



Ixchel's story

This is the inspiring tale of a little girl who fought for her life and emerged triumphantly with a smile—with the help of the community. It helps us remember what the Government of Canada's Workplace Charitable Campaign is all about.

By Alejandro Bustos

It was a rainy summer day in Guadalajara, Mexico, when six-year-old Ixchel started to feel weak. Her mother, Linda Hernández-Deslauriers, then a trade commissioner in Canada's consulate office, was informed that her usually vibrant daughter was feeling ill, so she went home and put her to bed. But instead of getting better, Ixchel (pronounced Eek-shell) felt worse the next day. Still, everyone assumed a simple fever was to blame.

"She was as immobile as a rag doll," Linda said while recounting the terrible episode that took place in late June 2007. "And her skin, it was as white as marble. You could see all the veins in her arms."

Soon, little Ixchel, a precious little girl with big, bright green eyes, went into shock. Terrified, Linda and her husband, Jacques Deslauriers, rushed their daughter to a local hospital, where she was initially diagnosed with meningitis. It soon became clear, however, that the doctors didn't fully understand what was going on.

"For three days they didn't have a clear diagnosis," recalled Linda. "All they would tell me was that all of her vital organs had collapsed." Finally, on the fourth day, the doctors diagnosed Ixchel with inflammation of the pancreas. She was also in cardiogenic shock, meaning that her heart failure had resulted in insufficient blood circulation.

It was a parent's worst nightmare. In the blink of an eye, a previously healthy child was now intubated and unconscious. Her organs had suffered widespread collapse, because the virus had spread and her small heart could not pump sufficient blood through her body.

Given her severe condition, doctors recommended that Ixchel be transferred to Hospital Angeles del Carmen, which had an intensive pediatric program. It was there that doctors diagnosed Ixchel with subacute myocarditis—an inflammation of the heart. It was later discovered that her condition was caused by an airborne virus called Coxsackie B1.

Running to the rescue

It was the family's most crucial time of need. Friends, family and coworkers rose to the occasion. People from all corners, even strangers, offered help of all kinds. "People we didn't even know came to the hospital to offer moral support and to pray for her," recalled Linda.

But by the end of July, Ixchel's heart was not responding to treatment, and doctors believed she needed a heart transplant. They recommended that she be transferred to Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children, one of the world's best medical centres for pediatric cardiology care.

On July 30, Air Canada allowed the family to board their flight to Canada, rather than pay the exorbitant fees for an air ambulance, thanks to a little help from a colleague. Jumping on a welcome opportunity to help, Kathryn Aleong, Canada's Consul and Senior Trade Commissioner in Guadalajara, had written a letter that would allow Ixchel's doctor to travel with her, thereby fulfilling the conditions of the airline and providing a welcome opportunity for medical exchange.

When the group arrived back in Canada, another helping hand was waiting. Because the family had been living outside the country on a foreign posting, the Ontario Health Insurance Plan could not cover the cost of an ambulance to bring Ixchel from the airport to the hospital. A friend of a friend—a complete stranger—picked the family up at the airport and drove them to the hospital.

"All of my colleagues were fantastic" noted Linda. "They pitched in for work, visited Ixchel at the hospital with gifts and asked the church to pray for Ixchel. I think I would have gone mad without the help of all of these people."

Recovery

A week after arriving in Canada, Ixchel started to feel better. Doctors could not fully explain why, though it was thought that a new experimental drug she was given in Mexico could have kick-started the recovery.

It has been a long period of recuperation. In what seemed like an endless August, each parent took 12-hour shifts to watch over Ixchel. At first, the family spent a large amount of money to stay in Toronto-area hotels. But in another example of community support and generosity, Ronald McDonald House came through with subsidized lodging.

Finally, in September, Ixchel returned with her family to Ottawa, where she became an outpatient at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), which she continues to visit.

Today at 7, Ixchel is a beautiful young girl with a brilliant smile. Though she is still not 100 percent—in February she had to spend a week at CHEO with a septicaemia attack that later led to an operation on her tonsils—she is much better than she was during that terrifying period last summer.

Her recovery has been aided by numerous people who were moved by her story: family, friends, colleagues, classmates, doctors in Mexico and Canada, charitable foundations.

“This experience has taught me that you can't ignore the plight of others,” said Linda, who now works at DFAIT Headquarters in Ottawa. “Whether they are your neighbours or your colleagues, people matter, because one day they could be the ones in need or the ones to offer you support in your time of need.”

As for Ixchel, she has shown that, regardless of the body's condition, immense courage and strength comes from the heart and mind. At one point in the hospital, the fragile little girl turned to her mother, who was making a valiant attempt to hold back her tears, and said: “Mami, it's OK. Don't cry. It doesn't hurt that much.”

Despite fighting for her life, Ixchel always believed she would one day return to her old self, going back to school and riding her bicycle with her two brothers Esteban and Santiago. She also learned empathy. “Mami, I know what I want to be when I grow up,” she confided during her ordeal. “I want to be a doctor for kids and a singer.”

“Why a singer?” Linda asked.

“Because I want to sing to the children when they are feeling sick and sad, so I can cure their hearts as well as their bodies,” Ixchel replied.

Alejandro Bustos is a trade policy officer at the Regional Trade Policy in the Americas Division. He is also a volunteer with DFAIT's GCWCC.