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Baptist doctors give kids a reason to smile - Doctors at Baptist Children's Hospital performed free surgeries on Sunday to correct cleft lips and palates and fix other facial deformities.

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**Author:** Rebecca Burton , [rburton@MiamiHerald.com](mailto:rburton@MiamiHerald.com)

Ana Lopez, a Kendall resident, took her 15-year-old son out of public school last year because of the way the other children treated him. Omar, an eighth-grader at Jose Marti School, was born with a cleft palate and deformed nose, and Lopez said Omar would often ask why he was born that way.

"Kids can be so cruel," Lopez said. "They were laughing at him."

When Lopez saw an ad on TV two years ago about Baptist Children's Hospital giving free plastic surgery to children in need, she immediately applied.

On Saturday, Baptist Children's Hospital in Kendall held its 11th annual Day of Smiles. This year, 12 children were selected to get plastic and reconstructive surgery for free. Surgeons donated their time to fix cleft lips and palates and repair ear and nose deformities. Returning patients, meanwhile, had surgery to fix scars that may have stretched from growing.

Joel Levin, plastic and reconstructive surgeon at Baptist Children's Hospital, helped start Day of Smiles after volunteering for an international organization called Operation Smile. He said he is pushing to make Day of Smiles more than once a year.

To qualify for the free surgeries, families are interviewed and go through a financial and medical screening. Typically, families lacking health insurance are given preference.

Omar had surgery done last June through the program, and returned this year to get additional nose work done. Lopez said she has already seen a confidence boost.

Omar starts high school in August at South Miami High School and is counting on Dr. Josh Lampert, plastic and reconstructive surgeon, to "fix him up," Omar said.

"I want him to make it good," Omar said as he was getting an IV in his arm and listening to his iPod. He didn't show an ounce of nervousness.

Another brave child in the pre-operation room was Mariya Klymenko, 16. Mariya has had more than two dozen surgeries at Baptist since December 1998, when she was just 21/2. This year, she was getting a skin graft on her eyelid.

"I usually cry because I'm so nervous," Mariya said. "But not now. I felt great this morning."

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Mariya was born in the Ukraine and would get sick in the cold winter months. Her mother, Nataliya Klymenko, would use boiling water for a humidifier to soothe her cold. But, one day Mariya stepped on a chair and knocked over the boiling water. Her face was badly scalded.

Klymenko met a Swedish missionary while she was still in the Ukraine and four months later, was introduced to Dr. John Cassel, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon. Cassel agreed to do all of Mariya's surgeries free of charge, and until six years ago, the mother and daughter traveled between Miami and the Ukraine multiple times a year.

Now, they live in Flagami and Mariya attends Felix Varela High School. She will take some of her classes at Miami Dade College next year, to get an advance in college. She hopes to become a veterinarian. Klymenko also got a job in the hospital cafeteria and says that the employees at Baptist are like her family.

"This is my home," Klymenko said. "I spend more time here than at my actual home."

Klymenko said she and her daughter have picked out a Father's Day card every year for Cassel. This year, they got him a pen engraved with the words "World's greatest doctor."

Cassel, who began working with Day of Smiles to follow his long-time patient, said his time donation to Mariya is simply to let people see past her scars. He said his goal was to make her face look proportionate and animated. As she grows, scar revisions are necessary.

"You just can't get past her beautiful smile," Cassel said. "She passes off as a totally normal, incredibly intelligent young teenager in South Florida."

First-timer Andres Castrillon, a 17-year-old at Coral Park High School in Sweetwater, encountered one of the most complicated surgeries. Levin and oral surgeon, Fred Petrolette, worked about three and a half hours to correct Andres' nose and cleft lip.

James Castrillon, Andres' father, who works in maintenance for apartments, said that he was nervous for his son, but grateful for the services.

"I had thought about getting this surgery for him for a long time," Castrillon said, when Andres went into surgery. "But, I didn't have the money. A friend told me about this and I applied. I'm pretty nervous, but the doctors make me feel better."

James said the surgery went smoothly and is excited to see the final results in about two weeks when the wounds heal.

"My son is feeling well," Castrillon said. "There is no bleeding and not too much pain."

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