

Belize accident victim finds hope in Charleston friends

By LYNNE LANGLEY
Of The Post and Courier staff

Addy Celeni Aguilar still finds it painful to talk and smile after so much surgery, but she'll be doing lots of both when she walks off the jet back home in Belize today.

Two months ago, the 21-year-old dental assistant hid her injured face behind a cloth as she was wheeled off a plane here in Charleston. An auto accident sent her crashing, face-first, through a windshield, destroying her nose and upper lip and dislocating her right hip.

After three operations on her face and physical therapy for her hip, she is going home transformed and amazed by the help and care she received free of charge from dozens of people, doctors and groups.

"The people of Charleston have been so kind," she said. "And I am very, very grateful for what the doctors did."

Michael and Donna Johnston of Mount Pleasant, with whom Aguilar and her mother lived after the hospital stay, hope they don't lose touch with the young

woman.

"It's been a wonderful experience for myself and my family," said Donna Johnston, mother of three young children. "I've learned so much from them. It's made me realize what's important."

Addy's father, William Aguilar, who teaches high school English, at first marveled at the big cars and wealth he saw here, Johnston said. Before he returned home last month, she said, he told her, "The family I have, the love and support makes me richer than people who have material things."

Dr. Dennis A. Fried, a colon and rectal surgeon in Mount Pleasant, called on fellow doctors, a hospital and the Charleston Breakfast Rotary to shoulder what became two months of free medical treatment and other assistance such as home-cooked meals and shopping trips.

He counts on seeing the family again and checking on the young woman's progress when he visits Belize. "We're joined at the hip," he said with a grin.

"We feel Addy is going back with more than a new face," Fried said. "She's going back with a fresh ap-



Staff Photo by Brad Nettles

Charleston surgeon Dr. Dennis A. Fried takes a look at the healing face of Addy Celeni Aguilar last week as Ann Fried (left) and Addy's mother, Addy M. Aguilar, look on.

proach to making something of her life."

A junior college graduate, she wants to study psychology, but the university in her Latin American home doesn't offer courses. The University of Florida does, and her mother's sister lives nearby, she said.

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But for Addy the expense is too much.

Donna Johnston said, "I would love to see her go on to college. I wish there was some way we could bring her back here and help her go to college." Johnston said she plans to talk to some people; so does Fried.

If she can get a psychology degree, Aguilar said, she wants to help patients injured in accidents.

"Even though my face is better, I have not healed inside," she said. She keeps thinking about the accident on the rainy night of Sept. 19.

As she lay in a hospital room recovering, she heard that Hurricane Mitch was aimed at her home and her father. Her close friend, who was driving at the time of the accident, had lost her father a week afterward.

Aguilar, a devout Catholic, remembers praying, "My God, are you going to punish me the same way?"

Her father, 10-year-old sister, 19 year-old brother, their home, 15 aunts and uncles and their families came through the hurricane just fine and are waiting for her return.

She wonders how they will like her new face, still swollen from the third plastic surgery less than two weeks ago.

Aguilar will continue to look and feel better, said facial plastic surgeon Dr. Tom Funcik. "It will take nine months, but this will become a distant memory."

He thinks of her almost as a daughter and foresees her going on dates and dealing, face-to-

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Breakfast Rotary president

face, with future patients.

Had she remained in Belize, where medical specialists are rare, he said, "She would have had a 'Phantom of the Opera' nose, a stunning disfigurement. It would have been a life-devastating experience."

Without an ambulance, it had taken seven hours to reach the main hospital in Belize, much smaller than East Cooper Regional Medical Center where she's spent much of the last two months.

The X-ray machine was broken, so doctors didn't even know she had dislocated her hip.

A Belize surgeon sewed up what had been her upper lip and removed part of her ear to build a new nostril. The graft died, and infection set in before she reached Charleston, Funcik said.

He immediately removed the dead graft and a thick scar from the wound on her forehead.

A week later, Funcik began building her new nostril with curved cartilage from her ear and a flap of skin. He rotated a blood vessel and the skin flap, cut from her scalp to her eyebrow, down to the end of her nose.

"It looked like a suitcase handle from her forehead to her nose tip," he said, adding that relatively few doctors perform that procedure.

When she touched the end of her nose, she felt

the sensation in her scalp, and her nose had to be trimmed regularly because the former scalp at first kept growing hair.

Three weeks later, new blood vessels had formed, and the original blood vessel could be returned to its home. Funcik also did some cosmetic surgery and liposuction to give Aguilar a more attractive chin.

If he and the hospital had sent bills, Funcik estimates, they would have topped \$40,000.

About five years ago, Fried launched Project Belize to improve medical care in that country. He's taught surgery to doctors there and hoped one day a patient might come here for care.

After Aguilar's accident, he received an e-mail saying, "Can you help us? We have a problem."

He called a series of specialists here, and they all replied, "No problem, no charge," Fried said. He also called the Breakfast Rotary.

Aguilar and her parents arrived six days later. Breakfast Rotary president Michael Johnston took wife Donna to meet the family at the hospital.

Donna Johnston remembers, "I fell in love with the family. They were so nice and gracious. I said, 'We need to take them in.' You could tell what good people they are right away."

Aguilar turned 21 this month, and the Johnstons and Fried asked her to write a list of gifts she'd like. When pressed, she finally requested a pair of tennis shoes.

Last week the Johnstons took her shopping for one other thing she wanted, a Christmas dress for her little sister.

Said Johnston, "They are so grateful and mesmerized by everything that has been given and done. It's been overwhelming for them."