

Kidney Donor Denied Visa for Cousin's Transplant

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BY ANA MENDIETA Staff Reporter -- Chicago Sun-Times

For 14 hours every day, Erich Monzon is hooked up to a dialysis machine, praying for a miracle.

Finding a compatible kidney donor is his only key to a normal life. He's 24 and refuses to give up on his dream of becoming a lawyer, and wants to live his life to the fullest.

But his only willing and compatible donor -- a relative who lives in the Philippines -- has been denied entry to the United States on a temporary visa.

U.S. Embassy officials in Manila think Monzon's relative may not have enough family and financial ties to return to the Philippines after the transplant, despite assurances by Monzon's family and the Chicago hospital planning to perform the surgery that the donor would only stay here for six weeks.

"We are willing to deliver this man in person to the U.S. Embassy, if that is what it takes for them to send him here," said Corazon Monzon, Erich's mother. "I don't know if there is enough time for my son, and there are so many things he wants to do."

Erich Monzon was diagnosed with lupus, an auto-immune disease that attacks the body's organs, when he was 16. He gained and lost a lot of weight and suffered from rashes, hair loss

and joint aches.

His energy level was low, and he was forced to refrain from strenuous activities and to watch his diet. Still, he was determined to go to college.

Monzon's condition worsened during his senior year at Loyola University. He lost even more weight and most of his energy. He was put on dialysis in 2001 for three to four hours a day at the University of Illinois at Chicago Medical Center.

Despite the illness, he was able to graduate with a bachelor's in political science the same year.

Monzon began to have problems with the catheter implanted in his chest, and he was switched to peritoneal dialysis, which allows patients to purify their own blood by injecting a mineral solution into their abdomen.

Bags of the mineral solution pile up in Monzon's bedroom as a reminder of the 14 hours that he must be hooked up to the dialysis machine every day in the family's Morton Grove home.

His time is slowly and sometimes painfully filled on the computer, watching television, reading or sometimes playing board games with friends.

"Dialysis puts a lot of restrictions in my life. I've had to adapt to it, but sometimes I get frustrated," said Monzon, who has to plan outings carefully and who has been forced to put aside his law studies.

After three years waiting for a kidney, Monzon hasn't found a compatible donor because of his rare blood type, AB.

The search led Monzon's father to ask about 200 relatives in the Philippines to be tested to determine which one could be a donor.

Ben Liggayu, one of Monzon's cousins, was the only good match. But when he applied for a temporary visa, it was denied.

Replying to a letter sent by U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), the U.S. Embassy said in a Dec. 3, 2003, letter that 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. "Although Mr. Liggayu works as a farmer, his monthly income is very modest. He has fairly small savings and no assets," the U.S. Embassy wrote.

The burden of proof is on the visa applicant, federal officials said.

Liggayu's visa application was supported by UIC's Organ and Tissue Transplant Services, which said Liggayu has an identical blood type to his cousin, as well as common DNA antigens. UIC also said it would cover all of Liggayu's transplant expenses.

"He [Ben Liggayu] is the only living donor available for Erich. He could wait on dialysis quite a long time, but his chances of survival are higher with a successful kidney transplant," said Dr. Enrico Benedetti, UIC's chief of transplant surgery.

He added: "It is very unfair to prevent Erich from going on with his life and living a better lifestyle just because the U.S. government is suspicious the donor could stay. This is a young man who deserves a right to a better life."