

# DAILY BRUIN

## Separated by UCLA surgeons, previously conjoined twins celebrate 10th birthday

BY DANIEL SCHONHAUT

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NEWS



Maria de Jesus, right, thanks guests for attending the birthday party held for her and her twin sister Maria Teresa in Malibu on Aug. 6. The twins were born conjoined at the head and were separated by a UCLA surgical team in a 2002 operation.

Shalev Netanel

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Nine years ago, two conjoined twins from a small village in Guatemala were flown to UCLA to receive a complicated separation operation.

The girls, about 1-year-old at the time, were joined at the head. This extremely rare condition had been operated on successfully before, although never by UCLA surgeons.



Watch Daily Bruin Video's coverage of the twins and their extended families as they celebrate the anniversary of the twin's miracle operation [here](#).

Courtesy of UCLA Health Sciences Media Relations

Two esteemed hospitals in the U.S. had already declined involvement in the case, saying the twins would die if they went under the knife.

As the university grappled over a decision to operate or not, UCLA neurosurgeon Jorge Lazareff paid his way to Guatemala City to meet with the twins' parents in person.

"I said to them, what do you want? "¿ Do you want this surgery to be done?" Lazareff remembers.

The father replied that when they grew older, the girls would be cast out by society. He hoped for a better life for his daughters.

"I told him, "Bear in mind, there is a strong chance that none of them will survive," Lazareff said. "(The father) said, "It's fine, it's fine with us."

In August 2002, after nearly 23 hours in the operating room, Maria de Jesus and Maria Teresa were successfully split.

The twins celebrated their tenth birthday at a beach house in Malibu on Saturday.

It was a festive, Hawaiian-themed occasion "" complete with luau dancers, a steel drummer, a swimming pool and a visit from actor Mel Gibson, called "Uncle Mel" by Maria de Jesus, who has known the twins since they were first brought to the United States.

To a large degree, the girls have found the better life their father dreamt of. But in other respects, they have overcome challenges that others their age could not begin to understand.

The twins have remained in Los Angeles to receive regular medical treatment that would otherwise not be available to them. Their parents are back in Guatemala, although they visit the United States twice a year and talk with their children every week on the phone.

The girls have been raised by two adoptive families and are supported by Mending Kids International, an organization that finds medical treatment and care for children in developing nations.

Although they live about half an hour apart, the twins see each other several times a week and have a great relationship, said Jenny Hull, Maria de Jesus's adopted mother.

Maria de Jesus, who goes by Josie, is a bright and outgoing girl who enjoys painting and aspires to one day become a journalist.

Recently able to walk with assistance from a specialized machine, Josie was happy enough to play with her friends at the party, but she stopped to blow out the candles on her cake and thank her guests for coming.

Although Josie's mobility is limited on land, she is an "absolute fish in the water," Hull said.

Josie showed off this talent at the party, to the delight of onlookers like Henry Kawamoto, chief plastic surgeon for the twins' operation. Kawamoto said he was amazed by her ability in the water.

Maria Teresa, who goes by Teresita, has had a harder time than her sister. Shortly after the operation, she was diagnosed with meningitis "" a life-threatening inflammation in the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord.

Teresita survived, suffering pain and brain damage. Yet she is confined to a wheelchair and unable to speak.

Although she can't communicate verbally, Teresita will lock eyes if she wants attention, smile if she's happy or throw fits if she's unhappy, said Vivian Cajas, her 23-year-old adopted sister.

Despite the challenges she's faced, Teresita has always had the mentality of a fighter.

"She's faced a lot of circumstances you could not see her surviving from, but she's come a long way," Cajas said. Where Teresita will go from here, Cajas admitted, is hard to predict.

Werner Cajas Dubon, Teresita's adopted father, called her a gift of God and the center of joy in their family. It's a large family, too.

The Cajas Dubon family has four children "" two sons and two daughters. Originally from Guatemala, they moved to Los Angeles in 1984 when Werner Cajas Dubon's infant son needed treatment for a heart condition.

Since then, the family has taken in 16 children through Mending Kids, Vivian Cajas said.

Most of the children stay for about four months while they receive medical treatment in Los Angeles. The Maria twins are a special case.

Hull spoke about the enormous sacrifices the twins' birth parents have had to make, saying it's something that can never be fully understood.

Although the girls' parents could not go to their party Saturday, those who attended "" including Lazareff, Kawamoto and a third doctor from the operation "" came to resemble a large, extended family.

Everyone was there to see the twins meet this milestone that nine years ago, many were unsure they would reach.

And though the spotlight was on them, Josie and Teresita were all smiles.