

# The Tale of The Little Marias



**TWENTY YEARS AGO** this past August, the world watched as UCLA surgeons operated to separate conjoined twin girls who had affectionately become known as “The Little Marias.” The babies — Maria de Jesús and Maria Teresa Álvarez, craniopagus twins fused at the skull facing opposite directions — were born the previous July in a rural region of southwest Guatemala and brought to UCLA under the auspices of an international nonprofit, Mending Kids International, that helps provide advanced surgical care to children in need across the globe.

The exquisitely complex surgery to separate the girls on August 6, 2002, took more than two months to plan and nearly 24 hours to complete. Their care before, during and after the operation involved hundreds of health care workers — surgeons, pediatricians, nurses, radiologists, anesthesiologists, interns, residents, technicians and social workers. It was the largest single medical team ever assembled in UCLA’s history.

Today, Maria de Jesús, known as Josie, and Maria Teresa, or Teresita, are two, distinct young women, each living her own life with their adoptive families in Los Angeles, where they returned after it became clear that they could not receive

TOP: Twins Maria Teresa and Maria de Jesús with their mother, Alba Leticia Alvarez.

BOTTOM: Hundreds of UCLA health care workers were involved in the care of the twins, including pediatric neurology resident Peter F. Morrison, MD (RES '03, FEL '06).

the ongoing care they would need in Guatemala. On July 25, they turned 21 years old.

Over the years, Josie and Teresita have periodically returned to UCLA to volunteer with a project to brighten the lives of young patients. Most recently, Josie was at UCLA Mattel Children’s Hospital for her Once Upon a Room project, a nonprofit she created when she was 12 years old with her best friend, Siena Dancsecs, and adoptive mother, Jenny Hull, to make over the rooms of pediatric patients and decorate them like the colorful bedrooms they might have at home. On this day, they transform the room of one 8-year-old girl from plain hospital white to Hello Kitty hot pink, complete with colorful comforters, banners bearing the girl’s name and a spangled cat-shaped purse that the youngster immediately wraps in a joyous hug. “You definitely put a smile on her face,” the girl’s mother says.

The team decks out a second room in green with a baseball theme, including a new mitt for the hospitalized child. Another is turned into a turquoise unicorn wonderland, with tassels hanging from the ceiling and a plush unicorn toy on the bed. By the time the decorating is done, the child in the room is wearing a unicorn headband and glittery pink wings.

“It makes the kids so happy,” Josie says. “I know how the kids feel when it’s just blank, with no decoration.”

As she makes her way down the hall, a nurse calls out to her: “I know you!” “All the nurses know me because my sister and I were separated here,” Josie says.

While both young women have physical limitations,

Teresita has faced more health complications than her sister. A bout with meningitis shortly after the sisters returned to Guatemala following their surgery left her non-verbal and reliant on a wheelchair. “[Maria Teresa] has faced a lot of circumstances you could not see her surviving from, but she’s come a long way,” her adopted sister, Vivian Cajas, said at the girls’ quinceañera in 2016.

Josie has graduated from high school and is looking toward college, preferably UCLA and a future career as a child-life specialist. Though she still contends with health and mobility challenges and uses a specialized scooter to get around, she’s outgoing, with an easy, warm smile. “She sees everything through happiness,” Hull says.

Perhaps that is because The Little Marias were immediately embraced with love and joy when they arrived at UCLA as infants, and that has endured over the years. “The nursing team — unknown, anonymous, some of the many beautiful people on staff — put two cots together and dropped the divider in between,” recalls Jorge Lazareff, MD, then the chief of pediatric neurosurgery and leader of the team that cared for the twins and now emeritus professor of neurosurgery.

“They cushioned with pillows all four sides of the cot so the girls would not bump into each other. Maria Teresa was facing one way and Maria de Jesús was facing the other side, almost 180 degrees. One of the nurses got a mirror and put the mirror in front of Maria Teresa so she could see her sister. And I think that perhaps was the first time they saw each other’s face.”



The formerly conjoined Guatemalan twins Teresita (left) and Josie Álvarez now live with adoptive parents in Southern California, and they visit each other several times a week and Skype regularly with their parents in Guatemala.

Kindness continues to be the hallmark of the twins’ experience at UCLA, Hull says. Dr. Lazareff has come to many of the twins’ birthday celebrations, and Hull is still connected to members of the hospital staff who went out of their way to share kindness and support. She recalls custodial workers who “came in every day they were at work. They were probably the biggest joy during our time being there because they weren’t who you expect to be the pick-me-up people.”

Yancy Tate is one of those angels. He started working at UCLA shortly before The Little Marias arrived. As soon as he saw them, “I knew I had to take care of them,” he says. He brought in foam mats so the girls could safely play on the floor. “From that point on, I was in there every day,” he says. “Those are my Guatemalan twin babies.”

When the twins turned 10 years old, Dr. Lazareff reflected on the cooperation and teamwork it took to care for Las Mariñas del Milagro

— the little miracle Marias. “The story of Maria Teresa and Maria de Jesús Quiej Álvarez brings me back to the first stanza of *Questions From a Worker Who Reads*, by Bertolt Brecht,” he wrote in an article for this magazine. “Who built Thebes of the seven gates?/In the books you will find the names of kings/Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?/ This,” Dr. Lazareff wrote, “is the beauty of medicine: It assembles people with different understandings of the realities of life and knits them together in a united effort to do the difficult work of helping to heal a stranger in need.”

— Sandy Cohen

To read the original story of “The Little Marias” published 20 years ago in *UCLA Magazine*, go to: [tinyurl.com/The-Little-Marias](http://tinyurl.com/The-Little-Marias)