LeFevre said. "This could be your own family going through this."

A few days later, Bowman pulled out well-wishers' cards from a bag in his living room. Taejah was still on the transplant waiting list at the time. The service raised \$2,500, Bowman said. The money was nice, he said, but that mattered less than the prayers.

As he spoke, Taejah shuffled from her bed to the couch holding two bags attached to her belly. She spoke of her sweet 16. She talked about singing and smiled. She missed her place in the church choir.

Asked to show her talent, she chose a simple gospel song, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow."

Her eyes, yellow from her illness, looked toward the ceiling, and tears streamed down her stepmother's cheek.

When songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies, I draw closer to Him, from care He sets me free; His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.