

Snapp Shots: A mission with heart

February 19, 2009

Section: My Town

By Martin Snapp

How would you feel if your child had a hole in her heart?

That was the catastrophe facing Elena Senotova of St. Petersburg, Russia, 20 years ago, during the waning days of the Soviet Union. Her little daughter, Maria — better known by her nickname, Masha — was dying painfully from this condition, one of the most common birth defects in the world. She was struggling for every breath, and her skin was turning blue from lack of oxygen.

If they had been living in America, it would have been no problem. Open-heart surgery on children had become routine by then.

But not in the USSR, where medicine was lagging decades behind the West. Every year, Elena begged the doctors to help Masha, and every year they turned her down because such surgery was beyond their ability.

In 1988 she was working as an interpreter at the first Soviet-American film festival, where she met one of the festival's organizers, Jo Ann McGowan of San Francisco, and told her Masha's story.

When McGowan got back home she contacted Dr. Nilas Young, who was chief of cardiac surgery at Children's Hospital in Oakland. Together, they arranged to have Elena and Masha flown here, and Young and his surgical team repaired the hole in Masha's heart.

"It was like night and day," says Masha. "After the surgery, I could run around like any other little girl. Before, all I could do is sit in the corner and read."

And that was that — or so they thought. But a reporter for TASS, the Soviet news agency, wrote a story about the operation, and within weeks Young was inundated with hundreds of letters from desperate parents all over the USSR, begging him to save their children, too.

"It would have been too expensive to bring all these kids over here, so it seemed to us that it would be more efficient for us to go there and teach our Russian colleagues how to do it on their own," says Young, who is now chief of Cardiothoracic Surgery at UC Davis.

In 1990 Young and pediatric cardiologist Dr. Stanley Higashino led a team of 20 people on their first trip to Russia. The group included surgeons, cardiologists, nurses, technicians and, of course, McGowan, who was proving to be a genius at cutting through bureaucratic red tape and scrounging state-of-the-art medical equipment.

And they've been back more than 50 times since then, performing surgeries and training their Russian counterparts, using the traditional American side-by-side teaching method.

Each operating room has an American surgeon and a Russian surgeon, an American anesthesiologist and a Russian anesthesiologist, American nurses and Russian nurses, and so on. And expert interpreters are always present to make sure nothing gets lost in the translation.

The program is now a nonprofit organization called Heart to Heart. To date, more than 7,000 Russian children have been saved from certain death and, like Masha, are leading healthy and happy lives.

On Saturday night, Heart to Heart celebrated its 20th anniversary at a banquet at the Claremont Hotel. The guests of honor: Elena and Masha, who flew here from St. Petersburg for the occasion.

Sadly, two people were missing: Higashino and McGowan. He died from stomach cancer in 1991, and she died from a stroke in 1996, while she was on the job at a children's hospital in St. Petersburg. But their legacy lives on in the thousands of children they helped save, starting with the very first.

"Tony Bennett may have lost his heart in San Francisco," says Masha. "But that's where I found mine."

To learn more about Heart to Heart or donate to its lifesaving mission, visit www.heart-2-heart.org.

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