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Guatemalan Twins Celebrate 2nd Birthday — Toddlers' First Birthday as Two Separate Individuals

(Note to Editors: KABC will provide pool feed of birthday party b-roll on Telco No. 948614 between noon and 2 p.m. KABC will alert stations of exact feed time through City News Service. Digital still photos will be provided through photo wire services. No hospital spokespersons are available for interviews.)

Separated Guatemalan twins Maria de Jesus and Maria Teresa Quiej Alvarez celebrated their 2nd birthday July 25 at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital. This special occasion also marks their first birthday celebration as two separate individuals.

UCLA doctors, nurses and Healing the Children volunteers joined in the landmark birthday celebration by decorating Maria Teresa's room with balloons and serving up cupcakes and two birthday cakes — one lavender, one pink — to share with those in the hospital's pediatric unit.

"We are blessed that both girls are able to celebrate this special occasion together," said Cris Embleton, a co-founder of Healing the Children, the volunteer organization that brought the twins to UCLA. "While they're no longer joined together physically, they are still very much joined in spirit."

The formerly conjoined twins were separated during a nearly 23-hour surgery at UCLA on Aug. 6, 2002. They flew home to Guatemala on Jan. 13 and then returned to Los Angeles on May 22 for additional medical care. Their parents remain in Guatemala but receive daily updates from hospital staff and Healing the Children.

Maria de Jesus was discharged from Mattel Children's Hospital on June 7, but has been a regular visitor to see her sister. She currently stays at the home of a local Healing the Children volunteer.

Maria de Jesus continues with her rehabilitation, including daily sessions in the swimming pool. According to Healing the Children, she also enjoys digging in the sand at the beach and going for walks in her stroller along the boardwalk. Volunteers also spend time reading books with her and coloring.

Meantime, her sister, Maria Teresa, continues to recuperate from the damaging effects of E. coli meningitis, which she contracted in Guatemala eight months after the separation surgery. A discharge date for Maria Teresa has not been determined yet.

"Maria Teresa suffered a very significant setback in her neurological development as a result of the meningitis," said Dr. Jorge Lazareff, lead neurosurgeon for the twins' medical team and director of pediatric neurosurgery. "Since returning to UCLA two months ago, her progress has

been slow, but recently she has started to show signs of improvement. We remain hopeful for her future.”

“Her sister, Maria de Jesus, is doing remarkably well, however, and we are immensely pleased with her neurological condition and her development,” Lazareff said.

“Healing the Children is extremely grateful for the incredible care that the UCLA team has given these miracle girls,” Embleton said.

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