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Local surgeons lend a hand to 'Healing the Children'

By **TERESA AKERSTEN**
of *The Montclair Times*

When Pearla Vanessa Rodriguez Dominguez of the Dominican Republic was 2 years old, she was severely burned in a house fire. Without medical attention, webs of scar tissue formed in her arm, leaving her without movement in her wrist or elbow.

Thanks to two doctors based in Montclair, and a program called Healing the Children, Dominguez, now 7, will regain the function of her left arm.

Drs. Allen D. Rosen and Valerie J. Ablaza of The Plastic Surgery Group operated on Dominguez earlier this year and are continuing to treat her pro bono until she is well enough to return home.

The doctors have volunteered their services to Healing the Children's Midlantic Chapter for several years, mostly treating burn victims and children with constriction bands that cut off circulation and cause severe inflammation.

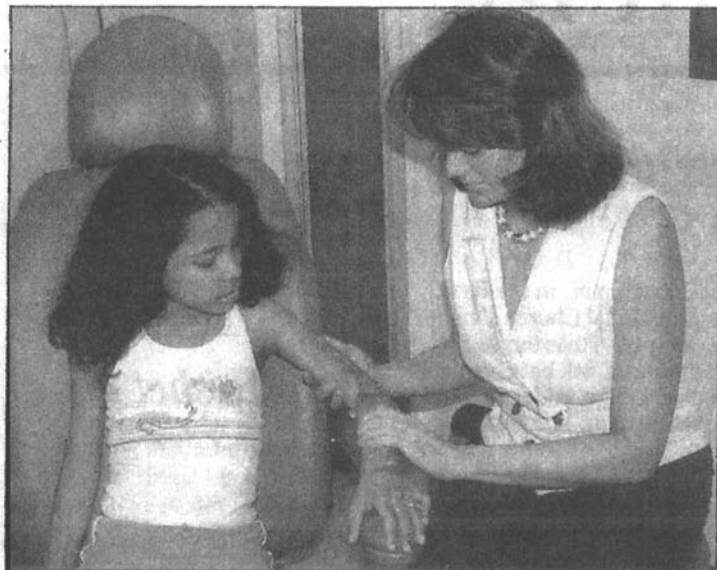


Photo courtesy of The Plastic Surgery Group

LOOKING, AND FEELING, GOOD: Dr. Valerie J. Ablaza of The Plastic Surgery Group in Montclair examines the progress of a patient who came to her through Healing the Children.

"If we didn't do the work that we are doing with these kids, they would never have it done," said

Rosen, explaining that in the United States, most people have access to the kinds of treatment and med-

ical care that Healing the Children participants need and lack in their countries.

In the case of Dominguez, Rosen said, "Two hours changed her life."

Each January, the doctors receive photographs and biographies of children who qualify for the program. They agree to take on one or two cases they feel they can handle.

In the spring, the children are flown to the United States by Healing the Children, which arranges for medical screening and matches them with doctors and host families.

In the case of Dominguez, Passaic Beth Israel Regional Medical Center in Passaic donated the anesthesia and waived the medical fee it normally charges surgeons to use its facilities.

Dominguez's host family is based in New York.

Host families are responsible for the basic living costs of the child they take in, as well as transporting the child to medical

appointments and picking up medications at the pharmacy. Healing the Children either reimburses the families for the medication or sets up an account with a pharmacy in their area.

Depending on the case, the child might need a home for anywhere from a month to a year.

"We try to match the child with the family, but you do have to be very flexible," said Denise Malsky, a staff member of Healing the Children's Midlantic Chapter. Malsky said the chapter, which is based in Kinnelon, helps 50 to 75 children a year.

"It's very rewarding to give these children a chance at a better life," Malsky said.

As a doctor, Ablaza agrees: "Once they start coming here, they are like our kids."

For more information on Healing the Children, visit www.healingthechildren.org. To learn more about out how to become a host family, call the local chapter at (973) 838-7114.