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Airman-Funded Heart Surgeries Change 150 Childrens' Lives

Staff Sgt. Carolyn Viss | 376th Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs

March 23, 2010

In an age when Americans are able to vote for a healthcare bill when they are dissatisfied with the current plan, many people around the world, including in Kyrgyzstan, struggle to afford surgery without any health insurance at all.

So, American airmen from the Transit Center have rallied together, raising or donating funds for what are now 150 heart surgeries for children in Kyrgyzstan, totaling more than \$75,000.

The 150th surgery happened March 17 when 13-year-old Firuza Nurahunova, who suffered from congenital heart disease since birth, successfully underwent an aortic valve replacement, the third, and hopefully final, surgery necessary for her recovery.



The surgery and recovery from it were the hard parts for Firuza and her family to get through. The funding was easy once airmen got involved.

On Feb. 26, Claudia Kuric, the Kyrgyz Republic Peace Corps country director, contacted the Transit Center humanitarian assistance office with the following email request: "My Kyrgyz local-hire staff member for the Peace Corps has a child who needs a heart operation," she said. "Is it possible to get her on the registry for the heart operations that the Transit Center supports?"

Within four days, they had the answer: "The doctor is willing to perform the surgery at no cost," said Chaplain (Lt. Col.) James Kinsey, the head chaplain

here. "The only fees will be hospital expenses, and Manas Area Benefit Outreach Society is willing to pick (those) up."

MABOS is a private organization that airmen organized so service members can make personal donations here to help the local people in the community, according to the chaplain.

"The troops here at Manas are sharing their time, money, talents, love and hearts with the Kyrgyzstan people," he said.

When airmen visited Firuza in the hospital March 21, four days after the operation, she was in good spirits. Her parents, Polak and Shakura Nurahunova, were full of thanks.

"We wish you and your families peace and a long life of happiness and health," they said through a translator.

Now, Firuza and the other 149 children like her who have had surgery can go on to live their lives, enjoying their favorite foods, favorite toys, and favorite colors. Firuza's favorite color is yellow, and it matches her personality to a "tee," according to those who have met her.

Firuza has the spunk of a young lady who's had to be strong through a lot of pain, said an Airman who visited Firuza. She was cracking jokes with the nurses in spite of a low-grade fever, and looking forward to being released March 23.

"There are no words to describe the gratitude and joy the Peace Corps staff feels concerning this very generous gift you have given our cook's family," Kuric said, in an e-mail. "The amount needed for this surgery was way beyond the family's means. This child is such a joy, and our staff has painfully watched over the last year as the child's energy and life were waning."

"My staff is truly overwhelmed by this gift, and it has prompted many conversations about the generosity of Americans and Americans' philanthropic natures," she continued. "One of my staff said it best yesterday when he said, 'Someone needs to tell the people of Kyrgyzstan that this is what ...Americans are really like. They have good hearts.'"

This 150th surgery blessed the airmen here as much as it blessed Firuza's family.

"I am amazed with how subjective the idea of happiness is," said Senior Airman Maria Gates, Transit Center coalition coordinator and linguist. "You don't become aware of the life you possess until you become exposed to something different. Last weekend, I was exposed to a 14 year-old who went through three heart surgeries, and was simply happy to be alive. How fortunate is she, and how astonishingly lucky am I!"