Schakowsky Comes to MG Man's Aid

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Morton Grove Champion

A cousin he's never met will travel from the Philippines next month to give Erich Monzon his life back.

Under pressure from 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 Friday and issued a temporary visa that will allow Ben Liggayu to come to Chicago to donate a kidney to Monzon.

Liggayu is expected to arrive in early March for additional medical tests. If all goes well the transplant will take place later that month at the University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center.

Monzon, hooked up to a dialysis machine 14 hours a day, was asleep when his parents found out about the decision.

"We were keeping in touch with my cousin in Manila," Monzon said Monday. "Late that night I was asleep but my parents were up. They were waiting.

"The next morning I woke up and they told me. I was happy, but a little cautious. I was really happy that it's happening. I'm a little cautious about the surgery."

"I wasn't sure it was going to happen. I was praying for it."

No hesitation

Even with that caution, after three years on dialysis, the last two for 14 hours a day, Monzon has no hesitation about going through with the surgery that will mean a new life.

He wants to travel, something he has been unable to do. And he plans to 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 as he lay in bed connected to his dialysis machine in a small bedroom on the second floor of his Morton Grove home. "More than half my day is here. I'm in this room for 14 hours a day."

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.

When he's not hooked up to the machine, he likes to get out of the house. But often, he said, he is too weak and unable to get out. He also has to be sure he's back in time for his next dialysis session.

If for any reason he stops before the 14 hours is up, he has to start all over again.

But that will change once he has the transplant.

"I want to finish law school. I want to travel. I think I'd like to go maybe to Las Vegas, Florida, Hawaii. I've been to California. I want to go back there. I haven't been able to fly anywhere for four or five years."

Originally, Monzon was considering a career in corporate or real estate law. But his experience has made him reconsider.

"With this situation I'm going to look into immigration law," Monzon said,. "It's not about making money. There's a lot you can do with it. You can help a lot of people."

Three-year wait

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 when he applied for a temporary visa to come to the U.S. for the surgery 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.

Under U.S. law the burden of proof is on the visa applicant, Schakowsky said.

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."

"He's a farmer and does not have a lot of assets," Schakowsky said Monday. "Even though he has a wife and four children, that was not considered sufficient.

"Here's a person willing to come to donate a kidney and save a life and there standing in the way is the U.S. government," Schakowsky said.

In the end, Schakowsky agreed to guarantee that Liggayu would return when his visa expires and the embassy agreed to reinterview Liggayu.

Liggayu had to travel a second time from his home to Manila, a 12-hour trek. That was Friday morning, Thursday night in Chicago.

Initially, Schakowsky said, embassy officials said Liggayu needed more medical tests before they would grant the visa. After repeated calls to them Thursday night they agreed to grant the short, six-week visa.

"They determined he needed more tests. That's where I got upset," Schakowsky said. "I said that was completely unacceptable and the people making those decisions were not doctors.

"I was on the phone a lot Thursday night. They finally said they would issue the visa."

In addition to support from Schakowsky, Monzon said people who read about his situation were very supportive.

"People found out about it. People felt it was something that shouldn't have happened," he said. "I'm just happy it turned out well."

But Schakowsky said often these types of cases do not have the same positive outcome. There is no provision in the immigration law that specifically covers cases where someone wants to travel to the United States for organ donations or similar medical issues.

Schakowsky said it is something she wants to look into.

"This is not uncommon," she said. "I want to look at the law now that I understand the issue."