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**HIGHLIGHTS:**

Three boys from Ecuador, ages 8, 9 and 11, are the first to undergo lifesaving heart surgeries at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center – thanks to the generosity of actor/director Mel Gibson, Cedars-Sinai surgeons, and the intervention of Healing the Children. The boys and their physicians are available for interviews.

**HOLIDAYS HOLD NEW HOPE FOR YOUNG ECUADORIAN HEART PATIENTS HELPED BY CEDARS-SINAI SURGEONS, MEL GIBSON & HEALING THE CHILDREN**

LOS ANGELES (Dec. 8, 2004) – Little Luis’ heart was so enlarged you could actually see it straining to beat beneath his skin and bones. Just 9, he was half normal size and had only months to live. Daniel, 8, could no longer keep pace with his friends or play soccer. Just 11, William, too, tired easily and was on the brink of heart failure. Today, their dire prospects have been replaced with real hope for normal childhoods, thanks to the timely intervention of Healing the Children, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and actor/director Mel Gibson, whose \$5 million gift to the hospital made these miracles possible. Now on the mend, all three boys are expected to return home Dec. 13, in time to spend the holidays with their families.

The boys’ life-saving journey from the impoverished villages of Ecuador to Los Angeles actually began in October, when Cedars-Sinai physicians evaluated them during an annual Healing the Children-sponsored medical mission. Alfredo Trento, M.D., chairman, division of cardiothoracic surgery at Cedars-Sinai; David Ferry, M.D., director, division of pediatric cardiology; and a team of physicians and support staff traveled to the struggling Central American country to provide care free of charge for about two dozen youngsters. For Luis, Daniel and William, though, surgery was deemed too risky in Ecuador, where hospital equipment and medical resources are limited.

At about the same time, actor/director Mel Gibson donated \$5 million to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center—working in partnership with Healing the Children—to provide care for children from foreign countries with serious medical conditions that cannot be treated at home because of prohibitive cost or lack of availability. The timing of the Gibson gift made it possible for the three boys to be the first transported from Ecuador for cardiothoracic surgery at Cedars-Sinai.

“These were high-risk, potentially challenging cases,” explains Gregory Fontana, M.D., vice chair of surgery for Pediatric Surgical Services and co-director of Pediatric Cardiac Surgery, who performed Luis’ surgery and assisted with Daniel’s. “The opportunities presented through Mel Gibson’s gift are very exciting. We can arrange for a regular flow of cases—perhaps as many as 25 a year—to Cedars-Sinai. We already have a long list of patients waiting.”

Of the trio from Ecuador, Luis was “sickest” and experiencing profound heart failure. Though nearly 10, he was the size of a child half his age. His chest had grown barrel shaped to accommodate his massively enlarged heart. Luis could walk only a few feet without resting, and often quivered with fatigue. On Nov. 12, Dr. Fontana replaced one heart valve and repaired another. Luis spent eight days in ICU and then returned to the home of his host family to recover.

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“Since the surgery, Luis’ whole attitude has changed—he’s much happier, especially since he knows he’ll be going home soon,” says host “mom” Sydney McDonnell, explaining that Luis worries about how his struggling family is managing without him. “We had a big birthday party for him Nov. 29, and it was the first time he ever looked really happy. They don’t celebrate birthdays where he lives—they’re just too poor—so he didn’t even know how old he was before he came here.”

She recalls Luis breaking into a run as she and her son tried to catch up with a staff member in the hallway at Cedars-Sinai in early December. “He actually started to laugh. That was the first time. It was so great—it just warmed your heart. I thought, he gets to play and run and be a kid again.”

Eight-year-old Daniel is a quiet child, according to his host “dad” Andy Leisner. Daniel arrived with a letter, written in Spanish, from his mother humbly asking “whom it may concern” to give her son love and hugs. The youngster has received those and much more. On Nov. 19, Dr. Trento, assisted by Dr. Fontana, successfully repaired a congenital defect—a hole between chambers of the heart—and replaced a heart valve.

“He was in the end stages of heart failure,” says Dr. Fontana of the young boy who once loved to play soccer. “He’s making a wonderful recovery, though, and was out of the hospital in just a few days.”

William, 11, is part of a close-knit family that lives in a poor area outside of Guayaquil, Ecuador, the country’s largest city. He was born with an abnormal aortic valve that caused significant weakening of his heart muscle. Like the other boys, his prognosis without surgery was grim. On Nov. 22, the faulty valve was replaced by Wen Cheng, M.D., co-director of Pediatric Cardiac Surgery at Cedars-Sinai.

William is progressing well, and his host family is anticipating his return home with mixed feelings. “It’s been really nice having him here—we give each other hugs,” says host “mom” Jennifer McCorder of the fun-loving youngster, who’s hooked on his new Game Boy and can’t get enough of the movies Shrek, Scooby Doo and Monsters, Inc. “The fact that he’s returning to a happy family makes it easier to say goodbye.”

The boys met for the first time on the plane from Ecuador. “It was cute how William took care of Luis,” remembers Cris Embleton, founder of Healing the Children and director of its California chapter. She also recalls Luis selflessness when he received several presents. “He wanted to take them home to share with his brothers and sisters.”

Providing specialized care for these special children is the tie that binds Healing the Children, Cedars-Sinai and other backers and benefactors, says Dr. Fontana, who also acknowledges St. Jude Medical Inc. and Edwards Lifesciences for their support. In addition, he recognizes the time and talent of the many medical professionals who made these “miracles” possible, including intensive care and pediatric cardiology physicians, anesthesiologists, nurses and other members of the cardiac team.

Cedars-Sinai’s Pediatric Cardiology and Cardiac Surgery program offers a full range of cardiology and cardiac surgery services to children and adolescents. The team includes board-certified pediatric cardiologists, a clinical nurse specialist and an echocardiographic technician with specialized expertise. Services include diagnostic and therapeutic cardiac catheterization, fetal echocardiography, neonatal and pediatric intensive care units. For details, call 1-800-CEDARS-1 or go online to [www.cedars-sinai.org](http://www.cedars-sinai.org).

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