

Visa Granted so Kidney Donor Can Help Cousin

February 22, 2004

BY ANA MENDIETA Staff Reporter-Chicago Sun-Times

Erich Monzon's prayers for a new kidney appeared to be within reach Friday when his cousin in the Philippines -- the only potential donor -- was finally granted a temporary visa to come to the United States.

Ben Liggayu, 41, is expected to arrive in Chicago in March to donate his kidney to 24-year-old Monzon, who is hooked to a dialysis machine for 14 hours daily.

"Definitely my prayers have been answered," said Monzon, who was diagnosed with lupus, an auto-immune disease that attacks the body's organs, when he was 16. "I am so happy because I'm going to be able to go on with law school and travel."

Liggayu applied for a temporary visa last November. His application was supported by the University of Illinois at Chicago's Organ and Tissue Transplant Services, which said Liggayu's blood type -- AB -- is identical to Monzon's and they have common DNA antigens. UIC also said it would cover all of Liggayu's transplant expenses.

But U.S. Embassy officials in Manila denied his visa, saying Liggayu failed to demonstrate he had "sufficiently strong familial, economic or professional ties" that would cause him to return to the Philippines after a temporary stay in the United States.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) intervened and asked the U.S. Embassy to reconsider its decision. On Tuesday, the U.S. Embassy in Manila told Schakowsky that Liggayu would be

granted a second interview.

Liggayu drove 12 hours from his hometown in Isabela to Manila for the interview, which lasted about four hours. But after the interview, he was told more medical tests were still needed.

Schakowsky called the U.S. Embassy again. "I said, 'I am putting my reputation on the line to say that after the surgery, he will go back.' "

At about 11 p.m., a U.S. Embassy official called Schakowsky and told her Liggayu was granted a visa.