

Transplant Patient Home Recovering

BY NICK KATZ - Morton Grove Champion - April 8, 2004

Just a month ago Erich Monzon was spending 14 hours a day in the second-floor bedroom of his Morton Grove home, hooked to a dialysis machine.

Now, following a kidney transplant, he is off dialysis and recovering from the surgery that has given him his life back.

"The surgery went OK," Monzon said Monday. "I'm off of dialysis. That's been a bit of a release."

Monzon's case received publicity in February when the U.S. Embassy in Manila refused to issue a temporary visa to a cousin in the Philippines so that he could come to Chicago to donate a kidney to Monzon. Embassy officials initially said they were not convinced the cousin, Ben Liggayu, would return to the Philippines when the visa expired.

Monzon, who has a rare AB blood type, has been on the waiting list for a new kidney for three years. About 200 of his relatives in the Philippines were tested and Liggayu was the only good match.

But under pressure from the publicity over the case and repeated calls from U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, the U.S. Embassy in Manila reversed its earlier decision in late February and issued the temporary visa that allowed Liggayu to come to Chicago to donate a kidney to Monzon.

After Liggayu underwent further testing in Chicago, Monzon received the kidney during transplant surgery in mid-March at the University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center. He returned home last week to finish his recovery.

His cousin was released from the hospital two days after the surgery and is doing well, Monzon said. He is staying with Monzon's family.

Monzon said the transplant was successful, though doctors still are adjusting his medication.

Monzon, 24, was diagnosed with lupus, a disease that attacks the immune system, in 1996. His kidneys failed in 2001 and he has been on dialysis since then. For the past two years he has had to spend 14 hours a day hooked up to the dialysis machine.

Among his plans now, Monzon said, are a return to law school at John Marshall where he was forced to drop out in the middle of his second year.

"It's going to let me do a lot of things I've wanted to do," Monzon said.

Liggayu initially applied for a temporary visa to come to the U.S. for the surgery late last year. At that time it was denied.

In reply to a November letter from Schakowsky, embassy officials in Manila said in December they were not convinced that he had sufficient ties to the Philippines to guarantee he would return.

A Dec. 3 letter from the embassy said Liggayu has "failed to demonstrate that he has strong familial, economic or professional ties that would cause his return after a temporary stay in the United States."

In the end, Schakowsky agreed to guarantee that Liggayu would return when his visa expires and the embassy agreed to reinterview Liggayu. After Schakowsky made repeated calls to the embassy at the end of February officials finally relented and agreed to issue the visa.